Unveiling Agency: Investigating Muslim Women's Agency in Hijab Discourse through Positioning Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The central premise of this article is that of all approaches to veiling, discourse analysis has a particular potential of demonstrating its multifaceted nature. Drawing on interviews from South African Muslim women, the study investigates one of the most polarizing aspects of veiling—the agency of hijab-donning women. Because its constitution protects public veiling, South Africa offers women the freedom to define their own hijab practices without legal compulsion or prohibition, providing an ideal context in which to explore hijabi agency. Often simplified in social and political studies for their lack of attention to language mediating women's experience, here veiling is examined via *positioning analysis*. With its focus on how individuals situate themselves and others in discourse, positioning analysis reveals complex mechanisms of identity construction. The findings illustrate participants' commitment to 'new veiling', as they seek to construct and maintain agentic identities while the intersecting structures of power, religion, and culture constrain these efforts, highlighting how contested agency in veiling is. Ultimately, the article shows that participants' diverse subjectivities identified via positioning analysis, undermine the reductive, hijabophobic discourses that portray Muslim women as passive and oppressed.

Keywords: agency; hijab; new veiling; positioning analysis; stance analysis

INTRODUCTION

Despite extensive sociopolitical and feminist analyses of veiling, there remains insufficient attention to the linguistic construction of agency among veiled Muslim women, particularly in non-Muslim majority contexts such as South Africa. While largely overlooked in global veiling scholarship, the South African context offers a unique perspective. Although Muslims constitute only about 1.5% of the population,[1] their presence in public life is highly visible—from prominent mosques to the availability of halal products, Sharia banking, Eid-related discounts in major supermarkets, to women wearing the hijab. South Africa, whose constitution (1996) allows donning the hijab in public, is the place where Muslim women veil and negotiate their relationship to the hijab outside of state-imposed mandates or bans (Dawood, 2024; Joosub & Ebrahim, 2020; Vahed, 2007, 2021). Given its history of anti-apartheid struggle, cultural and ethnic diversity, constitutional commitment to pluralism, and its unique position at the intersection of the Global North and South, South Africa offers an interesting site for investigating the agency of hijabi

[1] Statistics South Africa (2022)

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women. By foregrounding the experiences of Muslim women in this context, the article contributes a critical perspective to hijab scholarship, which has largely centered on Muslim-majority nations and the Global North-West.

Drawing on interview data, this study contributes to a growing body of research that centers women's own voices, challenging the historical marginalization of hijabi women in dominant institutional discourses. While phenomenological and anthropological studies have explored the lived experiences of veiling, less attention has been paid to how hijabi women discursively construct and negotiate agency through language. This study responds to that gap by foregrounding discourse as the site of agency—focusing not only on *what* participants say, but *how* they say it, and how they position themselves in relation to both dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses of veiling. In doing so, this analysis offers a timely and necessary contribution to veiling scholarship—one that moves beyond experiential accounts to examine the performative and strategic functions of language in the formation of hijabi subjectivity.

The article begins with a review of scholarship on the hijab and agency, then outlines the study's theoretical framework before presenting and interpreting the data analysis. It concludes with a discussion of the findings and their broader implications.

THE HIJAB

IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF VEILING AND AGENCY

Although meanings attributed to veiling vary across different geographical, socio-cultural, and socio-political contexts, a widely shared understanding is that the hijab functions to cover, conceal, and protect (Lane, 1984), while simultaneously serving as an enactment of piety and modesty (Gökarıksel, 2009). Within Western societies—where visibility is commonly equated with freedom (Scott, 2007)—veiling is predominantly framed as a symbol of patriarchal oppression. At the same time, an increasing number of feminists from both Muslim and Western backgrounds support it, particularly referring to 'new veiling' (Macleod, 1991; Nasser, 1999; Smith-Hefner, 2007). Challenging simplistic notions of oppression or religious obligation, this notion refers to the contemporary forms of hijab that transcend traditional religious prescriptions, incorporating personal, social, and political dimensions. One of the most celebrated aspects of the hijab in the discourse of new veiling is that it materializes a woman's personal agency.

VEILING IN POST-9/11 SECULAR CONTEXTS

New veiling has been widely studied all over the world. The most common curiosity underlying studies in the context of non-Muslim countries is the influence of their post-9/11 secular policies on the emergent meanings of the hijab. Findings from studies in France (Croucher, 2008), Britain (Franks, 2013), Canada (Baksh & Baksh, 2023; Mohammadi, 2020), the US (Hermansen & Khan, 2009), or Turkey (Gökarıksel, 2009; Secor, 2002) indicate that in these specific contexts, where the hijab is limited, stigmatized or prohibited, women veil in defense of their freedom and autonomy, i.e. to assert their religious identity, cultural distinctiveness as well as non-conformity and resistance to the values of secular society. Clearly, in these post-9/11 settings, new veiling becomes a means of enacting agency: once seen merely as a religious symbol or marker of otherness, within the discourse of new veiling, the hijab now also embodies resistance to secularism, neocolonialism, and white supremacy.

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VEILING AS A MARKER OF MODERNITY

Numerous studies show that Muslim women often derive a sense of agency from veiling as their response to modernity (Abbas, 2023; Fitria, Siregar, & Sembiring, 2023). While the hijab is frequently politicized by Islamist or secularist ideologies in ways that obscure women's autonomy, women themselves have also strategically mobilized the veil to pursue their political goals—e.g., in electoral campaigns, where hijab styling is used to project political alignment with voters (Ni'mah, 2021). In a study among Arab Muslim women managers in Israel, Arar and Shapira (2016) observe that they transition to veiling not solely for religious reasons, but also to enhance their professional careers. Likewise, in Greater Jakarta, Utomo et al. (2018) note that young Muslim women see the hijab as aligned with their high educational and professional aspirations and expressive of their modern, consumer identity. In fact, the fashion and consumer dimensions of veiling were identified both in other Asian contexts[2] and in the Global West. For instance, in her study among young British Muslims, Tarlo (2010) discusses at length how they maintain their commitment to the veil while navigating global fashion trends. The women, Tarlo finds, see the hijab as the expression of both their faith and their belonging to a modern, transnational, multicultural urban community.

DIGITAL VEILING AS A NEW HIJABI SUBJECTIVITY

The evolving social media landscape of veiling emerges not only as a space of commodification but also as a platform for shaping new agentic Muslim female subjectivities. Baulch and Pramiyanti (2018) highlight the rise of "hijabers" in Indonesia and globally—a term representing a fashionable, tech-savvy, and empowered Muslimah identity. Across contexts, Muslim women use social media to assert religious, civic, and personal agency. In Turkey, Karakavak and Özbölük (2023) observe that women promote hijab fashion online to elevate its status and encourage veiling among younger audiences. In Sweden, hijabi women used social media to publicly resist proposed hijab bans in primary schools, framing veiling as "an explicit act of agency" tied to emotional, aesthetic, and personal fulfillment (Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2024, p. 47). Meanwhile, in Pakistan, women navigate 'digital purdah' on TikTok to perform transgressive femininities (Kamran, 2023). Clearly, in digital spaces, the hijab becomes a medium through which Muslim women reclaim agency and challenge both Western secular feminism and Islamic conservatism.

VEILING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Despite its commitment to pluralism and diversity, South Africa remains interconnected with global dynamics, exposing local Muslims to challenges and shifts similar to those experienced across the broader Muslim diaspora. As in many parts of the world, South African Muslims faced rising Islamophobia in the aftermath of 9/11 (Vahed, 2007; Joosub & Ebrahim, 2020). Although veiling is legally permitted in South Africa, and South African educational policies broadly endorse diversity and inclusion, in practice, some schools continue to see veiling as conflicting with their dress codes (Essop, 2023). Research on veiling in corporate South Africa reveals mixed outcomes. While most workplaces accommodate religious diversity and veiling seldom impedes career advancement, it can present barriers during recruitment (Carrim & Paruk, 2021). In predominantly Christian and secular work environments, the hijab also renders Muslim women

[2] e.g. in Malaysia (Hochel, 2013)

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hypervisible as religious minorities, exposing them to persistent stereotypes linked to veiling (Joosub & Ebrahim, 2020; Dawood, 2024). Hence, unlike in the contexts mentioned earlier, where veiling increasingly signals modern, urban middle-class identity, in South Africa, this association appears absent—perhaps due to the country's secular character.

Briefly, South Africa is a context where hijabi women negotiate their agency not against a prohibitive or coercive state, but within a predominantly non-Muslim, yet culturally and ethnically diverse society, as well as within their own Muslim communities. As will be seen, while some participants expressed feeling religious and cultural pressure to veil, they also articulated ways of asserting personal agency within this socio-cultural landscape.

DISCURSIVE AND LITERARY RESEARCH ON VEILING

Building on the expanding body of veiling research that foregrounds Muslim women's perspectives, this article shifts focus to the linguistic dimensions of agentic identity construction—an aspect often overlooked in prior qualitative studies. By applying discourse analysis to in-depth interviews, this study aims to explore how South African Muslim women negotiate their agency within the multicultural context of post-apartheid South Africa.

DISCURSIVE STUDIES OF VEILING

Challenging the essentialist view of veiling, discursive research demonstrates that the hijab is a highly situated phenomenon, as its construction reflects not only historical, geopolitical, and socio-cultural disparities but also diverse personal experiences, whose nuances discursive qualitative studies examine in depth. To illustrate, studies such as Droogsma (2016) and Hamzeh (2011) highlight the agentic meanings that their participants ascribe to veiling within their socio-cultural contexts. Hamzeh identifies how Muslim girls in the US remain committed to the veil to assert their identities while navigating within the dominant discourses of modesty and visibility. Similarly, Droogsma examines how Muslim women in the US construct veiling as a tool for personal identity, resistance to objectification, and empowerment. In contrast, research on former Muslims shows their rejection of the 'new veiling' discourse. For instance, in their discursive psychological study of social media posts by former hijabis in Malaysia, Hashmi et al. (2023) investigate a number of anti-hijab themes as well as rhetorical and interactional strategies that the women use to frame veiling as unequivocally oppressive.

REPRESENTATIONS IN LITERATURE

Interestingly, interview-driven and media-ethnographic studies on the issue of agency and the hijab are remarkably enhanced by research on literary fiction written by Muslim women to depict daily realities of veiling. For example, in her study of Abdel-Fattah's novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, Majid (2016) shows how the protagonist constructs her agency by actively framing the hijab as a personal and religious choice, despite societal pressures in Australia—similarly to interviewees in research on new veiling in secularist societies. Likewise, a study by Muhamad et al. (2023) reveals how female protagonists in Muslim chick lit negotiate agency in the physical and digital spaces of the Global North-West, actively resisting the Occidental stereotypes associated with hijabi women.

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On the other hand, Noor et al.'s (2022) analysis of *Unveiling Choice* by Maryam Lee, i.e. a novel situated in Malaysia, calls attention to the scrutiny that is faced by the women who choose to unveil in a context where the hijab is deeply embedded in religious and cultural expectations. Deploying Wodak's Discourse Historical Approach, Noor et al. show the linguistic means of delegitimizing unveiling. The findings emerge in a stark contrast to the findings on new veiling as they reveal how the hijab functions as a tool of hegemonic gendered practice. Interestingly, in another critical analysis, Asl (2019) employs Foucault's concept of "counter-conduct," to examine how protagonists do not unveil and yet carve out their own spaces of agency within the rigid patriarchal system of Saudi Arabia and Iran. As the women engage in counter-hegemonic leisure practices such as driving, reading institutionally banned literature, dating, and booty calls, it becomes clear that these practices are their spaces of agency in contrast to the gendered sartorial norm of veiling.

While discursive and literary research has shown how veiling is negotiated across public and private spheres, little attention has been paid to how South African Muslim women linguistically enact agency within a post-apartheid, multicultural context. This study builds on this gap by drawing from discursive research on agency and grounding its analysis in poststructuralist theory.

DISCURSIVE RESEARCH ON AGENCY

THEORETICAL CONCEPT OF AGENCY

The theoretical concept of agency adopted here moves beyond the common understanding of it as simply the capacity to act according to one's intentions and choices (Baker, 2005). Instead, this paper adopts a more relational and situated perspective informed by poststructuralist thought. For instance, Bourdieu's (1984) concept of *habitus* emphasizes that individuals' dispositions and practices are shaped by their social environments, which in turn influence their capacity for action. Giddens (1984), through his concept of the duality of structure, defines agency as a negotiated outcome of individual attributes and social structures. Foucault (1982) similarly views power as both restrictive and generative, where constraints can provoke resistance and transgression. These theoretical perspectives converge on a key point: agency is not a fixed, internal trait but a negotiated and relational process, shaped and expressed through discourse. This discursive view of agency—where it is constituted, recognized, and contested in language—provides the rationale for this study's methodological choice. As elaborated later, the relational nature of agency underpins the use of positioning analysis as the primary analytical framework.

DISCURSIVE CONCEPTUALIZATION

There are multiple forms of the discursive mediation of agency. Following Ahearn (2001), the language people use, whether via its grammatical or syntactic markers, gives insight into how they understand and execute their capacity to act. Like other social structures, discourse can either strengthen or limit the capacity. The structuring and enabling implications of discourse have been examined by a number of discourse analysts, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists who construe language as both a set of formal structures and "a form of social action, a cultural resource" (Schieffelin, 1990, p. 16). These studies demonstrate that individuals navigate agency within the constraints and affordances of their social environments and linguistic repertoires.

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Beyond dialogical engagement with prior voices (Bakhtin, 1981), individuals negotiate their (sense of) agency in everyday interactions such as family conflicts (Comparini, 2013), or classroom communication (King, 2014), as well as in the stories people tell to others or even themselves (Barker & Galasiński, 2001).

EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS FROM GENDER STUDIES

Given the historical constraints on women's freedom and independence, it is unsurprising that linguistic anthropologists have predominantly focused their research on this demographic, exploring how women articulate their sense of agency. There is a substantial body of research on interview-elicited narratives in which agency is negotiated by, for example, university female students (Jacques & Radtke, 2012), abused women (Hydén, 2005; Semaan, Jasinski, & Bubriski-McKenzie, 2013), single women (Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007), lesbians (Lieblich, Zilber & Tuval-Mashiach, 2008) etc. This study seeks to contribute to this vein of research, while casting light on the femininity that has received comparatively less attention in discursive studies of agency—namely, the experiences of women in the Global South, as opposed to the predominantly Western focus of the existing scholarship.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION AND PROCESSING

This article draws on a subset of data from a broader qualitative study that explored women's subjective experiences of the body and beauty within South Africa's socio-culturally diverse, postcolonial context.[3] Participants were women aged 19 to 25, recruited through convenience sampling from among university students at the institution where I was based as a postdoctoral research fellow. The participants self-identified as Black African (13), Coloured (15), Indian (16), and White (11). Using purposeful snowball sampling, the study recruited predominantly middle-class women, the majority of whom identified as heterosexual, with three participants identifying as bisexual and one as homosexual. The research employed semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, conducted in private campus settings and in English. All participants provided written informed consent and chose their own pseudonyms.

During the interviews, all participants were asked about issues related to the body, identity, and perceptions of beauty. Among Muslim participants, these themes often naturally led to discussions about veiling. When the topic did not arise spontaneously, it was prompted by the question: "Why do some Muslim women in South Africa wear hijab?" While responses generally aligned with the question, they usually transitioned into personal narratives.

Participants were recruited using purposive and convenience sampling. I specifically sought Muslim participants and relied on the social networks of initial interviewees to recruit additional participants. Although the first few Muslim women were selected based on their ethnic self-identification, it became evident that, for this subgroup, their engagement with discourses of the body and beauty was shaped primarily by their Muslim identity, rather than by ethnic categories such as Coloured or Indian.

[3] Ethics Clearance issued by Free State University (UFS-HUM-2015-72)

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The dataset analyzed for this article comprises 14 individual interviews totaling 22 hours (each lasting between 1 and 2 hours) and two group interviews conducted with returning participants (each approximately 1.5 hours). Audio recordings were subject to cyclical listening, after which segments directly or indirectly related to veiling were manually transcribed. The transcripts underwent iterative, open coding by the researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), followed by refinement into discourse analysis units—such as levels of positioning and stance—to support a more structured examination of emerging themes.

PARTICIPANTS' INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES

As this article presents only a portion of the data gathered, the extracts cannot fully reflect the intersectional complexity of participants' identities. However, the most prominent intersection emerging in their narratives is between religion and gender. Given the historically gendered meanings ascribed to the hijab, participants' identification as heterosexual cis-women likely intensified their engagement with veiling.

Throughout the interviews, participants primarily positioned themselves through their identification with Islam, often described as both a religious and cultural identity—sometimes even superseding ethnic identification. Ethnicity may not have been phenomenologically salient to most of them in part because despite Indians' and Coloureds' demographic minority status, South African Muslim communities are constituted mainly by Indians and Coloureds.[4] As a result, participants may not experience their minority status as acutely within a broader social and political landscape structured around Black–White dynamics. In addition, their middle-class status—reflected in their educational goals and their parents' professional trajectories—may have further buffered them from structural marginalization and contributed to their non-identification as a minority group.

The interviewees' middle-class background likely shaped their relationship with veiling. This was particularly evident when some referenced their mothers to challenge stereotypes of the submissive, home-bound Muslim woman, and to highlight the perceived acceptance of the hijab in South African professional environments.

In relation to the latter, national identity also clearly shaped participants' discursive constructions of agency. Although this article does not explore it in detail due to space constraints, some interviewees drew on South Africa's constitutional protection of religious freedom and its post-apartheid commitment to pluralism to position themselves as autonomous and equal citizens.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In feminist research on the hijab, many scholars have approached veiling via the conceptual framework advanced by Saba Mahmood (2005), who agrees that veiling is a form of gendered subordination, but refuses to see it through the binary lens of resistance and oppression. Her insights have been helpful in refining this vein of research by shedding light onto the culturally specific modes of agency that take shape within Islam's gendered politics of modesty and piety (Chapman, 2016; Majid, 2016; Vintges, 2012).

[4] To compare, although Black Africans make up 81.4% of the total population, in Muslim community they are a minority—not only are they fewer in number but also feel marginalized and othered among Indian Muslims (Vahed, 2021).

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This study's understanding of veiling is informed by Mahmood's conceptualization of the hijab as *self-formation*, in which she draws on Foucault's theory of power. Specifically, Mahmood (2005, p.28) sees the hijab as a "mode of subjectivation," wherein "ethics is a modality of power that 'permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being' (Foucault 1997b, 225) in other to transform themselves into the willing subjects of a particular moral discourse." Importantly, however, rather than applying it to a critical feminist discussion of participants' narratives, this paper is interested in the intersubjective mechanisms of becoming 'the willing subject' of the moral discourse of veiling. The discursive-analytic framework advanced here is meant as an analytic lens that adds empirical depth to Mahmood's insight into the performative and discursive nature of the hijab.

POSITIONING ANALYSIS

As will be demonstrated, when talking about their personal experiences of veiling, participants related to other social subjects and structures and spoke about being positioned by others in social encounters. Hence, even upon a cursory glance at the data, veiling was found to be inherently intersubjective, providing an explicit cue with regard to the method of analysis.

The analytical frame of the study, i.e. positioning theory, defines positioning as the dynamic process through which individuals and groups are located within discursive practices (Davies & Harré, 1990; Green, Brock, Douglas Baker, & Harris, 2020; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Sadaf & Siitonen, 2022; Wetherell, 1998). Rooted in the idea that identity is not merely about fixed roles but rather about the ongoing negotiation of relations and meanings in social interactions, this perspective allows for a more multifaceted understanding of social phenomena. Investigating how individuals position themselves and others through discourse can reveal not only the fluidity of identities and relations but also underlying power dynamics and social structures. Hence, in this study, agency is also construed in poststructuralist terms (Baxter, 2002)—as an ongoing, relational and performative process rather than a fixed and inherent essence of the hijab, or the hijabi woman.

To clarify how positioning operates at different levels of interaction, negotiation, and contestation, Harré and Langenhove (1999) introduce the division into first-order, second-order, and third-order positioning. First-order positioning or 'I-positioning' refers to how people situate themselves and others in social encounters. Second-order positioning, also called reflexive positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 21), emerges when these initial positionings are questioned, negotiated, or explicitly reflected upon. Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) conceptualize these two levels respectively as forms of ongoing identity work and conscious identity work. In the interview context, first-order positioning occurs when participants are reflecting their own perspectives and self-understandings. Second-order positioning, by contrast, happens when someone challenges, negotiates, or reinterprets the self-narratives—such as through the interviewer's questions or alternative interpretations. Finally, third-order positioning takes place outside the immediate interaction (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 21), referring to how subjects not present in a given interaction are positioned through discourse.

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STANCE ANALYSIS

To further clarify how participants construct their relationship with veiling and surrounding reality, the study investigates the stances that participants took as they positioned themselves as hijabi women. Following Du Bois (2002), stance is social action in the sense that 'I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and align [or disalign] with you.'

Approaching stance-taking as resources for identity construction means examining how speakers express attitudes and emotions in discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Du Bois, 2002; DuBois, 2007). The division into affective, epistemic, and evaluative stance captures different ways in which speakers engage with their statements and interlocutors. For example, taking affective stances, speakers position themselves by expressing their emotional alignment with a topic or interlocutor. Through epistemic stance, speakers indicate their degree of certainty or source of knowledge. Evaluative stance reflects a speaker's moral, ideological, or social positioning, as it expresses opinions or value assessments about people, ideas, or situations. Therefore, in this analysis, stances are considered an interesting complement to the analysis of the orders of positioning.

Stance analysis can complement positioning analysis by offering a more fine-grained view of how agency is constructed in discourse—not only through the roles and relations speakers construct (positioning), but also through how they emotionally, epistemically, and evaluatively align themselves with ideas, experiences, or others (stances). Together, these approaches reinforce the analysis of agency by capturing its structural and interpersonal aspects as well as pinpointing personal attitudes and ideological alignments displayed by speakers with reference to them.

Therefore, while the analytic framework does not overlook the content of participants' accounts (i.e., the meanings emerging in their talk), it foregrounds the discursive processes through which those meanings are constructed.[5] Specifically, it enables the study to address the following research question:

> *What discursive strategies do hijabi women use to position themselves and negotiate agency in relation to dominant narratives of veiling?*

RESEARCHER'S POSITIONALITY

As noted, this study foregrounds the socio-semiotic processes through which participants negotiate veiling, rather than offering ideological interpretations of the hijab. However, working within a poststructuralist framework, I acknowledge that no analysis is free from positionality. Like all discourse, research is embedded within broader structures of knowledge and interpretation. For instance, the literature selected for this article frames and shapes the analysis, just as participants brought into the interviews their own non-linguistic frames—such as references to Western stereotypes or ideological views on veiling.

As reflected in my focus on women's agency and the hegemonic discourses surrounding the hijab, my epistemological stance aligns with critical interpretivism and feminist poststructuralism. As a white Eastern European woman raised in a Catholic context, I initially approached the topic of hijab with a limited knowledge of Islam. I was transparent about this with participants, openly acknowledging my positionality at the outset of our interactions. This

[5] For a summary of the analytical approaches combined in the framework, as well as illustrative examples of how this integration was conceptualized during its development, see Appendix B.

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reflexive disclosure aimed to foster a more equitable research dynamic by empowering participants and allowing them greater control over the direction and framing of the interviews.

In the initial stage of data analysis, key to recognizing my original bias in veiling through a Western lens was Mahmood's (2005) theoretical framework. It was pivotal in unsettling my understanding of freedom as the absence of external constraints. Mahmood's distinction of Islamic notion of freedom as the capacity to act within a moral framework enabled me to identify participants' positioning as negotiations of agency, rather than signs of submission. This reorientation informed the analytical lens through which patterns in participants' narratives were identified, as detailed in the findings below.

FINDINGS

Besides position- and stance-taking, the analysis identified two salient patterns. Namely, participants negotiated agency in two recurring ways—through references to temporal progression and by rearticulating the culturally inherited discourse of the hijab as protective. The analytical sections below follow this structure.

NEGOTIATING AGENCY THROUGH TEMPORAL PROGRESSION

Mubashira was the most explicit in constructing hijab as externally imposed:

Extract 1
Mubashira: [asked where she wears the headscarf] I don't wear it all the time. Like you have to wear a headscarf, it's compulsory, but some people, like my parents are a bit strict, so my father will tell me always to wear it, but I don't wanna until I am fully prepared you know? So, but I wear it on Fridays cause Friday is our prayer day, it's special you know. But I decided from next year I'm gonna wear it like every day.

The lexical cues ("*don't wear," "have to," "compulsory*") mark an externally imposed norm. Mubashira's account shifts between third-order positioning—situating herself in relation to her parents—and first-order positioning, where she expresses personal intent. Third-order positioning appears in her evaluative stance toward her father ("*a bit strict*"). Likewise, "*always*" implies her father's predictable insistence, indirectly indexing Mubashira's affective stance—likely frustration or resistance.

The conjunction "*but*" serves as a discursive pivot that contrasts external pressure with personal agency. From that moment, Mubashira speaks from a first-order position, articulating her decision ("*I decided from next year I'm gonna wear it like every day*."). The phrase "*from next year*" introduces temporal distancing, constructing veiling as an intentional, self-determined act rather than immediate compliance. The construction "*I decided*" foregrounds epistemic authority and reflexivity. Her use of the periphrastic future "*I am going to*" (as opposed to "*I will*") enhances the sense of commitment and volition, reinforcing her agentive self.

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A similar discursive structure appears in Nadia's account:

Extract 2
Researcher: Do you remember the first time you put it on?
Nadia: Um, like, after school we go to madrasah, it's like Islamic school. So, um, the first time I went there, <was about five years old?> (...) but, um, the first time I made the intention <to wear a scarf, like forever, was in grade 9, I think?> So I was around 14.
Researcher: What made you do that?
Nadia: Um, I guess it was the Islamic school that I'd gone to. Like, um, yeah, we were basically, told, well, not told, advised (...) >like< you know, when you know you do something right? And you do it?
Researcher: Mm
Nadia: So it was that kind of thing.

Nadia frames her agency through temporal sequencing and first-order positioning. The contrastive conjunction "*but*" marks the shift from early veiling experiences to a later, volitional act. Her hesitation and self-correction ("*told, well, not told, advised*") suggest affective ambivalence and identity negotiation—a signal of discomfort with passive conformity. The notion of "intention" recasts hijab as a matter of personal conviction, even if her reasoning remains somewhat implicit ("*that kind of thing*").

Radyaah similarly structures her narrative around personal religious progression:

Extract 3
Researcher: You told me that you're not wearing your scarf yet. Why?
Radyaah: Um, the thing is, it's compulsory in our religion to wear the scarf, it's just I haven't, many girls, from when they are young, their parents tell them that they need to wear a scarf. And I don't want to wear a scarf for my parents, I want to get to a point in my life when I want to wear a scarf for my creator. Once I have reached that point in my religion and my faith where I want to do it for God, not to impress other people. But I haven't reached it yet. That's why I don't wear a scarf.

Radyaah negotiates her agency via evaluative stance, negation, and temporal markers. She rejects third-order expectations ("*for my parents"*) in favor of a first-order narrative grounded in personal spiritual readiness ("*for my creator*"). The repeated use of negations ("*don't want*," "*not to impress," "haven't reached*") signals an active distancing from external impositions and indexes agency through resistance. Her positioning aligns with the discourse of new veiling, in which hijab becomes meaningful only when personally resonant.

In contrast, Khasiaah presents a less oppositional but still temporally structured account:

Extract 4
Researcher: Do you remember the first day you put it on?
Khasiaah: Yes. Grade one. >oh no no no< ↑Pre-school!↑ I sometimes I would wear it, cause I loved how cute they were. Cause I didn't have this one back then, I had the ones that children wear.
Researcher: What are they like?
Khasiaah: You just slip them on your head, and they're very colorful and very beautiful. I used

to lllove how they stood out. But I also like playing so every time I got hot I took it off.
Researcher: And when it was a uniform?
Khasiaah: Oh, when it was a uniform, wrapping was an issue because I had to use the pins. So half of the time it would be off ((chuckles)). By the time when I got into grade four I already had an idea of how to wear my scarf >and everything<. Then it was just part of me. And when I got to high school, I had to decide if I want it. And then it became my choice again.
Researcher: Why?
Khasiaah: I've always loved it. I've always loved the whole feel of hijab.

Unlike the previous participants, Khasiaah does not articulate conflict between external and internal expectations. Instead, her narrative unfolds as a developmental trajectory, anchored in positive affective stances. Lexical choices like "*cute,*" "*beautiful,*" *"lllove*," and "*whole feel*" underscore her emotional investment. The temporal progression—from childhood play to adolescent choice—foregrounds her sense of hijab as naturally integrated into her identity ("*just part of me*"). Her exclusive reliance on first-order positioning affirms an agentive self without recourse to oppositional positioning.

NEGOTIATING AGENCY BY REFRAMING THE HIJAB

Some participants articulated agency by repositioning themselves vis-à-vis dominant religious or cultural discourses, particularly the notion that hijab protects women from the male gaze.

Maimoonah initially invoked the familiar the metaphor of sweets, often used in Islamic pedagogies:

Extract 5
Maimoonah: Hijab is used to cover your body. ....Let me give you an example. If I have two sweets, right? Women are so precious in Islam. I have two sweets and I have one covered and one open. And I throw both of them on the floor. Which one would you choose? The covered or the open?
Researcher: Mm.
Maimoonah: The covered one. Cause it's purer and covered.

This metaphor frames women as objects of purity and hijab as a means of protection and value maintenance. Importantly, although Maimoonah constructs veiling from a first-order positioning, she metaphorically objectifies herself in the account. The contradiction between agentive narrator and objectified referent reveals the discursive tension inherent in internalizing the patriarchal metaphor.

Later in the interview, Maimoonah presented a nuanced repositioning of the veil in secular spaces:

Extract 6
Maimoonah: But even now, when postgraduate students are sent out to places, like formal meetings and everything, I do occasionally take off my scarf. I prefer not to? I don't really want to do it? But, yeah.
Researcher: Why do you take it off?

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Maimoonah: It's just like, um, often after the event, >we do presentations and so on< and after that we'll go to the club. And I feel like I'm disrespecting my religion going with the scarf in the club.
Researcher: Oh!
Maimoonah: I do go occasionally to the club, like once a year.
Researcher: Okay, so–
Maimoonah: Yes, so I feel like I'm disrespecting my religion going with my scarf into a club. So I take it off. To save the religion and–

Here, the club becomes a symbolic site of moral tension. Maimoonah's relationship with veiling shifts, i.e., she no longer positions herself as the protected subject but rather as the protector of the hijab. Her decision to remove the headscarf is constructed not as compliance with secular norms but as an act of religious integrity ("*to save the religion*"). This repositioning maintains her agentive identity while reconfiguring the logic of visibility.

Raessah's articulation of agency is more explicit:

Extract 7
Raessah: […] One of them ((the Islamic rules)) is to dress modestly, and as a woman to cover your hair. So, I like the idea that I control who sees what of me and the only image they see of me is what I choose to put forth. So the fact that I choose to cover my hair kind of shows that I am not relying on my external beauty to that degree to define who I am. If you want to know me you have to speak to me, there is no other way you get to label me. >You know what I mean.< So that's what I enjoy, that makes sense for me to cover up. And, I like the freedom it gives me, the power it gives me.

Raessah embraces the discourse of new veiling foregrounding its emphasis on individual autonomy—i.e. asserting her agency via epistemic ("*makes sense*") and evaluative ("*I like*") stances. Reframing the gendered politics of visibility, Raessah inserts a changed interpersonal dynamic via generic "*you*" to assert relational control over how others perceive her. She repositions hijab not as a response to surveillance, but as a proactive delimitation of the gaze, i.e. aesthetic surveillance.

DISCUSSION

Research including women's voices on veiling is known to demonstrate that their relationship with the hijab goes beyond the dominant understanding of the phenomenon. The subjectivities negotiated by participants in this study challenge both dominant forms of hijabophobia: the Western Islamophobic discourse that frames the hijab as oppressive and incompatible with liberal values of freedom and progress, and the Islamist hijabophobia regulating women's bodies through state-mandated standards of modesty (Hamzeh, 2015). Both discourses are androcentric in their view of veiling as a practice controlled by men; as such, both marginalize women's agency and erase their interpretive authority. By contrast, the participants' accounts foreground autonomy, reflection, and choice, offering discursive evidence that veiling can be an agentic practice embedded in personal, social, and spiritual meaning-making. The following discussion explains the main patterns underlying the construction of these subjectivities.

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Both first- and third-level positionings as well as stance-taking identified in the data situate participants' subjectivities within the discourse of new veiling. Third-level positioning highlights interviewees' ability to engage critically with their religious community and their tradition. I.e., rather than rejecting the hijab outright, they resist culturally inherited expectations around how and when to begin veiling. Constructing veiling as a deferred commitment—situated in a personal timeline and grounded in one's relationship with God, rather than in submission to imposed politics of visibility—represents an enactment of agency neither envisaged by Occidental feminist critiques nor allowed by Islamist regimes.

Likewise, participants' deployment of epistemic, affective, and evaluative stances shows that their veiling emerges from self-reflective involvement with both interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences. It follows processes of personal, emotional, and spiritual involvement that make formation of hijabi subjectivity far more complex than what predominant understandings of the hijab typically acknowledge. The autonomy enacted through these processes affirms Mahmood's (2005) argument that displayed piety does not negate one's freedom.

AGENTIC HIJABI WOMAN AS A NEGOTIATED SUBJECTIVITY

Although new veiling is often framed as freedom, such framings do not negate the fact that these choices are shaped by structural and relational constraints (Noor et al., 2022; Hashmi et al., 2022). This was evidenced in the participants' third-order positionings, when veiling was constructed as resulting from familial and community pressure. Although the participants did not engage in explicit forms of "counter-conduct" within the hijab discourse (Asl, 2009), they negotiated their agency through subtle yet meaningful acts of the contestation of the traditional discourses of veiling. These acts—such as situating veiling in a personal timeline, re-positioning, abandoning or re-articulating traditional metaphors—illustrate Muhamad et al.'s (2023) concept of hijabi women embodying a 'third space identity,' i.e. one characterized by "contradictions, dilemmas, paradoxes, and ambiguities posed by both the self and others" (Raihanah et al., 2014, p. 372).

The shifts, ambiguities, and contradictions identified in this study do not make participants' accounts any less typical of new veiling. Although the subject of new veiling is often associated with a strong sense of personal autonomy and cultural or religious pride, it remains a "complex and sometimes ambiguous effort to reconcile the opportunities for autonomy and choice offered by modern education with a heightened commitment to the profession of Islam" (Smith-Hefner, 2007, p. 392). By examining how participants discursively negotiated these tensions, this paper offers a more multi-dimensional account of new veiling—not as a fixed or monolithic practice, but as a dynamic process of self-positioning within, against, or across dominant and counter-hegemonic discourses.

NEW VEILING IN NON-CONFRONTATIONAL CONTEXTS

Unlike studies in the Global North-West (e.g. Croucher, 2008; Droogsma, 2016), where hijab is framed as resistance to secularism, this study's new veiling lacks confrontational rhetoric. Positioning themselves in the public spaces of secular society, the women navigated them critically—either by effectively mobilizing religion in their emancipation from Western appearance culture, or by actively protecting hijab from the perceived impurity of secular spaces (albeit without expressing hostility toward them). That none of the participants' reclaiming of

agency consisted in resisting the structural oppression of the state resonates with what some of them explicitly acknowledged—namely, that South Africa respects their right to religious expression.

STRATEGIC REFRAMING OF HIJAB DISCOURSE

Another discursive resource for invoking an agentic hijabi subjectivity was the strategic reframing of hegemonic discourses—be they Western or Islamic. As mentioned earlier, when talking about removing the scarf in *haram* spaces, one participant constructed Muslim piety in terms of her personal sense of responsibility to protect the scarf, thereby rejecting the passive positioning of a woman protected by the veil. Another participant framed veiling as a form of resistance to Western 'appearance culture,' rather than as protection from the impurity of the male gaze. Interestingly, while remaining grounded in her commitment to religious values, the interviewee aligned with Western feminist resistance to aesthetic objectification. This illustrates how agency operates not in opposition to religious norms, but through context-specific reinterpretation of these norms. Discourse analysis is thus essential: it reveals how participants subvert, reconfigure, or selectively align with dominant narratives of hijab. Clearly, veiling is not passively adopted nor uniformly imposed but discursively shaped at the intersection of religious and secular contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study provides discursive evidence supporting Joosub and Ebrahim's (2020, p. 364) argument that "Muslim women's choices regarding the hijab, and their sense-making of these choices, should be emancipated from hegemonic, androcentric representations emanating from colonial Western and Islamist hijabophobias." The central emphasis—and departure point—of this article is that such sense-making requires analytical tools specifically designed for studying meaning-making. Discourse analysis can illuminate the complex ways in which women articulate agency and identity within, through, and against dominant narratives.

Rather than simply asserting that agency is complex, this study offered a structured analysis using specific analytical tools. At the same time, it remained grounded in social context, enabling the findings to engage broader debates beyond a purely linguistic scope. These discourse-driven insights contribute to scholarship that challenges homogenizing and androcentric interpretations of veiling.

While acknowledging normative discourses in participants' narratives, the study revealed that agency is not undermined by piety. Instead, the formation of an agentic hijabi subject unfolds in ways that are largely prevented in contexts where veiling is state regulated. Importantly, while none of the participants explicitly framed veiling as an expression of modern Muslim femininity, their emphasis on individualism, autonomous religious practices, and veiling as self-directed resistance to Western aesthetic scrutiny aligns their sense-making with key tenets of modern femininity. Such data are particularly valuable in a global climate where the hijab is politically instrumentalized and stripped of its discursive and phenomenological depth and complexity.

Indeed, favoring depth over breadth, this study presents a limited volume of data, and it is narrowed to socially homogenous group of middle-class South Africans. While South African veiling is still under-researched, the study may be criticized for not including working-class women, whose standpoints are significantly under-examined in global scholarship on veiling.

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That said, the transferability of analytical tools proposed here facilitates comparative analyses of veiling practices across diverse discursive and socio-cultural settings. Such analyses, conducted in the spirit of cross-cultural and decolonial feminism, are urgent. Muting Muslim women's voices on the hijab leads to selective ideological framings, allowing neoliberal, neocolonial, and patriarchal agendas to exclude cultural or religious difference (Joosub & Ebrahim, 2020). This study responds to that urgency, offering a replicable framework that invites further discourse-analytic inquiry centered on women lived realities.

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APPENDIX A

TRANSCRIPTION NOTES

>talk<	faster stretch of talk
...	longer silence
?	rising intonation
(( ))	transcriber's comments
[talk]	overlapping utterances

[Adapted from Hutchby & Wooffitt (1998)]

APPENDIX B

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

TABLE 1. Orders of positioning (based on Harré & van Langenhove (1999))

Concept	Definition	Example
First-order Positioning	How individuals position themselves or others within a specific interaction.	A speaker says, *"I've always been the responsible one in my family."*
Second-order Positioning	When someone questions, reflects on, or negotiates the initial positioning.	Another responds, *"Really? I remember you as being more carefree."*
Third-order Positioning	How individuals position themselves or others in relation to broader social, cultural, or ideological discourses.	A speaker comments, *"In society today, people like me are always underestimated."*

TABLE 2. Stance types (based on du Bois (2007))

Stance Type	Definition	Example
Affective Stance	Expressing emotions or feelings toward people, events, or ideas.	*"I felt so **happy** when I finished the project."*
Epistemic Stance	Indicating one's level of certainty, knowledge source, or belief about a claim.	*"I'm not **sure** this is the right solution."*
Evaluative Stance	Communicating moral judgments, opinions, or assessments of social norms, behaviors, or ideologies.	*"That's just not the **right** way to treat people."*

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