

**DIGITAL BURQA OR BUSINESS SUIT:
SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE AMONG RESETTLED
IRAQI WOMEN**

by
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Abstract

This study explores concepts of digital justice for women who live in a liminal space between home and resettlement. It examines their experience in social media and how it is affected by their gender, immigration and marginality. I approach this topic through a case study of Iraqi women with a refugee background who are resettled to British Columbia, Canada. Their narratives shed light on the complexity of the digital divide for women. I use intersectional theory and feminist research methods to address the persistence of digital inequalities. My results contradict what early feminists wrote about ‘cyberspace’ as a liberating gender-neutral terrain void of structural barriers to entry. In reality, the internet today is anything but open and equal. This point is not new. However, studies on Middle Eastern women bloggers and online activists—especially those of Muslim background—still present the internet, via social media, as a site to practice selfhood and challenge gender norms. My findings suggest a more complex picture. We cannot detach technologies from the power structures that created them and the systems within which they are embedded. It is true that social media may offer opportunities to experiment with identity and challenge norms, but the internet also mirrors pre-existing social structures and can amplify the effect of those structures due to the immediacy of access and abundance of online material. To avoid surveillance, women in this study adopted one of two strategies: they either adorned a digital *burqa* and remained anonymous or wore a digital business suit and migrated to social media platforms where interaction is highly formal. The success women have in handling social media is due to their ingenuity in avoiding surveillance. This success comes despite the potential risks of using technologies designed to amplify users’ visibility and collect users’ data.

Lay Summary

This study looks at the inequalities online for Iraqi women in BC who immigrated to Canada as refugees, the challenges they face and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. Current studies still argue that access to the technology is the main obstacle for women in the Middle East. I found that participants' English level was the main obstacle to their access to online content. The other problems are harassment and male surveillance over participants' internet access and what they share online. To avoid surveillance and harassment, women either used a pseudonym and only mingled with women online, a strategy I call the digital *burqa*, or they chose formal social media platforms like LinkedIn, a strategy I call the digital business suit. The internet mirrors our offline reality. The problems women have online are similar to those they have offline. They extend the set of strategies they use offline to overcome online harassment and surveillance.

Preface

Four years ago, a group of tech savvy Arab immigrant women showed me how they used their digital devices to navigate their day-to-day life in Canada. For me, it was a pivotal moment, after which I chose to research online social justice. When I embarked on this journey, I did not fully anticipate the complexity of my subject-matter. Participants struggled with different pushes and pulls: on the one hand, from Iraq, their country of origin, and from Canada, their new home - as well as between systemic discrimination offline and cyber misogyny, harassment and community surveillance online.

Analyzing my data was perhaps the hardest part in my research. I had several discussions with my supervisor who patiently helped me cut through the thick body of research I had amassed after many in-depth interviews. Still, it took me a long while to hone my main argument and perspective. After many conversations with friends and colleagues in the Iraqi community, and discussions with a fellow researcher in the tech industry, Adam Pez, I came up with the idea of the digital *burqa* and business suit.

All chapters were written by me. As each chapter was written, I shared the draft with my friends first and then my supervisor. Both asked me questions about the subject matter, helping me to clarify my writing and fill in the gaps where I needed to explain more. I owe those who helped me refine my argument a great deal of gratitude.

Since this research examines a minority group, it required ethics approval. I submitted my proposal to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board with the Certificate Number H15-

02145. The original project title was “iBelong: A study of Cyberspace Effects on the Settlement and Belonging of Iraqi Women in British Columbia”.

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I also would like to thank professor Ayesha Chaudhry who was a constant source of influence on topics regarding feminist thought and reflexive discourse analysis.

I am forever indebted to the participants in this study who were kind enough to offer their time, knowledge and share their lived experiences. I also extend my gratitude to all the Iraqi women in British Columbia, many of whom are close friends and like sisters to me. They supported me in so many ways and never ceased to inspire and amaze me.

Finally, I would like to thank my feminist friend and mentor Gulalai Habib, who dedicated her life to social justice and supporting refugees and immigrants, for standing by my side through thick and thin.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Rationale

This study explores concepts of digital justice for women who live in a liminal space between home and resettlement. It examines their experience in social media and how it is affected by their gender, immigration and marginality. For this research, I use Chandler and Munday's definition of social media as: "the online and mobile technologies or platforms people use to interact and share content, including social networking sites, social bookmarking and social news sites, geosocial networking sites, blogs, online forums, file-sharing and media-sharing sites, social gaming sites, social commerce sites, virtual worlds, and wikis" (Chandler & Munday, 2016a).

I approach this topic through a case study of Iraqi women with a refugee background who resettled in British Columbia, Canada. Their narratives shed light on the complexity of the digital divide and how it amplifies pre-existing social structures. The term 'digital divide' has been traditionally used to describe disparities in how information and communications technologies (ICTs) are adopted. That includes disparities in physical access and motivation, as well as the skills necessary to achieve the full benefits of use (Van Dijk, 2012). I use feminist critical theories and intersectionality to address the persistence of digital inequalities, and how one's localised experience of gender is mediated by transnational networks that cross-national boundaries. I address three major questions:

1. How do Iraqi women participate in building their online communities?
2. What challenges related to digital justice do they face?
3. What tactics do they deploy to resist those injustices?

Since this study is interdisciplinary, these questions are examined through the sociology of gender, feminist critical theories, and information and communications technology (ICT).

It is worth mentioning that although I used the “*Burqa*¹” in the title, I do not wish to fetishize it, nor advance an argument that presents it as a tool for empowerment or subjection. I found the analogy of the *burqa* appropriate for three reasons, its function: to gain anonymity, its roots in the Middle East, and its historic association with resistance of the colonial gaze.

The *burqa* is a face cover that shows only the eyes. It has many uses. One of these uses is to conceal the identity of the person who wears it and, at the same time, allow her/him to see without being seen. The concept of the gaze is central to studies on epistemology (Foucault, 1977), surveillance (Lyon, 2001, 2006), and patriarchy (Mulvey, 1989). Scholars who wrote about the gaze were interested in how the veil reverses the power of the gaze (El Guindi & Berg, 1999; Lewis, 2003; Winifred, 2003; Yegenoglu, 1998). In “Colonial fantasies” Yegenoglu (1998) recognized the veil as a tool of resistance to the colonial patriarchy. Knowledge is power, therefore, Yegenoglu argues, the European colonialist used to conduct anthropological studies, where they observe and collect data about their subjects. The gaze is crucial to the accretion of data, yet Muslim women, clad in their veils, resisted colonials’ desire to treat them as study subjects. Instead, they were the ones who were casting

^{1 1} In *Muktar al- Sihah* (1986, الرازي), an Arabic dictionary, mask is one of the synonyms of *burqa*. I am using the *burqa* to symbolise anonymity, in a way similar to Guy Fawkes mask which has been used as a symbol of the online hacktivist group Anonymous as well as Occupy movement. In the context of Iraqi women, the *burqa* is more relevant than a Guy Fawkes mask.

the gaze and gathering knowledge about the colonial masters. The shift of power was unsettling to the ruling authorities. This is why, according to Yengenoglu, orientalist were both fascinated and disturbed by the veil.

The digital *burqa* in this study does not refer to the sartorial piece but rather to the set of strategies women use online to remain anonymous and resist gender-based persecution. Participants transferred to social media some of the techniques Iraqi women use in real life to shun male sexual advances, surveillance and exclusion, such as wearing a veil, having segregated spaces, and limiting their contact with men.

The second half of the title, “business suit”, is perhaps more familiar to the readers. The business suit conveys a formal environment where members must interact respectfully and with professionalism. Likewise, in cyberspace², women chose formal, business sites to socialise and network. They shared their real identity, professional photos and real names but used their digital business suit as a shield against male advances. These strategies presented opportunities for resistance for women using social media.

Some have attributed the success of social movements in the Arab world to social platforms like Twitter and Facebook rather than to the people who use the technology. But we should not separate ICT technologies from the power structures that created them and the systems within which they operate. Those who present this argument ignore the potential risk

² According to the Oxford’s “Dictionary of The Internet” the term 'internet' describes the global network and the technologies that facilitate it, while 'cyberspace' describes the world of interlinked computers and the people who use them (Darrel, 2013). Although some might consider the word 'cyberspace' outdated, and prefer using 'internet' instead, I found cyberspace more appropriate for my research since my focus is not on the technology itself but rather on the social relations within the virtual space.

of persecution which activists can be exposed to by using a technology designed to amplify the users' visibility. In fact, it's due to the ingenuity of individuals who use social media effectively and have devised strategies like the digital *burqa* to outsmart surveillance technologies.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that this research does not propose to identify a generalizable Iraqi immigrant woman's experience. Rather, this research documents those who are underrepresented in mainstream accounts. It aims to bring their narratives to light, demonstrate the strategies they use to confront hardship, and shows how they derive meaning from their experiences. I strive to do more than just document the struggles of Iraqi women; I also seek to convey their resilience and strength — aspects sometimes glossed over in academic accounts of immigrant women with a refugee background.

1.2 Personal interest

Three personal experiences ignited my interest in this particular topic. The first was prior to web 2.0³ and the rise of social media. This was during my time as a teenager in Saudi Arabia, a country where women are treated as second-class citizens. As a young girl living under an authoritative patriarchal regime, I genuinely feared persecution if I shared my feminist thoughts or protested my status. The internet was my portal to the outside world.

While my movement was restricted physically, I travelled online and met people with

³ Web 2.0 is an informal term used to distinguish the era of interactive and social media from the era pre-2000 (Andrew & Gerard Ekembe, 2016). It refers to a concept of the web as a platform for participation in which users are both consumers and content producers. This term describes the current World Wide Web where there is a high degree of interaction and collaboration between users using a wide variety of social media (Chandler & Munday, 2016b).

different beliefs and interest whom I could not have met otherwise. I spoke to men for the first time, often assuming a male identity. I met like-minded individuals inside Arabia who shared my view about human rights and women's rights in particular. My online encounters with people who, like me, hate patriarchy made my loneliness bearable, and my confinement less oppressive.

The second experience was during my work as a founder and coordinator of the Arab Women Cluster in British Columbia (BC), an initiative funded by the Women Economic Council (WEC). In the first months of the cluster initiation, I focused my efforts on building trust between members of the group. The connection between women in the cluster underwent a dramatic change after I created a private Facebook group where participants could engage in daily discussion and support each other. I was surprised to see their skill in social media across different ages and educational backgrounds, and the amount of time they spend online. It was then that I started to research the potential of social media for community building.

The third experience was with Immigration Canada between 2015 and 2016 during the Syrian Refugees Resettlement Project. Canada resettled more than 25,000 Syrians, of which 3,000 were resettled in BC (CIC, 2017). The short timeline for immigration set by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was a challenge for agencies in the settlement sector which needed time to hire and prepare more staff before launching the operation. At that time, I worked as a senior resettlement counsellor in BC. Within the initial chaos of the Syrian settlement project, Syrian refugees used social media to organise and bargain collectively. They connected with each other from the moment of their first arrival in Canada and then later within their communities where they settled. Through their large social network, they

shared and learned from each other's experiences. I was part of their social media group and I admired their level of coordination, which merits its own research project.

Beyond my fascination with social media's effect and the stories of Iraqi women, I believe Iraq's recent history, its people, and their struggles after an illegal war, as well as the growing Iraqi diaspora, represent a sociologically unique and under-studied subject-area. For these reasons, a study that uses a gender lens to examine refugees' use of social media should be significant.

1.3 Situating the story of Iraqi women

This research uses an intersectional framework to address the particularity of Iraqi women's use of social media in the diaspora. Since my research is a case study concerned with social justice, I found using an intersectional approach ideal to explore participants' narratives, and flesh out how gender, race, class, and religion affect women differently. Intersectionality theory focuses on the importance of understanding the imbrication of categories that are often treated separately. It suggests that social categories, like race, class, gender, and religion are not mutually exclusive but rather intertwine, leading to complex and contextual expressions of power and subordination. It is therefore necessary to contextualize women's stories within the modern history of Iraq, and to point out the overlapping racial and gender components of their immigration experience here in Canada.

1.3.1 Islam, tribalism, nationalism and women's movements

In this section, I highlight the current powers that are shaping women's rights in Iraq — namely tribalism, nationalism, a patriarchal interpretation of Islam, the war, and women's rights movement. I will briefly outline those factors to put my findings in perspective. This step is necessary for two reasons: First, gender discourse frames Iraqis' lived experiences

prior to their resettlement. Second, most first-generation immigrant Iraqi's have a large circle of family and friends who live in Iraq and contribute to the diaspora online community. Hence, the current gender discourse in Iraq has a significant influence on how Iraqis address gender in the diaspora.

Islam and tribalism have been part and parcel of the history of the state of Iraq. Historically, Islamic jurisprudence and tribal codes have been used across the Arab world to define laws affecting women — including marriage, divorce, dress code, custody over children, and inheritance laws. However, the influence of these traditions is not fixed. It expands and wanes with changing political forces. In times of political upheaval, ruling parties expand religion and tribalism beyond their natural scope to gain legitimacy. For instance, the British colonial mandate enforced a narrow, often medieval interpretation of Sharia law in cities and tribal codes in rural areas (Efrati, 2012). The British allied with tribal chiefs and Islamic leaders to ensure their loyalty and legitimize colonial authority. Despite the colonialists' association of Islam and tribalism with backwardness, they found it useful to allow Sharia law for family law and to a lesser extent, civil codes, but not for criminal and commercial law. This colonial arrangement significantly affected women's status— with repercussions today. Expanding and reinforcing religious and tribal codes changed the power dynamic between men and women and exposed women to an extremist interpretation of the law, especially in areas related to familial matters such as the marriage of minors, polygamy, divorce and child custody.

Just as colonialism reinforced patriarchal interpretations, so did the nationalists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries by using women's bodies as a symbol for the nation. According to feminist scholars Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (2000), nationalism is “a

process in which new patriarchal elites gain the power to produce the generic 'we' of the nation” (para.6). This modern homogenizing project draws upon female bodies as a symbol of the nation through discourses of motherhood and sexual purity. Embracing a counter-discourse, nationalist Iraqi intellectuals advocated changing colonial laws to embrace a modern perspective that would prioritize the needs of a strong Arab state. This discourse emphasized producing healthy, educated mothers over social justice or protecting women’s individual rights.

In the same manner, the nationalist Al-Ba’th ruling party (1968-2003) focused on women’s role in fostering a strong state and Arab identity. In the name of producing better mothers and ensuring proper care for children, the ruling Ba’th party improved education and health care, and discouraged polygamy. Once again, Iraqi women’s role was essentialised to that of reproducing the nation both through procreation and cultural representation. An example that illustrates this biological and symbolic duty is how Saddam’s regime presented women as producers of soldiers and as symbols for the honour of the nation (N. Al-Ali, 2005).

Over time, Iraqi women activists would fight tenaciously for the right to participate in creating laws affecting women. This resulted in a change in the Personal Status Law No. 188 to incorporate many egalitarian principles. It limited child and forced marriages. It also restricted polygamy and increased women’s rights regarding inheritance and divorce, and maternal child custody after divorce (Efrati, 2005, 2011, 2012; Zangana, 2011). In fact, this law was one of the most progressive in the Arab world. A 1993 UNESCO report commended the changes the law helped bring to pass, stating: “Rarely do women in the Arab world enjoy

as much power and support as they do in Iraq.” (as cited in Zangana, 2011, p.3). Much of the credit for this accomplishment should be given to Iraqi women’s rights activists.

In the 1990s, the Ba’ath party ruled over a country weakened by sanctions and multiple uprisings against Saddam’s government in the north and south. As part of its attempt to restore control, the state used patriarchal Islamic rhetoric to mollify the population and justify its authority. The state dissolved some of the earlier rights and freedoms women activists had won, restoring male authority over family along with other patriarchal privileges. Some of the laws which were introduced included a measure abolishing prosecution against violent offenders and limiting the right of travel for women under the age of forty-five (Zangana, 2011).

In the wake of the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, the new Coalition of Provisional Authority (CPA) would imitate its colonial predecessors by allying with sectarian religious groups, who were afforded greater power than they had enjoyed for four decades. The CPA appointed tribal leaders to the Interim Governing Council (IGC), which then passed Resolution 137. This resolution abolished the celebrated 1959 Personal Status Law and applied a patriarchal interpretation of Islam that placed women’s affairs in the hands of conservative religious authorities (Efrati, 2005, 2011, 2012; Zangana, 2011). At the time, retired judge Zaniyah Isma‘il Haqqi said, “This new law will send Iraqi families back to the Middle Ages. It will allow men to have four or five or six wives. It will take children away from their mothers. It will allow anyone who calls himself a cleric to open an Islamic court in his house and decide about who can marry and divorce and have rights” (Efrati, 2005, p. 116). Opposition to Resolution 137 unified women’s groups inside and outside Iraq and gave

momentum to a growing Iraqi women's rights movement. Their outspoken resistance and public protest led to the repeal of Resolution 137. Sadly, this success did not last for long. Clerics launched another battle in 2006 during the time the Iraqi Constitution was drafted. Zaid Al-Ali, an Iraqi scholar, and one of the legal advisers to the United Nations focusing on constitutional, parliamentary, and judicial reform in Iraq, described the imposition of a paternalistic perspective while drafting the portion of the "Liberties" chapter concerning women's rights:

“Despite the lack of detail, and despite the earlier prohibition against sexual discrimination, the authors of this provision clearly sought to impose their specific vision of Iraqi society on the entire country, which would see women encouraged to become mothers regardless of their own personal choice, to dress modestly and in a way that would not bring disrepute to their male relatives, and to care for their elderly and ill relatives, without necessarily being assisted in any of these tasks by any men, who were not the subject of any specific obligations under the 20 July draft.” (2011, p. 79)

In the end, clerics managed to add other clauses⁴ to the final version of the Constitution, which extends the power of patriarchy through religious dogma (Efrati, 2005, 2011). Hanaa Edwar — a member of the Advisory Arab Committee of Human Rights Watch, founder of Iraqi Women's Network, and the General Secretary of Iraqi Al-Amal Association—conveyed Iraqi women's frustration with authorities and local vigilantes telling women how to dress, noting that “day after day” she saw indicators of escalating discrimination against

⁴ Under the “Fundamental Principles” of the Iraqi constitution, Article 2:1 declares that “Islam is the official religion of the State and is a foundation source of legislation.” Furthermore, clause (2:1: a) gives religious clerks legislative power to interpret what laws and practices fits Islam. It states: “No law may be enacted that contradicts the established provisions of Islam.”

women who choose not to wear a *hijab* (Al-Shebeeb, 2012). Edwar mentioned that even women who wore their *hijab* were being forced to cover their chin as well.

As occupation-era politics became ever more patriarchal, Iraq of the 2000s was, and continues to be, a turbulent and insecure state with an ineffective government. The result of this instability has had a drastic effect on women's rights. Sectarian infighting, and the way authorities addressed these problems, contributed to re-shaping popular understandings of women's place in society. Reforms undertaken to stabilize the central government delegated power to patriarchy and legitimized the spread of ultra conservative interpretations of Islamic law. Women became increasingly seen as subordinate to men, their guardians. Gradually, this conservative turn changed women's roles in the society and what they can and cannot do.

1.3.2 The impact of war on women

Iraq has been politically unstable since the early 1980s. It suffered three semi-consecutive wars: first was the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), and then the Gulf War (1990 - 1991) followed by a period of economic sanctions that lasted for thirteen years. That was followed by the Anglo-American invasion in 2003 which unleashed a sectarian war and extremist militant groups. Al-Qaida emerged as a major force on the Iraqi scene in 2003. Later in 2014, The Islamic State (IS)⁵ would take its place. The invasion and subsequent fighting displaced an estimated 3.3 million Iraqis (IOM, 2017) with 239,077 fleeing the country as refugees for fear of persecution (UNICEF, 2016).

⁵ Also known as The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and *Daesh* in Arabic.

A report compiled by Human Rights Watch includes numerous Iraqis' statements and showed a new trend of collective punishment and recrimination specifically against women — a new phenomenon in Iraq that emerged after the Anglo-American invasion (Bjorken, 2003). Liberating women from Saddam's oppressive, patriarchal regime was one of the first rationales used to legitimize the invasion. Nevertheless, the experience of women under the imperial occupation between 2003-2011 was far from emancipatory; the torture and killing of women detainees in Abu Ghraib, the mutilation of women's bodies, use of chemical weapons, denial of medical care to the injured, deliberate attacks on red cross and rape of Iraqi women within the military all attest to the failure of the invasion and subsequent provisional government to emancipate women (Scahill, 2011, 2013; WikiLeaks, 2010; Zangana, 2011). The famous story of Abeer Al-Janabi, a 14-year-old girl, is one of the few stories that caught media attention. In March 2006, five U.S. soldiers gang-raped Abeer, set her on fire, and murdered her parent and her five years old sister. According to human and women's rights organizations, Abeer's story is one of many stories where soldiers violated women bodies. A survey by the Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq recorded that four hundred women were raped in Baghdad alone between April and August 2003 under the occupation (Bjorken, 2003).

In post-Saddam Iraq, women's bodies were used as a tool to discipline the population and as symbols to justify the fight against the ideals of the previous regime (N. Al-Ali, 2005). Lack of a functional Iraqi government and the ongoing sectarian war have increased the rate of violence against women. In her book "City of Widows", Haifa Zangana states: "Iraq now has U.S.-sponsored medieval sectarian militias who have barbaric ideas about women's role in society" (2011, p.2). Kidnaping women is another technique used to humiliate and subject

local communities. Sectarian abductions by militant groups has been used as a strategy to cleanse minorities from their neighbourhoods across Iraq (Khan, 2016). The kidnappers are motivated by financial and ideological gains. According to The Global Kidnap Review, Iraq ranks fourth among countries where locals run severe risk of kidnapping (International, 2016). The Islamic State, which surged in 2014, kidnapped hundreds of domestic nationals in areas under its control. Trafficking women is another tactic used to punish opposing parties. Yanar Mohammed, the President of Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq, explains that: "Women and girls are looked upon as the representatives of a community's honour, and so the sexual exploitation of women and girls belonging to a certain community is seen as the most effective way to humiliate and break it" (Mohammed, 2016).

Fear of rape, harassment and kidnapping have prevented women from living a normal life where they can move and practice their personal freedoms. It affected women's work opportunities, access to health services and education (Efrati, 2012; Holden, 2012; UNICEF, 2016; Zangana, 2011). Studies show that women who live in a constant fear of sexual violence, perceive their body as a liability that increases their chances of being victimized (Giles & Hyndman, 2004). Above all, the violation of bodily and sexual autonomy has a significant long term psychological impact on the victim. When experiencing sexual violence, a woman feels that her body is vulnerable and at the same time culpable. She does not locate the possibility of sexual violence as an outside threat but rather as stemming from the essence of her female body. If the body is violated the blame must rest on the woman's failure to protect it. Beyond the physical and psychological trauma, rape also has a cultural stigma. If a woman is raped or even believed to have been raped, she runs the risks of social ostracism, and possibly physical violence by family members.

Iraq is a contemporary example of how militarization can create gendered violence. The war has increased women's vulnerability outside their homes and built a cultural distrust to public spaces (Sassoon, 2010). This in turn affected the gender power dynamic in the Iraqi society and limited women's roles within the circumference of their permitted space (Efrati, 2011, 2012; Sassoon, 2010; Zangana, 2011). Patriarchal eagerness to guard women's 'honour' resulted in subordinating them to the private sphere of domesticity, and deprived them of their right of movement, education and equal representation (Efrati, 2011, 2012; Zangana, 2011).

This brief look at Iraq women's rights reveals two important points. First, women had more rights in the past than later on in the 2000s, after the war. We cannot, therefore, argue that patriarchy is inherently part of Iraqi culture, race or religion. Second, it shows how women's rights have been compromised over and over under the guise of advancing nationality, preserving tribal identity and promoting religious piety. Instead, the underlying factor has been appeasing patriarchy to maintain the hegemony of whoever is in power. Third, the violence women were exposed to during the war has impacted the strategies they use to combat and manoeuvre patriarchy. Understating these three points is essential to contextualizing my analysis of how gender discourse in Iraq still impacts Iraqi women abroad through social media.

1.3.3 Settlement in Canada

Immigrants should not be treated as a homogenous block with one shared reality. The generalization of the migration experience often overlooks the specificity of the issues of migrant groups. In addition, immigrants are involved in an ongoing cultural negotiation of

identity formation, adaptation and acculturation. Therefore, we have to be careful not to over-generalise the immigration experience of Iraqi women or view their settlements as a one-directional narrative.

The Iraqi population is demographically diverse. It contains a variety of ethnicities, languages and religions. Those who carry identity markers which categorize them as Middle Eastern or Muslims can be exposed to discriminatory acts in Canada, especially after 9/11 (Canefe, 2008; Fleras, 2014). Muslims and individuals perceived to be Muslims have been targets of racial profiling and hate crimes (Poynting & Perry, 2007).

The number of incidents targeting women is on the rise since 2015, and women were more likely to be victims in incidents targeting religion. The same report states that "The overlap between race or ethnicity and religion may have an impact on hate crime statistics" (Leber, 2017). Statistics on the crimes committed against Middle Eastern groups due to race or religion are closely tied because the perpetrator inflicts his/her violence based on assumptions about the victim's affiliation with Islam. As a result, the negative representation of Muslims in the media and Canadian politics are factors that contribute to othering Iraqi women regardless of their religious background.

Mass media and politics that targets Muslims play an important part in shaping the Canadian population's imagination of Arabs, Islam and Muslims. Historically, Muslims and Arabs have long been presented as the unruly 'Other' as observed by many scholars (Said, 1979; Yilmaz & Aykaç, 2012). In Canada, that was particularly the case under the Harper's government between 2006 and 2015. When asked about his view of immigration in an

interview with Report News magazine, Stephen Harper suggested that his biggest concern is the potential threat to Canada's national security that comes from refugees. Flecker (2008) reviewed Harper's statement in the context of 9/11 as colour coded: "Given that these source countries are largely non-white and non-Christian, it implies a profile of who, by virtue of colour and/or religion, is a security risk" (p. 172). Such language plays the orientalist binary of 'us' against 'them' as a form of clash of civilizations, which enables and maintains the structural violence against racialized bodies (Flecker, 2008).

All things considered, it seems reasonable to conclude that Muslims and racialized immigrants are expected to identify with mainstream norms and values, to varying degrees, and distance themselves from values and norms of their culture or ethnicity. If they practised different norms publicly, they can be considered a threat to the basic values of the host society (Andreassen, 2005). Therefore, it is possible to hypothesize that individuals who feel socially alienated in real life might escape to the virtual realm and use social media to create an alternative community with which they can identify.

In this chapter, I clarified the importance of my study and provided essential background on Iraqi women's status in Iraq and Canada. Before I move on to the literature review, I would like to briefly outline the principal points of each chapter.

Chapter two, presents an overview of current research on Iraqi women across the private and public domain, their use of social media, and their place in the digital divide. Research on Iraq is often presented as part of the Arab world in digital media studies. In the last section, I discuss gaps in literature on diaspora communities online. I found two major

issues in current studies on Arab women online. The first is that it covers a period before the rise of social media and mobile technology, hence it is outdated. The other is that it focuses on women who are already online, like bloggers and social media celebrities in the Arab Spring and uses them as a case study. I found the same issue with studies on online diaspora communities—they mostly harness their data online rather than conduct field work or interviews.

In chapter three, I present my methodology. Participants in this study were first generation immigrant Iraqi women who are nineteen years old or above and lived in Canada for at least three years. I used two participant centered approaches that emphasizes the importance of including marginalized communities in knowledge production: the intersectionality theory and feminist community research methodology. I conducted in-depth interviews to ensure participant self-representation with their own voices. Since I was examining digital accessibility, I did not collect my study sample online. Instead, I contacted these women offline through referrals from the local community.

We get into the core of my research in chapter four, where I present and discuss my findings. I divided this chapter into three main sections. In section one, I illustrate the positive correlation between being a caregiver, which also meant being a mother, and the frequency participants used social media. Caregiving was an important factor that affected how and where women engaged with social media. It limited participants' mobility and made them more reliant on their online social network. In this study, all caregivers were mothers taking care of their children and in one case, a husband with special needs. This created an overlap between the two categories: being a mother and being a caregiver. Unlike single

women, mothers' education slowed down after their arrival to Canada while single women continued their formal education and improved their English. Because English acquisition for mothers is slow, they relied on social media more than single women to socialize and get information about settlement. Here, social media worked as a temporary patch to a large problem. It did alleviate some of the immediate problems they faced but by using it, their problem became an individual burden less visible to the society. I argue that being the sole person responsible for caregiving limits women access to education— to language classes in particular. Mothers/caregivers used social platforms to learn English and get answers to questions related to health, taxes, and other resettlement issues, questions usually addressed through language schools, settlement services and social agencies. Because women are handling these issues privately at home, these institutions, which rely on quota of clients served to measure its success and get government funding, might not be aware of their settlement or caregiving challenges. Ultimately, this leads to less targeted financial funding towards programs that would assist this group. Rather than being a shared responsibility addressed through community programs, caregiving for children and special needs individuals has become increasingly privatized and feminized, as much of this work still rests solely on women's shoulders.

In section two of chapter four, I answer my second question: “How do Iraqi women participate in building their online communities?”. I argue that women who were continuously othered in their neighbourhoods, could not find a circle of support locally, have

sought refuge in social media. Those who wore *hijab*⁶ were subjected to discriminatory acts more than unveiled women. As a result, they were more likely to rely on online communities.

The third section of chapter four addresses the last two questions of my study and elaborates on the analogy of the digital *burqa* and business suit. Here, I discuss the challenges women face in social media and the tactics they use to overcome them. The digital *burqa* and business suit present two sets of strategies women use online to avoid gender-based persecution. The first is anonymity, or the digital burqa, where women use a pseudonym, and avoid sharing photos or socializing with men online. The second strategy, which I call the business suit, entails limiting their socialization to business networks, like LinkedIn, where interaction is formal.

I present my conclusion in chapter five where I provide a synthesis of my findings and my study contributions. I navigate this section by using the three main questions of this thesis as an outline. I end this chapter by offering suggestions for future research on immigration, social media and cyber misogyny.

⁶ In Islam, the veil is a cover that reflects modesty. Because it is understood and adopted differently in different parts of the Muslim world, its meaning and how it is practised varies according to the region and era. Nowadays, the word veil is an umbrella term that includes *hijab* (a head scarf), *burqa* (a face cover that shows only the eyes), *niqāb* (a face cover that covers the nose and lower face), and chador (a whole-body cover). The veil has different names in Arabic beside those four, some are *abāyah*, *ṭarḥah*, *burnus*, *jilbāb*, and *milāyah*.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Notions of cyberspace altered social science concepts such as place (Castells, 2011; Wellman, 2001) community and social capital (Huysman & Wulf, 2004; Wellman, 2001), belonging and social interaction (Cerulo, 1998; Katz & Rice, 2002), and national borders (Appadurai, 1996).

Two theoretical approaches are particularly important to my research. The first is derived from scholarship by Islamic feminists who wrote on Islamic theology, questioning men's rule over women. I explain how Islamic feminist scholars conceptualize private and public domains. In turn, I suggest how religious justifications of men's power over women and private/public theorization are critical to understand the unique character of Iraqi women's participation online.

The second approach which I cover in the second half of this literature review is focused on cyberfeminists and research on the digital divide. I discuss how this divide has been theorized in relationship to the Arab world, particularly after the Arab Spring. I then explain gaps in the online diaspora community literature and point out some of the gaps in studies of the digital divide concerning gender.

2.1 Transferring Islamic feminist theories of public and private to cyberspace

One cannot deny the cultural and historical impact of Islam on the Iraqi population. Islam has been the dominant religion in Iraq for over 1,400 years. Even under secular regimes like Saddam Hussein's, it was looked upon as an essential part of Iraqi culture.

Furthermore, the recent politicization of Islam in Iraq since 2003 has affected laws and norms regarding women's mobility, rights and religious expression.

Islamic feminists dispute men's monopoly on religious interpretation citing the fact that Islamic jurisprudence, used to justify male interpretive power, was devised in the ninth century— two centuries after the foundation of Islam (Mernissi, 1987; Wadud, 1999). Medieval Islamic jurisprudence, also called classical *fiqh*, translates the Quran to confer two rights to men: (*wilayah*) legal authority and (*qiwamah*) the right to guardianship and to rule over women generally (Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Mir-Hosseini, Al-Sharmani, & Rumminger, 2015; Wadud, 1999). Both (*wilayah*) and (*qiwamah*) grant men various powers over women, including over their mobility. Male ownership over women's sexuality is manifested in many patriarchal privileges embedded in marriage and divorce laws. These include a father's responsibility to give away daughters in marriage and his automatic custody⁷ of them during a separation; a husband's power to verbally divorce his wife, but the wife needing to return her dowry and litigate for the same privilege (A. Y. Ali, 1975; K. Ali, 2010; Khalifa, 2007; Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Pickthall, 2017; Shakir, 2001; 2005, تيمية ابن).

Many of these laws are justified on the contested notion of “*qawwamūn*”, found in the Qur'anic verse 4:34: “Men are *qawwamūn* over women, because God has given the one more than the other, and because they support them from their means”. Some Islamic scholars

⁷ In classical Islamic jurisprudence, mothers are given the right to care for their children until they reach seven. After that, the path of custody depends on the child's sex. If the child is a girl, she is awarded to her father. On the other hand, a boy has the right to choose with which parent to live.

translated “*qawwamūn*” to mean “maintainers” (Shakir, 2001). Others interpreted it to mean “protectors and maintainers” (A. Y. Ali, 2015), “in charge of” (Pickthall, 2017), or “responsible for” (Khalifa, 2007). “Maintainers” obviously implies a lesser degree of control than “in charge of”. Nevertheless, while Classic Islamic scholars disagree on the particulars of “*qawwamūn*”, they are in consensus that verse 4:34 justifies patriarchal authority and validates a cosmological hierarchy in which men are above women and a step beneath god (Chaudhry, 2013). Amina Wadud argues that scholars who interpreted “*qiwamah*” as a divine preference for men expand the man’s rights over women to include non-family members, thus licensing men to police women whether they are family or not (Wadud, 1999).

The Islamic feminist Fatima Mernissi wrote extensively on women’s place in society, and how public and private are theorized in Islam. In her classical work “Beyond the Veil” (1987), Mernissi starts with a bold statement: “Muslim sexuality is territorial”. Using Edmond Hall’s theory of proxemics, she analyzed patriarchal anxiety around women’s sexuality—used to justify restrictions on women’s movement. According to the traditional Islamic understanding of gender, she argues, the “*Umma*”⁸ is a masculine public domain characterized by logic, reason and order. In contrast, the private domain, occupied by women, is believed to be subordinate, and marked by desire and disorder.

Mernissi explains the rules governing the relationship between the two domains. The

⁸ *Umma* in Arabic means people or community. It has several uses in the Quran, especially in contrast to the social divisions of humanity. Prophet Mohammed envisaged the creation of one *Umma* that transcend the division in the world (Bowker, 2000).

“*Umma*” is the public and primary domain. Any space with a male majority is a public domain. But spaces with a female majority are private and subordinate. Women’s entry into the public domain is always problematic: her presence is seen as a transgression and possibly a catalyst for chaos or “*fitna*”⁹. If we apply the medieval interpretation of verse 4:34 here, we can say when women leave the private domain, their sexuality is still private property. Men’s interaction with a woman in public is only permissible if mediated via her guardian: i.e., the owner of her sexuality. What is fascinating about Mernissi’s theorization of public/private division is that it is not constrained by geography. Rather, it is contingent on the people in that space and the relationships between them. This is what makes her ideas theoretically applicable to virtual space.

Deborah L. Wheeler, who has done field research on Arab women online in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan and Egypt since 2000, found that women use the internet to transgress traditional social norms, such as chatting with men (Wheeler, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007). Wheeler asked about the empowering effect of the internet on Arab women and if the internet can “enable women to increase their power and influence in both public and private spheres and how far that process is obstructed by local constraints.” (Wheeler, 2004a, p. 144). I would like to take this question a step further and ask how the

⁹ Later on, Mernissi noted that initially, the Prophet Mohammed intended to create an egalitarian society based on the belief that all people are equal before God. He advanced women’s rights through unifying the public/private spheres. That is why he situated his wives’ home next to the first mosque in Medina, where they can participate in public debates. Mernissi said: “The Prophet’s simple manner of living was a threat to those around him, for he cared nothing for the virtues of the public/private division of space, and male supremacy can only exist and be consolidated if the public/private division is maintained as an almost sacred matter” (Mernissi, 1991, p. 111).

online social domain is delineated around gender. Is there a cyber public/private boundary where women's access is debated and their social conduct has to be adjusted? What sort of social norms and inequalities does this delineation engender? What negative impact might similar restrictions have on women's opportunities online? These questions are at the core of digital social justice. The cultural norms which defines the public/private spheres offline restrict women's mobility, civic participation and access to employment and basic services. In the case of Iraqi women in the diaspora, questioning online boundaries also sheds insight on how power is shaped and contested locally by different populations. Offline, it signifies local powers in Canada. Online, it refers to the virtual Iraqi community and Arabic speaking people in general.

Male guardianship over women online can be analysed using studies on surveillance, defined by David Lyon as "any collection and processing of personal data, whether identifiable or not, for the purpose of influencing or managing those whose data has been garnered" (Lyon, 2001). Academic discourse on surveillance in cyberspace focuses mainly on the panoptic¹⁰ power of the state and the various technologies that enable control and censorship (Coleman, 2004; Lyon, 2001, 2006, 2015; Taylor, 2002). Applying a gender lens and intersectional approach to surveillance discourse expands our scope of analysis and brings to the fore other social structures that affect the rights of women and minorities to

¹⁰ The term Panopticon comes from Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century design of prisons where small number of guards located in a central tower can have a pan-view of the prison. In this design, prisoners cannot see the guards and can never know whether they are being watched. Therefore, they assume that the surveillance is continuous and have to modify their behaviour accordingly.

access virtual mobility and freedom of expression. For instance, Hille Koskela (2002), applies the notion of the male gaze in her study of security cameras in public spaces. She points out that these cameras, what she refers to as technologies of control, are aimed at making spaces safer. But she notes, these cameras also make public space “less public” by increasing oversight and control, and invading people’s privacy. Koskela concludes her study encouraging other researchers to investigate the impact of surveillance technologies on women in cyberspace.

Using the Quran verse 4:34 and Mernissi’s public/private analysis, we can anticipate many issues: do women need a man’s permission to access social media? What would the power relation be when they encounter men on social media? Would men feel the need to apply “*qiwamah*” and police women’s virtue in virtual space? Each of these questions touch on women’s rights to equal access to social media and equal benefit from the technology— issues at the heart of digital social justice. Yet answering these questions requires going beyond cyber netnographic¹¹ methods, can provide. Netnography relies solely on the internet to collect data, for example: online surveys, analysis of hashtags in social media, and tracking digital public conversations. We need to include findings from off-line qualitative studies that contextualize online participation as part of women’s lived experiences offline.

The concept of the digital divide is a good starting point for discussing inequalities on social media. Early literature on the digital divide in Arabic speaking countries focused on

¹¹ Netnography was originally developed in 1995 by marketing professor Robert Kozinets to analyse online fan discussions about Star Trek. It was used in marketing studies initially then spread to other discipline.

access, internet penetration and censorship (Abdulla, 2007; Emdad, Badamas, & Mouakket, 2009; Loch, Straub, & Kamel, 2003; Warf & Vincent, 2007). When the gender lens was applied to address the inequalities in ICT, it was discussed in terms of physical access. Warf and Vincent (2007), found that young and relatively well-educated men compose the majority of internet users in Arab states. They attributed this phenomenon to the patriarchal values of the region which restricts women's access to the internet (2007). By 2011, the growth of mobile phones usage increased ICT penetration globally ¹² to 95% (Union, 2012). Hence, discussions about the digital divide in terms of infrastructure and affordability have become largely irrelevant. Contemporary scholars of digital sociology have expanded the boundaries of the digital divide to incorporate all dimensions of oppression preventing racial and ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, rural populations, and those with low socioeconomic status from participating online and benefiting (Castells, 2002; Wessels, 2013). Ragnedda and Muschert (2013), provided the most comprehensive approach to examining the digital divide. They argued that the digital divide can be viewed as a system of inclusion and exclusion that denies vulnerable people equal levels of opportunities to develop digital skills, to participate in democratic process, and to enter the labor market (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013). I rely on this definition in my analysis for the digital divide.

¹² It is worth mentioning that the ICT penetration in Iraq was low according to the report —it reached 7.10% by 2012 and risen to 36.2% in 2017 according to the Internet World Stat (Stats, 2017).

2.2 The impact of the Arab Spring on analysis of power and empowerment in social media

Interest in ICT and social media in the Arab world peaked in 2011 during the Arab Spring, when social media was supposedly used to foster democracy and create mass movements. Empirical research using netnographic data showed the centrality of social media in the success of social movements in Egypt and Tunisia (Howard et al., 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013). The participation of bloggers, vloggers and the Twitteratis¹³ were the most visible portion of the Arab Spring to the outside world. They have provided academics an immense amount of electronic data to study, analyze and debate for years.

The visibility of social media activists gave them immediate international fame as ‘cyber activists’. Some of these celebrities are the Tunisian blogger Lina Ben Mhenni who covered the story of Mohamed Bouazizi¹⁴; the Egyptian activist Asmaa Mahfouz who is credited for sparking the Egyptian Revolution after her video urging people to protest went viral; Tawakkol Karnaman the Yemeni journalist who later won the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize; the Bahraini activist Maryam al-Khawaja; the Libyan activist Danya Bashir and the Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy. These cyber-savvy women did not only tell the story of the

¹³ Twitterati refer to the influential users of Twitter. It is a portmanteau of Twitter and literati.

¹⁴ On the 17th of December 2010, the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself in desperate protest to the poverty and social injustice in Tunisia. His act ignited the Tunisian Jasmine Spring and later the Arab Spring.

¹⁴ In forced migration, individuals are pushed out of their home countries by force, like refugees of war or climate change, rather than leaving with their own volition like immigrants under economic class and family reunification.

revolution but also were a source of information for academics and journalists. The shift of power over knowledge, which these women demonstrated, contradicts the orientalist image of the helpless Arab woman.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, headlines like “Twitter Revolution” and “Facebook revolution” circulated in the media. Some Euro-American media writers advanced the idea of the internet and social media as liberation catalysts for the oppressed. For instance, in “Democracy's Fourth Wave” Philip Howard (2013), suggests that digital media fostered a democratic atmosphere in the Arab world and changed the gender politics between men and women. According to Howard, the internet had several democratizing effects: first, through online markets: women acquired economic freedom in some of the most patriarchal countries. Second, through the internet, women and men could now get a glimpse at what life was like for women in other countries. Third, it afforded an open forum where men and women can freely debate gender issues relevant to their culture, creating an opportunity to renegotiate gender relations (Howard & Hussain, 2013).

Manuel Castells (2015) relied on Philip Howard in his study of ICT in the Middle East (Howard, 2010). He affirmed Howards’ findings on the positive correlation between internet penetration and democracy in Muslim countries. Castells says: “the diffusion and use of ICTs favor democratization, strengthen democracy and increase civic involvement and autonomy of the civil society, paving the way for the democratization of state and also for challenges to dictatorships” (p.106). Truly, as Howard’s research suggests, there is a correlation between social media penetration and calls for democracy in the Arab world. However, studies on digital justice and technology penetration trends also indicate that the

first adopters usually belong to the privileged, well-educated class (Ragnedda & Muschert, 2013; Warf & Vincent, 2007). An example of this are the cyber activist and Twitterati celebrities I mentioned before who are university graduates and possess higher socio-economic status. It would therefore be impossible to generalize on the inclusivity of social media based on this group's participation. Studies on the accessibility and inclusivity of social media must include traditional field work rather than relying on online data and interviews targeting web savvy netizens of higher social status.

Furthermore, the data indicates that the gender participation gap during the Arab Spring was fairly close for Egyptians and Bahrainis, yet far from close for Tunisians, who started the Arab Spring, the poverty-stricken Yemenis (Kuhlow, 2013) and war torn Iraqis—including transnational Iraqis in Canada and the US (Al-Rawi, 2014). Al-Rawi proposed two hypotheses to explain the underlying reasons of digital gender disparity in Iraq. The first is regarding the attitude of the Iraqi patriarchal culture inside and outside Iraq. The second is the lack of social and economic stability inside Iraq, which has created a social polarity, lack of internet infrastructure, and women's fear of harassment in public internet cafes. Al-Rawi's study does not compare Iraq to other Arab states. Hence, we cannot attribute women's reluctance to participate online solely to patriarchal attitudes of Iraqis, but perhaps to a combination of both factors: rising patriarchy after the war and lack of stability and infrastructure. Those factors are the outcomes of a continuous war which lead to the destruction of Iraq. Furthermore, in my study, participants were heavy users of social media. However, many preferred to navigate social media anonymously. I offer an explanation to

why Iraqi women seem absent from social media in the fourth section in my finding where I discuss women's choices of visibility and anonymity.

The notion of the internet as a democratic terrain (Castells, 2015; Howard et al., 2011) and social media as empowering tool for the marginalised (Radsch & Khamis, 2013) echoes the old rhetoric of cyberfeminists who viewed the internet as a gender neutral terrain ready to empower women. In the early 1990s, feminist studies on cyberspace brought about three core theories: identity hybridity of human and machine (Haraway, 2006), identity tourism where users can experiment with other identities, genders and races (Nakamura, 1995), and disembodiment where interactions would transcend the biases and limitations of our corporeal bodies (Plant, 1997). Cyberfeminists had high utopian hopes of the potential of the internet. Cyberspace is text-based, Plant argued, and women are the masters of text. Therefore, women will dominate the virtual world: "Cyberspace is out of man's control: virtual reality destroys his identity, digitalization is mapping his soul and, at the peak of his triumph, the culmination of his mechanic erections, man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female and dangerous" (1996, p. 181).

These theories framed the discussions of cyberspace in utopian terms especially regarding women's empowerment. The internet was prophesied to be a liberating gender-neutral terrain void of structural barriers to entry, and also, as the ultimate utopian escape for humanity from its socially- constructed gender, race and class prejudices. Mernissi (1987), who described the gender boundaries in the Muslim society as belonging to two different universes with clear cut borders: the public male domain and the private domain of sexuality, shared her optimism about the new technology and wrote describing its potential in her blog.

She went so far as to assert that ICT has destroyed/eradicated gender boundaries in the Arab world:

“...the strategic issue mobilizing the Arab World: *al-fitna raqmiya* (digital chaos), the destruction of space frontiers by the new Information Technologies (IT). The key problem giving anxiety fits to elites and masses, to heads of states and street-vendors, to men and women in the Arab world today is the digital chaos induced by IT such as the internet and the satellite which has destroyed the *hudud* [boundaries], the space frontier which divided the universe into a sheltered private arena where women and children were supposed to be protected, and a public one where adult males exercised their presumed problem-solving authority” (Mernissi, September 2005).

Over all, studies on online Muslim and Arab women present cyberspace as a site to practice selfhood, challenge gender norms (Amir-Ebrahimi, 2008; Campbell & Howie, 2016), and interact with men without fear of social consequence (Wheeler, 2006).

Cyber-utopianism was challenged and complicated by scholarship on the digital divide. Researchers in the new millennium found that those who have access to the internet tended to belong to the same privileged social group: those with education, wealth, health, and namely young able-bodied men. In fact, social justice researchers and advocates were anxious about the internet as a new factor that contributes to the steady increase of inequalities in the world instead of helping to close the socio-economic gap. And while optimism about cyberspace has been largely debated, the Arab Spring revolution came to revive and maintain the narrative of saving humanity through digital technology.

If we apply cyberfeminist theories to my case study, we can hypothesize that Iraqi women will delve more in the virtual world to resist restrictions on their mobility in real life and carve a safe gender-free zone. Following the same set of theories, we can also

hypothesize that the gender boundaries of public/private are clearly drawn for Iraqis in real life; whereas in cyberspace, these boundaries are muted or absent. This creates two mutually intersecting tensions: cyberspace as a place of empowerment, but also a space where intersectional politics persists, coloured by race, ethnicity, gender and religion. I argue that women have agency online and they were creative in resisting patriarchy. However, cyberspace also mirrors and amplifies pre-existing social structure. As a result, power hierarchy and gender boundaries persist online and they are far from being eradicated.

2.3 Diaspora communities online

Stephen Castles (2010) argues that in the past, the flow of international migration has been mostly permanent and in a one-way direction from one nation-state to another. This has changed with the continuous expansion of globalization and cross-border communication which cyberspace enables. An increasing number of immigrants connect to societies outside their geographical locality and in doing so develop communities with distinct transnational consciousness (Appadurai, 1996).

Castles' research (2010) explains that immigrants who experienced forced migration are more connected to their transnational ties than other groups. Yuval-Davis (2011) similarly includes immigrants' social networks beyond their geographical location when examining their senses of belonging. She argues: "diasporic and transnational belongings, especially with the use of virtual realities of the internet can, at least partially, transcend these limits of physical geography" (p. 10-11).

The dominant cyber diaspora literature explores case studies of online diasporic groups and focuses on activism, online discussion of shared history, ways of belonging,

cultural identity (i.e. how ethnic groups present themselves and how they are represented by others online), and the online reactions of mainstream populations towards ethnic minorities which usually propels a deeper discussion of race and culture , and questions about belonging to the nation-state (Bernal, 2006; Fung, 2006; Kusçu, 2014; Shakhsari, 2012; Smith & Kollock, 1999; Stephan, 2013). Arjun Appadurai was one of the early scholars in globalization to hypothesize the potential of cyberspace in uniting diaspora communities across borders, beyond their local geographies and beyond the power of the nation-state. He was especially interested in the new media's potential for mobilization, which could enable its members to organize, and bargain collectively (Appadurai, 1996).

In her analysis of diasporic Muslim communities' use of media in Canada, Faiza Harji (2006) explains how marginalized diasporic communities rely on social media to foster a sense of identity or community. She confirms that not all members are invested in the diasporic social media; it depends largely on whether or not they are comfortable within the host culture.

Most of these studies use netnography which if applied alone does not give a full account of the diasporic community's experience since it is limited to the online community sample. Even within that sample the researcher has to bear in mind that not all users are actively voicing their opinions in social forums. Furthermore, this research method is limited to specific internet hubs or platforms and does not include the overall effect of social media where users are merely viewers e.g. watching online videos, reading news, or one-to-one

communication as with Viber, Skype, and WhatsApp¹⁵. In addition, these studies did not explicitly incorporate factors pertinent to immigrants into their analysis. Their investigations of experiences of online connection and offline isolation do not focus on the unique condition of immigrants who confront challenges that native-born individuals generally do not. These challenges include lesser access to social capital, a language barrier, cultural loss and acculturation stress. Thus, as part of my investigation, I pose further questions to address what I see as some of the gaps in the literature. I ask, how can social media affect immigrants who have limited communication capacity in real life? Does social media hinder the settlement of immigrant women by isolating them locally? Does social media help if they have limited physical mobility, as in the case of mothers with preschool children? Together, I think these questions show how studying the experiences of immigrant Iraqi women can be a compelling project, especially given that the majority of Iraqi diaspora migrated after the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, a year that coincides with the wide dispersal of information communication technologies.

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that WhatsApp is owned by Facebook.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study uses two approaches developed by feminist scholars. The first, intersectionality, draws attention to how gender, race, sexuality, and class are interconnected and produce intersecting oppressions. One prominent intersectionality theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw, introduced this term in "Mapping the Margins " (1991), as part of a theoretical framework highlighting how women of colour, especially those belonging to disadvantaged communities, are excluded from knowledge production and policymaking (Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality theory, as a "method and a disposition, a heuristic and analytic tool" (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013, p. 303), helps unpack the complexity of social and economic factors that affect Iraqi women's uses of social media.

The second approach I relied on in designing my research originated in feminist community research methodologies, which focus on social problems afflicting minorities with the hope of resolving them. Community research methodologies have an activist component since they emphasize the importance of including marginalized communities in knowledge production to transform planning and policy-making (Creese & Frisby, 2011), as an alternative to top-down models. What is especially important in this approach is the notion of reflexivity: feminist community research methodologies encourage the researcher to take into account their location in relation to the outcomes of their study. It encourages researchers to examine their biases and reflect on how differences in power and privileges shape their research approach and analysis prior to entering the field (Chilisa, 2011; Creese & Frisby, 2011). To minimize their biases in knowledge production, researchers should make their positionality explicit (Chilisa, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2013). This involves carefully examining the power relations and dynamics at play in their work, and then attempting to

resist and break down different forms of socio-economic hierarchies both in their methodology and desired outcomes. A Feminist community research framework is ideal for my research because it puts the issues and lived experience of Iraqi women at the forefront of knowledge production. Also, the ethical considerations present in the feminist community pay attention to the evident power dynamic while doing interviews and field work. This worked well with my study participants since they were largely women of colour facing many socio-cultural and economic barriers.

The intersectionality theory and feminist community methodology encourages a participant centred approach, like in-depth interviews, to collect data (Cuadraz & Uttal, 1999). I conducted ten semi-structured, in-depth interviews to ensure participant self-representation with their own voices. In line with feminist methodologies, these interviews emphasise the importance of participants' agency and allow self-definition of ones' circumstances to interpret the meaning of their own experiences and to define their issues in their own terms. Furthermore, it privileges the collection of rich data from a small quantity of interviewees rather than the collection of limited, closed-ended answers from a large sample of participants, as in surveys. In contrast to in-depth interviews, a survey does not probe the meaning of the questions fully and approaches the field with predefined categories. Hence, surveys can serve to advance the vision and the prejudices of the researcher rather than capture the participants' actual opinions.

Face to face in-depth interviews fit the criteria and the purpose of this study, yet—like surveys—this approach has its limitations. First, the answers obtained from the interviews are the result of the interpersonal interaction between the interviewer and

participants. As a result, different interviewers may provide different narratives on the same issue, depending on their knowledge of the topic, biases, and how they connect with the participants. Simply put, the results are influenced by the interviewer's presence, personality and biases (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). I attempted to mitigate my influence on this research prior to interviews by clarifying my role, affiliation and positionality. In feminist methodology, the idea of sharing one's positionality is thought to level the power plane and increase reciprocity (Hesse-Biber, 2013). During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions such as "Tell me about your browsing routine" and "Can you tell me more about your Facebook use?".

I clarified my understanding of participants' statements especially regarding information relevant to my findings or when a participant's statement was ambiguous. In those cases, I directly asked participants to elaborate on the meaning of what they just said, or shared my interpretation of their answers — which they might confirm or refute. I also shared my preliminary findings with participants who allowed me to contact them later on.

I tried to be conscious about the risk of my assumptions and biases, and admittedly I was occasionally surprised with participants' answers and ultimately my findings. That being said, I cannot claim that my questions or interpretation of participants' answers are entirely objective or value-free. After applying due diligence, I can only acknowledge my positionality in this research.

3.1 The positionality of the researcher

My imagination of Iraq and Iraqis was shaped early on when I lived in Saudi Arabia. In school, I was taught that Iraq is part of the Arab world where all Arabs share geo-political interests, language unity, and religious and blood ties. Iraq history was central in my Islamic education, which spanned until high school. However, modern Iraq under Saddam was presented as a threat to Islam in the Saudi media. Saudi Arabia fought against Iraq in 1991 during the Second Gulf War. This national and historic animosity between Iraq and Saudi extends after the fall of Saddam, particularly considering the Saudi government role in supporting Sunni groups in the sectarian war. Participants were aware of my background and recalled the Saudi government involvement in the last two wars in Iraq.

Although the Saudi media was hostile towards the Iraqi government since 1991, I grew up in an intellectual milieu that admired Iraqi's resilience and stubbornness in the face of different occupying powers. This sentiment was not unique. Iraq became a symbol of resistance to imperialism among Arab intellectuals like Abdul Rahman Munif, an outspoken political author who was stripped of his citizenship over his criticism of the Saudi regime, and Mohamed Hassanein Heikal an Egyptian writer and a former editor-in- chief of Al-Ahram newspaper. As a child and adolescent in Arabia, I read every book, every magazine article about Iraq I could lay my hands on. I even kept a scrapbook where I collected news pieces about Iraq. To my young eyes, Iraqis were legends. I remember asking my brother in the 1990s to show me his Iraqi professor, solely because of his nationality. He was the only Iraqi I heard of then who lived in Arabia. Clearly, things have changed after the 2003 Anglo-

American invasion. Now, Iraqis are dispersed across every continent¹⁶. But back then, my imagination of Iraq was filled with symbols of a glorious Arab history — emblemized by the Caliphate — and of contemporary Arab resistance against imperialism.

Moving forward to my life in Canada, between 2011-2015, I worked as a resettlement counsellor for the Arabic and Spanish speaking communities supporting Government Assisted Refugees in BC. I started my work during the peak of the sectarian war in Iraq and the Syrian civil war¹⁷. I worked closely with over 400 Iraqi family units, and my level of engagement varied with each family's level of need. As part of my role, I conducted intakes and case management. My previous clients shared so many stories about their life in Iraq — how it was before the war and how it was affected by the war. They recounted how they fled from one country to another, and how they lived in constant fear. They shared stories of the people they lost to war, and people left behind. They told me of the scars they still carried — physically and psychologically— and their refugee experiences continued to affect them on daily basis. None of those stories shared in confidence were part of this study. However, my

¹⁶ Yet Iraqi refugees are not welcomed in Saudi. The only time Saudi received Iraqis was during the exceptional political circumstances in 1991. Roughly 35,000 refugees lived in Rafah camp (UNHCR, 2013). From the 35,000, around 24,000 were resettled outside Saudi, while the rest were returned to Iraq. Around 77 were forcibly returned to Iraq during the peak of the sectarian war (USCRI, 2009). Saudi is not a signature on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol. Nor it is a party to either the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons or the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (UNHCR, 2013).

¹⁷ By 2007, Syria hosted around 1.2 million Iraqi refugees (Al-Khalidi, Hoffmann, & Tanner, 2007). The Syrian war affected Iraq refugees as well and strangled and displaced a population that was already suffering.

work experience has shaped my perspective of the current reality in Iraq and affected my choices and approach to this study.

I also have been involved with projects focusing on Iraqi settlement cases in Mexico. In Canada, beside my experience as settlement counsellor, I work independently assisting the Arab community in collaboration with several non-profit agencies¹⁸. Furthermore, I am a racialized immigrant woman with refugee experience and a member of the Arabic speaking community in BC. This makes me both an insider and outsider. My ethnicity, language, refugee experience and social ties make me an insider. Yet my education in immigration law and professional experience in the settlement sector puts me in a position of power over new immigrants, who may perceive me as a gatekeeper. I mitigated this conflict between my role as a researcher and previous role as settlement counsellor by excluding new comers who have been in Canada for less than three years and youth who are less than nineteen years old. I did not approach participants directly during the recruiting period for fear that they would feel obliged to enroll in my study. Instead, participants were either referred indirectly through organizations where I shared my recruitment poster and through members of the Arabic community who were informed about my study.

¹⁸ Namely: The Women Economic Counsel, Mosaic, S.U.C.C.E.S.S., Options Community Services Society, DIVERSEcity, Kiwassa Neighborhood Services Association, The Family Services of Greater Vancouver, The Frog Hollow Neighborhood House, and Geeks for Peace. All these agencies are located in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia.

3.2 Research procedure

I posted recruitment advertisements in community hubs such as public libraries, neighbourhood houses, language schools and settlement offices. I called staff at these places and explained to them the scope of the research and gave them copies of the study poster to circulate in the Iraqi community. In addition, I shared it with my acquaintances in the local Arabic community. The poster listed the requirement for the ideal participants and outlined the research purpose, its significance, and my affiliation with the University of British Columbia. Participants in this study had to meet the following criteria:

1. Must be first generation Iraqi immigrant
2. Self-identify as a woman
3. Live in BC
4. Be 19 years old or above
5. Has lived in Canada for at least 3 years
6. Is interested in sharing her immigration story and internet use experiences
7. Is willing to have the interview recorded

Individuals who were interested in being interviewed contacted me via email or phone. I then screened individuals based on whether they matched research criteria, and explained the research scope, risks, interview procedure and answered any questions. Many participants changed their mind about participating in the study when they heard that the interview was recorded. Those who accepted were scheduled for an interview a week after their call. I asked participants to contact me at any time if they had questions or concerns, or

if they wished to withdraw. I deliberately chose a delay between recruitment and the interview to ensure that participants had time to digest what I told them, and consider any possible risk that might result from participating in this study.

The interviews were conducted in places familiar to participants, such as community centres, neighbourhood houses, cafes, libraries and settlement agencies. This familiarity is essential for women to feel safe and comfortable while being interviewed. Selection of interview location was based on the participant's preference.

To ensure informed consent, I explained the nature and purpose of this study and the potential risks to participants. Participants were given a copy of the consent form in Arabic, and we read it together before they signed it.

The research topic and questions alone should not trigger traumatic experiences. Still, you cannot have a conversation with first generation Iraqi immigrants without talking about loss of home, family, lifestyle and the ongoing war in Iraq. Although being a refugee was not a requirement for enrolment, all participants in this study fled Iraq as refugees. I anticipated that they might feel some distress when asked to recall memories related to their home country. Therefore, I needed to mitigate the risk of triggering traumatic memories. Towards that end, I checked the participants' level of distress regularly and asked if they were comfortable enough to continue. They were reminded of their right to withdraw between questions and whenever they showed discomfort during answers. When a participant felt uncomfortable, she was reminded that she can decide not to share a particular story and was encouraged to take a break. All participants were given a referral list of agencies that can aid individuals who experience a mental or emotional crisis.

Participants were asked to use a pseudonym when they were interviewed. During the interview itself, participants had free choice over what questions to answer. They could withdraw from the study and have their data deleted at any time up to a year after the interview.

Interviews were recorded on a laptop or tablet disconnected from the internet. Any recordings were immediately copied into a storage device and the original deleted. The storage device was protected by password and kept at my home office. After five years of the publication of my research, all audio files will be permanently deleted.

I conducted eight interviews in Arabic and two interviews in English following a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. Interviews took an average of three hours. First, I asked participants about their personal background, such as previous education, marital status, work and immigration status. This was intended as an icebreaker and to contextualize their experiences. The bulk of my interviews focused on a participant's internet activities, their daily web browsing routine, how they used social media, what type of social media they preferred and why, the things they liked or hated about it, who was on their list of contacts, what particular challenges they faced and how they resolved those challenges. I then asked about their personal life and social activities, and how these were affected by social media. I used a funnel method to encourage discussion. I started with general questions and gradually worked towards questions that would solicit responses about their personal experiences. After they gave me answers that were relevant to my data, I summarized and repeated what they told me to make sure that I understood them correctly. Participants would correspond by confirming, elaborating or refuting my interpretation.

3.3 Reciprocity and compensations

Taking steps toward social transformation and giving back to the community is one of the important aspects of feminist community research (Creese & Frisby, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2013). Participants were compensated with two bus tickets for their transit cost.

This research hopes to inform settlement and immigration planners, and social media developers by providing an account of the lived experiences of refugee women's use of social media. Summary of the research findings was available to participants who chose to be contacted when research results were finalized. If this research is shared or published in any form, credit will be given to women from the Iraqi community in British Columbia without revealing participants' names.

3.4 Analysis

Field notes were taken during the interview and recorded immediately after each interview. During transcription, I noticed participants intermingled Arabic and English words. For instance, while interviewing mothers in Arabic, the word "daycare", "immigration", "English-level", "family doctor" popped up in English. Some participants code-switched more than others. This reflects the duality of their social life. Another linguistic phenomenon was the partial Arabization of ICT terms. Facebook, for example, became "*Al-Fais*", WhatsApp became "*Al-Whats*". Some used the Arabic suffix (-at) to create a plural instead of the English (-s) so you would hear "*adminat*" instead of admins and "*groubat*" instead of groups.

After four interviews, I created coding categories with MAXQDA software, where I placed keywords or tags to segments of text to permit later retrieval. Once the interviews were done, transcribed and coded, I started analysing content. During the interview,

participants moved back and forth between the local and transnational while talking about family, education, norms and values. Their extensive transnational ties seeped into their local lives, with social media mediating between the two realms. Keeping a distinction between what is local versus transnational and what is online versus real life was perhaps the hardest analytical challenge I faced in this research.

Because I used intersectionality theory, I had the flexibility needed to address complex social issues and analyze overlapping layers of oppression. I focused on the main challenges participants identified and then examined how local life, transnational ties and social media have contributed to empowering or disempowering them. The primary keywords in my coding system were language, loss, lack of mobility, caregiving, surveillance, distrust, having relatives in a war zone and belonging.

3.5 About the participants

The study included ten participants, five married mothers, and five single women without children. All participants were born in Iraq, and self-identified as women. They were first generation immigrants with a refugee background¹⁹ living in BC, and at least nineteen years or older. The ten participants were given refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) while they were living in Syria, Jordan, Turkey and Greece. Then, they were sponsored for resettlement to Canada either by the Canadian government or a relative in Canada. Once they landed in Canada, they immediately become permanent residents. At the time of this study, seven had their citizenship and three were still

¹⁹ The requirement to participate in this study is to be a first-generation immigrant. However, when I interviewed participants, they all said they immigrated on refugee grounds.

holding the permanent residence status. Each had been in Canada for three years or more and thus had a better understating of their individual freedoms and rights as well as my role and obligations as an academic researcher.

I considered participants' ethnicity, religion, age and marital status during the recruitment period to make my research sample more inclusive. Although religion, or rather cultural interpretation of religion, was an important factor on the women's understanding of their gender roles and their feeling of belonging locally, 40% of the participants preferred not to declare or discuss their religious denomination.

Participants	Number of years in Canada	Age group	Ethnicity	Marital status	Family abroad	Work experience	
						At the time of interview	In Iraq
Suhair	3	40s	Arab	Married with children	Yes	No	No
Lama	5	40s	Arab	Married with children	Yes	Yes	Yes
Malak	3.5	40s	Arab	Married with children	Yes	No	Yes
Najwa	5	40s	Arab	Married with children	Yes	No	Yes
Nadia	4	60s	Arab	Married with children	Yes	No	Yes

Maria	3	30s	Kurdish ²⁰	Single without children	Yes	Yes	Yes
Noor	5	20s	Arab	Single without children	No	Yes	Student
Dunia	14	30	Chaldean ²¹	Single without children	Yes	Yes	Student
Yasmin	4	20s	Arab	Single without children	Yes	Yes	Student
Basma	5	20s	Arab	Single without children	No	Yes	Student

Table 1: Participants demographic information

The majority of participants identified as Iraqi and Arab. Dunia, who also strongly identified as a Christian Chaldean, did not see a contradiction between having Iraqi, Arab and Christian Chaldean identities. She was comfortable to identify herself under all those labels. On the other hand, Maria was an adamant supporter of an independent Kurdistan. She simply

²⁰ The Kurdish population is spread among four countries, northern Iraq, eastern and southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, and northwestern Syria. The Kurdish ethnic identity is not based on a unity of language or religion. The southern and northern Kurdish dialects (known as Sorani and Kurmanji) are not mutually intelligible. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but a small number of them are Shi'a, Christian, Zoroastrian and Yezidi (Krieger & Crahan, 2001). As an ethnic minority, Kurds have been subject to a variety of human rights violations, including denial of their existence as a distinct ethnic group, rejection of citizenship, bans on Kurdish language and names, collective punishment, and mass killings (Forsythe, 2009).

²¹ Chaldeans represent less than 10 % of the population of Iraq. They speak a dialect of Aramaic, also referred to as Chaldean, Assyrian, or Syriac. The majority are Roman Catholic, and practice one of the 18 to 20 separate rites of the Catholic Church.

identified herself as Kurdish and saw Arab identity as a colonial identity imposed on Kurds. She also refused to be called by her nationality (Iraqi), or the religion of her ancestors (Islam).

During the interviews, participants were cautious about giving the names of their relatives who have been victims in the war, and names of politicians and influential individuals in Iraq. Some were careful about discussing politics even though they were informed they would remain anonymous. Some women wished to have a few of their answers remain off record, but they wanted me to listen to them in confidence to help me understand the context of their disclosures. They did not wish to have these off-the-record answers recorded or written despite the reassurances of their anonymity. Most of these off-record accounts were related to their refugee story in Iraq. I did not include any off-record information in my data.

A plausible reason for their reservations is that in Iraq they lived under a dictatorship and corrupt bureaucrats, followed by a sectarian war where neighbors feared betrayal by other neighbors in mixed sect neighbourhoods. All are strong factors fostering distrust and secrecy as a survival strategy. Being recorded might also remind them of interrogations by the Iraqi regime (before and after Saddam), and their experiences fleeing Iraq and having to provide an account of themselves to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to get asylum.

Chapter 4: Findings

I have identified three distinctive dimensions in the Iraqi women's use of social media. I will cover each dimension in a separate section. The first one is embedded in perceived gender roles in Iraqi culture where women are held responsible for the care of children, the sick and the elderly without receiving assistance from men. My findings show a correlation between women's role as caregivers and their use of social media in that caregivers rely more on social media to socialise, learn and navigate their lives in Canada.

The second dimension is hinged on participants' local social capital and their feelings of belonging. Experiencing othering offline and having family in Iraq pushed participants to turn to online communities to connect with family members and satisfy their need for belonging.

The last dimension is grounded in gender dynamic in social media and the participants' choices around visibility and anonymity online. Here, I unpack the concept of the digital *burqa* and the business suit. I explain how participants' decisions are shaped by a lack of trust, fear of sexual harassment and cyber misogyny, and surveillance by family members and their online community.

4.1 Section 1: The effect of class and caregiving on participants use of social media

Education and gender are factors that contribute to the digital divide. Therefore, in this section, I focus on the role social status, education and literacy play in women's use of social media. The definition of literacy has changed over the years to include computer literacy. But the criteria used to assess computer literacy varies. For instance, some include basic skills like knowing how to use a word processor or send an email, while others include more complex abilities, like knowing a programming language (Braman, 2011; Hoffman &

Blake, 2003; McArthur & McArthur, 2005). For this study, I define literacy as the ability to read and write in Arabic and English; and the ability to browse the internet and use social media.

The women I talked to are all immigrants with a refugee background – some of whom live near or under the poverty line. One lacked any formal education. I conclude that participants’ level of English literacy —affected by their class background and caregiver status —was instrumental in shaping their use of social media. It also shaped their experience of the digital divide and was a much more profound factor than physical access to the technology itself.

4.1.1 Access to ICT

About 40% of participants lived below or near the poverty line. However, all participants perceived having internet access as a basic necessity. Everyone had access to a smartphone and or a computer regardless of their financial limitations, age or educational background.

Yasmin: “I cannot live my daily life without the Internet. I cannot start my day without checking Instagram or WhatsApp, just to know if someone called me or needs me.”

A smartphone combines mobile access to telephone and internet networks with affordability, and for those reasons participants relied on it more than a computer for internet access. They could make calls, send SMS messages and use many different apps (not just social media), from the palm of their hand and at a fraction of the cost of a laptop or desktop. Only one participant, Suhair, did not own a personal smartphone. She instead shared a phone with her

family of eight. Her blind husband was in possession of the phone most of the time due to its accessibility features, designed for the visually impaired.

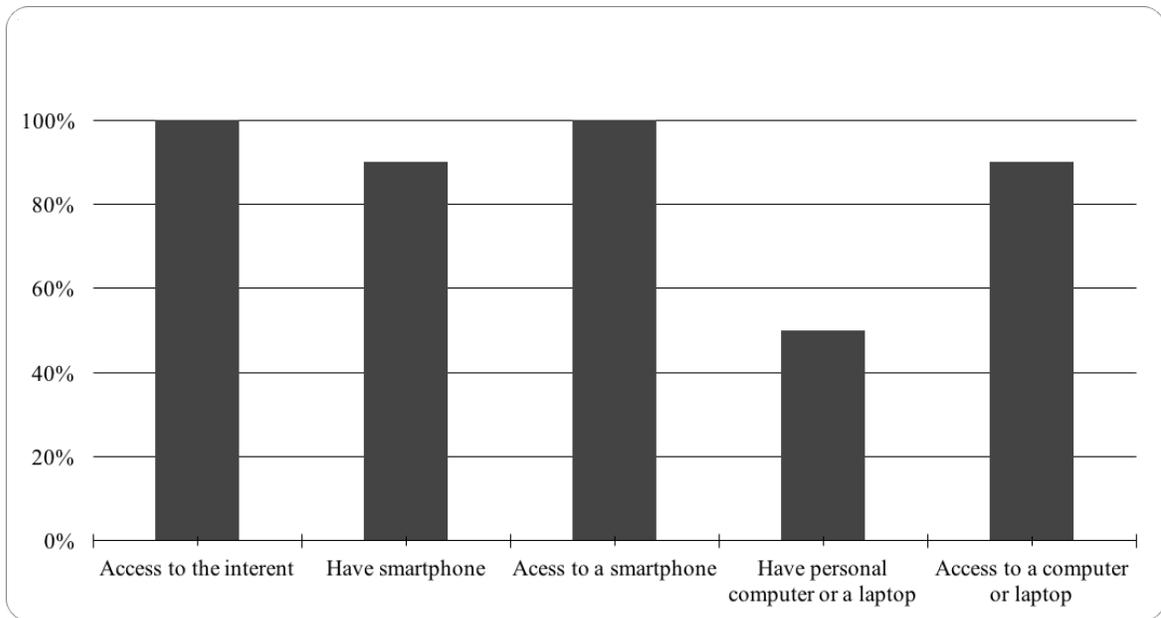


Figure 1: Percentage of participants who have access to the internet, smartphones and computers.

Viber, Facebook, and WhatsApp were the top used social media applications. Participants described their ability to use them as high or above average. Viber and WhatsApp were primarily used to call and text family members and close friends. Overall, mothers used media platforms more than single women. The most commonly discussed topics for mothers were health, nutrition, marriage, and parenting.

Due to the limitations on their mobility and their limited English proficiency, mothers relied more on social media to socialize, learn and access information related to settlement and life in Canada. Online, they would rely on English-fluent, Arabic-speakers to translate news about events, services and changes in the law on their behalf. In contrast, single women spent more time outside home and socialized offline more, factors that generally improved

their English-fluency and meant direct access to English-language information without the need to an interpreter.

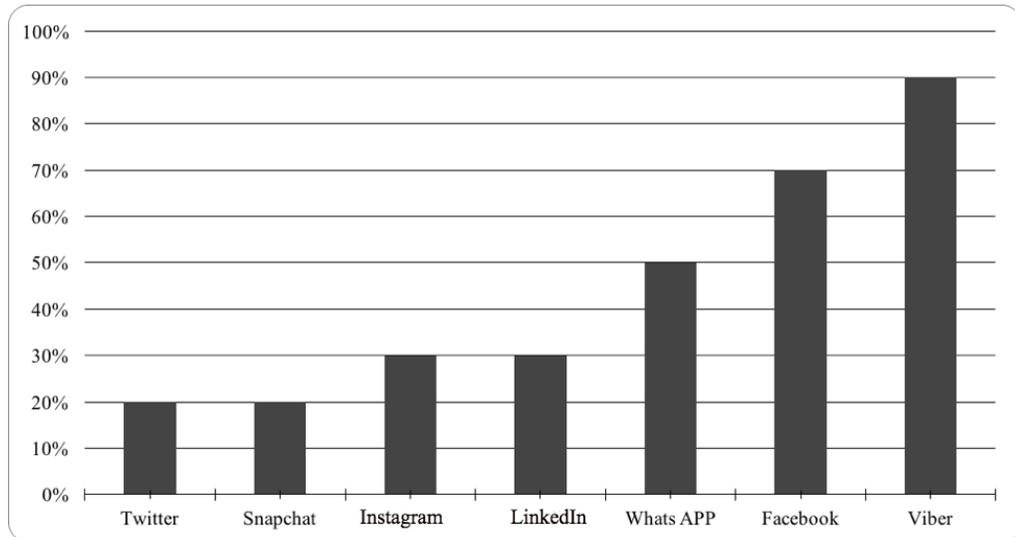


Figure 2: Social media platforms used by participants.

4.1.2 Literacy

Among mothers, only Nadia did not have a Facebook account due to her limited literacy. She never received any formal education, and as a result, she struggled to read in Arabic, her mother tongue. During her interview, however, Nadia showed me how she used her second-hand iPhone 6 to get around her language barrier and read Arabic text on WhatsApp messages without needing help. She would use a speech feature to read the text, which worked well—albeit imperfectly. Occasionally, she told me, it would read out gibberish. But when that happened, she could still call the sender and ask for context—or ask a family member for help as a last resort.

4.1.3 Caregiving and social media

Participants' language level is assessed by Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC), a free program designed to help permanent residents increase their English language proficiency. LINC was initially intended to provide basic language training and knowledge about Canada. But it was later changed to be consistent with the new Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) 2000 (CIC, 2011). Mothers' average LINC level was around three, while single women LINC average was around ten. To put the participants' English levels in perspective, it is worth mentioning that most universities require level eleven (equal to high school English) for undergraduate degrees and level twelve for graduate degrees.

LINC or CLB grade	Level
0-4	Beginner
5-8	Medium
9-12	Advance

Table 2: LINC levels

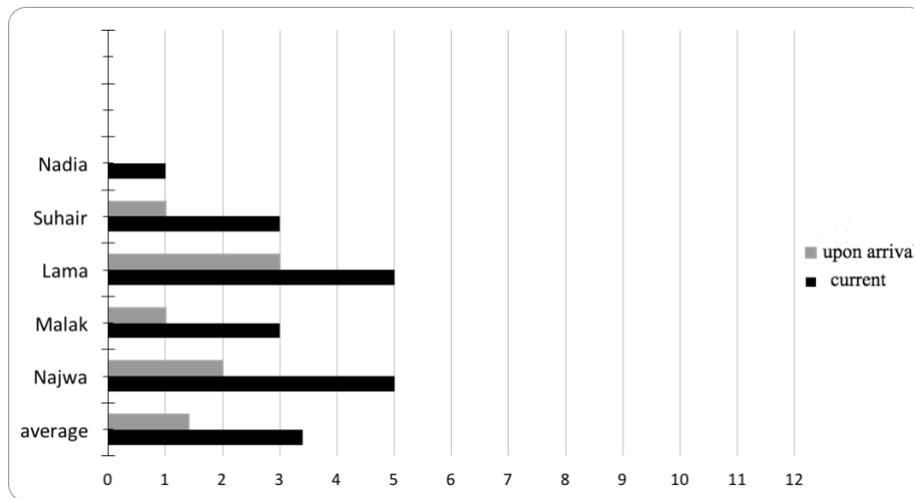


Figure 3: Comparison between the English level of mothers upon arrival to Canada and their current level

Upon arrival to Canada, single women and mothers showed little difference in their English and formal education. But over five years, singles widened this gap over married women significantly.

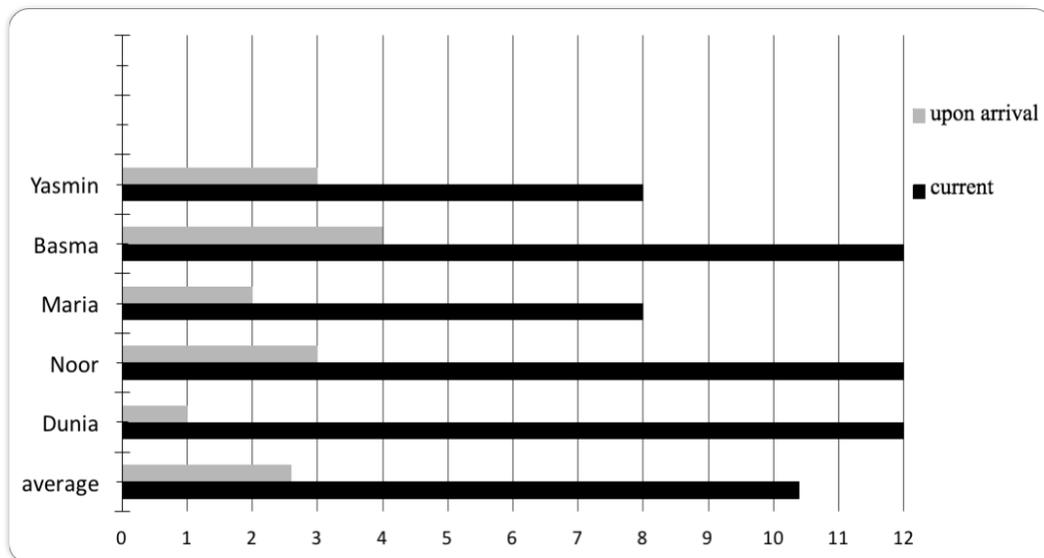


Figure 4: Comparison between the English level of Single women without children upon arrival and their current level.

Single women had far more opportunities to practice their English through regular attendance at English classes or through their jobs. Maria described how her first job in Canada, despite being just a low-paid dishwasher position, acted as her “university” by helping her develop her English. Her future employer rejected her application the first time because he thought the job was too hard for women. But her Kurdish friend, who worked in the same restaurant, intervened by pretending to be sick and asking her to go to the restaurant to cover for him in a volunteer capacity to show her reliability. The manager was impressed by her performance and ended up hiring her.

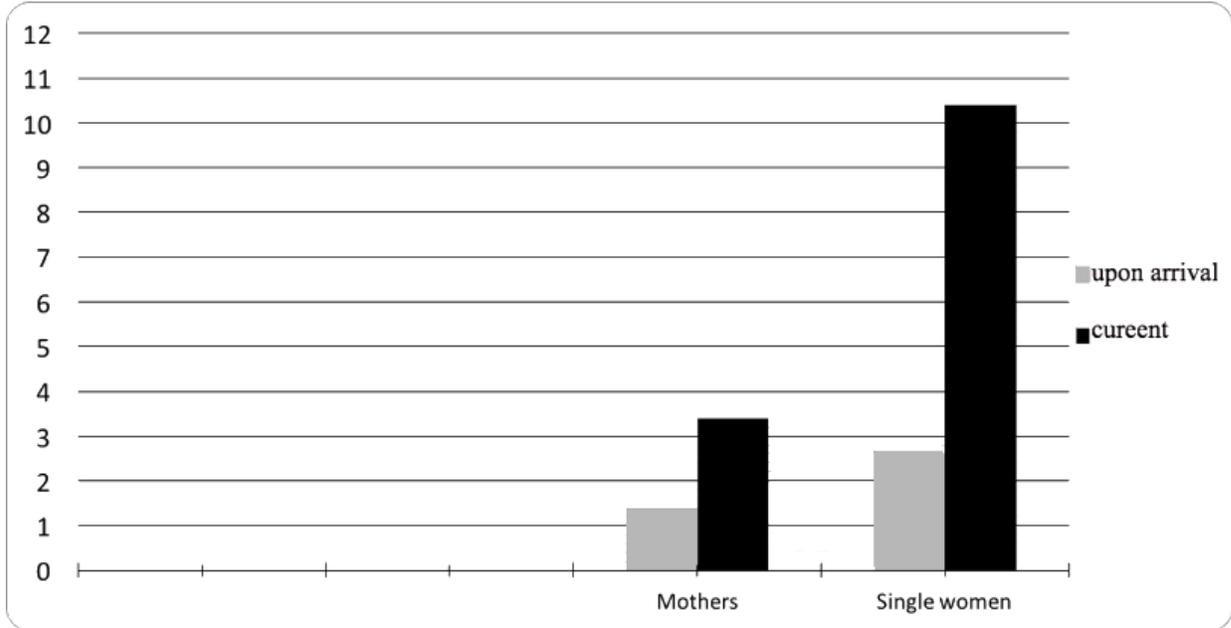


Figure 5: Comparison of English level between mothers and single women without children

When single participants were asked about how they improved their English, they attributed improvements to a combination of interaction with English speakers through work or school, and English classes. Yasmin, for example, cited working two jobs while finishing high school. Noor credited her remarkable English level to attending school and daily social interaction outside the home. She helped her father in his local store after school and worked in marketing during summer. Similarly, Dunia was alternating between work and study, and was one-year short form graduation from college during the time of the interview. Basma too was working fulltime in a local non-profit organization after she finished her university degree.

In contrast, married women had fewer opportunities for casual conversations with English speakers while doing errands. They had basic English skills and stated that they

managed to explain their needs to English speakers and somehow get by. This did not involve an articulate level of conversation where they expressed and shared opinions and experiences. Their lack of language proficiency generally limited them to asking for help with directions, shopping or taxes. Nevertheless, I noticed they became upbeat when they described the strategies they used to surmount communication barriers. They were generally proud of themselves at having achieved a level of autonomy through perseverance and clever use of technology.

Suhair: “I didn't study English. I may know two words like thank you [laughs]. I was like a blind kitten. But then I mingled with people here. Like I took my two kids to school, and I brought them back from school. And I would hear a word here or there. So, I adapted bit by bit. I talk to people and I felt happier because when I wanted to do something I used all methods to [communicate] my thoughts... the point is, I managed to get what I needed.”

Mothers did not lack the motivation to learn. In fact, they were all eager to improve their English, knowing that Canada is their new home and their linguistic capacity can translate into power, access to employment, and citizenship²². So why is it that mothers did not attend and utilize LINC classes which are free for immigrants? Why did they not try to continue their education or find a job? When asked these questions, mothers consistently identified caregiving as the primary obstacle. In this study, all mother were caregivers.

²² Canadian citizenship laws require citizenship applicants to obtain a minimum of level 4 English fluency, among other conditions, to be eligible for Canadian citizenship.

Mothers pointed out that they are the principal caregivers for their families while their husband were the breadwinners. Therefore, they cannot go to school or work and leave their children home unattended. At the same time, access to government funded child-minding program is limited. The waiting period for child-minding at free language centres is quite long due to a large number of applicants and the limited seats. Women are encouraged to find a family member or hire a babysitter, which Malak did, for instance, despite her financial difficulties. But many of the married participants struggled to find time for a proper English education. Najwa, for example, found it difficult to attend classes because of her family responsibilities:

Najwa: "What stopped me is my son. First, I had my twins and my son was young he was three years old so I stayed with him until he was in kindergarten. Then I got pregnant with the girls so I stopped studying. Then my son had an operation. It was 2012 and I was pregnant it was hard for me to take care of him. He had a cast from the waist down"

Malak's experience also demonstrates the correlation between motherhood and education. Malak was confident in her capacity to learn, but she was busy taking care of her kids. On top of that, she was also in mourning for her mother, who had passed away three months prior to the interview:

Researcher: "You do not think you conquered the language barrier?
Not even a little?"

Malak: "Of course, it is not like when I just arrived. If I make time for learning I would succeed."

Researcher: "Why don't you make time?"

Malak: "I am preoccupied mentally, and I am busy with the kids."

Likewise, Suhair's role as mother and caregiver interrupted her education throughout her life. She had been the primary caregiver since she was a teenager in Iraq. When her mother got

sick, she had to take care of her siblings because she was the eldest girl in her family. She later married an artist (painter) who lost his eyesight due to injuries sustained in a bombardment during the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. As a result, Suhair was pushed once again into the role of sole caregiver for her special needs husband and special needs son.

Participants' English level directly impacted their employment opportunities. Most mothers in this study used to work as teachers, in factories or as store owners in Iraq. But only one mother and caregiver was working at the time of the interview. This mother, Lama, worked part-time from home preparing and selling Arabic food to affluent visiting Saudi students. The 60 plus-year-old Nadia, a grandmother, did not shy from work either. She found a job in a cafeteria owned by an Arabic-speaking man. Unfortunately, her work was not as steady as she wished, and her employability was restricted by her limited English. On the other hand, all single women were working at the time of the interview— sometimes in more than one job or alternating between work and study.

It is important to mention that although assigning caregiving to women has its roots in gender roles; it is also affected by gender income gap. Women still earn less than men, and immigrant women in Canada make far less than their male counterpart. According to Statistics Canada, the average total income of immigrant men between 25 and 64 years old was \$44,363, while immigrant women made \$26,630 —almost half (Canada, 2016). This also meant that potential income of these mothers from work is equivalent or less than the cost of daycare. Mothers might opt to stay at home and take care of their kids rather than experiment with the labour market and be in debt. While single women without children fared better financially compared to married women, still they were low- paid.

4.1.4 Social media as a tool to overcome Language barrier

When we look at the digital divide for Middle Eastern women and people from Iraq, we immediately think of material access to ICT as the biggest feature of the digital divide. My findings, however, suggest this is no longer the primary issue. A smartphone is a necessity, not only to stay in touch with relatives on the other side of the world, but to help refugees settle in and survive in their new life. Most immigrants ensure they have access to a smartphone and or a computer—even if that means making personal sacrifices. Clearly, having material access does not reflect affordability. Some women in this research budgeted for their devices, but they perceived access as a basic necessity.

A persistent obstacle to getting the most out of these technologies, however, is language ability. When discussing the digital divide, language is perhaps the most pertinent and persistent barrier to access for non-English speakers. This is particularly so for those who speak languages with a grammatical structure significantly different from English, like Arabic.

Arabic is the fifth major language spoken in the world. But you would not get that impression from a survey of web content. Although Arabic speaking users online are the fourth largest language group, after English, Chinese and Spanish (Stats, 2017), the amount of Arabic-language content on the web is still startlingly small (Warschauer, 2004). According to Web Technology Surveys (W3Techs), 51% of web content is published in English (W3Techs, 2017). But apart from Chinese and Japanese, the top ten most used web languages are all European (W3Techs, 2017). The same site indicates the percentage of Arabic content accounts for only 0.7% of all the websites online. Thus, Arabic content ranks in sixteenth place among languages online. The digital content available online is even less

for Kurdish, Chaldean and other Iraqi minority languages. Therefore, for those who speak other languages, come from a lower socioeconomic stratum (where getting access to second language education is difficult), or who belong to different cultures, the full potential of the digital information revolution is yet to arrive.

Most websites for agencies, organizations, and institutions do not offer an Arabic version for their content. The same is true of Canadian federal websites for public services, immigration and taxes²³. The few websites that offer Arabic content rely heavily on a Google translate plugin which uses statistical machine translation. This method generates translation using analysis of bilingual text corpora. The problem with statistical machine translation in Arabic, as admitted by Franz Och, the previous head of Google's machine translation group, is that “Arabic is a very challenging language to translate to and from: it requires long-distance reordering of words and has a very rich morphology” (Och, 2006). Hence, the translation falls short when the sentence order of the target language is significantly different from English. Current results coming from English to Arabic text are acceptable for short phrases, but it renders large text considerably fragmented and hard to read. Unfortunately, this covers much of the instructions on government websites.

In summary, translation apps that rely entirely on automation fall short for the language groups mentioned above. On the other hand, friends and community groups in social media might help fill some of the resulting gap. For instance, participants could ask friends and members of their online community for help on Viber, WhatsApp and Facebook

²³ It is worth mentioning that the average readability of Canadian government website in Flesh–Kincaid readability tests is 49.6 which is categorized as college level.

when they had content they could not translate with Google. By posting their questions on one of the Iraqi Facebook groups, they could either get the information they were looking for directly or find someone who could translate the page for them.

Language acquisition is hindered by women's gendered responsibilities. In Iraq, child-rearing is largely seen as a female duty (Efrati, 2012). This responsibility is ameliorated by help from extended family, especially grandmothers, who play a secondary role in the care of young children. Once in Canada, however, mothers are often deprived of this support network. Yet they are still held accountable for the same child-rearing. At the same time, we should remember that gender discourse is embedded in class, race and power. Making financial priorities is crucial for families with limited income. The choices of gender roles for Iraqi families with young children are impacted by immigrant women potential income in Canada since they earn far less than their male counterpart.

Compounding matters is the fact that there is less federal and provincial funding directed to daycare, making it harder for mothers, who live on or under the poverty line, to leave home and improve their education. With limited English, these women turn to their digital devices to help navigate the system, improve their education, and make friends.

Mothers use social media in three ways to resolve restrictions on their mobility. First, they use social media to learn English. For instance, Malak expanded her vocabulary by using Quizlet.com, a social media learning site where users can build and share interactive lessons on a wide variety of subjects.

Second, mothers can share their experiences with other mothers in similar circumstances. This helps them feel they are not alone and gives them opportunities to feel valuable by sharing their practical knowledge of caregiving. In fact, research on new mothers

and blogging supports this finding. Mothers in the general population who use blogging to connect with the wider parenting community improve their marital satisfaction and suffer lower rates of depression (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2012). The mothers in this study also used social media to engage with their extended family and friends online. Socialising online helped mothers create a circle of support and a sense of connectedness without leaving home.

Third and finally, mothers used social media as a vital source of information. Because mothers learned English informally and sporadically, they acquired English at a slower pace compared to single women without kids. As a result, mothers' access to English-language information online was restricted—especially on topics related to local Canadian services, laws, taxes, and health care. Consequently, mothers were far more reliant on Facebook and other social media sites where they could get information from their peers in their native tongue (Arabic, Kurdish and Chaldean).

In summation, social media helps these mothers survive, but in a manner that resembles a crutch. It ameliorates some of the problems created by lack of access to child-minding and limited mobility, yet it does not radically alter patriarchal structures. Having their needs temporarily met online, women have fewer incentives to leave home and engage with people outside their community, establish in-person local ties, improve their English, and increase their employability and gain economic independence. Therefore, mothers' use of social media may naturalise women's place in the private domain by maintaining a system that pushes women to be less visible in public and entraps them into essentialised roles.

4.2 Section 2: Offline local Inclusion and online engagement in the Iraqi network

Iraqi women in this study used social media in ways similar to the general population. They used it for entertainment, to stay in touch with family and friends, and to keep abreast of new events in their community. But their use also differed because of their unique refugee background. All participants experienced severe psychic and physical dislocation having been ripped from their homes by war and turmoil. Forced into the diaspora, their old transnational ties became crucial to them, as Castles (2010) observes of many people who were forced to immigrate. Few participants used social media to follow Canadian news and politics. At the same time, women who have families living in a war zone were more attuned to Canada's immigration policies towards refugees and family reunification.

4.2.1 Social media as a source of news: pros and cons

All participants have relatives in Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt or in North America and Europe; and about 70% of participants have first-degree relatives (i.e. parents, children or siblings) in Iraq. Participants used social media to connect with their families abroad as it proved more affordable than a telephone. Facebook is popular for light conversation with casual friends and distant family members. In turn, WhatsApp and Viber are preferred for more intimate calls with close friends and relatives.

With few journalists willing to report in a dangerous war zone, and government media outlets generally deemed untrustworthy, ordinary Iraqi people in Iraq, who posted on their day to day events, functioned as journalists. The posts they shared on social media inform their community online about war events, political trends, stories of government corruption and service shortfalls.

Participants contacted their families frequently and followed news closely through social media. They had a genuine fear for the lives of their families in Iraq. Some participants mentioned that following the news was undesirable due to the emotional toll they had to endure when they saw gory images and heard about violence, the poverty and the precariousness their relatives have to endure.

Maria: "If I continue hearing it [the news], I feel that I came here only physically. I do not want that; I want my mind, my imagination and everything to be here".

But most participants could not abstain from following the news. Their ties to Iraq and the frequency by which news of Iraq is shared in their social media circles kept them engaged. Attachment to the unsettling news in Iraq made the participant feel numb, helpless, and hopeless²⁴. Yasmin said that continuous exposure to the news of war back home made her "feel like a zombie".

Likewise, Malak described her feelings of surreal dissonance between her life in Canada and the violence she saw in her home country. In Iraq, her brothers are subject to regular bombardments and her sister, along with her nephews and nieces, have been missing for months in Mosul. While in Canada, she has to go about her daily routine as if nothing is wrong. Living between these two worlds was an important theme for all participants, and it was more pronounced for those who have direct family members living in dangerous zones

²⁴ Although my role in this research is a mere observer, I personally struggled with depression during the period I researched the effect of war on Iraqi women, and again while transcribing the interviews. I acknowledge the personal toll of this research to put the lived experiences of Iraqi women in perspective. The fact that these women continue their daily life despite their pain is a symbol of Iraqi women resistance and courage.

in Iraq. They described logging in and out of social media in terms similar to walking in and out of the looking glass in Lewis Carroll's fantasy. By entering the Iraqi portal, they go down the rabbit hole into a world rife with anarchy, injustice and arbitrary violence.

I interviewed Lama a few days after the Al-Karada terrorist attack on July 3rd, 2016. The so-called Islamic State (IS) carried out the attack—one of the deadliest ever—in Baghdad's Al Karada district during Ramadan, a few days before Eid Al-Fitr celebration. Hundreds of people, mainly women, children, and youth, were shopping at the amusement mall. A suicide truck explosion killed more than 292 individuals (Doucet, 2016). Earlier in the interview, Lama described her obsession with news on social media as an obsession born out of fear:

Lama: "Whenever I wake up at night [she holds her iPhone and swipes the screen with her finger as if she were browsing]. You know, whenever something happens this appears."

Researcher: "The notifications?"

Lama: "Yah"

Then she talked about the stark difference between her chaotic Iraqi world online and her peaceful Canadian life offline. Lama found it difficult to separate these two worlds. The flow of information from Iraq via social media seeps into her subconscious even while she is asleep.

"I am comfortable here. I do not have problems. My kids and husband are with me. [...]. Still, my wound is there [in Iraq] not only for my family but for all of Iraq. My home [Iraq] is killed, tortured and I am helpless. The simplest thing is to help them get food and I cannot. [...]. I barely have something to support my family. I save money from here and there. If I do not send money to my brother in Georgia, he would sleep in the street. And my other brothers, my friends, and others. [...]. Today I had a terrible dream. I woke up in tears. I cried a lot. [In the

dream] I was told that my mother had died. I was crying in the dream and I was telling myself that it is just a dream and dreams signify the opposite: it means long life. I woke up disturbed. I was thinking, gosh, my subconscious was thinking and my body is thinking and everything in me is thinking. I was interpreting my dream in my dream."

Participants were painfully aware of the precarity and struggles their families faced in Iraq and tried to support them financially. About 80% of mothers and 20% of single women sent money to their relatives in their home country. They all have direct family members in Iraq. One participant mentioned that all the money she gets from work goes directly to her mother and siblings. Another participant said that she is sending money behind her husband's back.

4.2.2 Social media as a tool to maintain a cultural identity

About 70% of participants did not believe that they participated in any civic discussion online such as discussion on politics issues in Iraq, and political reforms and civic engagement. Nonetheless, when asked about what topics they share online, many participants could cite multiple instances where they contributed to a discussion about social justice or activism. Most of the content they shared and comments they posted were among their online female circle. Participants posted mostly on Facebook and with one or more of the following objectives:

1. To signal their identity: Participants used social media to share their feelings, personal stories, life events, and or their belief system. Expressions of self were usually posted on their Facebook wall, Twitter or Instagram.
2. To collaborate in community building: Participants rendered support and encouragement to other members of their community, recalled their immigration

experience and shared knowledge about important events and changes to the Canadian immigration laws. Common platforms used for these conversations are bulletin boards, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Viber.

3. To discuss topics perceived to be exclusive to women: Here, the conversations varied across topics such as religious practices, health, nutrition, parenting and family care. These themes were usually discussed in closed groups on Facebook and bulletin boards administered only by women or on personal walls between female users.
4. To challenge institutional power: Some used Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber to organize demonstrations and social events, and share insights about the political turmoil in the Middle East.

4.2.3 Race and religion matter

Participants	Percentage
Rejected religion because it oppresses women.	10%
Embraced religion as part of cultural resistance.	10%
Avoided mingling with men online because of religion.	10%
Highlighted religion as a source of comfort when talking about loss of relatives.	60%
Experienced discrimination due to religion or race	100%

Table 3 Participants' and religion

Perhaps no topic has stirred up distrust and discomfort among participants more than religion. This did not come as a surprise considering the length and impact of the sectarian war in Iraq. Two participants expressed strong and sharply divided beliefs about religion as a social institution. A participant, from a Muslim family, said religions in general are

patriarchal tools to oppress women. Another saw elements of empowerment in religion. Apart from these two, the majority preferred not to debate religion at all. And when they talked about it, they discussed it as an extension of their culture or gender identity.

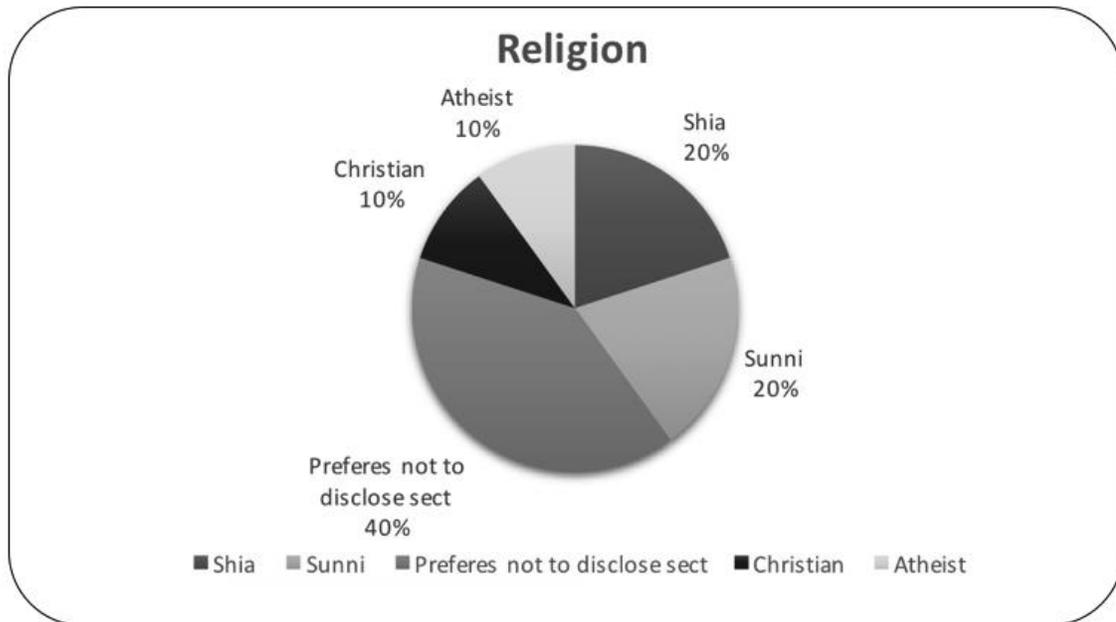


Figure 6: Participants religious affiliation

Religion was highlighted mostly when participants discussed topics that evoked feelings of grief or helplessness. For years, Malak wished to see her sick mother before she died. She could not renew her Iraqi passport, or travel to Iraq without running the risk of losing her residency in Canada²⁵. Her only option was to wait until she gets her Canadian

²⁵ In 2012, Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA) passed a law where permanent residents who got residency on refugees or protected persons ground, could lose their status if they get a passport from their country of origin or travel back to that country because they “re-availed themselves of the protection of their country of origin.” (IRPA, 2012). Iraqi refugees experienced precarity with immigration laws in neighbouring Iraqi countries and struggle for years to get their status in Canada. The fear of losing their residency in Canada push them to make hard choices between their families in Iraq and their personal safety.

citizenship. Unfortunately, her mother passed away before she could complete the citizenship requirement.

Malak: "Iraqis cannot visit Iraq unless they have obtained the citizenship. They [immigration law makers] do not know what would let an Iraqi go to Iraq. They [immigration law makers] have the right to prohibit Iraqis from returning. But if they have urgent matters, a sick person a special situation, why would not they allow them to go [without having to risk losing their residency]. To be honest, I am not eager to get the citizenship anymore."

Researcher: "Why?"

Malak: "It is what prevented me from seeing my mother."

Researcher: "When was the last time you saw her?"

Malak: "Almost eight years ago [...] God is our help [she cries]"

Some participants used religion to make sense of their sacrifices and the suffering they endured, especially in Iraq:

Lama: "No creature made by the hands of god has suffered as much as the Iraqi women. During peace, she suffered from poverty. I was among seven children. My mother took care of us. She gave us food and if there is something left, she would eat. If there is nothing left, she would say it is Ok, I am not well and I do not feel like eating, you go ahead and I eat. The war came and they killed her [my mother] sons in front of her. Injustice, poverty, displacement, men are killed, starved or rendered sick. All these disasters end to be the women's burden. If a woman crosses a line, she gets raped. Women are easily punished with rape for minor thing. When they are done raping her, they either let her go or throw her in jail. In Iraq, there are many kids who came as a result of rape. Some women refused to go back to their husbands. A woman's family would come to take her out of prison and return her to her husband but she says how can I go back to my husband after being gang raped? I'd rather die in prison [...]. And the depleted uranium that was used on us in Iraq. We had so many kids with rare diseases and deformities. Diseases that no one has heard of before. Which heart can bear all this pain? God is our support. Only god in his wisdom knows why did this happen to us. We are in the end of times and those who endured with patience will be rewarded."

Mothers emphasized religion when they narrated their sacrifices as parents and wives. Consider Najwa, for instance. She took care of her special needs son when he broke his leg while also raising the rest of her children. She said she felt alone. But her faith helped her get through a difficult period.

“The home care support [through special need program] was once a week. I told them it was not enough... I was offered to stay with my son in the hospital. I could not stay in the hospital for three months and I was pregnant then. I told them god is there, god is my support and reward. Thanks to god we endured the crisis and it passed.”

The reliance of mothers on religion as a source of comfort and meaning agrees with Woodhead's (2001) argument regarding patriarchy in Islam, Jewish Orthodoxy, and Evangelical Christianity. She explains that mothers and wives who play traditional roles are attracted to religion because it validates their sacrifices, gives them a status (especially in secular societies) and helps them "gain some control over difficult domestic roles" (p70). Having just made a comparison with Woodhead's findings, I want to nuance my argument. It is true that mothers and caregivers in my study used religion to make sense of their reality and hoped to be rewarded in the afterlife for enduring the suffering that comes with being the sole caregiver, as well as an obedient wife or daughter. Yet few attributed the traditional division of domestic labour or gender roles to religion. Instead, they employed religion to cope with their oppression and avoid conflict.

While religion played a vital role as a source of comfort inside the home – outside is another matter. Outward displays of observance (like wearing their hijab), plus their skin colour and accent –affiliation often served as a ground for being discriminated against. All women in this study believed they were discriminated against because of assumptions about their race and/or religion. When I asked about feeling of being accepted locally, they all said

they felt welcomed in Canada. To illustrate their point, they referred to gestures like smiling and greetings, and people taking the time to give them directions and showing patience with their limited English. But as I asked more questions about their experiences, they all cited witnessing instances of bigotry or verbal abuse. They commonly associated acts of discrimination with having visible racial or religious markers, like skin colour or dress code.

Participants who wore *hijab*, which included all veiled women in this study, were harassed publically. At times, they feared physical violence — as in the case of Nadia. While on her way back from work during a winter night, she was followed by a man she assumed was drunk who kept screaming at her: “Muslim? F*** you”. Nadia, a senior woman, was freighted and had to run home. A similar situation happened to Basma and her sister in law. While they were waiting in a public space, a man approached them, used profanity and yelled, “leave my country”. Both women were terrified and felt unsafe.

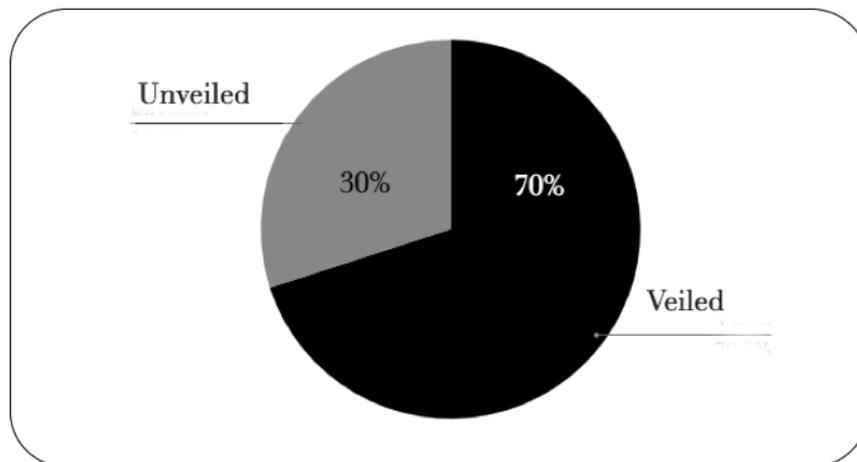


Figure 7: Percentage of veiled and unveiled women in

Sometimes the acts of othering are subtler. Women noticed how people avoided them and attributed it to their race or religion:

Malak: "I can tell from their look that they are disgusted with my headscarf. Sometimes in the bus. For instance, today on my way here, I noticed that there is an empty chair beside me but nobody sat beside me. Immediately they notice my headscarf. I do not care about all this."

Researcher: "It happened to you more than once?"

Malak: "Yes, it also happened on the bus."

Suhair also concluded she was shunned because of her race and religion:

Suhair: "Sometimes I feel that they don't want to talk to us or deal with us because we are Arab and Muslims."

Researcher: "How do they know you are a Muslim Arab?"

Suhair: "They know from my headscarf. From the way I dress. Obviously not everyone is like that but it affects me. I mean why? What if we are Arab and Muslims?"

According to a 2017 Statistics Canada report, 56% of hate crimes targeting Arab or West Asian populations between 2010 to 2015 were violent crimes — 31% of which were assaults. In 85% of cases, the offender was male. Women were more likely to be victims in incidents targeting religion, and these incidents have been on the rise since 2015. The same report states that "The overlap between race or ethnicity and religion may have an impact on hate crime statistics" (Leber, 2017). The statistics do not explain why women were targeted more, but my view is that it is because racialized women are easier to point out. They 'looked' Muslims in the eyes of their antagonists, because of association they made between their skin color, dress code, or wardrobe choices and religion. Thus, women became targets for acts of bigotry and exclusion motivated by Islamophobia, even when they are not Muslim. This association about a woman's ethnic identity can also affect their economic status.

Maria is a good example of this overlap, and it illustrates the intersectionality of race, religion, and class. Maria is an atheist who self-identifies as a hard-core feminist. She is not veiled, yet her skin colour and what she describes as wardrobe choices indicate that she is racialized. In Iraq, Maria worked since she was young helping her father in his store, then she joined the writing and publishing industry. Finding a job was a priority when she got to Vancouver, Canada. But she struggled to enter the labour market. Some employers refused to hire her because of her accent, her looks and her “accessories”. She eventually found a low-paid job, and has since been working and paying taxes. When I asked her about discrimination, she shared two stories:

Maria: “When I had an operation [on my leg]. I was using a cane. A man approached me and told me you people come from poor countries and you pretend to have an accident so you can get our money. Another time in a bus when Justin Trudeau said that he will bring refugees. A woman [beside me in Granville bus] said refugees destroyed our country and took our money”

Researcher: “Was she talking to you personally?”

Maria: “Yes, she was talking to me. She was telling me Iraqis are all terrorists. A man intervened because he noticed my physical reaction. I did not speak but my face was red. The man said do not talk about immigrants. We are the ones who built the country. [...] She said that she didn't say anything wrong, that she only was saying Syrian and Iraqis are all terrorists”

These incidents show how looks and appearance can incite Islamophobic assumptions about a woman's religion and how, in turn these negative inferences can lead to negative assumption about a person's class: i.e., that she is not educated and relies on social assistance. What is also interesting about Maria's story is that she was accused and shamed for abusing the welfare system, although her reliance on social assistance would make sense considering the employment barriers she had to deal with.

Yasmin is a single young woman who does not wear a veil either. She felt the same about discrimination based on association of race and religion:

Yasmin: “When they know that I am from the Arab world, they ask me stupid questions like if you are a Muslim why you are not wearing *hijab*. They do not know that wearing *hijab* is not a condition. Or they make fun of my religion.”

Researcher: “At your workplace?”

Yasmin: “Yeah”

Similarly, Dunia, a coloured Christian, thought there is a correlation between assumptions about race, religion, and class. She mentioned instances where people discuss her needs with her white boyfriend, instead of talking directly to her, thinking that she does not speak or understand English. Dunia explains that maybe those who choose not to address her directly are well intentioned. They assume she doesn’t understand and do not want to make her uncomfortable. But these reactions show assumption about racialized women knowledge and power (class), which affects their potential in the Canadian labour market.

Participants qualified their experiences within the general atmosphere of cordiality they felt is a hallmark of the Canadian identity. They emphasized that their encounters with discrimination are by no means representative of their overall experiences. However, that was not the case for Noor who arrived at Canada when she was a teenager. Noor spoke of her struggle to fit into a predominantly white school as a 16-year-old. She said she felt her visible ethnic markers—her headscarf, skin colour, and limited English at first—set her apart and made her a target for bullying. She considered taking off her *hijab* after being bullied and believes it would have helped her become socially acceptable.

Noor: “So, you know that feeling that the West will not accept Muslims. [...] In the beginning, I felt like they didn't accept me mostly because of my *hijab* and it was somehow like true... If they saw me without my scarf they would accept me because they don't know where do I belong. While I'm wearing this [she points to her headscarf], they kinda worry; they are scared of me.”

The struggle Noor had at school pushed her to reflect on the reason why she wore a *hijab*—and perhaps make sense of her othering. This led her to read more on Islamic theology. She researched the *hijab* and, in the end, was convinced she should wear it. From that time on, she wore it from a point of conviction, not just tradition.

Noor shared stories of the struggles her family went through and spoke of how important freedom and democracy was to her family. She recounted when she was ten, her parents and grandparents went to cast their vote in the first election in Iraq. They each took turns, going in pairs, to ensure if two were killed in a terrorist attack Noor and her siblings would still have a mother and a father figure. With tearful eyes, Noor recalled how afraid she was when her parents left home. She shared this story to illustrate how for most of her life, freedom, democracy and peace were precious ‘luxuries’. Thus, for her, the rights enshrined by the Canadian Charter of rights and freedoms are sacred and hold personal significance.

Noor is an outspoken energetic activist. At school, however, her classmates seem preoccupied with conversations about boys and makeup. She feels disconnected from peers raised in Canada. In contrast, on social media, Noor is but a click away from people who have gone through the same experiences as her. These are people she feels she can talk with in a way that is impossible with her classmates. Noor mentioned that she “lived on Facebook” during the first year of her arrival in Canada because she felt a sense of alienation from her peers, who could neither understand nor appreciate the traumatic experiences she had gone through during her childhood in Iraq.

Noor: “Imagine how desperate we [immigrant youth] were — we’d rather stay on Facebook and talk to people we never saw before, which is a great risk. [...] I could go out and see Canadians who are nearby. [...] I wouldn't sacrifice my time with them, instead I would stay on Facebook and talk to people who are exactly the same as me although

I haven't met them. [...] I have my own character, I have my own tradition, my own religion, my everything. I'm not going to follow you. [...]. And that's what I did: I created my own community. So, I'm like, if Canadians don't want to be like me, and I can't find somebody like me, I'm not going to run after them, I'm just going to sit down, and I'll be talking to my friends back until who knows how this situation will be resolved.”

The experience of Noor is completely different from the positive school experience of Dunia, a Christian who also arrived in Canada as a teen. Dunia lived in Surrey and went to a school which had Iraqi students who spoke Arabic, Chaldean (her mother tongue) or both. With the support of the Church and her local Chaldean community, Dunia’s transition to life in Canada was smooth and gradual. She spoke fondly of her English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher who was more familiar in dealing with immigrant students and made them feel like they are “home”:

Dunia: “Mr. Andrews, I still remember his name. And he's actually now a family friend. Once awhile he checks on us still. I think he made it home for people, and I was a very good student.”

As an adult, Dunia wished to enjoy Canadian multicultural experience by living away from her family’s home, located close to the Chaldean community in Surrey. Although she benefited from staying close to her community during the first years of her arrival to Canada, she questioned the long-term value of living in a tight ethnic cluster, particularly for a female. Dunia explained how she compared the traditional women’s role in her community, where females have defined duties, mainly to their families, to the individualistic life approach in Canada. Finding a balance between the two perspectives, and attaining a level of independence from her family, was the main challenge Dunia faced:

"What I found it challenging coming from a very traditional culture where family is number one, to an individualistic culture where you as an individual is number one. I think the values they were very very opposite. And it took me awhile— five, six, seven years— to really figure out how can I balance that."

Dunia decided to live alone to enjoy the freedoms granted to her by the Canadian law. Yet her show of independence was received with apprehension because her family, which she described as traditional, expected her to stay at her parents' home until she gets married.

Noor and Dunia equally cherished the rights and values enshrined by the Canadian Charter. Yet they felt differently when it comes to how they are accepted as members of the Canadian society. Noor felt she would not be fully accepted, while Dunia felt that since her arrival "maybe some people say I exaggerate this, but I really really feel welcomed". Noor "Lived on Facebook", while Dunia believed relationships and socializing should be off-line, not on social media.

Dunia: "I think to be part of things, it needs more than just online. It needs... needs... your belonging to some network... I don't know if I'm able to express what I'm trying to say... but I think for me personally, it just gives me an eye on what's happening but not necessarily feeling like I'm included in it. It gives me perspective on things but not necessarily the attachment you would feel as part of something."

It's probable that racialized women are pushed to find alternative communities online with whom they can freely share their experiences of immigration, racialization or religiosity. Indeed, my study provides anecdotal evidence of this tendency. Veiled participants used social media on average three times a week, while unveiled participants used it once a week. Also, 90% of veiled participants used Facebook to connect socially, while unveiled participants did not use Facebook. The only veiled women who did not use it explained that

she is not on Facebook because she cannot read posts due to her literacy level. Unveiled participants used social media to get updates with current events and boost their professional profile. Using social spaces for cultural maintenance and a feeling of belonging has more significance for veiled women in this study, perhaps due to their constant othering through tacit and overt forms of racism. Muslim women who wear the veil in public have been singled out in media as a threat to Western values and national identity more than any other religious or cultural group (Haddad, 2007; Hendricks, 2006; Murti, 2013). Online they could find respite with people who share their experiences. Muslims and people perceived to be Muslims, due to ethnicity, colour or dress code, continue to be targets of racial profiling and hate crimes in the lingering aftermath of 9/11. Racialized women are pushed to find alternative communities online with whom they can freely share their experiences of immigration, racialization or religiosity.

The othering some immigrant women experience upon arrival in Canada makes a difference on the trajectory of their settlement and how they settle into life in Canada. Participants who were constantly othered found solace and solidarity from within their community. They explored the roots of their identity— be it culture, ethnicity or religion— to find meaning in spite of experiences of discrimination. Social media was an important tool for them to connect and socialise in their communities with people who identify with their experiences. However, while this can provide short-term empowerment, the long-term outcomes can negatively limit their economic horizons, and accentuate their offline local isolation.

In contrast, women who received local support and were not exposed to major discriminatory experiences had better living opportunities and found an easier balance between their conflicting identities. My findings on the correlation between feelings of marginalisation and use of social media parallel those of Faiza Harji (2006) in her study on diasporic Muslim communities. She found that many immigrant populations rely on social media to foster a sense of belonging when they do not identify with the host community. Social media becomes a place to trade memories of home and share media content on Iraq and thereby anchor one's identity in cyberspace.

4.3 Section 3: Digital *Burqa* or business suit

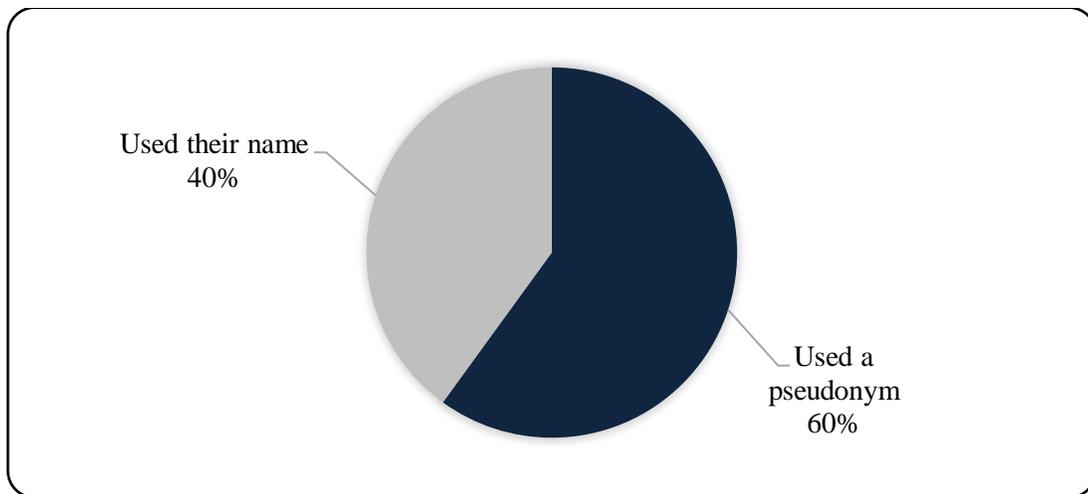


Figure 8. Percentage of women who used a pseudonym compared to those who preferred using their real name

4.3.1 Choosing anonymity or conditional visibility

The majority of participants in the sample group preferred using a pseudonym online. They wrote in Arabic letters using nicknames reflecting emotion (Sea of Silence), patriotism (Longing to Baghdad) and (Proud of My Roots), or religiosity (*Subhan Allah*)

which means praise god. Other participants used teknonyms such as "*umm Ramah*", which translates to the mother of *Ramah*. A teknonym (in Arabic *kunyah*) is a nickname derived from the bearer's eldest child and is used to show reverence for the bearer's status. In contrast, using a person's name stripped of titles signifies familiarity and potentially, disrespect, especially when used towards one's elders (الزيات, القادر, النجار, & مصطفى, 2004, p. 802)²⁶.

Only four participants, all single in their mid-twenties and thirties, used their real name instead of a pseudonym. They come from different backgrounds: Maria is an atheist feminist, Dunia is a Christian conservative, Yasmin self-identifies as a Muslim, and so does Noor, (the youngest participant and the only person who wore *hijab* among the four). They were all vocal during the interview about Middle Eastern politics and spoke often of the challenges of being a racialized immigrant woman. The four participants shared photos and posted content questioning patriarchal bigotry and/or political corruption. Dunia, Yasmin and Maria were critical of gender double standards in their community, and they struggled to mediate between what their community perceives as proper conduct for women and what they perceived as their given personal freedoms in Canada (e.g. going out when and with whom they like, wearing what they want, living an independent life, living alone and befriending men). I was curious to know if they expressed these views online and they did for a while. Later on, they left Facebook for platforms less popular in their community such

²⁶ The Arabic dictionary I cited is titled "*Al-Mu'jamul Waseet*", contemporary dictionary written in 2004 by al-Zayat and others. It is written and published by Arabic scholars from the Academy of the Arabic Language, established in 1932 in Egypt with the objective of preserving the Arabic language.

as Twitter, Instagram, and platforms where communication is professional, like LinkedIn. The reason they gave for leaving platforms popular within their communities aligned with the reasons other participants used for hiding their identity with a pseudonym: lack of trust, unwanted sexual advances and or surveillance by family and community members. Noor was the only participants who stayed on Facebook and was actively posting using her real name.

4.3.2 Sexualizing cyberspace and policing gender boundaries

Some participants asserted that their presence in social media was problematic due to complex gender relations in their community. They were concerned that what they say or do online might be interpreted as a signal for sexual availability. All participants asserted that socialization between sexes online is better avoided. But their views were less definitive about socializing with men from other ethnicities. Basma, a prominent youth counsellor, explained why she does not like to comment:

“Because someone else will build on my comment and I don't like to build a relationship with someone that I do not know. Who knows, he might be sick and claim things about me that are not true. He can do anything. So, I would rather stay away from people I do not know”.

While on Facebook, Dunia used to share her personal photos. She was surprised when she received comments praising her beauty and requesting social interaction based on her looks. She even received marriage proposals online because of her photos. Dunia was uncomfortable with being blatantly objectified. In the end, she decided to close her Facebook account:

“I just didn't want people to judge me based on how I look and more to judge me on how they know me. It was kind of silly, but I did it and I don't regret closing it.”

Dunia was not the only participants who experienced sexual objectification in social media. Other participants had similar experiences. What is more interesting is that participants who shared their photos publically or posted controversial content about women or gender boundaries were sexualized, and at the same time censored or criticized by male family members and random men online. Male family members either manually made changes to participants' profiles, or admonished participants to make the changes themselves. Random men who could see participants' posts also participated in gender surveillance. Men used a religious language to tell women what they should or should not do. Maria recalled receiving messages from men outside her social network who questioned her dress-code and advised her to delete her photos because it is against religion.

Maria: "You post a photo where you are wearing something and they ask you how could you? You are a Muslim. You have to do this or that."

Men acted as if they were *qawwamūn*, (i.e. guardians over women in the name of God) regardless of their relationship to participants. I find the term "*qawwamūn*" appropriate because of the religious language men used to admonish participants. Furthermore, it suggests a hierarchy in the social interaction where men are watchful over women online telling them what is right and what is wrong in the name of god.

While men claimed a higher moral ground, women were the ones surveilled and held accountable for their actions. Participants said that women were disproportionately policed online and that the stakes of their actions on social media were higher. Yasmin illustrated this point with a story about a time she experimented with her digital gender identity. She logged on to a chatroom with her female friend whom she knows offline. Yasmin logged under a

male name while her friend kept her female identity. Yasmin pretended to flirt with her female friend in the chatroom: "I told her that I like her [...] We laughed. It was for fun."

Yasmine noticed how her female friend was admonished while she was not, just because she is a girl:

"Boys can do whatever they want and no one will object. But for a girl, of course not. You cannot speak like that. they told her it is *haram* (against religion) to talk in this manner. I said the same thing there but it was treated like normal and they interacted with me. Why it was only wrong when she said it? Because she is a girl."

When participants persisted, and continued to post controversial content despite the warnings, men raised questions about their respectability and that of their family. When that happened, the posts became very personal and participants and their families took them seriously. The caution of these women was a response to the potential consequences of online communication on their respectability offline. The stakes were even higher when participants used their real names instead of a pseudonym. Yasmin's family asked her to delete her comments and avoid posting about provocative topics in the future to maintain family respectability. Similarly, Maria shared an example of one of her negative experiences while discussing women's rights to explain why she left Facebook:

Maria: "For example when I talk about women rights, a guy commented that some of the rights I am asking for are *haram*. I said OK. But women should not be killed in the name of honour and moralities. Immediately they said what if your sister did this or that? would you kill her or not? If I say no, they say you are without honour if I say yes, they tell me I am a hypocrite. I am talking about the issue in general but they push it to be personal. My sisters are not comfortable to be associated with these conversations. It affects their name as well."

The men who communicated with Maria online do not necessarily reflect the views of the Iraqi community in Canada about women's sexuality or women's rights. In fact, since this conversation took place in a public post on social media, it is not clear if the men who commented on her statement were in Canada or if they were Iraqis at all. Regardless of these men's location or relationship to the participants, they saw the need to tell women what is morally right or wrong and who is respectable and who is not. Such comments impact how Iraqi women abroad approach public participation online since their digital print can be misconstrued and traced. It also preserves the gender boundaries between public/private domains in cyberspace in terms similar to the gender boundaries offline.

Keeping that in mind, we need to be careful in how we frame women's experiences in this research to avoid falling into a simplistic essentialist analytical trap. Although, we are using Islamic feminist thought to contextualize and articulate participants' experiences online, we should step back and frame their experiences within similar discussions of online sexism and violence. Cyber spaces are fraught with misogyny, (Emma Alice Jane, 2014; Emma A Jane, 2016; Mantilla, 2015; Poland, 2016). Women are bombarded with sexism online across the cultural, race and religious spectrum. Perpetrators of cyber misogyny use different reasons to justify their motives, yet the underlying reason is rooted in patriarchy. Therefore, we need case studies, like this research, to understand how patriarchy is constructed in each case in order to break it down and combat it.

Women in this study experienced male surveillance not only from relatives, or local community, but by random men who could access their posts regardless of their geographic location. The global access to social media has a local impact on women's choices of visibility online, as well as their choices of platforms and discussion topics. Participants

joined different Facebook groups, like Iraqis in Canada, where group members share questions and updates pertinent to Iraqis abroad. The majority of participants were subscribed to this group and posted questions about Canadian Law, settlement services and immigration processes. But they preferred to speak up and express their opinions in closed women's groups. Women's groups tended to have strict entry policies, with members admitted by invitation only. To get into these groups, an existing member would have to vouch for the applicant's identity (that she is a woman). Only trusted contacts could gain access to the group. The strategies participants used to shun men's advances online mimicked what these women do in Iraq, including socializing in women-only groups where women could talk safely among friends without fear of harassment or male policing.

The experiences participants shared and the techniques they used to avoid male surveillance show that gender boundaries online can be permeable and perhaps ambiguous, but they are far from being eradicated in the ways that Mernissi and early cyberfeminists predicted in the 1990s. Furthermore, social media is not inherently benign. Participants who resisted patriarchy online experienced surveillance and cyber misogyny. Therefore, scholars who study the disruptive role social media plays in creating change (e.g. during the Arab Spring), need to consider the dark side of social platforms. In particular, how social media further aids systems of surveillance and puts activists at risk.

4.3.3 Trust and cyber romance

All participants used the internet as part of their daily lives. Their continuous use suggests a degree of trust. On the other hand, participants demonstrated low levels of trust in other online users and relationships. Only 20% have online friends (i.e. friends with whom one communicates entirely only through the internet). One reason cited for distrust was that

self-disclosure online could jeopardize relatives at risk of abduction in Iraq. Kidnappers, Lama explained, select their victims using Facebook and “get to know everything about their target” via social media:

Lama: “In Iraq, so many people gather information on Facebook. They get to know everything about their target. After the US invasion smartphones got to Iraq. In that sense, the internet and technology became a curse. They even use them [smartphones] to set off explosives.”

Traditional Iraqi families expect their children, especially daughters, to marry within their community and faith group. Bearing that in mind, I expected to see more participants stating they have met or searched for husbands online, given the relative isolation of Iraqis living in BC. In comparison to traditional hangouts like offline friends and family circles, the internet contains a much larger pool of singles of the same ethnicity and religion.

Of single participants, 30% agreed that online romance can be sincere and might lead to marriage. Still, only one participant admitted to using social media to look for romance. About 80% of the other participants found the idea of meeting a man from their community online inappropriate, whether for romantic motives or otherwise. The reasons participants gave for this distrust was that they could not know the person’s intentions based solely on online interactions. They asserted that individuals could easily create a new persona online and fake their identities to manipulate them:

Maria: “You do not know who is behind the app. They too do not know you. They see your face and they think that your hair and eyes are pretty. That’s it. The majority of guys are looking for sex”

Participants with teenagers and adult daughters were anxious about the outcomes of free communication between sexes online. Mothers cautioned daughters against the perils of

casual online communication with men. For instance, Naida, a grandmother, explained her concerns about sexual entrapment and blackmail —also known as cyber sextortion — using the term “retaliation”. Retaliation ensues as follows: men entrap women in a love scheme and then blackmail them using their photos, videos and chat messages. Their victims have to comply with their demands, which range from money to sex, or else they share their photos and messages publicly:

Nadia: “I tell my daughters that relationships online are not successful. Maybe [the internet is good] in other areas but not in relations. You do not know who the person is. You might talk to him and he talks to many other girls. Even if he is not talking to other girls, if there is a problem between the two of you, he might retaliate and the girl is always the loser”.

Interaction between sexes in cyberspace is generally accepted if the relationship started through traditional means offline. Only once the relationship is formalized (i.e. the male becomes either a fiancé or husband), do online communication and romance become socially acceptable. For example, Lama’s eldest daughter met her husband while she and her family were in Syria, and her husband’s family requested the union. Lama’s daughter immigrated to Canada after getting married. The couple maintained their relationship online until the daughter was able to sponsor her husband’s move to Canada.

4.3.4 Visibility and surveillance on social media

The majority of participants responded that they experienced surveillance to ensure gender conformity both offline and online. Generally, those policing gender do so under the role of a guardian watching over a female relative. While single women said they are under surveillance by their parents and male relatives, married women are mainly monitored by their husbands.

Participant	Percentage
Believed they do not participate in larger conversations; i.e., they “listen” in online discussions but rarely post themselves.	70%
The actual percentage of participants who posted content and participated in larger conversation.	90%
Believed participating online created a social entanglement with their family and put them at risk.	90%
Felt they were under surveillance online.	80%

Table 4 Participants’ contribution online

Relatives conduct surveillance and enforce gender boundaries in two ways. When a guardian has the option to do so, they may access a family member’s phone or social media accounts without their permission and make changes: for example, adding or deleting friends or content. The second way is by following participants on social media and asking them directly to amend or delete a post. This can be done in real life or via private messages. In both cases, social media technology is used to surveil women and invade their privacy.

One participant, was told not to share thoughts that dispute gender roles or show intimate feelings, which are “better kept in a private journal”. She responded with frustration about her family scrutinizing her every post, and said she felt posting her opinions online to be pointless. She eventually stopped posting comments entirely and abandoned Facebook because she no longer wanted to self-censor so that everything she posted complied with her family’s wishes.

Social media platforms are designed to push and enable user visibility. Upon setting an account, platforms like Facebook, Google Plus, and Twitter give users the option of importing their email contact list (or phone numbers in the case of WhatsApp and Viber). Platform users are then recommended to invite people chosen by an algorithm.

But by pushing visibility, social platforms facilitate family and community surveillance. Accounts, which are publically accessible by default, provide a window for viewers to learn a lot about a person simply by looking at their profile. By checking wall posts and photos, reading the biography section and user likes, outsiders can amass information about a user's location, marital status, belief system and family affiliations. In addition, through 'recommendations', these platforms can create unpleasant social entanglements for these women, who may be unable to block or refuse friend requests from family or community members out of politeness.

Indeed, a full 70% of my participants mentioned adding family members or acquaintances whom they regretted adding but could not block them because doing so might create unpleasant consequences offline. Lama, for instance, felt it would be awkward to block some individuals on her list yet felt quite uncomfortable posting knowing that they could see her comments. She had to create a new profile, change her privacy settings and even change her listed email to ensure these social sites would not recommend her as a contact for a network list in the future. In addition, she chose a pseudonym she hoped would help make her utterly untraceable: "The name does not signify anything, not a woman or a man or an animal."

Social media platforms also create the opportunity for complete strangers to surveil these women. Participants reported receiving private messages from random users telling

them to delete their photos or accusing them of crossing gender boundaries and abandoning their faith. One participant mentioned that a male stranger contacted her because he had found photos of her through a Google search that she had originally posted in social media. He then admonished her for sharing her personal photos in public online.

One of the reasons Al-Rawi (2014), gave to explain Iraqi women absence online is women's harassment in public internet Cafes. While access might not be a problem for participants who can browse internet from their smartphone, their fear of harassment, however, persists once they log into the public space online. This reflects the continuity of private/public gender boundaries in cyberspace. It also shows that we cannot separate ICTs from the power system that created them and the social relations where they operate. Cyberspace mirrors and amplifies our offline social problems.

Furthermore, while I do agree with Al-Rawi on the impact of the rising patriarchy in Iraq after the war on women use of social media, I argue that patriarchy has influenced how women interact online but not their access per-se. In fact, women have a large presence online. However, because they face surveillance and harassment, the majority opt to remain anonymous and/or prefer to participate in women-only groups.

4.3.5 The user is the product

In "The Big Disconnect", Micah Sifry explains the power relation between platform designers and users: "Architecture is politics, and coders are legislators. Every choice the designers of a website or platform makes about the way their service interacts with users contains subtle, implicit decisions about power." (Sifry, 2014, p. 172)

Big social media platforms operate on a capitalist model where the user is the product. Public self-disclosure is key to commodifying user interactions and network

building. Towards this end, social media actively facilitates publicity through invitations for users to express their so-called “authentic self” through selfies, self-branding, self-presentation and self-promotion. To build this alleged authenticity, some social networking sites have strict identity policies which require the use of real names in user profiles and verification with real documents, such as a birth certificate, marriage certificate, passport or driver’s license. This has been the case for Facebook, LinkedIn, Quora, Yelp among other sites at one point or another. The official reason for these restrictions are to discourage bullying and create a sense of accountability. Facebook’s terms of service specify the real name policy is in place to ensure “you always know who you're connecting with and keep our community safe.” (Facebook, 2017, January 27b). What is not stated is that accurate user profiles also add veracity to the information in the platform, and hence value to the platform’s marketing tools, reliant on harnessing user data such as age, gender, ethnicity, location, search history and applications use in order to profile the user for targeted advertising. It is also for this reason that Facebook prohibits the use of more than one personal account (Facebook, 2017, January 27a). Multiple accounts for a single user would naturally degrade the quality of data about their authentic self and hence, the data’s market value.

Social media provided participants with opportunities to socialise, learn, mobilize and experiment with gender identity and gender roles. Yet cyber misogyny is prevalent and gender boundaries are far from disappearing. The gender dynamic of Iraqis in social media mirrors problems in their offline community: online interactions are still hierarchical, patriarchal and filled with anxiety about women’s sexuality. Social media, as a space, is divided along gender lines. Women are chastised when they share aspects of their life which

patriarchal figures deem inappropriate. Personal photos of women, particularly if the woman is unveiled, could lead to considerable admonition and/or sexual solicitation. The more visible a woman is online, the bigger the target, compared to women who are less visible, because they use a pseudonym, do not share personal photos or only share photos where they wear *hijab*.

The relationship between Iraqi men and women in social media ultimately echoes Mernissi's prescribed dichotomy between public and private domains. There is an anxiety about gender proximity and gender boundaries. Women are visual online, and close to strange men, and this leads to women's sexualisation. As women belong to the private domain, seeing them in the public domain causes *fitan* (i.e. moral chaos), which leaves women open to unwanted sexual solicitation, because in the same logic of harassers, by trespassing in the public domain women are offering themselves and thus they 'had it coming'.

At the same time, women are simultaneously admonished by random male vigilantes who act as *qawwamūn*, i.e. guardians over women in the name of god. Men played the role of guardians as they took measures to 'protect' women, so they do not transgress the public domain's gender boundaries. This policing can include making unauthorized changes to a female family member's profile, relatives pressuring them to delete what they deem unsavory posts or random men asking women to delete an unveiled photo which they came across in a google search. In turn, because women were under surveillance, and because this surveillance is pervasive yet frequently invisible, as in the Panopticon, these women felt pressured to amend their behaviour and practice self-censorship.

David Lyon, a well know scholar in surveillance studies, uses Foucault's analysis of the panoptical in his theorization of surveillance. In "Surveillance and the Eye of God", (2014) Lyon points out that the Panopticon has some religious parallel and elements of god's 'watchfulness'. The Panopticon, initially proposed for penitentiaries, is designed to expose prisoners to an invisible guard in the centre who is watchful but cannot be seen. The design limits the personal privacy of prisoners and increases self-censorship. Prisoners conform to rules because they assume they are always being watched by the invisible guard, even when they are not. Like in the Panopticon, participants in my study, who had negative experiences about being admonished, surveilled, and censored by men, assumed they are being watched at all times by invisible online users and opted to self-censor.

To navigate in the Iraqi virtual realm safely without being exposed to cyber misogyny, participants adopted one of two strategies. They could choose anonymity and use a pseudonym or withdraw from participation and limit their comments and discussions to private women's groups. I refer to this set of strategies as adorning a digital burqa. A second approach adopted by other participants was to use their real names and photos but restrict most of their online communication to professional sites like LinkedIn where professionalism constrains people's behaviour. I refer to this second strategy as the business suit.

The approach Iraqi women used to navigate gender constraints in the virtual world ultimately mirror the strategies they use in the real world, where public spaces are inherently a man's domain, and women are treated as trespassers. Interviewed participants who shared their opinions saw the need to create women-only spaces because social platforms popular among their community are perceived as a public domain and thus inherently a masculine space hostile or inappropriate for women.

Just as they do offline, marginalized groups rely on creative strategies to resist the powerful online. Some Iraqi women did use social media to resist patriarchy, but they did so at risk to themselves. Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms are by design technologies of surveillance. This creates risks for activists and marginalised groups in authoritarian patriarchal societies. Women who do take risks online either have strong socio-economic status that provides some protection, or they have mastered using the digital *burqa* to protect their identity.

The participants' experience of harassment online is not unique to the cyber Iraqi community. Online spaces are rampant with all sorts of cyber misogyny, and it affects women, in various degrees, regardless of where they fall in the social spectrum. The suicide of Amanda Michelle Todd, a 15-year-old Canadian girl in British Columbia, is an example of how violence on the internet affects women disproportionately. Before she took her life, Amanda posted a black and white video on YouTube using flashcards where she shared how she was sexually exploited and bullied by online predators (Todd, 2012). Amanda stood in front of the camera showing the lower part of her face and skinny body while cutting her eyes and the upper part of her face from the camera lens. The description section of the video, Amanda wrote:

“I'm struggling to stay in this world, because everything just touches me so deeply. I'm not doing this for attention. I'm doing this to be an inspiration and to show that I can be strong. I did things to myself to make pain go away, because I'd rather hurt myself than someone else. Haters are haters but please don't hate, although I'm sure I'll get them. I hope I can show you guys that everyone has a story, and everyone's future will be bright one day, you just gotta pull through. I'm still here aren't I? – Amanda Todd (2012)”

The video went viral. It reached more than twelve million views. The story of Amanda stirred an uproar against cyberbullying. On March 9, 2015, Bill C-13, An Act to amend the Criminal Code, the Canada Evidence Act, the Competition Act and the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Act, also known as the Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act, also known as cyberbullying law came into force. The law criminalizes cyberbullying and sextortion also known as "porn revenge". Bill-C13 (Parliament, 2013), is a good starting point it is not sufficient alone. First, we have to deal with globalizing effects of the internet, which renders it ineffective if the perpetrator of the crime is outside Canada. Second, it still cannot protect women from cyber stalkers. Third, it does not address other forms of cyber misogyny where trolls simultaneously shame and sexualize women for their size, looks, and wardrobe choices.

Cyberspace is the new frontier for misogyny. The perpetrators of this misogyny usually give different reasons for their acts of violence, be it race, religion, class, gender or for the "lulz", (i.e. for the perpetrator amusement at the expense of women). But the underlying reason remains connected to endemic patriarchy.

Contrary to what early cyberfeminists predicted about the possibility of a genderless space, or what Mernissi foresaw as the eradication of public/private boundaries online (Mernissi, September 2005), patriarchy, power differences and gender boundaries all persist online. Consequently, in contrast to Wheeler, (2006), my participants feared the consequences of interacting with men online, which meant they were not emboldened to rebel and cross gender lines on social media. And if they do interact with men, as when they post questions on Iraqi Canadian Facebook group or ask for translation over WhatsApp groups, they do so from beneath a cyber-shield using the digital *burqa* or business suit

strategy. Although the day-to-day offline interactions of many of these women might reflect a belief in gender equality, women were noticeably more cautious online in response to the surveillance they experienced, and the offline burden of respectability.

One of the reasons why my findings are different from that of Wheeler is perhaps because Wheeler's research was conducted before social media ascended to popularity in the Arab World. Prior to Web 2.0, chatrooms were mainly text based, and individuals' presence was far less visual. Popular online chat software like Paltalk, Windows Live Messenger and Yahoo Messenger relied mostly on communication between a very limited number of computer devices. Unless one of the users deliberately shared their content in a public forum, the discussion would remain private. In contrast, social media in Web 2.0 is highly visual. Users are pushed to share their photos and maintain their real identity to better sell their personal brand. Every day, thousands of selfies are published and judged. More apps connected to social media are released to enhance and edit users' photos. Women in particular are pressured to maintain an image that fits mainstream media. Therefore, the current web is a dystopia that clashes with early cyberfeminists dreams of achieving disembodiment, and transcending gender boundaries online. On top of that, Web 2.0 is accumulative, searchable, and sticky. A user profile is an ongoing story. The photos and content in this story can be crawled²⁷ by search engines if it is not set to private. Even if set to private, the content can be shared in public if a friend shares it on their wall and their

²⁷ Web crawlers, also known as web spiders, are computer applications (internet bots), that systematically and continuously navigate the internet to index websites. Search engines, routinely revisit registered sites using web crawlers to refresh their data. This process is called spidering or crawling (Butterfield, Ngondi, & Kerr, 2016).

profile is set to public. Once content starts circulating on the internet, it can become very difficult to erase especially if that content goes viral. This possibility of uncontrolled exposure, or at the very least fear of it, heavily influences how Iraqi women conduct themselves online.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

This research examined three central questions about the experiences of Iraqi refugee women in British Columbia using feminist theories of intersectionality:

1. How do they participate in building their online communities?
2. What challenges related to digital justice do Iraqi women face?
3. What tactics do they deploy to resist those injustices?

Applying feminist theories of intersectionality, I analysed the factors that affect Iraqi women's use of social media and contribute to their choice of network platforms, discussion topics and visibility or anonymity. My findings show that gender, race, religion, and class are interlocking systems of oppression that interact in complex and contradictory ways online and offline, locally and transnationally. In this section, I will provide a synthesis of my findings, arguments and study contributions and show how this thesis addressed each of the research questions.

5.1 How Iraqi women participate in building their online communities

Online communities can become a collaborative forum for diasporic populations where their stories, memories, and knowledge are archived. Women in this study used the internet in four strategic ways to build their community. First, they used it as a safe electronic space to demonstrate their identity and show solidarity. They congregated to support each other and celebrate their history and identities by sharing their feelings, personal stories, life events, and/or their belief system. Second, they used it to collaborate in building their local communities by sharing their immigration experience, and knowledge about important events and changes to the Canadian immigration laws. Third, they discussed topics perceived to be exclusive to women, like religious practices, health and nutrition, parenting and family care.

These themes are usually discussed in closed groups administered only by women. Fourth and last, they used it as a tool to challenge institutional power, by organizing demonstrations and social events, and sharing insights about the political turmoil in the Middle East.

5.2 The challenges related to digital justice Iraqi women face

When we talk about the digital divide for Arab women, physical access is what usually comes to mind. But my study suggests that language is the most pertinent obstacle. The majority of web content is written in English, for an English-speaking audience. Literacy in English is significantly impacted by gender roles as well as marital and parental status. In this study, single women acquired English through socializing and steady attendance to school and built a broader local social network that extended beyond their Arabic-speaking community. Over time, they became less reliant on the knowledge, aid and translation services that their community provided on and offline.

In contrast, caregivers and stay at home mothers continued to face two main barriers: restricted movement and delayed English acquisition. Each placed a limit on their income and offline mobility. Mothers who struggled with poverty could not afford to pay for the childminding that would free them up to continue their education and English language training, and thus their employability. Therefore, just as language limits opportunities offline, it also constrained what sites these women could access online without help. During the first years of their settlement, mothers and caregivers were dependent on interpretation provided by English-speakers in their community to navigate the system and learn about local services, news, and events. Social media became their preferred place for information because of its ease of access—especially via mobile devices—and fast results.

Social media eased caregivers' transition into life in Canada, in the short term at least, by helping with language and mobility issues. Mothers, especially those with heavy caregiving responsibilities, used social media in three ways to resolve restrictions on their mobility: They used it to learn English, to get vital information about settlement in Canada, and to create a support network they could access without having to leave home. Nonetheless, their reliance on the internet might also cement their domesticity in two ways. First, it patches the problem of restricted mobility but does not resolve it, concealing the burden of caregiving. In turn, because this issue is private (i.e., in the home), and is perceived as a personal issue, it receives less attention by policy makers. Policy inaction on affordable child care, in turn, forces caregivers to compromise their education and employment to take care of their family. Second, women who relied solely on the support of their community, locally and online, felt that they could not escape their communities' surveillance and thus felt they needed to perform their gender roles, or at least pretend to, in ways that conformed with patriarchal norms.

All participants experienced discrimination due to assumptions about their race or the association of their race with religion in Canada. Assumptions about women race and religion affected women's employability and potential income and further consolidated their roles as caregivers and stay at home mothers. Furthermore, women who experienced racism, because of their accent, skin colour or dress-code, sought connection with their community online and were empowered by it. Members could rely on the relationships built on social media for support, to celebrate their stories and shared identities. Diasporic populations could archive their stories, memories, and knowledge online. Social media also played an important role as a source of news and information, especially when mainstream

media failed to provide material that is meaningful to them. In this manner, social media could provide these women a sense of belonging, and connection to home.

Cyber misogyny is another important obstacle that affected women's use of online spaces. It manifests through online harassment, sexting, sextortion, cyber stalking, and surveillance. Unlike language barriers, this obstacle is gender based and particular to women. Those who chose to be visible in social media, through content posting and photo sharing, were simultaneously admonished, and sexualised for crossing gender boundaries.

For Iraqi women in Canada, expectations differ depending on their geography. The global connection, which social networks provide, brought with it familial and social ties from their community inside and outside of Iraq. For Iraqi women, who live between two worlds, this increased connectivity pressures women to socially conform or risk losing their respectability. Women in this study experienced male surveillance not only from relatives, or local community, but by random men who could access their posts regardless of their geographic location. The global access to social media means their digital print can be traced, copied, analysed and reconstructed/misconstrued. This has locally impacted how women approach public participation online, including their choices of visibility or anonymity, as well as their choice of platforms and discussion topics.

The last obstacle is lack of trust in online spaces. This perhaps is due to the ongoing war in Iraq. Kidnappers use social media to collect information about their targets. Therefore, having more exposure online could jeopardize relatives at risk of abduction in Iraq.

5.3 The tactics Iraqi women deploy to resist digital injustices

To resist their isolation, Othering and lack of online content in their native language, especially content related to resettlement in Canada, women sought support from their community members online and transferred the knowledge and support later on to new members.

The digital *burqa* and business suit are two other tactics women use to resist patriarchy. Married women and mothers are careful in their conduct on public forums out of fear of being shamed, harassed and surveilled. That is because women who use their real names in their social profiles, or who share their photos, are chastised for crossing gender boundaries and can become targets for unwanted sexual solicitation. The strategies women use in social media to maintain their respectability and block unwanted sexual advances mirror the strategies they use offline. They adorn a digital *burqa* and become anonymous by using a pseudonym and creating women-only groups. Alternatively, women might adorn a virtual business suit by joining professional social media sites where highly formal business modes of interaction constrain people's behaviour.

Authority over knowledge in online spaces is gendered. Knowledge is transmitted in their native tongue (Arabic, Kurdish and Chaldean) and controlled through cultural norms. If you go against that control, you can be disciplined. This control includes peer group members regulating gender roles and women's sexuality. Women are directly or indirectly discouraged from participating in knowledge production in the public domain while using their true identity. Therefore, they often opt to share their knowledge privately in women's groups only.

Closed groups can provide a secure network for women to support each other, render advice, show empathy, and swap stories. Minority spaces are meant to focus on core community concerns without having to deal with bigotry and distractions, and repeatedly explain to outsiders why their experiences are different and why they matter. Yet, by choosing to participate in women's groups only, Iraqi women's knowledge is limited to the private domain while having finite influence on the mainstream.

5.4 The larger picture

Feminists have provided a thick body of sociological theory on why and how public spaces are constructed as a male domain. In the findings section, I compared Iraqi women's interaction in offline public and private domains to their social media use online. Cyber spaces are fraught with misogyny, and the experience of Iraqi women online is not an exception. My findings agree with ICT literature that indicates that cyberspace mirrors our offline world, where different powers compete to exert control over who can interact in said space, and on what terms (Below, 2014; Keohane & Nye Jr, 1998; Radu, 2014).

Cyberfeminists have long hailed the internet for its revolutionary potential, particularly areas where women are able to participate in a genderless knowledge creation. Their optimism peaked in the 1990's, a time when text was the central medium, in emails, forums, and chatrooms. The belief was that, presented with text alone, readers might judge the content free of prejudices about the writer's gender, race and or class. Things changed with the arrival of Web 2.0 and the rise of social media. Web 2.0 is highly visual, accumulative, searchable, and sticky—aspects that clashes cyberfeminist dreams of disembodiment, identity tourism, and the eradication of gender boundaries. Nowadays, the message is multidimensional, and users have multiple tools to share messages through

recorded videos, audios, photos slideshows, and live streaming. These technologies help users build their personal brand and market their message, so they can acquire followers and monetize their personal data and social network.

Looking at the larger picture, my findings contradict the notion of ICTs as the future saviour for the marginalized, an idea some digital studies experts have long held. We cannot detach these technologies from the power structures that created them and the systems within which they are embedded. It is true that social media may offer opportunities to practice selfhood and challenge gender norms, but at the same time, it magnifies pre-existing social structures due to its immediate global outreach and radical visibility which makes escaping gendered social structures impossible for the most vulnerable. Furthermore, social media might put novice users at risk of cyber misogyny, harassment and surveillance, and require them to self-censor. I believe the difference in my findings from the other studies is also due to a difference in methods. In contrast to these other studies, I did not rely on netnographic methods. Instead, I contacted these women offline through referrals from the local community. Another possible factor is the timing of my research. My study was done after social media had fully spread across the Arab world and became ubiquitous. Furthermore, the intersectionality approach was an ideal analytical tool that helped me address the complexity of social and economic factors that affect Iraqi women's uses of social media.

It is important to attribute the success some Iraqi women have achieved in using social media, despite their patriarchal surroundings, to their strategic use of the platform. We should give credit to the ingenuity of these women in mastering the digital *burqa* in order to survive and strike an (albeit limited) victory against patriarchy, rather than crediting the technology itself as the agent of political and social change.

5.5 Future directions

We are witnessing forced migration from the south to the north of historic proportions. This mass migration is accompanied by a new phenomenon: social media. When analysing the experiences of diaspora populations, immigration scholars need to add social network technologies as a new power that connects people across distances regardless of their geographic and economic realities, and despite the political tendencies of the ruling regimes they live under.

Researchers must step away from the naïve optimism about social media's positive political potential for participatory democracy and freedoms while, at the same time, overlooking the risks it poses. Future research should address issues of mass surveillance, and the asymmetric relationship users share with large corporations who seek to monetize their behavior. It should also pay more attention to cyber misogyny and other forms of inequality replicated in online spaces.

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