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Discursive construction of anti-hijab discourse on Facebook and Twitter: the case of Malaysian former-Muslim women

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ABSTRACT

This study sheds light on how Malaysian former Muslims construct their anti-hijab discourse in the context of Facebook and Twitter interactions and how a dichotomous meaning is assigned to the hijab. The five participants were identified using the snowball technique, starting from a well-known Malaysian former Muslim. Data was generated by observing the participants' postings over nine months, from April to December 2019. Three hundred ten postings were collected which challenged Islam and its principles. However, this paper narrowed its scope to focus on 116 anti-hijab postings. The data were analysed using discourse analysis, particularly discursive psychology. The study revealed that participants' postings had thematic links through which an overall theme emerged; the hijab is a tool of women's oppression. This theme emerged through the discursive features such as assessment, category entitlement, extreme case formulation, blame, and corroboration with the anti-hijab ideology which exists on Facebook and Twitter, wherein former Muslims contest the wearing of hijab in certain Islamic countries and attempt to enhance the dichotomy of "women oppression versus women rights" to hijab.

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Introduction

The use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter for entertainment, sharing news and views, forming and framing opinions, propagating agendas, and constructing and contesting identities is a multidimensional phenomenon. Muslims, former Muslims, and non-Muslims can all engage with social media to voice their concerns over various global political, social, and religious issues. This study examined how Malaysian former-Muslim women use Facebook and Twitter to negotiate the Islamic concept of the hijab (headscarf) through their strategic rhetoric on women's empowerment and rights.

Like other users, former Muslims can fully use Facebook and Twitter to express their opinions, propagate their beliefs, and gain support for them. Their engagement with these social media sites demonstrates their challenges to religious teachings in general

and local traditions in their respective countries. Facebook and Twitter can be an essential intermediary between former Muslims and the general public (Radzuwan Ab Rashid, et al. 2018, 1).

In Islamic countries like Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran and several other Islamic countries, there are constitutional punishments for rejecting Islam or committing what is considered apostasy and blasphemy (Elmira Akhmetova and Muhammad Izzuddin Jaafar 2020; Hanibal Goitom 2014). Due to the fear of punishment, most former Muslims in Islamic countries keep their views closeted and feel marginalised regarding freedom of expression (Azweed Mohamad, et al. 2017, 1). But Facebook and Twitter, through their range of features, present promising safe spaces, privacy and cloaked identity, which can encourage them to express their genuine opinions and beliefs about the religion, seek support from other former Muslims, help other closeted former Muslims, and contest, motivate or convince other site users to agree with them (Rashid et al. 2018, 2). Using the sites, they can enhance their visibility in society (Rashid et al. 2018, 2).

The practice of veiling women and covering their heads is not Islamic *per se*. It exists in other cultures and religions—orthodox Jewish women cover their heads, often by wigs; Nuns wear the habit; Sikhs wear the turban; Hindu women use a head covering as part of the sari. However, the wearing of a hijab among Muslim women is controversial as it is made compulsory by the majority of Islamic scholars who interpret the instructions in the Holy texts regarding the covering of “adornment/private parts” to include hair/heads/faces along with other parts of the body. In Malaysia, wearing the hijab has been a deep-seated culture.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter opened the door for former Malaysian Muslims to communicate with society at large and provided them with an opportunity to reach a wide range of people, especially women who may support and reject the wearing of the hijab. The concept of hijab and “niqab” (veiling or face covering) are distinct practices in Islamic culture. But former Muslims use these terms interchangeably in their discourse on social media, so this study uses the terms “hijab” and “veil” interchangeably.

The five main participants in this study currently reside abroad (i.e. Europe and America). In addition to gaining insights into their standpoint on the hijab and how they discursively construct their anti-hijab ideology, this study explores the potential mediatization of veiled women through conventional dichotomies linked to the meanings of the hijab.

Literature review

Muslim women’s hijab is still a topic of hot debate in contemporary media, social media and different discussion forums. These debates mainly are built on the false dichotomies of “Eastern versus Western”, “Islam versus individual freedom of choice”, “patriarchy versus women rights”, and “women oppression versus women empowerment” (Brenda O’Neill, et al. 2014; Kyle Conway 2012; Sajida Sultana Alvi, Homa Hoodfar and Sheila McDonough 2003).

Whereas a myriad of research studies have proven this dichotomous point of view about assigning the meanings to the hijab as false binary oppositions (e.g. Ana Carolina Antunes 2022; Gustav Brown 2019; Nurzihan Hassim 2017; Nurzihan Hassim 2014a;

Nurzihan Hassim 2014b; Neil Chakraborti and Irene Zempi 2020; Sandra Hochel 2013; Suzanne Brenner 2011; Rachel Anderson Droogsma 2007; Alvi, Hudfor and McDonough 2003; Jasmin Zine 2002; Claire Dwyer 1999). They have emphasised taking a broader perspective of how the meanings are assigned to the hijab. Alvi, Hudfor and McDonough (2003) pointed out that giving importance to the hijab is a distinct phenomenon with unique dimensions in different socio-cultural contexts. They argued that donning the hijab by diaspora women may have different meanings than the meaning assigned to the hijab by the women living in the community of indigenous culture. There is a lack of literature that expose the meanings assigned to hijab in the Malaysian context above the level of monotonous and old-fashioned dichotomies lacking the voices of women who choose to veil or who do not choose to veil.

Nancy J. Smith-Hefner (2007) argues that contrary to mainstream media's portrayal, the Javanese hijabis viewed the hijab as a motivation toward modernism instead of returning to traditionalism. The Javanese hijabis did not view the hijab as a tool of patriarchal oppression. Instead, they considered it a symbol of their maximised freedom and personal choice that connected all aspects of their lives and promised increased participation in public life without sacrificing their options.

Droogsma (2007) argues that unlike the dichotomous discourses on the hijab that attempts to define veiled women, the understanding of women's agency and their own experiences reject such dominant discourses and construct an alternative discourse that provides a new definition of veiled women and, thus, new meanings are assigned to hijab. Contrary to feeling constricted and oppressed, diaspora veiled women identified several empowering functions of hijab in their lives (Droogsma 2007). These functions include: hijab is a statement of Muslim identity; it acts as a behaviour check; it is resistant to women's commodification and exploitation; it preserves intimate relationships; moreover, it is a source of greater feminine freedom. They emphasised the hijab as a reflection of their standpoint resisting the identity inscribed by the dichotomies prevailing media discourses. They seemed to contradict such dichotomous discourses to assign new meanings to the hijab and to ensure alternative consideration of situating women in society. The new definition of hijab offered by the veiled women ultimately poses a challenge to Americans as well as international media discourses that, in their view, have long been distorting and miscommunicating an individual symbolic practice promising more women empowerment than the shallow slogans frequently disseminated based on conventional dichotomous discourses on hijab (Droogsma 2007).

According to Fatima Koura (2018), diaspora Muslim women in America believed that media played an essential role in framing conventional dichotomous debates on hijab and Muslim women whose agency mainly was neglected. The diaspora Muslim women claimed that such negligence toward Muslim women's agency and the lack of the inclusion of Muslim veiled women's experiences in the comprehensive research on hijab resulted in the furious and frequent stereotyping of veiling Muslim women in general and of diaspora Muslim women in American society in specific. Koura (2018) pointed out that 80% of the diaspora women participants in this study viewed their lived experiences in American society as regulated by how others treat them. Due to the workplace discrimination, most of the participants in this study viewed micro-aggressions as a common struggle among the veiled women, whereas 30% of the respondents expressed that such micro-aggressions toward hijab conditioned them to

change the style of hijab from the unmistakable style of Islamic headscarf to a more general and liberal looking head-dress. The participants believed the hijab was a powerful statement of their religious identity and an expression of their religious freedom and women's rights in the United States. They rejected the stereotypical identity of veiled women portrayed in media and the false dichotomies constructed in the name of individual freedom and women's rights (Koura 2018).

A few studies have adopted a broader perspective above such dichotomies to explore the meaning of the hijab in the socio-cultural context of Malaysia (e.g. Brown 2019; Shahreen Mat Nayan 2017; Hassim 2017, 2014a, 2014b; Hochel 2013). Hassim (2017, 1) pointed out that in line with the majority of Muslims in Malaysia, Malaysian women donning hijab view Malay identity as a blend of Malay culture and religious outlook. They integrate the hijab into Malay culture and define it within the global Islamic concept of hijab that has the flexibility of integration into local traditions and individual cultures.

The meaning of hijab emerged as a unique binding force among the Malay community and broad Islamic culture based on best-matched practices (Hassim 2017, 4). The participants in Hassim's (2017) study believed that such a special binding force emanating from different forms is the basis of new sub-cultures representing diverse ethnic groups. They viewed the hijab as a symbol of an improved and fashionable lifestyle while abiding by the principles of the religion they believed in (Hassim 2017, 5). In this way, "hijab" becomes a symbol of Malay Muslim identity that binds them with the Malay community and lets them enjoy individual freedom (Mat Nayan 2017, 46; Hassim 2017, 5; Judith Nagata 2011, 56; Judith Nagata 1995).

Hochel (2013, 46) examined the meanings assigned to the hijab by veiled, unveiled and sometimes-veiled Muslim women in Malaysia. Hochel (2013) pointed out that all the three segments in this study rejected the connotation of hijab as a religious/patriarchal operation; instead, they viewed hijab as their chosen outlook that allowed them to express their femininity and enjoy the more significant opportunity of personal freedom. Adhering to the hijab as a sign of religious obedience emerged as a hijabis' stimulus. Still, at the same time, they viewed the hijab as a symbol of being fashionable and looking beautiful. Most non-hijabis Muslims rejected the traditional dichotomy of "religious/patriarchal oppression versus women's rights". They believed in the hijab as a religious obligation and contemporary fashion in Malaysia that they wished to adopt at some stage in the near future (Hochel 2013, 52).

Hassim (2014a) conducted a study to explore how Malaysian hijabis were presented in the Malaysian print media, focusing on two fashion magazines, *Nur* and *Hijabista*. In her research, all the informants were 30 years of age or under and had agreed to comply with the modern "hijab" trends portrayed in *Hijabista* to look stylish, visible, trendy and classy. They claimed this current trend challenged the negative stereotypes of "Muslimah", labelled as oppressed and backward. The study further pointed out that the young Malaysian women viewed the hijab as an ongoing process of transformation in line with the recent fashion of expressing femininity while improvising broader communal trends to satisfy their sense of belonging to the Malay Muslim community (Hassim 2014a).

To synthesise the meanings assigned to the hijab by the diaspora Muslim women and the Malaysian Muslim women, the hijab emerges as a marker of Muslim communal identity, statement of religious commitment, expression of Muslim women's agency with freedom of choice, the satisfaction of femininity, and greater empowerment in the

society. Above all, it emerges as a symbol of veiled Muslim women's fashion and living style choices. The broader meanings of hijab that emerged from the reviewed literature demonstrate a clear rejection of the conventional dichotomies linked to the purpose of hijab, such as religious oppression versus women's rights; eastern feminism versus western feminism; slavery versus freedom; archaic versus modern; and patriarchal oppression versus women empowerment. At the same time, mainly the studies exploring the meanings of the hijab have critically dealt with the interview data to extract significant themes linked to meanings assigned to the hijab by the Muslim women, whilst the construction of anti-hijab discourse on Facebook and Twitter remained unexplored. This paper fills in the gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of how the anti-hijab discourse is constructed and how the argumentation is managed to favour the anti-hijab standpoint to justify the conventional dichotomies linked to hijab. This study thus, incorporated discourse analysis instead of thematic analysis to avoid the monotonous repetition of themes built on the traditional dichotomies; and to explore the novice dimension of the construction of anti-hijab discourse as to how the Malaysian former Muslims manage the anti-hijab discourse to propagate dichotomous meanings of hijab on Facebook and Twitter.

Methodology

An ethnographic approach was adopted in this qualitative study whereby the primary data collection method used was a direct observation, with some participation of the researcher/observer. Social media observation to generate data has emerged as a leading data collection method for researching online phenomena. Some recent studies that have utilised social media observation as the method of data collection include Rashid et al. (2018) and Nely Koteyko and Daniel Hunt (2015). Based on a well-known Malaysian former Muslim's Facebook account that was open to the public and using a snowball technique, nine Malaysian former-Muslim women were identified in the first phase. In the second phase, their use of Facebook and Twitter was observed to confirm whether they write publicly or semi-publicly on these two social media platforms.

Five Malaysian former-Muslim women whose postings were open to the public on Facebook and Twitter were finally retained as the participants of this study. Sue, Jane, Zoey, Fiona and Fancy (pseudonyms); all are Malaysian females who were Muslim-born and raised. However, they renounced their Muslim faith and became atheists, non-believers in any god. They are former Muslims, now atheists, and have mentioned this in their social media profiles. Sue's postings on Facebook Pages and the other four participants' postings on Facebook and Twitter were observed for nine months, from April to December 2019. In her article for *Research Ethics Journal*, Willis, a researcher from the University of Oxford, argued that postings made on any Facebook Pages are considered public data as they are indexed by a search engine such as Google (see Roxana Willis 2019).

No password is needed to access the posts. On Twitter, the shared content is default set as public. Only the protected content on Twitter requires permission from the account holder not part of this study. Twitter privacy statement reads, "what you say on the Twitter services may be viewed all around the world instantly. You are what you Tweet!". It becomes clear that Twitter renders no restriction to observing and using non-protected

data. We echo these arguments. Hence, the data were considered public data, with no obligation to ask for consent from each user who publicly posted on Facebook and Twitter. The five studied women made more than 300 postings about Islam and Muslims, but this study focused on 116 explicitly dealing with “hijab”.

Selection of exemplary excerpts

The postings related to hijab, posted on Facebook and Twitter, were frequently shared and re-tweeted to agree or disagree; comparatively more insightful postings that carried dichotomies linked to hijab; and in contrast to the implicit expressions, the postings explicitly demonstrated anti-hijab arguments to support the dichotomies were chosen for the presentation. We selected the postings for presentation based on degradations and differences among all the postings. In this paper [Sue. FP. 6] stands for Sue’s Facebook post occurring at number 6 in the data sequence. The post explicitly constructs the anti-hijab argument attributing Muslim hijabis as Muslim feminists and criticising their blind belief about the hijab as a choice that, in Sue’s viewpoint, is a hurdle for women’s empowerment.

Out of the 116 postings that constructed the anti-hijab standpoint, Sue’s posting was identified as unique due to the use of corroboration from the ICHR (a third party) report suggesting the independence of information and thus, attempting to manage the factuality of her discourse. She offers her stance against the hijab by justifying the conventional dichotomy of “patriarchal oppression versus women empowerment”. Her claim that Muslim feminists blindly believe in the hijab as a veiled women’s choice and her over-generalisation make this posting distinct in terms of the social mediatisation of veiled Muslim women. In the fashion of discourse papers, it is common to present selected excerpts from extensive data to avoid length constraints.

The topical categorisation of assigned meanings to hijab in the generated data and the findings were discussed with an inter-coder, a senior researcher in the field of discourse analysis; he agreed with the identified overlaps of dichotomous meanings linked to hijab and the utilised discursive devices, which helped us to identify the mainly used discursive devices in assigning the negative connotations to hijab in each of the postings and then add to the findings.

Analytical lens

The data generated from partially participating observation were analysed using discursive psychology (DP) (Sally Wiggins 2017; Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter 1992). DP is an analytic discourse tradition that considers discourse as a medium of social action (Sally Wiggins and Jonathan Potter 2008, 77; Jonathan Potter 2012, 446); this means people utilise discourse as a medium for performing activities such as blaming, holding or shifting accountability, to complain, justify, seek advice, question, to build an identity and create norms etcetera (Te Molder and Potter 2005, 255–257; Derek Edwards and Jonathan Potter 2005, 41–42; Jonathan Potter and Alexa Hepburn 2008, 2; Wiggins and Potter 2008, 78; Hedwig Te Molder 2015, 5). Social acts like these are performed during interactions and can be explored using discursive devices (Jessica Nina Lester 2014, 141; Stephanie Taylor 2014, 5; Sarah Seymour-Smith 2017, 310). This study aimed to examine the interactional discourse on

Facebook and Twitter, focusing on how their anti-“hijab” views were managed in their postings. This is why DP suits this research’s objectives more than other discourse analysis traditions.

The discursive devices that emerged from the data analysis are briefly explained below.

Extreme case formulation: identified with words/phrases that take the account to extremes, beyond exaggerating or emphasising something. (Wiggins 2017, 310; Edwards and Potter 1992, 162; Anita Pomerantz 1986, 219).

Assessment: personal opinion or reaction that locates the individual’s preferences who utters them (Wiggins 2017, 311).

Category entitlement: a pivotal way to manage identities during interactions. Entitlement of category to an individual, such as being an expert, having a particular skill, being an ordinary person, belonging to a specific group, being trustworthy, etc., is managed to support or refute a claim during interactional discourse (Wiggins 2017, 422; Edwards and Potter 1992, 160).

Footing shift refers to any movement across the participants’ roles that occurs in the interaction’s talk or text (Wiggins 2017, 355; Erving Goffman 1979, 5).

Attribution of blame: a social explanation of an event or account with negative consequences. It starts with judgments about causality, personal responsibility, or possible mitigation of the consequences (Wiggins 2017; Edwards and Potter 1992, 87).

Corroboration: report something as if an independent source supports it and present it as a warrant to build up the factuality of an account (Wiggins 2017, 388; Edwards and Potter 1992, 163).

Script formulation: a description that presents a behaviour or event as if it regularly or frequently occurs (Wiggins 2017, 410; Derek Edwards 1995; Edwards and Potter 1992, 148). It is used in interaction to normalise particular behaviour by showing it as a regular/frequent (hence everyday) occurrence.

Minimisation: treating an object or account as minor, of little importance, by using “only”, “just”, or “scarcely”, etc. It is employed in interactions to downplay the significance of an entity or account (Wiggins 2017, 375).

Systematic vagueness: provides a flexible means of displaying an effector problem but reduces the possibility of being wrong (Wiggins 2017, 392; Edwards and Potter 1992, 162).

Analysis and discussion

The former Muslims justified their views of the practice of hijab based on the claim that they knew more than non-Muslims about what it feels like, with hijab and without hijab, because they had experienced hijab for several years and were currently non-compliant and had been so since they had rejected Islam and Islamic countries.

In Extract 1, Sue strategically constructs anti-hijab discourse to assign the meanings to “hijab” as a symbol of women’s oppression. She seems to be reworking the dichotomy of “women’s rights versus women’s oppression”, which Koura (2018) pointed out as an outdated conceptualisation of the hijab.

Extract 1

(1) There are many negative impacts of the hijab, and one of them is when women who wear the hijab tend to downgrade others and look down on those who don't wear it.

(2) Feminism much, right? I thought feminism was about against oppression and women who support each other from being oppressed?

(3) The least you can do is question why is hijab a "choice"?

(4) While many others are still in the closet, afraid to take off their hijab and are fighting against a law forcing them to wear it.

(5) You think about it.

(6) You can't simply claim that the hijab is a "choice" while it is a tool to oppress and brainwash people.

[Sue. FP. 6]

Extract 1 is particularly interesting for its sequential unfolding of the rebuttal of "hijab is a choice". Sue starts with an *objective assessment*, claiming that the hijab has many negative impacts, but she avoids referring to any noun responsible for this claim (line 1). This objective assessment presents the claim as an accepted and known fact that needs no warrant to support the claim (Wiggins 2017). Sue then reformulates the assessment subjectively to shift the blame to blame Muslim hijabis for looking down upon non-hijabis (out of arrogance or piety). After giving the *initial assessment* and confirming it with a *second assessment* to attribute blame (Edwards and Potter 1992), Sue poses a rhetorical question that strategically disassociates hijabs from "being feminist" (line 2). This question follows an ironic response where she associates hijab with "oppression" through *category entitlement* (Wiggins 2017), suggesting that hijabis are oppressed. The warrant for this category entitlement is given in line 4, where Sue offers that many closeted women are forced to wear the hijab and want to get rid of it. This category entitlement to "hijab" is reinforced when Sue declares that the hijab is a tool to oppress and brainwash people (line 6). In this way, Sue categorises the hijab as one of the tools under the broader category of women's oppression. She argues that feminism and the hijab are two opposing practices and cannot co-exist. Through the engagement in discursive devices such as; objective assessment, second assessment, blame attribution and rhetorical questioning, she attempts to justify the conventional dichotomy of "women's rights versus women's oppression" that Alvi, Hoodfar and McDonough (2003) found not only irrelevant, but false dichotomy in line with the Muslim hijabis' lived experiences.

As shown in Extract 2 below, Sue constructs Muslim hijabis as Muslim feminists who blindly believe that hijab is a choice and can co-exist with women's empowerment. To develop this construction and generalisation, she gave an example of Iran's laws related to the hijab and declared them to be against human rights and dignity. Sue is seen reconstructing another conventional dichotomy of women "oppression versus women empowerment" to negatively connote the Muslim women's hijab as a tool of oppression in Muslim societies.

Extract 2

(1) Something that Muslim feminists should take notice of.

- (2) Instead of blindly believing that “hijab is a choice” is “women’s empowerment.”
- (3) “The ICHR strongly condemns the government of Iran’s criminalisation of women for not
- (4) choosing hijab, and they must end their extreme form of gender discrimination and all types
- (5) of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment that profoundly damages women’s human dignity. . . .”
- [Sue, FP. 65]

The strategic use of language is evident in line 1 when Sue confers the pre-supposed title of *feminist* upon Muslim hijabis, which can be seen as a tactic to attract Muslim women’s attention and interest and provoke *consensus* (Edwards and Potter 1992) on the other hand. The attribution of “blindly believing” to hijabis (presupposed Muslim feminists) in line 2 is a complete rebuttal of all potential *warrants* to the claim that hijab is a choice. She further invokes the device of *corroboration* (Wiggins 2017; Edwards and Potter 1992), the independence of the ICHR (a third party) report (line 3), to cast doubt on hijabis’ views of hijab. She strategically uses *corroboration* alongside *extreme case formulation* (Wiggins 2017; Edwards and Potter 1992; Pomerantz 1986) to maximise the intended consensus for the rebuttal that she presented in line 2. The construction of solid phrases such as the *extreme form of gender discrimination* (line 4) and exaggeration in list formulation such as *all types of cruel, inhuman and degrading* (line 5) suggests the *extreme case formulation*, which serves as a warrant for the rebuttal in Extract 2. The thematic induction of Extract 1 is similar to that in Extract 2. In both extracts, she challenges the Muslim women to rethink the practice of hijab and strives to convince them of their oppression at the hands of Muslim males through hijab.

Sue appears as an ex-Muslim representative in the following extract. In this long post, she challenges cultural and religious adherence to the hijab by presenting a former Muslim’s account of her suffering. She engages in systematic vagueness, footing shift, corroboration, script formulation, and extreme case formulation that collectively emerge as a strategy of assigning the meanings of religious/patriarchal/familial oppression to the hijab.

Extract 3

- (1) Still, think that “hijab is a choice”? Read this thread.
- (2) “Auntie saw me without my hijab on and told my parents, I woke up at 3 am to them pinning me down and cutting my hair.
- (3) I detest the hijab.
- (4) My ultra-religious father forced me to wear it when I was 5.
- (5) My mom also supported this, despite wearing a hijab and religious clothing from 48.
- (6) Pretty hypocritical,
- (7) Anyway, I am 23 and a PhD student. Since starting my PhD, I have felt brave and started going to the school without a hijab.
- (8) I would put it on before coming home”.
- (9) This story is from an Ex-Muslim girl.

- (10) It's horrendous what Ex-Muslims have to go through at the hands of their families, who are supposed to protect them from the harms of the world.

[Sue, FP. 109]

It's horrendous what Ex-Muslims have to go through at the hands of their families, who are supposed to protect them from the harms of the world

Sue poses a question in the opening line of her post that performs threefold functions in this post; it invites the target audience (those who believe that hijab is a choice) and secondly, the qualifier *still* invokes a rebuttal to the claim "hijab is a choice" (line 1). This qualifier *still* further warns the audience to be ready for some strong warrants to the intended rebuttal that occurs after the question, and the phrase *read this thread* soon after the question (line 1) serves as *corroboration* (Wiggins 2017; Edwards and Potter 1992), taking the audience to an anonymously reported account (lines 2–8) presenting a solid warrant for the rebuttal of the claim "hijab is a choice". The use of first-person singular pronouns—*me* (line 2), *my* (lines 2, 4 & 5) and *I* (lines 3, 4, 7 & 8)—demonstrates *footing shift* (Wiggins 2017; Edwards and Potter 1992) through which Sue manages the anonymity of the speaker and enhances the authenticity of the account by presenting it as a first-hand experience. The strength of the warrant lies in the strategic use of *script formulation* (Wiggins 2017; Derek Edwards 1994, 1995). Script formulations are descriptions that present behaviour or event as if it regularly or frequently occurs (Wiggins 2017; Edwards 1995). The anonymously reported account in this post (lines 2–8) is essentially a *script formulation* because it is presented as general, normal behaviour and not a single event (line 10) whereby she expresses her sadness about the cruelties faced by former Muslims at the hands of their families and condemns such highly religious families. She engages with *extreme case formulation* (Wiggins 2017; Edwards and Potter 1992) to show and demonstrate what former Muslims have to undergo in the world without any ethnic or geographical distinction. The story tells the cruelty of parents who clipped the daughter's hair by force as a punishment for leaving off her hijab for some hours at school. The generalisation through *script formulation* helps justify the claim that the hijab is not a choice; rather, it negatively connotes Muslim women's hijab with the conventionally assigned dichotomous meanings of women's oppression.

Jane posted the following extract. In addition to the textual posting shown below, she also uploaded an image. The image has the caption "start of the decade vs end of the decade" and contains two photographs of the same lady. On the left, the lady is dressed in Islamic attire, and on the right, in the second photograph, she is dressed in skimpy clothes showing her cleavage. This picture drew criticism from other Twitter users (lines 4–10). Jane screenshot these comments and refers to them in her response (lines 1–3). She constructs an anti-hijab account by engaging in specific discursive devices such as; assessment, second assessment, and assuming the role of an animator. She attempts to show the audience that the hijab is a tool of women's oppression at the hands of religion.

Extract 4

- (1) Hijab is a choice; they say
- (2) Muslim Twitter attacks ex-Muslim women over new clothes.
- (3) Wearing the hijab is a choice until you take it off

- (4) [The screenshot Jane refers to is shown below]
- (5) A: Great job. You are going to hell
- (6) B: Just like how a covered sweet that is lovely becomes a thing of distaste after being uncovered and can easily be contaminated
- (7) C: From a woman who has self-respect to public property
- (8) D: From 'la Allah' to 'la Abdallah'
- (9) E: This is what happens when Islam isn't taught right.
- (10) F: More like from heaven to hell
- (11) G: Live all your life, no one told you not to, but this way, you are encouraging others to do the same + this is considered disrespectful to our religion; how shameful, may you rot in hell.

[Jane, T. 147]

Jane's anti-hijab discourse is based on the strategic use of previous postings and comments. This post consists of an earlier posting and the comments left by Muslims, which she refers to in line 2. The figure is a lady not dressed according to the Islamic dress code. Jane starts with the allegation that Muslims claim that hijab is a choice (line 1). Jane manages the refutation of this claim by engaging in an *assessment* (Wiggins 2017) (line 2) and a *second assessment* (Wiggins 2017) (line 3). *Assessment* (line 2) invokes criticism of some Muslims' attitude towards the lady who gave up the Islamic dress code. The *second assessment* (line 3) confirms the first assessment and frames a rebuttal to the claim (line 1). Jane manages to warrant the rebuttal by purposively assuming the role of *animator* (Goffman 1979) when she presents others' points of view (lines 4–10). This role of *animator* allows her to manage her neutrality while constructing the warrant for her rebuttal (line 3) and claim whom to blame (line 2) when she presents seven comments by A, B, C, D, E, F and G cursing the lady for quitting Islamic dress code. Through the strategic construction of discourse in this post, she shows that other Muslims have made the hijab a tool to oppress women, which is not a choice. On the contrary, several recent studies (e.g. Antunes 2022; Brown 2019) pointed out that Muslim women expressed a variety of meanings that they assign to the hijab based on their knowledge of culture, religion and above all variety of meaning that they give to hijab based on their knowledge of culture, religion, and their lived experiences as hijabis. They integrated hijab into their sense of femininity, the satisfaction of being stylish, greater confidence at the workplace, and empowerment in day-to-day interactions with the males (Antunes 2022; Brown 2019). They rejected the conventional dichotomies that some women's bad experiences of veiling or donning a hijab cannot represent the overall multi-faceted meanings of hijab for all Muslim women who wear hijab (Antunes 2022; Brown 2019).

Fiona is a Malaysian former Muslim vocal on Facebook and Twitter and criticises Malaysian Islamic ideology and local culture. The following extract is an excellent example of her views on Islam and the hijab in Malaysia.

Extract 5

- (1) I believe that Malaysians are better than this.
- (2) I know we are better than this.

- (3) The idea that a piece of cloth reflects the morality of an individual & the idea that we
- (4) think we can attack someone for removing it –
- (5) this is not what Malaysians are, nor what Islam is.

[Fiona, T. 182]

Fiona starts with *systematic vagueness*, which provides leverage for initiating a rebuttal (Edwards and Potter 1992), claiming that Malaysians are better than this (line 1). The pronoun *this* (line 1) signals something unknown because she has not mentioned anything previously, which refers to. This *systematic vagueness* continues with a *footing shift* (Wiggins 2017) when she uses *we* in place of Malaysians (line 2), demonstrating her identity as Malaysian. This vagueness (lines 1 & 2) draws readers' attention toward the next part of her post, where she unfolds this vagueness (e.g., lines 3 & 4). In light of line 3, it becomes clear that she claims that Malaysians are better than the shallow idea of morality connected to the hijab. She utilises *minimisation* (Wiggins 2017) to refer to the notion that the hijab reflects the morality of an individual (line 3) and that Malaysians can attack someone for not wearing a hijab (line 4). She minimises the concept of hijab by calling it a "piece of cloth" (line 3), reflecting her engagement in *minimisation* to manage the religious value associated with hijab by some Muslims. She further engages in a *disclaimer* (Wiggins 2017) when she says that this is not what Malaysians are and this is not what Islam is (line 5) to support her conceptualisation of the hijab. Her engagement in discursive devices such as systematic vagueness, footing shift, minimisation and disclaimer frame her strategy to undermine the Muslim hijabis, women's agency and the meaning that the diaspora Muslim hijabis and the Malay Muslim hijabis assign to their hijab in line with their lived experiences (see Antunes 2022; Brown 2019; Hassim 2017, 2014a, 2014b; Neil Chakraborti and Irene Zempi 2020; Hochel 2013, 2013; Brenner 2011; Droogsmas 2007; Alvi, Hudfor and McDonough 2003; Zine 2002; Dwyer 1999).

The following extract presents Fiona's opinion of the Malaysian hijab ideology. She seems strategic in constructing anti-hijab accounts by assigning the conventional dichotomous meanings of women's oppression to the conservative majority's traditional dichotomous meanings of women's oppression.

Extract 6

- (1) In the past decade, the conservative majority in Malaysia has oppressed women with its
- (2) arbitrary and archaic ideas of dress codes.

[Fiona, T. 200]

The adjectives *conservative* (line 1), *arbitrary* (line 2), and *archaic* (line 2) are central to Fiona's opinion that making hijab compulsory wearing is based on the outdated and old fashioned religious teaching. *Conservative* has a negative connotation in the discourse on ideology (Michael Billig 1988), and the adjective *arbitrary* (line 2) describes the accidental existence of something without any systematic and authentic originating source. She also engages in *extreme case formulation* (Wiggins 2017) that most Malaysian conservatives oppress women (line 1) with their ideas of dress codes. Through her engagement in these

discursive devices, she attempts to prove the culture of donning a hijab in Malaysia as an archaic practice whereby she claims the hijab is a tool of women's oppression in Malaysian society. Her construction of the anti-hijab viewpoint is viewed as over generalisation that denies the Malay Muslim women's stance on the meanings of the hijab as explored in several studies that Malay Muslim women view the hijab as a unique cultural marker (Hassim 2017), a statement of their Malay identity (Brown 2019; Hassim 2014a), a symbol of their religious commitment (Brown 2019; Hassim 2014b), an expression of their femineity (Hochel 2013), and a choice fashion to look beautiful (Brown 2019; Hassim 2014a, 2014b).

Extract 7 is Fancy's account of criticism of some Muslim acquaintances. She seems to insist on the conventional dichotomous meanings assigned to the hijab.

Extract 7

- (1) Finding it rather ridiculous
- (2) that an acquaintance forces his children to wear the hijab and tells them their hair
- (3) will attract rapists, is similar to people like the London stabber
- (4) that gives Islam a bad name.

[Fancy, T. 276]

Fancy's technique of anti-hijab discourse in Extract 7 is similar to that of Fiona's in Extract 5. The discourse in this post has a linear cause-effect relationship. The effect demonstrates her engagement in *assessment* (Wiggins 2017) when she finds *it rather ridiculous* (line 1). The cause reflects her engagement in *corroboration* (Edwards and Potter 1992) when she compares a man who forces the hijab to be worn (line 2) and a London stabber (line 3) and that both give Islam a bad name (line 4). In this way, she manages her assessment through the engagement with corroboration. What is ridiculous for her is comparing the man who forces his children to wear hijab because their hair will attract rapists and the London stabber, but then both *give Islam a bad name* (line 4). Through the cause-effect relationship of *corroboration* and *assessment* in her post, she links Islam to misogyny and terrorism. Her discourse strengthens the conventional meanings of the hijab as a tool of women's oppression, but at the same time, she manages to delink the Islamic teachings from the Muslim women's practice of wearing the hijab; instead, she equates it with giving a bad name to Islam if some parents ask their daughters to wear hijab.

In the following extract, as the speaker, Zoey poses a question and then presents an anonymous account of an ex-Muslim, assuming the role of animator. She uses specific discursive devices to link the dichotomy of "women oppression versus women freedom" to the meanings of the hijab.

Extract 8

- (1) Choice or oppression?
- (2) "I wish I could write my story more openly, but unfortunately, I have to be anonymous.
- (3) Although I'm an ex-Muslim atheist and do not believe in hijab, I still wear it. I hate it.

- (4) I hate every second of it. I wish to be free of it, but it's not even my decision to remove it
- (5) as it would cost me my freedom.
- (6) It bothers me, women in secular countries, when they push the notion that 'the hijab is
- (7) a choice' not knowing how millions are forced to wear it."

[Zoey, T. 308]

Zoey's technique of anti-hijab discourse is narrative, as in Extract 11. She poses a rhetorical question (line 1) and engages in *corroboration* (Wiggins 2017) when she starts presenting someone else's account (line 2). This *corroboration* allows her to give a neutral position regarding the answer to the question she poses in line 1. Alongside the *corroboration*, she engages in the *narrative* (Edwards and Potter 1992) by giving the details of an account of the hijab experienced by some other anonymous lady (lines 2–7). Her engagement in the *narrative* is strategic because it offers a convincing answer to the rhetorical question (line 1). She manages to produce a strong warrant for the argument that the hijab is a tool of women's oppression (line 4). When she says that *millions are forced to wear it* (line 7), she engages in *script formulation* (Wiggins 2017), which fuses generalizability to the story and offers consensus of rebuttal to the claim that the hijab is a choice. Zoey emphasises that the Muslim women in secular countries provide the meaning of hijab as a free choice, but they ignore the millions forced to wear hijab in Muslim countries. She over-generalises the experience of the hijab as a tool of oppression by offering a story where the teller of the story does not appear in the discourse. Instead, it is managed as proof of women's oppression that the teller cannot show her identity due to the fear of being harmed. Overall her discourse attempts to revive and enhance the dichotomous meanings conventionally attached to the hijab. However, the relevant studies in the edited work of Alvi, Hudfor and McDonough (2003) have rejected all the dichotomous meanings linked to the hijab due to its ignoring of the women's agency.

The technical affordances of Facebook allowed its users to write in what length and space they wanted to write as it does not pose any word limit. Facebook also let its users network with other users where they tagged other users to their constructed posts, enabling them to disseminate their postings among many social media users even before its sharing with the others. Facebook provided the opportunity to find comrades, their interests, and their following and membership of Facebook groups which helped the users to connect with the like-minded Facebook users. The affordances of Twitter are pretty different to those of Facebook. Twitter limits its users to post within the limit of 140 words and demands their users to express them concisely and meticulously. Twitter networks ideas and topics in the form of #Tags where users express their standpoint. A trending #Tag emerges from the activity of connecting with the topic, which shows that joining with the idea or topic is given comparatively more important than connecting with the people inside Twitter. Leading stream print and electronic media mostly pick up such trending #Tags to include in the news, and the Twitter #Tags become more disseminated than the posting on Facebook. We argue that due to the affordances of Twitter, the users seemed to post more decisively on hot topics such as hijab, women's rights, terrorism and Islam etc., unlike Facebook, where the postings on similar issues seemed characterized by extended argumentation. Another difference that emerged was

the way of saying what is said on Facebook and Twitter such as Twitter users said directly and conclusively as compared to the Facebook users who seemed to integrate individual experiences giving their postings a narrative touch.

Conclusion

The conventional dichotomous meanings linked to the hijab have long been rejected by the researchers who involved Muslim women's agency in investigating how the importance of the hijab is shaped through the lived experiences with or about the hijab. At the same time, these dichotomies are reworked and reborn using specific arguments such as proclaimed bad experience of donning a hijab; and strategies such as engagement in discursive devices to construct anti-hijab discourses and manage the factuality of conventional dichotomies linked to the hijab.

The analysis in this study has shown that former Muslim atheists—as they tend to refer to themselves—leverage the affordances of Facebook and Twitter to promote and enhance an anti-hijab ideology through their argumentative written discourse that the “hijab” is a tool of women's oppression. The postings sometimes offer warrants for the claims made and sometimes provide warrants for the rebuttal of others' claim that hijab is a choice. The discursive psychological lens provides profound insights into the strategic construction of the postings to illustrate how the participants engaged in different discursive devices—corroboration, extreme case formulation, script formulation, assessment, second assessment, attribution and blame assignation. The analysis of the postings shows how the subjects' engagement with different discursive devices performed other functions: producing strong warrants/evidence for their claims and rebuttals; reducing their accountability; justifying their accusations; and proving their objectivity through which they not only assign the conventional dichotomous meaning to hijab but also urge their audience on Facebook and Twitter to view hijab through such dichotomous lens. The analysis of the postings further shows that former Muslims justify their views with the cases and stories of forced hijab to support claims of anti-hijab themes on Facebook and Twitter. The analysis identified the central argumentation of Malaysian former-Muslim women, which claims that ‘hijab is a tool of Muslim women's oppression and that the conventionally assigned dichotomous meanings to hijab were exactly what hijab means in the contemporary Muslim societies. In this way, they entirely ignore the bundles of research studies that have confirmed that the hijab subsumes a variety of much broader meanings than the false conventional dichotomies linked to the hijab.

Future research could focus on other ideologically contested discourses concerning official policies and micro-cultures in Islamic countries dealing with Islamic practices such as fasting in Ramadhan, the Islamic concept of marriage and polygamy, etcetera. This will provide insights into the conceptualisation of these practices from the former Muslims' perspectives; and the dichotomies linked to these religious practices, which might be helpful to Islamic scholars in understanding the renunciation of Islam.

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