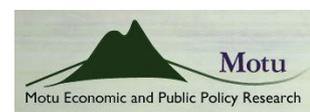# Re-definition of social identity among Iranian migrant females in New Zealand

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**Re-definition of social identity among Iranian migrant females in New Zealand**

**Abstract**

Although Iran is considered an Islamic country, and most Iranian migrants in New Zealand are Muslims or cultural Muslims, female Iranian migrants are especially prone to constructing secular social identities for themselves after leaving Iran. These women typically resist being perceived or categorised as Muslims. According to the data I have collected from my PhD project, Iranian female migrants have different ways of defining their post-migration social identities than most female migrants from other Muslim countries. Muslim-background women from other mainly Islamic countries usually seek to find a balance between maintaining their Muslim identity and accommodating themselves to the practices of their host society. This is rarely the case among Iranian migrants in New Zealand. Yet, despite this difference in approaches, all Muslim-background migrants have to deal with similar stereotypes about Muslims in their host societies. All of these women aim to show that they are distinct individuals who do not fit such stereotypes.

In this paper, I explore the ways that Iranian women redefine their post-migration social identities, specifically in terms of their day-to-day interactions with New Zealanders. I will examine their strategies for shifting the centre of their identity from its more controversial (Islam-related) aspects, to its less controversial and more personalised aspects (such as the more ancient aspects of Persian culture and the global aspects of sociality). I will also examine how these women's processes of social identity-making differ from those of Muslim-background women from other nations. Finally, I will discuss the possible reasons for this difference, especially in terms of these women's pre-migration experiences with Islam in Iran (as both as a religion and a political system).

**Introduction**

The securitisation of international migration, and particularly the framing of Muslim migrants in the West as a security problem, has grown increasingly common since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, and the similar attacks on trains, buses, and airports in Spain in 2004 and Britain in 2007. The more recent series of terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States since 2014, which were mostly related to the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, has tightened the existing political linkage between issues of international migration, national security, Islamic fundamentalism, and terrorism. Even before the 9/11 attack, Muslim migrants in the West were commonly seen as hard to integrate due to their alleged incompatibility with Western values. With the war on terror, they were increasingly viewed as a serious security concern (Castles, 2003; Castles & Miller, 2014). In addition, the rapid increase in the volume of refugees arriving from Muslim-majority countries (especially from Syria to Europe in 2014–2016) heightened concerns over what has been called the 'Islamiphication' of Europe.

As a consequence of these events, Islam, Muslims, and particularly Muslim females, have become objects of considerable political controversy in many Western countries such as Australia, France, and the USA. The dress-codes, customs, and identities of Muslim women are all debated for political reasons, and in these debates the diversity among Muslim-background women is commonly overlooked. A vast number of studies on Islam and Muslim

females in the West have focused on the ways that Muslim women seek to reconstruct and maintain their Islamic identities after migration (Ozyurt, 2013; Sirin & Katsiaficas, 2011; Ali & Sonn, 2017; Akhtar, 2014). However, it is equally important that many women with Islamic backgrounds take different approaches to reconstructing their social identities, and these women are normally underrepresented in studies concerning Islam and migration to the West. In this paper, I discuss how female Iranian migrants in New Zealand construct their social identities. I explore the ways that Islam and Islamic backgrounds influence how Iranian migrant women recreate their social identities. I find that most Iranian migrant women in New Zealand do not seek to maintain an Islamic identity. Their choices are influenced by both their pre-migration experiences of religion and their post-migration experiences of secular society. In this context, this paper discusses how, despite the previously mentioned diversity among female migrants from Muslim-majority countries, all of these women are dealing with the same types of stereotypes about Muslims in their host countries. All of them are trying to cope with the challenges of Islamophobia and other negative perceptions regarding their identities.

It is important to emphasise that this paper is a study of Iranian migrant women, and not a generalised study of Muslim women in the West. While some of these women identify as Muslims and some not, the main focus is not just on the ways that these migrants identify with Islam, but also on the effects of their experiences with Islam, both as a religion and as a community. In many previous studies of Muslim females (Ozyurt, 2013; Sirin & Katsiaficas, 2011; Stuart, 2012; Ali & Sonn, 2017; Akhtar, 2014). Iranian women have been absent from the picture. This absence reflects the tendency of Iranian migrant women to not identify as Muslims. Still, this study shows that Islam remains a strong factor in these women's lives, both before and after their migration. For instance, Islam and the Iranian theocracy are part of the politico-legal environment that many of my research participants chose to leave. Moreover, I examine how Islam and the stereotypes regarding Muslims continue to present challenges for these women post migration, as they seek to make new social identities and conduct daily interactions with members of the wider host society.

**Methodology**

The data that I discuss in this paper is drawn from a larger research project which explored the pre- and post-migration experiences of Iranian women in New Zealand. In that project, I considered the wider political ideologies, institutions, laws, social norms, and practices of both

Iran and New Zealand, to show how political contexts can influence Iranian migrant women's hopes, goals and everyday lives.

The data for this study were obtained through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 34 Iranian female migrants between August 2014 and August 2016. All of these participants had arrived in New Zealand between 1979 and 2012, and all were at least 18 years old at the time of their arrival. These participants ranged between 26 and 71 years old, with an average age of 38. Twenty-three of the participants were living in Auckland, four in Wellington, four in Hamilton, and three in Christchurch. In terms of religion, 23 were Muslims (including 5 practising and 17 non-practising or secular Muslims). Two of them were Christians, three were Baha'is, and five were atheists, agnostics, professed to have no religion, or claimed to be spiritual rather than religious. .One of the participants declined to answer this question. Although I chose these women to represent a variety of social conditions in terms of marital status, age, ethnicity, religion, and time spent in New Zealand, they were not statistically representative of all Iranian women in New Zealand.

**Iranian and Muslim Migrants in New Zealand**

According to Statistics New Zealand's 2013 census data, the total number of Iranian/Persian residents in New Zealand is about 3,195. This included people born in New Zealand who chose 'Iranian' or 'Persian' as their ethnic identity, as well as those who were born overseas. About 80% of the people who identified themselves as ethnic Iranian/Persian were born outside the country. The overall trend of Iranian arrivals to New Zealand has been dropping since 2006, but the numbers of ethnic Iranians have steadily increased. In terms of religious affiliation, about 68% of Iranians said they affiliated with at least one religion, and 26% said they had no religion. By comparison, 41.9% of the total New Zealand population said they had no religion. The most common religions for Iranians in New Zealand were Islam (45.1%), followed by the Baha'i faith (10%) (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

New Zealand has hosted Muslim migrants for more than a century (Kolig & Shepard, 2006), and although their numbers are still small, this 'community' is growing rapidly. According to census data, the Muslim population of New Zealand in 2013 was 46,149 (slightly more than 1% of the whole population), and Muslims were the third fastest-growing religious group, after the Sikh and Hindu religious communities (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). Approximately 75% of the Muslim community in New Zealand are overseas-born migrants, who come from a wide

array of countries and ethnicities, with the largest number of them (around 30%) coming from India (Ministry of Social Development, 2008, p. 28).

Although New Zealand is commonly seen as more tolerant of ethnic differences than many other Western nations (Ward & Masgoret, 2008; Jasperse, Ward, and Jose (2011), the country has never been immune to Islamophobia. Many of the most common Western stereotypes about Muslims can be found circulating in New Zealand. The event of the Christchurch mosques shooting on 15 March 2019, in which 50 Muslim people lost their lives at the hands of a white supremacist, has brought the issue of Islamophobia in New Zealand to a new level of public concern. Over the last few years, various members of Muslim community have noted that Islamophobia is a serious issue in New Zealand (Rahman, 2019; Perera, 2019; Newsroom, 2019). Between 2014 and 2018, the Human Rights Commission of New Zealand received hundreds of complains regarding expressions of anti-Islamic sentiment, including 106 formal complaints of unlawful discrimination. The Islamic Women's Council of New Zealand has suggested that this is just "a tiny proportion of [the] negative behaviour directed at the Muslim community" (Fuller, 2019).

In the aftermath of the Christchurch event, some steps have been taken towards constructive dialogue and interaction between the Muslim community and the wider society. Although it is too soon to establish whether these conversations will lead to any substantial change in attitudes, they have demonstrated a willingness by many members of the wider society to learn about their Muslim neighbours through face-to-face communication, rather than through second-hand generalisations.

To survey Islamophobia in New Zealand prior to Christchurch terrorist attacks, we can look at how the media in New Zealand have represented Islam and Muslims. In general, the representation of Islam in New Zealand's media, which is heavily dependent on overseas sources, tends to uncritically convey negative stereotypes of Muslims as supporters of terrorism and violence. Kabir and Bourk's (2012) study suggested that between 2005 and 2006, approximately 75% of all published reports about Muslims dealt with issues of terrorism and civil conflict (p. 327). The Iranian nuclear issue was another major focus of reporting on the Middle East and Muslims. The main theme of this reporting was that Iran could not be trusted to develop nuclear energy, because this fundamentalist Muslim nation was likely to build and use atomic weapons (Kabir & Bourk, 2012). Since the Christchurch mosque shooting, the media representation of Islam in New Zealand has changed. More coverage has been given to

events related to the local Muslim community, with less coverage of international events related to Muslims. It remains unclear if this shift in coverage represents a temporary response to the recent events, or if it signals a more permanent shift in attitudes.

Various studies have confirmed that it is fairly common for Muslims in New Zealand, and especially for Muslim females who practise an identifiably Islamic dress code, to experience 'specific kinds of prejudice and social exclusion' (Dobson, 2015, p. 229). For instance, the data collected by Jasperse and Etal (2011) indicated that only 15% of New Zealanders believe that it is acceptable for a woman to wear an Islamic-style head covering in public. This finding seems to demonstrate a clear relation between the 'frequency of wearing hijab and greater perceived discrimination' (Jasperse and Etal, 2011, p, 14). Also, as three out of every four Muslims in New Zealand are migrants, it can be argued that these people tend to experience a kind of double marginalisation. They commonly feel socially marginalised both for being migrants and for being Muslims. We need to consider this social background in analysing the ways that female migrants from Muslim majority countries re-define their social identities.

In this paper, I seek to examine the ways in which Iranian migrant women, as migrants from a Muslim-majority county, negotiate their identities in relation to 'mainstream' New Zealand society. I look at the various strategies these women apply for dealing with common stereotypes about who they are, and for shaping how they are perceived. This study treats the process by which migrant women construct new post- social identities as a dialectical interaction. In other words, individuals do not process their social identity on their own. Instead, as Tseng (2002) explained, 'social identification is considered as a dialogic process in the sense that it is created, preserved, reaffirmed, and even rejected through a continuous set of contrasts between one's own group and others' (p. 386). Therefore, the interaction between how these women view themselves and how they are regarded by members of the wider society is an ongoing, dialectical process.


**Iranians' post-migration social identities**

According to the available data, most Iranian migrants in Western countries are secular[1] individuals (Stirling, 2018; Mobasher, 2006; McAuliffe, 2005). These migrants generally try

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[1] The term 'secular' refers to people who are either not practising Muslims, or who regard their religion as a purely private matter.

to emphasise the national rather than the religious aspect of their identity, and seek to define themselves mainly in terms of their nation's more ancient cultural characteristics. In their social lives, these people typically seek to minimise or deny their religious identity. Many Iranian migrants identify themselves with the term 'Persian' instead of 'Iranian', as a way to place more emphasis on the national aspect of their identity (as based on historical origin rather than religion). The data collected for this study confirm that Iranian immigrant women in New Zealand also follow this pattern. In other words, they try to negotiate both the identifying label and the content of their ethnic identity in the host country, as they conduct their daily interactions with New Zealanders. They typically want to avoid being categorised or labelled as Muslims, and they try to shift the centre of their identity to its less controversial aspects.

In most cases, negotiations over the definitions of ethnic or national identity start with questions from people of the host country, such as 'Where do you come from?' or 'Do you want to return home or not?' My participants mentioned that they do not like such questions, especially if they are asked repeatedly over an extended period of time. These questions persistently remind the participants that they are seen as 'others' in their daily interactions with the host society. Some participants, however, take these questions as opportunities for defining themselves in the ways they would like to be defined.

**Participants' self-identifications**

In answering the question of 'Where are you from?', 14 out of my study's 34 participants said that they are 'Persian'; 12 said they are 'Iranian'; 3 said they are from New Zealand; 3 used both 'Persian' and 'Iranian'; 1 of them said 'I'm from Cyprus'; and 1 participant said that she normally does not answer this question. These responses replicate results of several other studies, which have found that 'Iranian' and 'Persian' are the most common terms of self-identification among Iranian migrants in diaspora. Studies that discuss Iranian identity in other countries have reported different balances in the use of these terms. Jamarani's study (2012) of 15 Iranian women in Australia reported that about 40% of her participants introduced themselves as Persian, compared to 20% who used the term Iranian. Daha (2012) suggested that 82% out of 55 second-generation Iranian-American adolescents labelled themselves as 'Persian', and only 2% of them used the term 'Iranian'. These findings suggested that most of the Iranians who participated on these studies had a tendency to introduce themselves as Persian, mainly because they believed that 'Persian' was evaluated more positively in Western societies than 'Iranian' (Jamarani, 2012). Also, there seems to be a clear correlation between

the prevalence of negative images associated with Iran in the host country, and the number of Iranian immigrants who self-identify as Persian (McAuliffe, 2005). Especially in the USA, the name of Iran is strongly associated with the hostage crisis of 1979, so Iranians there commonly try to distance themselves from that negative association by calling themselves Persian (Mobasher, 2006).

The participants in my study gave a number of reasons for calling themselves Persian instead of Iranian. These reasons included a wish to avoid being associated with the negative image of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and a desire to emphasise their (historical and cultural) nationality instead of their religion. A more practical reason was to avoid confusion between the names of Iran and Iraq, as the participants felt that many New Zealanders make no distinction between these nations.

Mahsa was one of the participants who introduced herself as Persian. She was 55, and had lived in New Zealand since 1997:

> I don't like to say 'I'm Iranian'. When you say 'I'm Iranian', they look at you as a terrorist. … Persia is a nicer term. It reminds you of Persian carpets or Persian cats.

Another participant, Sima, 40, who had lived in New Zealand for 16 years, said,

> I normally said my race is Persian and I'm from Iran … this term is more acceptable. Sometimes I'm not feeling good when I say I'm from Iran. I'm worried about others' judgment, especially because of the image that the media presents about Iran …

In these two cases, we can see that the participants were trying to redefine their identity. These people believed that the term 'Persia' received a better immediate reaction than 'Iran', and this difference could shape the rest of the conversation with a person of the home country. If migrants used the term 'Iran', then people spoke to them about Islam, war, or politics. When they used the term 'Persia', they were changing the basis of the discussion. Pittinsky, Shih and Ambady (1999) suggested that in the process of social identity making, people may choose to minimise the salience of some controversial aspects of the group they belong to, in response to contextual factors such as negative stereotypes, or to practices of discrimination against a particular category of people. Likewise, people may highlight certain aspects of their identity that they consider to be positive. We can see that Mahsa and Sima followed this pattern, since

they deliberately chose the label of Persian to avoid association with a certain stereotype. They wished to guide the conversation in another direction by changing their label. They used the term 'Persian' as a part of their effort to negotiate the content of their identity, to gain a more positive immediate reaction, and to avoid certain presumptions that might impact their interactions with the wider society.

The participants who introduced themselves as 'Iranian' were also aware of the political load of this term. However, they believed that it was simply inaccurate or dishonest to describe themselves as Persian. Sara, 32, who arrived here in 2003, explained,

> So, you know, the immediate reaction to the name Iran is really strong, and it could affect your whole conversation. During the first years that I was here, I used to say 'I'm Persian', because at that time I had just arrived here. I wanted to settle down, and it was important for me how other people were thinking about me. But these days, I'm not caring any more how others will think about me based on my ethnicity, so when someone asks me where I am from, I just say I'm from Iran.

Faranak, 28, who has been living here since 2012, said,

> I think people who say we are Persian are escaping from the realities of their own country. Iran is a more realistic term. Of course I'm always worried when I say 'I'm from Iran'. I'm afraid that others will judge me based on my nationality. For example, last year I wanted to rent a place with two other people. I liked both the house and my flatmates, and I really wanted to take it. So, when one of the flatmates asked me where I am from, I said I'm from Iran. And then I unconsciously started to say that, look, but I'm like you guys. I'm not Muslim. If you want to drink or party it's absolutely fine with me. I'm just a normal person.

Both Sara and Faranak preferred to use a label that they believed was more factual, but they were aware of the backlash the term receives. They preferred to keep the label of their Iranian identity, and just negotiate over the content of that identity. So they identified themselves as Iranian, and then either chose to ignore the backlash, or else tried to disarm the presumptions typically associated with this term. These sorts of clarifications and corrections of clichés

commonly happen without any question being raised from the other party. It happens as a type of reaction to the existing context, which the migrants are aware of.

As mentioned above, most of my participants preferred to identify with the national aspects of their identity, rather than the religious aspects. The term 'Persian' seemed to emphasise ethnicity, and 'Iranian' suggested association with the nation's official religion. In seeking to avoid a religion-based identity label, a number of the participants also added an explanation that they were not practising Muslims. Another group of participants took this claim one step further, and tried to explicitly demonstrate through their behaviour that they were non-Muslims.

Nava, 35, who had lived in Christchurch since she arrived here in 2013, said,

> I normally introduce myself as an Iranian rather than Persian, but I'm trying to clarify that I'm not Muslim. I mean I'm not practising Muslim. … For example, whenever I go out with my New Zealander friends, I drink. Or if it's not really a drinking time, I try to order something which has alcohol in it. While I'm not really keen on drinking, I just do that to send this message that I'm not Muslim.

This participant used drinking mainly to distance herself from certain behaviours associated with Islam. She sought to prove that she was not a practising Muslim, and show that her main concern was assimilating into her host society. For Nava and Faranak, being a 'normal person' meant being a person who was not Muslim, and one of the most direct ways of showing that was through consuming alcohol. These two participants did not make much effort to challenge the existing stereotypes about Muslims. Instead, they worked hard to be seen as fitting into the cultural context of their host society. They accepted the existing context for what a Muslim woman is, and simply tried to avoid that label. Although this approach could reinforce existing stereotypes about Muslims, it could also help these women to feel more integrated into the host society. Later in this paper, I discuss how creating a secular social identity can work as an integration tool, and give migrants a greater sense of relation to their host society.

The examples of Nava and Faranak also show how integration is commonly viewed as something for which migrants bear all of the responsibility, as they are expected to do all the work to fit in with the practices and cultures of their host societies. Interestingly, although migrants are expected to integrate, and they commonly put great effort into conforming with

the ways of their host society, they often experience confusion over which social practices or values they are supposed to adopt, and how much diversity is acceptable in mainstream society.

In their process of social identity making, many of my study participants sought to establish a secular social identity, and wished to avoid being considered a practising Muslim. However, almost all of these women mentioned that they never felt embarrassed because of their nationality. They were only sometimes embarrassed because Iran and its politicians were commonly portrayed as radical religious fundamentalists. Only one of my participants in this study denied her Iranian identity. However, it seems that Iranian migrants in other countries sometimes do this as well, as a technique for easing their transition into the mainstream of their new society. McAuliffe (2005), in his study of second-generation Iranians in the three cities of Sydney, London, and Vancouver, noted that his participants mentioned knowing a number of Iranians who made 'use of Italian identity as a surrogate for Iranian identity, to explain their dark appearance in the white population' (p. 192). They felt that being Italian was a more socially acceptable national ethnicity than being Iranian. Certainly, claiming Italian ethnicity helped these migrants to avoid various stereotypes and negative perceptions regarding who and what they were. Also, this use of fake Italian ethnicity illustrates the dialectical aspects of identity-making for Iranian migrants in Western societies. In this dialectical exchange, ethnic identity is a composite of the views that migrants have of themselves and the views that others hold about their ethnic group. In the case of Iranians who claim another ethnicity, the host society's negative attitudes towards these migrants' nationality and/or ethnicity is so strong that it overrides any dialectic interaction between identities. Instead, people are motivated to conceal who they are, and assume a fake identity. As such, adopting a fake ethnic identity is a reflection of the Islamophobia (or Iranophobia) found in many Western societies.

**Religious identity**

As mentioned above, Iran is generally considered to be a homogenous Islamic country, but most Iranians in the diaspora consider themselves secular. McAuliffe (2007) reported that the largest group of his Islamic-background research participants in Sydney, London, and Vancouver were either completely secular or culturally Muslim, which meant they 'are looking at Islam as less a religion than a moral code embedded within Iranian identity' (p. 41). Another study also indicated that many Iranians with Islamic backgrounds living in the United States are not proud of their religion, and do not look to religious values or rituals as 'a guide to their family and social life' (Mobasher, 2006, p. 101). According to that study, about 46% of Iranians

with an Islamic background (out of a sample of 487) were not practising Muslims. Jamarani (2012, p. 87) found almost the same percentage of Iranian non-practising Muslims in Australia. Some 47% of her participants (out of a sample of 15, all females) were non-practising Muslims, compared with 20% who said they were religious, and 33% who considered themselves as having no religion.

Although my study's sample was not representative of all Iranian-born women in New Zealand, its findings also indicated that the majority of the participants who were born Muslim did not consider themselves to be practising Muslims. A majority of 17 (out of 23[2]) participants with Islamic backgrounds mentioned that they were not practising Islam in their daily lives, compared to 5 who considered themselves followers of Islam. However, the sorts of Islam that these five people practised could be considered 'secular' forms of Islam, which mainly concerned having a personal relationship with God in private life, rather than maintaining 'Islamic' social relations. A further five participants introduced themselves as atheists, agnostics, of no religion, or spiritual. Two of them had converted to Christianity, and one participant did not disclose her religious affiliation.

It is important to consider that for the participants in this study, being a non-practising Muslim was not related to any post-migration change in identity, or to any aspect of their acculturation process. Very few of them were practising the Islamic religion prior to their migration, and the only difference after they came to New Zealand was that they felt freer to openly show their attitudes. In other words, most of the participants indicated that emigration made no substantial change to their level of religiosity.[3] That is why it is particularly significant that many of these non-practising Muslims nevertheless reported feeling motivated to explicitly demonstrate that they were not following Islam. They wished to resist being categorised or defined by local (New Zealander) expectations of Muslims. This resistance could have several motives, including a desire to avoid exposure to hostility towards Muslims, which has grown more globally common since the 9/11 attacks (Hopkins, 2007; Yasmeen, 2007). In addition, many Iranian migrants wished to avoid being identified with the negative international image of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Mobasher, 2006), or to avoid other negative stereotypes about Muslim women. As mentioned earlier, New Zealanders, like people in many other Western societies, are prone to lumping all women from Muslim-majority countries (and even Muslims

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[2] This number is exclusive of Two Christians, three Baha'is and five atheists, agnostics, no religion, spiritual participants.
[3] Except for the two participants who converted to Christianity from Islam after migration.

who are originally from New Zealand) together into one stereotype, based on either irrational fears of terrorism, or on presumptions about the oppression of Muslim women.

As outlined earlier, about 75% of the Muslim people in New Zealand were born overseas, and they come from many different nations (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). In general, migrants from Muslim-majority countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East are perceived more negatively than immigrants from non-Muslim countries in the same regions (Jasperse & Etal, 2011, p. 14). Therefore, Muslim migrants typically feel a need to deal with two levels of exclusion – based on their religion and on their ethnicity. They deal with the same kinds of exclusion that many non-white migrants experience, and they also deal with exclusion that is particularly directed at Muslims.

**Islamic identity: Muslim women vs. Iranian women, similarities and differences**

The ways that most Iranian female migrants define their religious identity, and the ways they react to existing stereotypes about Muslim women are different from the approaches that many other Muslim women in Western societies adopt. As several studies have shown, Muslim women from most other majority-Islamic countries commonly seek to find a balance between maintaining their Muslim identity and accommodating themselves to the practices of their host society (Ozyurt, 2013; Sirin & Katsiaficas, 2011; Stuart, 2012; Ali & Sonn, 2017; Akhtar, 2014). Iranian migrants are far more likely to openly dissociate themselves from Islam. A large number of Iranian female migrants simply do not practise their religion. Those who do practise their religion usually regard it as a purely private matter, and they avoid showing any outward sign of Muslim identity. Although there are differences in the levels of religiosity among both of these groups of women, the ways that my Iranian participants sought to downplay their associations with Islam marked a significant contrast with most other groups of Muslim-background migrants.

We can see the difference in approaches between most Iranian migrants and most other Muslim- female migrants by comparing the ways that these various women negotiate their religious identities. For example, Stuart's study (2012) of Muslim immigrants in New Zealand showed that many Muslim women considered hijab (headscarf-wearing) as an important part of their social identity, and a way of showing others that they were Muslims. Therefore, hijab-wearing for them was not just a personal religious practice, but a display of social identity. Their stated reasons for wearing hijab showed an intention to differentiate themselves and to emphasise their religious identity (p. 55).

In another study, Ali and Sonn (2017) investigated how Muslim females of diverse origins in Australia negotiated 'negative representations of Islam' in their daily lives. Although only some of them asserted their Muslim identity by practising an Islamic dress code, all of them sought to challenge existing stereotypes regarding Muslims, and particularly the way that Muslim females are viewed as a homogenous group. Many of these women consciously aimed to demonstrate that they did not fit those stereotypes. They sought to show that although they were Muslims, they were not overly moralistic. They did not dress in certain expected ways; they were open to working in 'non-Muslim' careers, such as jobs in the wine industry; they could take senior job positions; and in general, they were good, responsible, caring citizens.

This approach of seeking to accept but redefine Muslim identity differs from the way that most of my participants dealt with their Islamic-background origins. Generally, these participants chose to either disavow any Islamic identity, or to make their Islamic faith a strictly personal, private matter. Some participants tried to shift attention from their religious affiliation towards other aspects of their identity, and some sought to publicly deny any relation to Islam. Those who identified themselves as Muslims practised their religion in a secular, strictly private way, and showed a clear reluctance to get involved in any sorts of public or social negotiations regarding their religion. This reluctance can be attributed to the relationship that Iranians have with the Islamic government in their home country, and their experiences with the social practice of Islam. It could be argued that where religious practices are required by the state, people have a more intense desire to either reject or to privatise religion. In contrast, the approach that Stuart (2012) and Ali and Sonn (2017) described among many other Muslim females can be considered a sort of political action in defence of Islam. This is an approach that almost all of my participants sought to avoid.

It is important to consider that the approach of distancing themselves from Islam is just as political as the approach of asserting an Islamic identity after migration. Therefore, although each of these groups of women have their own ways of negotiating their post-migration identity, they are all conducting political choices in relation to Islam. While each group of these migrants have their own approach to social identity-making after migration, both groups face similar types of perception from members of their host societies, because of their associations with Islam. Both groups, despite of their differences, feel a need to prove that they are 'normal people', and that they do not fit the prevailing stereotypes of Muslim women.

In this context, it is also helpful to look at how secular Iranians in New Zealand respond to other Iranians who are practising an Islamic dress code, because this response illustrates how these women relate to the issues of assimilation and to the political aspects of Muslim female dress codes. Only one of the Muslim participants in my study of Iranian women was practising an Islamic dress code, which made her religion socially visible. This practice brought her a different set of social experiences than were reported by the other Iranian participants. The way that this participant dealt with her religious identity resembled the practice that is commonly found among Muslim women from most other countries. She tried to maintain her heritage as a Muslim in her new society, to show her Muslim identity in a publicly visible way, and to represent her religion in a positive light by demonstrating friendly, caring behaviour towards others. However, this approach also affected her relations with other Iranians. She said that she commonly received negative responses from other members of the Iranian community in New Zealand because of her hijab-wearing:

> Sometimes, some Iranians asked me what do I want to prove with my hijab, …
> I don't want to prove anything, that's just my own belief. Or sometimes people
> tell me, 'If you wanted to be like this [wearing hijab], why did you leave Iran?'
> … Well I just migrated because I was looking for better things, like everyone
> else that came here. For you [the ones who asked her], the better thing is leaving
> your country and not wearing hijab. For me the better thing is leaving the
> country and wearing hijab.

The way that some other Iranians reacted to her hijab reflected the political meaning of hijab in Iran, and the fact that mandatory hijab-wearing has been considered a symbol of the Islamic Republic's power for the last four decades. The use of hijab as a political symbol developed during the Islamic revolution, and it became a major aspect of Islamic Republic's identity. Over recent years, and especially after the 9/11 attacks, the political aspects of hijab have received increased attention internationally. Before these terrorist attacks, wearing a headscarf was commonly regarded as a symbol of 'women's oppression', but now it is widely regarded as a tool for Islamic activism (Ali & Sonn, 2017). It is important to consider that wearing hijab, as the most visible characteristic of Muslim women's identity, is a political issue – both for those who practise it and for those who do not. Therefore, choosing to wear or not to wear hijab is often more of a political than a religious choice, and each option has its particular sociological consequences.

The reaction to hijab-wearing by most of my participants highlights the issue of assimilation. Some non-practising migrants tend to define religiously observant Muslims as 'others', and set a boundary that excludes those Muslims socially, on the basis of their religious beliefs. Those migrants who are keen to assimilate tend to consider themselves part of the host society, and therefore as different from the orthodox-religious others. They believe that their critical attitudes towards religion give them a stronger claim of belonging to the surrounding host society. Presumably, this stance gives them a better chance of being received as full members the host society. It also expresses their sentiments towards religious authority, which they formed before seeking to emigrate.

Another important aspect of the above-mentioned reaction to hijab wearing by other members of the community concerns the assumption that practising Muslims (especially those who are practising an Islamic dress code), have no real reason for leaving their home country. Although many of my research participants mentioned several factors involved in their decision to leave Iran, they tended to judge the motives of practising Muslims by a single criterion.

**Conclusion**

Although Iranian female migrants come from a Muslim-majority country, they typically seek to adopt secular social identity in New Zealand, and to distance themselves from affiliation with Islam or an Islamic personal identity. In particular, they report concerns about being categorised or judged according to the expectations that many New Zealanders have towards Muslims. In this study, the formation of 'social identity' is treated as a dialectic process of interaction between the members of minority groups and the wider society around them. The research participants in this study discussed how they negotiated the content, and in some cases the labels (Iranian/Persian) for their identities, especially during their initial interactions with others. Most of this study's participants suggested that they sought to shift the centre of their social identity away from its more controversial associations, and particularly away from those aspects of their identity that were associated with Islam or the Islamic Republic of Iran. Most of them sought to emphasise the less controversial aspects of who they were, such as the more ancient features of their national identity.

As a part of this attempt, many of the participants took to introducing themselves as 'Persian' rather than 'Iranian'. Those who chose to introduce themselves as Persians explained that the name 'Iran' was generally associated with the Islamic Republic, Islam, and with Islamist extremism and terrorism. They felt that the term 'Persian' was less politicised and that it would

receive a better immediate reaction. These findings are consistent with those of various other studies on Iranian migrants in Canada, the United States, and Australia (Mobasher, 2006; McAuliffe, 2005). Therefore, it seems that despite the different political contexts of those various host societies, Iranian migrants are following relatively similar patterns for constructing their social identities in nations around the world.

Another important feature of Iranian social identity in New Zealand concerns the fact that most of my participants were not practising Islam. This finding is also consistent with that of other studies on Iranian migrants in other Western societies (McAuliffe, 2007; Jamarani, 2012; Mobasher, 2006). Most of the participants in this study felt that being critical towards religion and/or being secular gave them a closer sense of belonging to the wider host society, and they tended to avoid associating with conservative devout Muslims of any nationality. The minority of my participants who did retain an Islamic dress code and/or regarded themselves as orthodox Muslims found themselves being more or less excluded from their own expatriate community. As social identification is dialectical, and arises from perceived differences from others, the Iranian immigrants in this study showed a tendency to define (or redefine) themselves more through their attitudes towards religious orthodoxy than through reference to their nation of origin.

The attitudes of Iranian female migrants towards religion and the ways they re-define their social identity in New Zealand generally differ from the approach to identity construction taken by most Muslim women in Western societies (Ali & Sonn, 2017; Yasmeen, 2007; Alrasheed, 2013). The most common approach that Muslim female migrants take in constructing their social identities involves seeking ways to reproduce or maintain their Islamic identities in their new contexts, often in the face of discrimination or racism. This is seldom the case among Iranian female migrants. As almost all of my participants explained, they had a specific concern to define a secular social identity for themselves after migration.

The findings of this study, therefore, differ from those of most previous studies on the ways that Islam and Islamic backgrounds influence women's reconstructions of their post-migration social identities (Bahiss, 2008; Dobson, 2009; Joudi Kadri, 2009, Jessen, 2010; Hartono, 2011). It should be noted that although this study did not predominately focus on the participants' relations to Islam, these migrant women's engagement with and connection to Islam (both as a religion and as a political issue) was a very important aspect of their stories. This study has illustrated that migrants with Islamic backgrounds can express various contradictory types of

social identity after migrating to Western societies. These redefinitions can be based on their differing pre-migration experiences and religious affinities, as well as their post-migration experiences of acculturation.

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