Article

Young Muslim women on Nadiya Hussain, turbanisation and the politics of respectability: Navigating public space and Islamophobia

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Abstract

Using the changing image of British celebrity and *Great British Bake Off* winner Nadiya Hussain as a catalyst for exploration, we consider young British Muslim women's attitudes and practices towards the turbanisation of the hijab and the politics of respectability. Drawing on focus group data with young Muslim women based in London, England, we examine this sartorial practice, which Nadiya Hussain represents in her celebrity career, and argue two overlapping points. First, the adoption of a turban style of hijab is considered by our participants to be a more contemporary form of veiling, and more palatable to white and non-Muslim audiences. It is perceived to obscure their religious identity, affording them a greater level of respectability, enabling them to traverse often burdensome representations of their faith, racialisation and Islamophobia encountered in the public sphere. Second, while the turban allows for respectability in the context of white society, the women doubt if it is 'proper hijab', and thus turbanisation presents a potential challenge to their religious respectability. As such, the article contributes to theoretical debates concerning respectability and appearance, showcasing the complexity of managing the expectations of religious practice and white society for young British Muslim women. It reveals the significance of turbanisation as a tool for acquiescing and merging into the

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dominant white society for these women, and it emphasises the intersections between fashion, celebrity, religion and race.

Introduction

Nadiya Hussain's celebrity formed the focus of our research. As a second-generation British Bangladeshi and a visibly Muslim woman, Hussain has maintained her prominence as a public figure since her success on the *Great British Bake Off* (GBBO) in 2015, forging a career as a cook, writer and presenter. Notably, her style of dress and hijab changed during this time, and since 2016, she has commonly been seen in a turban-style hijab. Hussain belongs to a larger community of British Bangladeshi Muslims, a subject of growing research in Britain (Alexander, 2011). Studies have been conducted on Bangladeshi migration to British cities, including London, Luton and Birmingham, the Islamophobia they have experienced, their dress and their language practices (Rajina, 2024; Redclift et al., 2022). They have also been part of policy briefs on racial and economic inequalities (Alexander et al., 2020). Emblematic of a wider evolving community of Muslims in Britain, Hussain's celebrity, her representation and fashion choices provide a helpful way into discussions with young Muslim women about their own styling practices and evaluations of others' lives amid everyday experiences.

Located in discussions of respectability politics, religiosity, fashion and celebrity, our research explores how Muslim women experience respectability and femininity vis-a-vis their religious dress in the public sphere. We wanted to understand whether our participants felt veiling practices had shifted towards turbanisation as a means of making Islam and Muslimness more palatable and how this related to understanding respectability. Turbanising still involves wearing a headscarf wrapped in a bun and a turban, making the neck visible. We also wanted to explore the women's hijab practices and how these were informed by experiences of Islamophobia and popular culture, alongside expectations concerning religion and respectability which emanated from their own communities, families and friends.

Thus, using GBBO winner Nadiya Hussain's celebrity and public image as a catalyst for discussion, here we consider young Muslim women's attitudes towards the turbanisation of the hijab as a means of making young women's Muslim identity more ambiguous and less visible. We argue that our participants perceived this style of hijab as making Islam more palatable to a white British audience and thus affording Muslim women a greater degree of respectability. As such, it is a style of hijab that some of our participants adopted in a bid for safety and protection because it allowed them to acquiesce and merge into the dominant society in a way that disturbed the white gaze as little as possible and enabled them to navigate the public space more easily.

These discussions assist us in putting forward two overlapping points. Firstly, rather than being recognised and marked as visibly Muslim by wearing the hijab (Allen, 2014; Tarlo, 2010), our participants perceived adopting a turban style as more discreet and creating ambiguity regarding their religious identity. It offers some degree of protection from the difficult and oppressive representations of their faith amid Islamophobia and racialisation encountered in public places, allowing them to be present in ways and spaces not typically expected. Secondly, although some young women questioned whether the turban style is 'proper hijab', it is a style which nevertheless facilitated the balance of expectations between religious practice and white society. Still a form of hijab, our participants considered it a style that makes Muslim women appear more modern and thus more palatable, affording them a greater degree of respectability whilst fulfilling the requirements of their religion. Though studies on modest fashion have importantly noted different stylisations of the hijab in response to socio-cultural, economic and consumer trends (Lewis, 2015; Nistor, 2017; Tarlo, 2007), turbanisation with respect to politics of visibility of Muslimness has been little remarked upon across sociological studies.

To address this lacuna in sociology, we first introduce Nadiya Hussain and explain her celebrity status, particularly the period between her GBBO win in 2015 and when our research took place in 2019–2021. Second, we set out our theoretical framing, drawing on concepts such as white space, white gaze and respectability. Third, we outline the methods of our research. Fourth, we thematically illustrate the socio-religious complexity of the turban style of hijab held among young Muslim women, concluding with some final thoughts. Our research points to an area that has received scant coverage: how hijabi fashions, particularly turbanisation, are materially operationalised by young women to manoeuvre and navigate their presence in different social spaces.

Nadiya Hussain: *Great British Bake Off* winner

In 2015, Nadiya Hussain was crowned the winner of the BBC's *Great British Bake Off* (GBBO) television competition. A second-generation British Bangladeshi, born and brought up in Luton, she was not the first Asian contestant nor the first Muslim to participate in the show, but she was the first visibly Muslim female on the programme. She beamed into British viewers' households each week, cooking her Asian take on quintessential British recipes while wearing a black Al-Amira style hijab. This is a style of headscarf frequently worn by Muslim women in Western contexts, often dark in colour, which 'consists of two pieces – a larger headscarf and a smaller scarf that resembles a tube cap' (Keeble, 2016, p. 70) covering a woman's hair, ears, neck and chest.

Heralded by the British press, both tabloid and broadsheet, as a representation of inclusivity and diversity, her success in what was considered 'a thoroughly British competition' was widely acclaimed, her positioning as a visible Muslim woman deemed '"proof" that "Britishness" is a broader and more open concept than some would like us to think' (Aly, 2015, n.p.). Subsequently, Hussain was invited to several high-profile engagements, including making the official cake for the Queen's 90th birthday

celebration. Her image became an icon of multiculturalism (Saha, 2021), and she became a household name.

Hussain underwent a style transformation in her transition from housewife to celebrity (Rauwerda, 2020). Rather than wearing the black Al-Amira style, since 2016, she typically featured in a turban style hijab, initially dark in colour and over time much brighter, coordinating with her outfits, allowing her neck, earrings and, in some instances, her hair to be visible. Her makeup also changed, becoming more noticeable; her nails were painted in rainbow colours, and her clothing frequently revealed her wrists, forearms and body shape. Though there may be subjective reasons for this changing image, not least her experiences on the GBBO and her success, Hussain's celebrity and public representation in itself is potentially significant in terms of how her audience understands and relates to her, and thus became the focus for this research. The change in her hijab style, the unveiling of her body, if not all her hair, and the general playfulness of her dress led some to suggest that her image was more cosmopolitan and less conservative (Rauwerda, 2020), with the effect of lessening the focus on her Muslimness and enabling her to sustain and develop her celebrity.[1]

The move away from wearing black is particularly intriguing as it is a colour that conjures a specific reading of Muslims. Tarlo's (2007, p. 161) work suggests black 'has become associated with a particular type of austere and dreary interpretation of Islam' and used as an 'obvious and visual shorthand for and stereotype of "Muslim"' (2007, p. 155). Moving away from wearing black, then, could be understood as distancing Hussain's image from stereotypical representations and the contradictory hegemonic discourses which configure the hijabed Muslim woman 'as both victim in need of saving, and complicit in a backward, dangerous religion' (Bibi, 2022, p. 710) mobilised, for example, in the portrayal of Shamima Begum in 2019 (Rajina, 2021). More broadly, developments in her styling raise questions about the extent to which Hussain's Muslim identity sits at the forefront of her celebrity profile. While her television series, books and interviews continue to focus on her Bangladeshi heritage and her South Asian take on British cuisine, the turbanisation of her hijab means perhaps that her Muslimness is somewhat obscured, thus facilitating a celebrity image which is more marketable to a white, non-Muslim, British audience.

Theoretical framework

Key features in our participants' discussions were the entwined notions of palatability, visibility and practices of religion, fashion and space. These issues come together in the concept of respectability politics. Although under-theorised, respectability politics has a long history, emerging from the writing of Higginbotham (1993) and her observations concerning the lived experiences of African American Pentecostal women in the late twentieth century (e.g. Bauer, 2018; White, 2015). Higginbotham's work reveals how, in response to suspicion and marginalisation, Black women emulate the etiquette and behaviour of white women to demonstrate their obedience to the dominant culture, that is, white middle-class norms and values, in their bid for respectability. As judgements of respectability typically centre on public behaviour, emphasis is placed on disciplining

speech, gestures, clothing, posture, and other ways the body can be coerced into comply-ing with social norms (Dazey, 2021, p. 582). The body is critical as a site for constructing and communicating identity and the embodiment of social understandings, expectations and practices which confer respectability. Green and Singleton (2016, p. 121) state, '[w]omen must regulate and be responsible for their bodies and strive to maintain embodied respectability' while the work of Mirza (2013) and Bibi (2022) speaks to the significance of embodied intersectionality for Muslim women, arguing that emphasis should be placed on how differences are projected onto and read through the body.

This is evident in everyday public spaces: bodies that fail to adhere to normative rules are stigmatised and othered (Appleford, 2016; Bibi, 2022; Cohen, 1997). Writing about the 'White Space', Anderson (2015, p. 10) remarks that 'wider society is still replete with overwhelmingly white neighbourhoods, restaurants, schools, universities, workplaces . . . a situation that reinforces a normative sensibility in settings in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present. In turn, blacks typically approach such spaces with care.' Anderson elaborates that a 'dance' happens: 'in effect they perform to be accepted' to show that 'ghetto stereotypes do not apply to them', which could mean 'dressing well, speaking in an educated way' (p. 13). The white space that Anderson writes about encompasses the white gaze, which Fanon (1967/2008) theo-rised as producing a 'racial epidermal schema' of which the Black body is inscribed and objectified. Weighed down by the white gaze, the white imaginary, 'The Black body is constructed as antithetical' to the white body, which is deemed as 'the transcendental norm, the good, the innocent, and the pure' (Yancy, 2016, p. xxx). Like Anderson and Yancy, Puwar (2004) also draws on Fanon (1967/2008) and discusses the white gaze that objectifies Black and Brown bodies in white spaces such as parliament and the civil service, where they are deemed 'out of place'. Black and Brown Muslim women who wear the hijab further confront intersectionally (Mirza, 2013) the gendering and raciali-sation of religion when in white spaces and under the white gaze, causing them inclu-sions and exclusions depending on how they are situated and how their corporeality and clothing are read.

Moreover, racialisation and the politics of respectability converge. As Dazey (2021) argues in her work on French Muslim communities, it is important to recognise that respectability politics exist not only between the dominant society and the marginalised group but also at a local level. Highlighting, as other sociologists have (Appleford, 2020; Skeggs, 1997), the critical role class plays, Dazey suggests that among the oppressed, those who are socially privileged reinforce group hierarchies to distance and differentiate themselves from their (unrespectable) counterparts. Although it is crucial to consider the exercising of power by the dominant group, just as significant is the mobilising of 'power and privilege within oppressed communities to gain rights for those deemed "deserving"' (Cohen, 1997, p. 575).

Moreover, what is considered respectable shifts between cultures, ethnicities and reli-gions, and these different understandings of respectability shape how the body is viewed and gazed upon (Puwar, 2004). Although the hijab may be a source of stigmatisation within the dominant white society, not wearing a hijab can equally be a source of unre-spectability within some Muslim communities. In striving for respectability, members of

marginalised groups are not necessarily constrained by dominant societal norms. Still, they can draw on expectations mobilised by other social systems such as faith and tradition. Further, while marginalised people may seek respectability, that does not mean they look to 'completely erase their "difference"' (Dazey, 2021, p. 589) or renounce their heritage and identity. Some Muslims may adopt styles of dress which are fashionable or considered more modern or liberal, but this does not mean they 'relinquish their religious faith' (p. 589). Rather, respectability politics are about hybridity, shared culture and 'complicated understandings of intentionality' (p. 589). As our participants conveyed, it is about managing the demands of white society and religious identity at individual and collective levels. Arguably, the turban style is vital in managing respectability for young Muslim women.

Methods and data

Our study took a qualitative approach. Focus groups were our primary data collection method. The advantage of focus groups is that they offer space to explore the 'tacit, uncodified, and experiential knowledge, as well as the opinions and meanings of the participants' (Johnson, 1996, pp. 521–523 cited in Hopkins, 2007, pp. 528–529). They create opportunities for interactions between participants and the moderator. We had 10 participants take part in three focus groups. As the sample size is small, findings are not generalisable and it is a limitation of the study. Despite this, the small size of focus groups was better than individual interviews because of the similarities, differences and collective experiences shared. The focus groups were initially held in-person at our university and then moved online during the pandemic. This affected variations of privacy, reading of body language and dis/comfort. Strengths were rapport-building and sharing of in-depth experiences.

Throughout the focus groups, we utilised celebrity images of Nadiya Hussain taken between 2015 and 2021 to generate and encourage discussions which could not be brought about by questions alone. Our opening question, accompanied by her image, was, what do you know about Nadiya Hussain, the *Great British Bake Off* winner in 2015? All our participants knew about her to some degree. This question was followed by: In what ways is her identity as a Muslim important? Who else do you consider a public Muslim female figure? These raised interesting answers, such as Dina Tokio (hijabi blogger), Ilhan Omar (politician), Leah Vernon (model and influencer) and Halima Aden (activist and model), revealing participants' knowledge of the modest/fashion world and veiling among public figures. Other questions were: In what ways do you think Nadiya Hussain being a 'visible Muslim' is important? How has her image changed since being on *Bake Off*? What do you think motivates changes in hijab style? How do you decide to wear the hijab? What influences that decision? In what ways does that contribute towards an understanding of visibility or not? We explored the women's practices and experiences from these questions.

Participants were aged 18–25 and of various ethnic backgrounds, including Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Afghan, Somali and Sudanese. They all identified as Muslim, and across the groups had different styling practices and habits, which they discussed. Three intimated that they had worn the hijab in a turban style on occasions, some wore hijabs

during the research, and some did not. As the research highlighted, practices around hijab wearing were not static and though none of the participants wore a turban style hijab in the focus groups this did not mean they had not tried the style out or had not thought to.

The women were home students recruited from a London university, where the three researchers worked as academics. The university has a high number of first-generation students, with just over 50% from Black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds. A high number of them live and commute from home, and the university is located in an area where over two-thirds of the residents are white. Participants were approached through a snowball and convenience sampling system, although we were mindful not to approach potential participants we were teaching at the time because of power imbalances and hierarchies (Gani & Khan, 2024). Our research processes were approved by the University Faculty Ethics Committee and all participants gave informed consent.

As authors, we are from different socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds and have research interests in various areas of sociology, resulting in rich discussions and varied readings of our data collection and analysis (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002). After much debate, we have not declared our ethnic, racial and religious identities here. We question the value of these types of positionality statements in mitigating the unequal power dynamics and hierarchies with our participants (Gani & Khan, 2024). Nonetheless, we acknowledge the importance of reflexivity to qualitative research. Throughout the project, we were mindful of how power hierarchies can exist between participants and researchers and thus carefully considered how we should approach participants and conduct the focus groups (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). For example, we discussed who should lead the introduction of the topic and facilitate questions for discussion within each focus group. We made use of warm-up exercises and discussed ground rules for the conversation. In-person focus groups were held in a private neutral space on campus, and we chose to sit amongst/between the students rather than as a panel. Where it seemed appropriate, we offered some instances of self-disclosure (Farquhar & Das, 1999).

Our data analysis took a thematic approach. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) model, we familiarised ourselves with the data and generated initial codes, upon which we searched, reviewed and defined key themes (p. 87). Our approach to the data analysis was working independently and then together to code and discuss our data and analysis. Thus, we present four key themes. Firstly, Nadiya Hussain as a visible Muslim in British society, and her changing stylisation of the hijab is explored, followed secondly by the notion of 'proper hijab'. Thirdly, the rise of the hijabista and turbanisation and, finally, turbanisation as a form of protection and acquiescing into mainstream white society. These themes capture young women's perspectives on hijabing, marked as a visible form of religious dress and expression and informed by racialisation and respectability. They also highlight the global reach of changing hijabi fashions and young women's views on incorporating these or not.

Nadiya Hussain – visibly Muslim

Although Hussain has commented in interviews that she 'struggled' with the emphasis the media placed on her Muslim identity, there can be little doubt that the 'Nadiya-mania' which ensued from her success on the GBBO (Mapstone, 2017, n.p.) was related to her

being British-Bangladeshi, and her wearing the hijab. Mirza (2012) suggests there is a preoccupation in the media with veiled Muslim women and Hussain's status as a 'hijabi' was significant for our participants too. In fact, despite there being several Muslim women in the public eye, our respondents separately suggested few are as well-known as Nadiya Hussain. Though their recognition of her was due to her successful television career, as they explained, it was primarily driven by her being visibly Muslim in the white space:

Fahmida: She is the only Muslim woman in the public eye, British Muslim, that's quite cool . . . She's very brave . . . I mean, I don't even look visibly Muslim, but I don't think I could ever step into white spaces. It's called the *Great British Bake Off*, it's like a racist joke waiting to happen.

Fawzia: She's the first hijabi British Muslim on the *Great British Bake Off*, and to have won was a big deal for the Muslim community.

Marzana: There's not a lot of hijabis [in the public eye] that I can use as an example, only Nadiya to be honest.

Khadeja, Marzana and Noor described Hussain as 'inspirational' due to her ability to balance her career and family life and for Fahmida, just as important was her 'bravery' for entering the public arena as a hijabed Muslim woman. Fahmida's comments illustrated that Hussain's win and presence on screen is a rare example of a 'hijabi' taking up space on mainstream British television and on a programme which predominantly celebrates white culture. In a recent interview, Hussain herself suggested: 'there's no one in this industry who looks like me . . . I have felt that I didn't belong. People have said I don't belong, people have said this is not your space' (Hussain, 2023). Our participants recognised that entering this space brings risks because it involves confronting racial and religious stereotypes and requires accepting a level of public scrutiny and interrogation. This is highlighted in an exchange between Fahmida and Fawzia:

Fahmida: Some of the interviews I've watched, I feel like she has to defend herself. Because, when she talks about how she got an arranged marriage, you know? She was sitting with a bunch of English ladies, and they're all like 'my God, arranged marriage?'

Fawzia: Because she's under, like, a constant like magnifying glass, they're always waiting for her, like, to do something so they can scrutinise her and just comment, they're just waiting for her fall.

According to Turner (2004), the very nature of celebrity means that there is increased media interest in an individual's personal life, often over and above their professional career. For Nadiya Hussain, this has meant her Muslimness has become a source of public intrigue and one which, at times, has resulted in personal political injury. In 2016, for example, it was reported that she required police protection following threats from Islamophobic trolling (Watson, 2016). Representation comes with a political burden, which, in turn, presents itself as a spectacle (Hall, 1997). Hussain is called upon to share and deliberate on personal matters involving her life and upbringing,

particularly concerning her Asian and Muslim identities (see Hussain's memoir *Finding My Voice* 2019).

Arguably, her wearing of a hijab largely motivates this particular line of interrogation. The specific obsessive curiosity about her arranged marriage is one such example. The questions that emanate often reflect a general discourse around the hijab. Emphasis is repeatedly placed on Hussain being 19 when she married and having only met her husband the day before her wedding, arranged by her father and father-in-law. These circumstances have led media personalities to question the extent to which her marriage was her choice. Ghumman and Ryan (2013) argue, 'hijabs are likely to be stigmatized due to their affiliation with Muslims, a group that is so often associated with negative stereotypes, . . . Muslim females are stereotypically seen as docile, submissive, sexually chaste, religiously conservative, exotic and oppressed' (p. 673). Consequently, knowing that she is likely to be confronted by these questions as a hijabed Muslim woman, Hussain's perceived willingness to be visible and to publicly challenge this discrimination is seen by our participants as courageous, and evidence of her bravery.

A potential consequence of this bravery, however, is that it creates the expectation of being, as Khadeja suggested, a 'spokesperson' and a representative for all Muslims. Hussain herself has commented that she has felt pressure to be publicly answerable for any event that is seen to involve the Muslim community, and for our participants, this is one of the reasons they suggest ordinary Muslim women choose not to wear the hijab.

> Fahmida: I think women might not like it [wearing the hijab] because they don't want to feel like a spokesperson, a representative, like they have to defend themselves . . . If people ask 'why do you wear the hijab or why do you not wear the hijab?' Sometimes there's not such a deep answer, it's just 'I wear it because it's part of my religion' or 'I don't wear it because I don't want to.'

The questioning over the choice to wear the hijab is something the young women recalled Hussain having to face, noting that she, like them, tended to provide mundane responses suggesting she wears it to 'cover up her bad hair' (Sanghani, 2016) to deflect personal intrusion. Despite this public media scrutiny, our participants felt that Hussain was able to 'go against the stereotype where they say Muslim women are oppressed, . . . she doesn't seem that oppressed' (Khadeja), presenting herself instead as happy and content. She was an important role model for our participants, and one they suggested inspired other young Muslim women to 'not stay in the shadows'.

Here, the arguments of Ghumkhor (2020) concerning the 'desirable Muslim subject' provide a possible insight. She argues that across public life, there has been increased visibility of the hijab wearer, whose 'sole preoccupation' is to dispel, shatter, challenge, and rupture Western and stereotypical understandings of the hijab and Muslim women. These women, Ghumkhor claims,

> accrue social capital by positioning themselves, or are positioned in media coverage, as exceptional voices. Their talent, self-empowerment, uniqueness and visibility . . . invested in the stereotype of the hijabed Muslim woman. In the paranoid gaze of the Muslim question, their

efforts aim to humanise Muslim women, to educate the world of Islam's relatability (and therefore, compatibility) as a religion of peace and individual empowerment. To be human is to be visible, transparent and have nothing to hide. (p. 237)

This is a pertinent point to consider, as it suggests the very exceptionalisation of Nadiya Hussain cements her position as less transgressive and instead locates the burden of representation (of Islam and of being a Muslim/woman) on her. Ghumkhor's work denotes there is a fixation on wanting to humanise the Muslim woman for the consumption of the white gaze and make her legible. Yet, this legibility must occur within a framework deemed appropriate by the (white) audience and predicated on the alleged transgressive pushing of boundaries, typically coded as having freedom. For example, Hussain uses her hijab as an important symbol of her Muslim identity and a source of empowerment. This can be considered to represent something of a new perspective around the (re)configurations of the hijab increasingly demonstrated by young Muslim women. This new approach to the hijab, including its turbanisation, seeks to embrace it as a means of identity construction and expression whilst still recognising the hostility that being visibly Muslim can bring (Nistor, 2017, p. 61).

While our participants considered Hussain to be embracing the hijab, they also felt her style transformation since 2016 was quite striking. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their discussions led to speculation about Hussain's agency and subjectivity, as well as the significance of the media in her changing image.

> Fahmida: I wonder if it was more of a personal choice or if she was styled that way . . . I don't know if she made that decision that 'I think I'll look more approachable if I style myself like this' or if she doesn't have a choice because people are styling her that way, like when she makes like public appearances.

Rojek's (2001) work helps to note that Hussain's image is one of celebrity, and thus 'carefully mediated', involving a host of cultural intermediaries centred on creating and maintaining an enduring appeal (p. 10). Her image will, therefore, seek to balance dominant ideologies and alternative and oppositional views held by sections of the audience (Dyer, 1979). Marzana reflected that making sense of Hussain's transformation was complex. It involved many different tensions: empowerment, fashion, religious practice and protection from Islamophobia.

> Marzana: I think she feels it's what she's comfortable with, and most probably she thinks the hijab is, 'as long as I've covered my hair'. I think she's wearing it in a way that looks pretty . . . fashionable, but at the same time, she still wants to follow Islam and be covered up . . . As a British Muslim, she wants to balance both cultures . . . and sort of not look like Shamima Begum . . . with that full-on garment . . . near my house the lady there wears the full burka with the niqab. She's a lovely lady, but she suffers harassment because of her garment . . . But if they maybe saw her like that [as Nadiya is dressed], they wouldn't bother her as much.

Like Marzana, other participants surmised that by adopting the turban style, which they described as a more 'fashionable' look, Hussain would be perceived as more 'liberal' and 'modern'. Unlike Marzana's neighbour, Nadiya Hussain was in her place. Her being 'out of place' (Puwar, 2004) is 'overcome by a performance, a negotiation' through her stylisation of dress (Anderson, 2015, p. 13). The turban style infers mainstream values and norms, making her image more respectable, her Muslimness obscured. Although this style of hijab allows for greater respectability amongst a white audience, our participants suggested it fell short of religious expectations and was not 'proper hijab'.

'Proper hijab'

Across our conversations, the women often referred to the notion of 'proper hijab' as they collectively explored the tensions they experienced between the demands of faith, family and wider Muslim community, white British society, and the growing influence of popular culture, celebrity and social media.

> Sania: . . . I think, when you see someone like Nadiya on the TV and the way that she's changed her hijab, it sort of makes young Muslim women watching like, 'Oh, she's wearing it in this way, I can too'; because she is your public figure, the one that you can look up to. Otherwise, you have to turn to your own community and see the way that they're doing it and if they're all wearing it in one style, a proper full hijab, then you can't really break away from that and wear a turban style. But now that we have public figures doing that, it makes it more okay to transition to that style.

Sania's comments represented a general view that Hussain's turban style was not 'full' or 'proper hijab'. Several stated that wearing the hijab in a way that allows a woman's neck, ears and hair to be seen does not fulfil religious expectations. It is not 'correct', citing this as one of the reasons that some of them chose not to adopt this style.

> Noor: . . . I feel, just because it's [the turban style] not actually like hijab, you're not fulfilling what it's meant to be worn as. It didn't feel comfortable for me, wearing it as a turban.

Though comments concerning the 'proper hijab' feature in other academic works (Lewis, 2013; Moors, 2013), it is not a concept concerning young Muslim women's everyday practice that has been fully explored. When the notion of 'proper hijab' emerged, participants indicated that this was a concept which featured in conversations with parents, 'family' or 'the community', and when asked to explain more, their discussions turned to their knowledge and understanding of Islamic principles. They understood 'proper hijab' as concerned with modesty, requiring full coverage of a woman's hair, neck and other parts of the body. Though some observed that the turban is a common style of hijab in specific regions, such as Qatar, reflecting Lane (1984 cited in Ruby, 2006) and Siraj's (2011) claims that hijab practices differ across regimes, there was a collective view in our focus groups that the turban style hijab does not meet the necessary criteria of 'proper hijab'.

Soraya: The idea of wearing the hijab is to protect yourself and also cover your-
                 self and that doesn't just mean covering your hair, that also means cov-
                 ering your neck, covering your arms to a certain length, so I think it's
                 from the wrist up, that's not supposed to be shown and also from the
                 ankles, anything above the ankles, that's not supposed to be shown.
                 But, in the form of a turban that obviously defeats the purpose because
                 the neck is being shown, so I'm not saying it's the wrong way but the
                 whole traditional way of wearing the hijab would be to cover the hair
                 and the neck.

Soraya noted how the hijab should be worn in the traditional way, which connoted
respectability and adherence to full body coverage, excluding hands and face. To be
respectable means operating properly and ensuring that an individual holds the correct
values and behaves in the right way (Skeggs, 1997). Still, as explanations of proper hijab
indicated, these judgements of respectability sit within the context of Islam and religios-
ity rather than respectability in terms of palatability. The participants drew on binary
constructions thus reifying them as a way to explain Muslim women's behaviours. In that
sense, the focus group discussions revealed different understandings and practices of
respectability that were at play and the potential conflict these young women faced
around adopting the hijab and its styling, not to mention the introspective nature of
young Muslim women's veiling practices.

Khadeja: For me, I feel more comfortable in my hijab than I do without it and it's
                 not because, don't get me wrong, I'm not completely religious, like
                 there's a lot I need to improve, but it's the fact that I just want to wear
                 it, it brings me closer to my religion but it's also the aspects of my
                 religion.

As others suggest (Appleford, 2020; Entwistle, 2023; Tseëlon, 1995), clothing can often
operate as a form of protection or armour in everyday social encounters, providing the
wearer with emotional and social support as they go about their daily lives. Khadeja's
comments echoed this argument, wearing her hijab provided comfort and religious
practice.

   Soraya's comment regarding the 'traditional way' of wearing the hijab highlighted the
slippage which exists between 'traditional' and 'proper'. These terms were often used in
conjunction with one another and set in contrast to modern and liberal. Hawkins (2011)
explains that specifying the formal difference when writing about the distinction between
traditional and non-traditional hijab is difficult, as there may be no essential criteria.
Such a distinction is, however, meaningful in everyday discourse and certainly amongst
our participants, there was a general understanding that a black hijab that entirely covers
a woman's hair, ears and neck was more traditional. In contrast, the turban, especially
one that is brighter in colour, was perceived as more modern.

   In discussing 'proper hijab', our participants were keen not to be seen to judge fellow
Muslim women because they decided to wear the hijab or to wear it in a particular way.
Neither did they appear to mobilise the notion of 'proper hijab' to demonstrate their

piousness, which was revealed in their candid conversations about their own relationships and practices around the hijab. Rather, the topic allowed the women to share their understandings of the Quran and reflect on differences in practice across ethnicities, regions, families and generations. They reflected on competing attitudes around styles of religious dress and respectability that are shaped by content and audience. Participants felt individual choice was important, reflecting the discourse of empowerment, which, as already discussed, surrounds Nadiya Hussain's wearing of the hijab. This was demonstrated in comments made separately by Marzana, Sania and Samia.

> Marzana: . . . it's the individual choice of the person whether she wants to wear it or not and no-one should really like pressure her into wearing it.
>
> Sania: . . . it clearly states in the Quran that it's a woman's personal journey, it's her own choice. It's not for pleasing of others . . . To give someone hate about what they want to do as a person, I feel it's not right . . . it's the individual choice of the person, like, the woman, whether she wants to wear it or not.
>
> Samia: I was never told to start wearing [it] . . . it was a personal choice.

Under-scoring these comments is a sensitivity around judgement that may, in part, be a result of the makeup of the focus groups, as each included young women who wear the hijab, those who do not, those who wear it only in certain spaces, and women who wear it in a range of different styles. The young women were eager not to offend each other during discussions, which we reflected on as researchers. The mix of participants may have led some women not to speak as openly. Likewise, the diversity in the focus groups offered space for reflective accounts from the women of their own personal relationship with the hijab, discussing how they had previously worn it and now chose not to, for example. Others noted what the hijab meant or how they wanted to wear it but did not feel ready yet. Here, 'proper hijab' features again as an aspiration, with some suggesting that the turban style can be a stepping stone towards 'proper hijab'.

> Fawzia: A lot of Muslims feel like if you're wearing the turban and your neck is showing or hair's out you might as well not wear it at all, but it's the fact that everyone starts off somewhere, because it's hard to go from no hijab to a hijab, so it starts with turban, then it's a hijab, and Inshallah one day, it could be an niqab or jilbab . . . If you're a hijabi lady you're obviously, you have a role in this world . . . you wouldn't go clubbing because you wear a hijab, you wouldn't smoke because you wear a hijab, you wouldn't be showing affection in public spaces because you wear a hijab.

In Fawzia's comments, notions of respectability and religiosity intersect in the practice of wearing the hijab. Wearing the hijab is concerned with faith and religious respectability. Siraj (2011) argues it is a choice motivated by religion and offers women the 'ability to guard their reputation' (p. 724). Women can control what is seen, disrupting the male gaze. It also mobilises particular social expectations of how a woman will behave, their

attitudes, values and practices amongst other Muslims. Whilst there is not always congruence between social expectations and practices, as many of the young women told us they see hijabi women smoking and using foul language, the hijab connoted respectability because there is an association made between appearance and manner, just as there is shame and surveillance should a woman transgress socio-religious expectations while wearing the hijab (Finch, 1993; Sharma, 2024). Simultaneously, the hijab visibly marks these women as Muslim in non-Muslim environments (Siraj, 2011, p. 724), which has the potential to lessen levels of respectability in these settings. This is demonstrated by the incidents of racism our young women experienced, as discussed further below. Siraj (2011) contends 'the hijab as an embodiment of modesty is related to spatial relations: it offers women the opportunity to assert themselves in religious practice . . . but it can also be seen to restrict women's mobility and freedom in public spaces' (p. 716).

The personal stories from participants about their relationships with the hijab challenged the idea that 'Muslim women living in Western secular societies do not necessarily associate it with Islam religiosity' (Nistor, 2017, p. 62). Participants identified a religious aspect of veiling and viewed the freedom to choose as critical while acutely aware of the consequences of wearing the hijab in particular spaces. In the discussions, the women considered the significant role social space and the social audience played in their decision-making. They reflected on the role of fashion and social influencers. Their sartorial decisions on how and where to wear the hijab, if at all, were highly complex and fluid (Williams & Vashi, 2007) because these decisions can mark an individual as an insider or outsider of white society and the Muslim community (Nistor, 2017; Zempi, 2016).

Hijabistas and turbanisation

This emphasis on choice and agency and the notion that the hijab is a symbol of religiosity but also group affiliation, visibility and values are reflected in a broader hijabing movement (Lewis, 2013; Nistor, 2017; Tarlo, 2010; Williams & Kamaludeen, 2017), tied to the rise of Islamic cosmopolitanism as young Muslim women increasingly engage with global fashion styles whilst still adhering to principles of modest dress and Islamic dress codes. The Internet, and particularly social media, has forged a digital space where faith and fashion coexist (Akou, 2015; Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017), enabling a younger generation to blend Muslim dress with global styles, creating fashions that are personal, contemporary and still religious (Williams & Kamaludeen, 2017). An Islamic culture industry has emerged, comprising retailers, brands and media and marketed explicitly to Muslim women, cultivating styles which are 'urban and cosmopolitan . . . powerful and trendy' and maintain religiosity (Hassan & Harun, 2016, p. 479).

Within this landscape sits the hijabista, a portmanteau term formed from the words hijab and fashionista. Described as 'Muslim women who dress "stylishly" while still adhering to the rules governing "modest" apparel that coincides with the Islamic dress code' (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017, p. 850) the hijabista's identity centres on the sartorial negotiation or 'hybrid' between contemporary fashion looks and Islamic modesty, and using social media platforms (e.g. YouTube, TikTok) to disseminate ideas and advice on how to style the hijab (Hassan & Harun, 2016). Well known hijabistas include Dina

Tokio, Leah Vernon and Hana Tajima, all Muslim women mentioned by participants, all of whom have popularised the turban style.

This general creativity around the stylisation of the hijab has, however, conjured some reproach as audiences wrestle with the seeming contradiction between modesty, conspicuous consumption and fashion. And as mainstream fashion incorporates hair wraps and turban caps in their latest trends, the distinction between fashion accessories and religious practice is increasingly blurred. Moreover, the turban is not the only way in which hijabistas have recast the possibilities of reworking the hijab style. Hijabistas such as Leah Vernon and Hana Tajima have been seen wearing the hijab under berets, fedoras and bucket hats.

Haleema: . . . there's a few people I follow on TikTok . . . they wear the hijab and then they wear like a beanie. It makes it look cool and then I see people, one side of the hijab is left really long so it goes all the way down to like her waist, so then people are like, 'Oh my God, I thought it was your hair because it matches the same colour', so it's creating this illusion.

Wearing the hijab in this way mobilises tension between religiosity and fashionability, as the criticisms of these fashionistas indicate, and further raises the issue of visibility, as fashion accessories and styles make the hijabed women's Muslim identity more obscure. Easat-Daas (2020) notes, for example, how Muslim women in Belgium and France wear the beret not to comply with the latest fashion trends but because the women are compelled to reconfigure veiling in alternative ways (p. 126). In a context where veils are banned in public spaces, these women use the nation-state's acceptable cultural references, such as the beret, to shift the paradigm, effectively inserting themselves into the nation's imaginings and minimising encounters with Islamophobia.

Acquiescing and merging into the dominant society

Rather than being subversive, then, the hijabistas might be understood as attempting to acquiesce and merge into the dominant society in a way that disturbs the white gaze as little as possible. The turban can help restrain the fears some groups may hold about Muslim women by making them appear more ambiguous. As Mirza (2013, p. 6) suggests, bodies become 'fearsome' through the association of signs that stick to them, as has been the case with Muslims. Thus, through turbanisation, the Muslim woman can mobilise a sign which might be read as Sikh or Pan-African or as embodying other identities, allowing for a further dilution of their Muslimness to reduce the fear. These women, however, are not seen as embodying a white identity. Interestingly, Piela (2015) discusses in her work on white convert Muslim women that those who adopt the niqab are no longer read as white women since they are perceived to have crossed the boundary of whiteness. This attempt to contain others' fear simultaneously offers some degree of protection to Muslim women. By styling the hijab differently, participants can navigate the public space, as explained in the exchange between Noor, Fahmida and Fawzia.

Noor: . . . I know when attacks or things that are related to terrorism extrem-
               ism happen my mum out of fear would be like, 'wear your hijab in a
               turban style or to keep bad things away from yourself'. She would say
               'don't wear the proper thing, just wear it as a turban so people don't
               come at you', because the turban isn't actually related to a religion or
               attached to a religion like the hijab.
Fahmida: I think it's more ambiguous, it could be worn to protect your hair, pro-
               ject a style, I mean men wear turbans.
Fawzia: It's easier to not be identified when you're wearing a turban because
               people don't know what you are. So, with the headscarf, straightaway
               you're a Muslim, whereas with a turban it's 'is she a Muslim? Is she
               another religion? Is she just like a fashion blogger?' You just feel safer.

In addition to physical safety, the choice of styling and decisions over when and where
to wear the hijab are driven by a need for psychological and emotional safety too.

Haleema: I go to Jummah every Friday . . . I wear the jilbab so it's not just a hijab,
               it's one piece from head to toe and I can sense the difference in people's
               responses to me; just from crossing the road I can see people are giving
               me looks and they treat you differently . . . I think it's why it's so dif-
               ficult for a lot of young Muslim girls to commit to wearing the hijab in
               our society because there's so much stigma. I can understand fully why
               maybe wearing the turban is a way of balancing that and maybe more
               pleasing for others. I think that they sort of want to blend in and feel like
               they want to fit into society in that way, . . .with the hijab they'll stand
               out more.

Although the practice of turbanisation can be understood within the discourse of empow-
erment and choice, fashion and subversion, this exchange highlighted how turbanisation
was used to address the burden of representation, diminishing the faith aspect of identity.
It demonstrates how the turban is more easily consumed. The appropriation of a turban
allows Muslim women to move in and around white spaces more easily and, to a greater
extent, go unnoticed, to be seen without being fully seen, providing a degree of safety.
Since Fanon (1967/2008), scholars have theorised whiteness and its continued hierarchi-
cal effects in relation to various aspects of social life (Ware, 1992), including the effects
that the somatic norm – the universalisation of white androcentricity – has on how Black
and Brown bodies can occupy institutional and everyday spaces (Puwar, 2004).
Turbanisation provided participants with flexibility in their (re)presentation in the public
sphere, enabling protection from overt and targeted Islamophobia, but, as already dis-
cussed, it raised questions about compromising their religiosity and Muslim identity.

Concluding thoughts

By researching young British Muslim women's sartorial worlds and their reading of
Nadiya Hussain, our article demonstrates the significance of turbanisation as a tool for

acquiescing and merging into dominant white society, and it reveals the complex inter-sections which occur between religion, race, fashion and celebrity. Our discussions expose some of the tensions which exist for these young women between religious and perceived secular norms and how racialisation of religion can mark individuals and groups as different. The project underlines fashion and popular culture's significant role in demarcating and reifying social identities and the complexities of everyday material cultures. Indeed, the research illustrates how the study of fashion and celebrity can offer a valuable intellectual vantage point for intersectional analyses and research.

Exploring Nadiya Hussain's changing image offered us a way into essential discus-sions with young British Muslim women about their hijab practice and how it is informed by fashion, celebrity, religion, safety and space. Discussions revealed the turban as a more modern style of hijab, read as less conservative and more liberal, which can enable entry into the white space. It mobilises an image and (re)presentation of the self that is more ambiguous, approachable and palatable, consequently lessening the intensity of the white gaze, and affording some degree of respectability. Although respectability can never be fully achieved, as differences cannot be entirely erased, and the consequences of racialisation are always present (Dazey, 2021), turbanisation offers the potential for Muslim women to navigate social spaces with greater safety.

In this way, our research corresponds with and contributes to the work of Higginbotham (1993), Skeggs (1997), Green and Singleton (2016) and Dazey (2021) by demonstrating how appearance, specifically the styling of the hijab, is mobilised by young British Muslim women in a bid for greater legitimacy and protection from real threats and social harm. Yet, as the act of wearing a (turbanised) hijab is often racialised, these women can never fully embody a legitimised performance in the white space. Instead, respectability presents itself, as Skeggs (1997, p. 100) argues, as a garment that does not fit, 'designed for someone with a different body'. These young women are compelled to engage in a 'dance', as Anderson's (2015) work suggests, often weighed down by the white gaze and the white imaginary and the conflicts that turbanisation creates in respect of religiosity, religious obligations and the wearing of 'proper hijab'.

With respect to this final point, the project also raises areas for further research. Firstly, the notion of 'proper hijab' needs closer consideration. As our work here high-lights, it presents as a relatable point of common understanding amongst young British Muslim women. However, it is a concept that academic research has yet to explore fully. Secondly, there needs to be a closer examination of how young Muslim women are informed by celebrity and public figures to provide a fuller understanding of the intersec-tions between religion, popular culture, celebrity and fashion, and how other fashion styles may be employed to navigate the white space. Thirdly, we query how audiences and everyday people respond to different stylisations of the hijab, including the turban. Different methods may uncover how intersections of beauty, religion, race and dress generate social un/ease in interactions in places such as the school drop-off or the work-place (see Lewis and Aune, 2023).

Finally, whilst we concede that the number of participants in this project is low, and, as already acknowledged, our findings are not generalisable, our article offers a valuable contribution, for it illustrates how everyday clothing is not just everyday clothing. Societal influences and norms and their associated inclusions and exclusions have

significant material effects, and thus, what may be understood as a simple piece of cloth also carries important embodied, inscribed and resisted meanings.

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Note

1. Interestingly, since our project concluded her image has changed again and Nadiya Hussain has been featured wearing a hijab which drapes down and covers her ears, neck and hairline, as in her UNICEF appeal in March 2023.

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