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# **The Dressed Body, Material and Technology: Rethinking the Hijab through Sartorial Sociology**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the opportunities provided for dress and fashion studies by an analytical focus on garments through a number of disciplinary and conceptual lenses. Drawing upon sociological sources, including Bourdieu's practice theory and Alfred Gell's insights of human/object agency, as well as anthropology, considerations of material technologies, and clothing physiology, a framework is developed for depicting the many roles that textile materials and garment objects play in knowledge-creation, individual experiences of wearing garments, and the operation of habitus. In my case-study analysis of female Islamic veiling in Finland, I draw upon both primary data and secondary sources that take account of *histories* – involving individual histories, socio-cultural histories, histories of technological and material developments, and histories of transnational trade-routes – and *materialities*, including the physicality of garments, human bodies and physical and spatial environments.

**Keywords** Materiality, materialities, veiling, Muslim women, Bourdieu, bodies, technologies, habitus, Finland, hijab

## **Introduction**

It is not uncommon for a scholar of dress and fashion to find that the various theoretical tools offered by academic disciplines provide only partially suitable frameworks for understanding the specificities of garments. When one locates a promising tool suited to research one aspect of garments, it often proves to be less well fitted for comprehending other elements of dress

phenomena. This is partly a disciplinary problem, for each discipline is strong in something and weaker in other areas. Therefore it is hardly a surprise that when working towards my PhD in sociology, with a specific focus on Islamic dress in Finland, I found myself picking a theoretical tool from here, another from there, and patching them together into a map that could work for the type of analysis I wanted to do. One reason for my dissatisfaction with currently available concepts was that I had been initially trained as a clothing designer, and had during my studies and when working in the industry afterwards developed a strong awareness and knowledge about textile materials in particular, and this certainly is not an area that sociological tools are very suited to comprehend fully.

In the years following my PhD, I have continued to work in this research area, and while I have found many very useful ways to study garments, none of them was quite as far-reaching and comprehensive as I desired. In short, I wanted to develop a sociology of garments, or a *sartorial sociology* as I call it, that would take into account the specific characteristics of garments and dressed bodies, yet would go far beyond garments, acknowledging that dress phenomena have long, often globalized histories that continue to shape the phenomena today. This approach draws upon many useful ideas in existing scholarship, both general sociological and fashion/dress interdisciplinary work, but seeks to push the boundaries of scholarship in a more fusion-like direction, encompassing both micro- and macro-level, and historical and current, phenomena.

In this paper, I argue that when talking about everyday dress, *garments* themselves, *human bodies*, and the *environments* inhabited by those bodies must all be considered in relation to each other (for the principles of relational thinking, see Emirbayer 1997). All of these – garments, bodies, environments – are simultaneously physical, mental/emotional, and social/moral in character. They are rendered socio-moral, and thereby mental and emotional, through forms of *knowledge* (e.g. what is appropriate coverage of gendered bodies in a certain

socio-spatial environment). Knowledge of such matters is collectively created, and both influenced and internalised by individuals, and through such processes knowledge comes to shape mental and emotional experiences and responses to dress phenomena. Yet garments, bodies, and environments are also physical, and therefore elements of their *materiality* must be factored into analyses of garment-wearing. Crucially, garments are not simply passive objects of human knowledge-creation, but may indeed come to shape both knowledge about dress and individual experiences of dress-wearing.

Garments, bodies, environments and forms of knowledge are all both micro- and macro-level phenomena, being both geographically located and globalized in complex manners. They are phenomena that reach from the level of personal intimacy to globality. Importantly, all have *histories* too. All these elements of any particular dress phenomenon are essential to consider. Through such a synthesis of analytical elements, many factors of garment-wearing can be understood more clearly than if taken in isolation, and also surprising elements of individual dress preferences can potentially be seen in a different light.

In what follows, I will first flesh out the theoretical framing necessary for the type of analysis developed in this paper. Thereafter I will discuss my ethnographic fieldwork among Muslim women in Finland, especially Somali migrant women and local converts to Islam. I will then demonstrate how, first, religious knowledge is partly created as a response to historical change in terms of technologies, textile materials and garment styles, and may or may not be internalised by individuals. Second, I will consider how personal preferences in terms of garments are influenced by a number of factors, such as local trade networks, national textile and garment narratives, and the level of economic capital an individual possesses. While such matters are often discussed in terms of comfort and personal preferences, a number of macro-level factors are also in play here. This is most strikingly demonstrated in how differently

Somali and Finnish women discuss their garments and consider different textile materials comfortable or not.

### **Bodies, Garments, Environments**

Dress can be understood as something fundamentally necessary for social order in terms of transforming bodies into socially and morally acceptable entities. The intimate connection between dress and the human body is manifest in individual practices of dressing the body, while the body's social significance is seen in how it either fits or does not fit its social environment. The lack of attention to these factors in research on the body on the one hand, and dress on the other, led Joanne Entwistle (2000b) to develop the influential idea of dress as a situated bodily practice, which binds the individual, their social environment and their body through practices of dressing.

Yet despite the significance of such a framing, and calls for the body to be introduced into studies of fashion (e.g. Entwistle 2000a, 2000b; Entwistle and Wilson 2001; Wilson 2003), fashion scholars have still too often treated the body in a curiously immaterial manner, which is typical for cultural and social studies more generally (Massumi 2002). It is this relative lack of physicality that this article in part focusses on. For while 'the physical characteristics of objects and environments act upon people to influence action and meaning-making', the failure to address, in the case of fashion phenomena, the materiality of both bodies and garments can result in 'neglect[ing] the causal power of physical objects and bodies in interaction' (Griswold et al 2013: 345). As Smelik et al (2016: 287) have argued, '[a] theoretical and methodological focus on materiality allows for a sustained analysis of embodiment and embodied experience, while it also enables attention to [be given to] the materiality of the textile and the technology involved'.

Some anthropological studies have sought to place analytical focus on objects and material culture in addition to socio-cultural phenomena (Miller 2005a, Woodward 2005). Yet here again disciplinary boundaries have meant a certain lack of focus on the physicality of objects. Arguably, whether one sees material culture as ‘the attribution of meaning to objects by the people who produce, use, consume, sell and collect them’ (Riello 2011: 3), or whether one considers it ‘an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us’ (Miller 2005b: 5), a lot of academic discourse is less interested in the characteristics of materials themselves than it is in the meanings humans project onto material objects.

Material culture accounts also have varying success in dealing with historical issues. While some anthropological accounts of garments are highly developed in their consideration of details of objects and human interpersonal relations (e.g. Miller 2010; Miller and Woodward 2012; Woodward 2005; 2007), they often do not sufficiently consider their findings within a wider historical context. A similar absence is present in various scholarly accounts of garments and technologies. While dress and fashion scholars have paid much attention to contemporary technologies, particularly as regards smart fibres, wearable technology and intelligent textiles (e.g. Kuchler 2008; 2010; Smeilik et al 2016), textile technologies of course have much longer histories, and given that this history has significantly shaped dress preferences and fashions (Tortora 2015), more attention needs to be given to these historical trajectories.

Fashion studies’ blind spots regarding objects and materialities is attributed by various scholars to the influence on the field of the semiotic turn, associated with scholars such as Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu (Riello 2011). It has been claimed that the humanities- and social sciences-trained scholar ‘struggles to see through the web of social relations to materials and their properties’ (Knappet in Woodward and Fisher 2014: 12). While it is true that Bourdieu’s work is far more focussed on symbolic significance of garments (see e.g. Bourdieu 1991: 50, 70, 89, 123, 277; 1992: 200–2) than it is on other characteristics of objects, such as materiality

(Rocamora 2002), his work in my view nevertheless provides ample opportunities for doing dress and fashion analysis differently, in a way that materiality is effectively accounted for.

To get beyond the purely symbolic level, the obvious starting point is the notion of habitus, particularly the bodily elements of it. Bourdieu (1977: 78) has called habitus 'history turned into nature, i.e. denied as such', meaning that history, when it is internalised and naturalised, becomes unconscious. Habitus is not only discursive, but also deeply implicated in bodily practices. The body is a form of memory, embodying social principles and values, which due to their embodied nature are 'beyond the grasp of consciousness' (Bourdieu 1977: 94). The embodied principles are the elements of habitus experienced as the most 'natural' of all (Bourdieu 2004: 584).

According to Bourdieu (2001: 64), bodily hexis 'includes both the strictly physical shape of the body ... and the way it is "carried"', and encompasses elements such as bodily posture and ways of walking, which are learned in early childhood. At the same time, bodily hexis is a sign read by other people. How others read such signs often comes to be internalised by the individual thus categorised. Yet consciousness of one's bodily hexis is generally only evoked when there is a mismatch between the individual's dispositions and the social environment (Bourdieu 2004).

An individual's biographical 'material conditions of existence', such as diet, exercise and beauty treatments, are integrally part of their habitus and modify the body on an ongoing basis (Bourdieu 1992: 437). It is not difficult to extend this point to clothes. While Bourdieu (2004: 583) saw 'correlation at the level of meaning' between movement, clothing and expression, he does not directly make the (obvious) argument about clothing not only *signifying* but also *shaping* bodily hexis. Falk (1995) has argued that different kinds of bodily modification, both temporary and permanent, are in many ways inflicted upon bodies through garment choices.

How the body can move is enhanced and restricted through clothing, and specific ‘techniques of the body’ (Mauss 1973) are shaped and created through changes in sartorial fashions.

Bodily techniques are always more than just bodily, for they are profoundly shaped by forms of socially-shared knowledge. ‘The cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized, “embodied” social structures’, as Bourdieu (1992: 468) notes. Bodily hexis and bodily habitus are not just physically expressed but are also experienced forms of knowledge, which are partly conscious and partly unconscious. Habitus orients an individual towards positions in social space which she can comfortably inhabit (Bourdieu 1992). Different forms of bodily and mental comfort and discomfort which people experience when wearing their clothes (Miller and Woodward 2010), can be understood as expressions of habitus, with habitus shaping their knowledge of appropriate forms of dress in particular social situations.

Here it is relevant also to consider how humans make sense of their ‘feelings’ in this regard. While different kinds of ‘affects’ which cause sensory experiences are often simply physical in nature, ‘feeling’ is a psychological experience shaped by individuals’ social histories. Feeling is constructed in light of past experiences and knowledge of the (un)suitability of socially shared emotions (Shouse 2005). Therefore, how something ‘feels’ in terms of garments is an integral part of an individual’s habitus, often guided by unconscious factors. Yet ‘feelings’, based on different kinds of affects, are also driven by physical experiences, such as garments touching the skin (Schmidt et al 2009).

So obviously clothes are more than just social signifiers; they are also sources of feelings, of conscious and unconscious comfort and discomfort. Discomfort in relation to clothes is often (though not always) unexpected and undesirable, shaped by complex circumstances, for garments are non-human objects with specific characteristics that may ‘introduce elements of presence, uncertainty and deviation’ into human activities (Prior 2008: 314). In some accounts,



garments are attributed a certain level of agency, due to the unexpected circumstances they sometimes create (Woodward 2005). This is a capacity that needs to be taken into account, and Bourdieu's work is not fully satisfactory in this regard.

Alfred Gell's (1998) ideas are helpful in filling the gap left by Bourdieu. Gell discusses such moments of betrayal that inanimate objects in general are capable of. Usually the individual wearing garments is in the position of 'agent', someone with the capacity to act. But a material object can turn an individual into a 'patient', someone to whom the material object 'does' something, such as leaving them on the road in the case of a broken-down car. Most of the time garments are objects of action for the human agent who determines the action. But just as any other object can turn temporarily into an agent, so too can clothes force their wearer into the position of patient. This would happen, for example, when the garment makes the body look undesirable or unsuitable to the wearer, or when a garment unexpectedly betrays its wearer socially – when an outfit turns out to be 'wrong' for the situation – or physically – when the dress is unexpectedly disarrayed, thus revealing parts of the body that the individual would prefer to keep hidden. While the incidence of dress betrayal is caused by physical conditions, such as an unexpected gust of wind, its consequences are usually social and moral, exposing the wearer-patient to possible ridicule and moral censure.

There are, of course, also other ways of theorising garments' capacities for agency. We could follow garments through the complex networks that they are created in, travel through, and partly shape and create, such as Actor Network Theory advocates would suggest (Entwistle 2015). Such an approach would require us to see a dress mishap as a form of 'resistance' in a network where factors such as human bodies, garments and their production chains, and environmental factors all play their part. Alternatively, we could draw upon different theoretical positions, such as Bourdieusian and ANT ones (Prior 2008; Schwarz 2013), and recognise that not only are these mishaps situational and created by a complex network of

factors, but they are also embedded in hierarchies of social status and position. However, there is something suitably flexible in Gell's insights into agent/patient relations that seems to suit his terminology for the analysis of everyday dress dilemmas. His insights in this regard have not, to my knowledge, been used for such analysis as proposed here, but they seem worthy of attention when seeking to explain momentary experiences of loss of control in dress terms.

I will therefore seek to understand the phenomenon of Islamic dress in Finland in the light of factors such as habitus and experienced (dis)comfort, different kinds of materialities and various interconnected histories. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate that such an analytical framework as the one proposed here offers new insights into the subtleties of these phenomena.

### **An Ethnography of Veiling**

When I first started studying the area of Islamic veiling, the literature available was much more limited in scope and geographical reach than it is today. Veiling studies has grown vastly in scope as the political and economic significance of the phenomena has increased (for an extensive overview, see Almila 2017). There are accounts of veiling and modest fashion phenomena (e.g. Abaza 2007; Lewis 2015, 2017), analyses of various elements of the Islamic fashion and lifestyle industry (e.g. Gökarıksel and Secor 2010; 2013; Jones 2017), histories of the complex politics of veiling (e.g. Abu-Lughod 2002; Ahmed 2011; Cronin 2014), and rich ethnographic accounts of veiling in different locations (e.g. El Guindi 1999; Tarlo 2010).

My own approach started as ethnographic research, conducted between 2011 and 2012 in the 'Greater Helsinki' city-hub area of Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa. I accessed informants through various networks and also through formal organisations, such as the Roihuvuori Sunni mosque which is popular among young Somalis and Finnish converts, and the Resalat Shi'a mosque. In accordance with ethnographic principles, I spent time with my informants, observing them in various locations, and had lengthy conversations about their clothes and wardrobes. When

conducting semi-structured interviews with altogether 46 women, I also made notes about various characteristics of the garments the women showed me, including sketches of garments and notes about textile materials, which came to inform my analysis further.

In this article I focus on two groups of veiling women: Somalis and Finnish converts to Islam. The analysis draws upon interviews with 16 Somali women, aged 19–45, and 20 Finnish converts, aged 19–61. For the analysis I develop here, as we will see, informants' ethnicity mattered more than other attributes. The histories of the textile and garment trades, and nationally based narratives about what counts as fashionable, came to play a part in individuals' garment preferences in a striking manner. At the same time, my group of informants was varied, and individual differences were obviously present. However, where I draw attention to a particular informant's views, these are views that other informants also expressed in one way or another. While the research is obviously somewhat limited in scope, I hope to demonstrate the plausibility of the wider points I am making.

The context in which the study took place, the urban area of Greater Helsinki, is home to an ethnically varied Muslim population<sup>1</sup>. Somalis started arriving in Finland in the early 1990s, and are the largest group of Muslims in the country today (Martikainen 2008). During recent decades, Somalis have established various commercial networks, both formal and informal, through which the needs of the community are met. Formal initiatives include shops that typically offer a bit of everything – food, garments and other goods – and are patronised by community members (and sometimes shunned by Muslims of other ethnicities – see Author in press). Informal networks involve the small-scale distribution of garments that individuals bring from abroad and sell to their friends and acquaintances. Clothes are also ordered online, and especially the younger generation shops in mainstream high street stores such as H&M. While the Somali community is rather tight-knit, and individuals depend upon each other to acquire the goods they need and desire, Finnish converts to Islam are less networked among

themselves, but are, rather, linked to the ethnic communities of their husbands. Yet they often continue to shop the way they shopped before their conversion, sourcing their garments largely through high street stores and supermarkets.

### **Textiles and Garments Shaping Discourse and Knowledge**

When talking with veiling Muslim women during my fieldwork, I became aware of certain expressions repeatedly used. Many women spoke of the ‘perfect hijab’, and about their ‘knowledge’ as to whether their hijab conformed to such a category. This ‘perfect hijab’ was different for everyone, and it is not my aim here to discuss the multiplicity of the concept, but rather to point to the fact that such a concept existed for so many women in the first place. The knowledge of the ‘perfect hijab’ is a form of religious knowledge, arrived at through religious discourses, and when internalised by an individual, forming a part of the religious dimension of their habitus (Rey 2008).

Therefore when one of my informants described her hijab as ‘lacking’ because she wears nude-coloured translucent socks, she showed remarkably detailed knowledge of the religious interpretation and guidance as to the hijab that she is following. But what intrigued me more was this: surely this kind of detailed knowledge must be quite recently created, given that such socks as she wears have only existed for some decades? Indeed, the material from which such socks are made has only been available for a short historical period, since the 1950s at the earliest. This is the question I deal with in this section: how has the development of textile technologies, materials and garments come to shape religious discourses and knowledge production? It is this long-term historical development, and its consequences for moral discourses and the religious aspects of habitus, that interests me here.

One reason for the hijab being so hotly debated within Muslim communities today is that the Qur’an gives very little guidance as regards appropriate female dress (Akou 2010a: 332).

Moreover, the Hadiths – the sayings attributed to Muhammed – have little to say about women’s clothing. Their focus is on male garments and materials considered appropriate for believing men rather than women (El Guindi 1999: 135). But today there is a wide field of interpretation by Islamic scholars about the hijab, and individual Muslims discuss the topic both in face-to-face and online contexts, seek information and guidance, and develop their own perspectives on appropriate dress (Akou 2010a). While the significance of political and fashion developments for these debates about female dress is well documented (e.g. Ahmed 2011; Lewis 2015), the significance of materiality and technological developments is less recognised in the literature. The point here is that such debates are necessary partly *because* certain garments and dress options exist. Clothing and textile histories have made certain forms of dress *possible*, and thereby have *required* such forms of dress to be debated by religious scholars and believers. The development of, for example, translucent fabrics, tightly-fitting elastic garments and fluid fabrics that follow body shapes, all present dilemmas for Islamic doctrines, and are constantly addressed by clerics and lay women and men alike.

This was not always the case, and the peculiarities of the present-day situation can only be understood by considering long-term historical changes. In the seventh century Arabian Peninsula, the common textile fibres were wool, camel- and goat-hair, silk and linen (Baker 1995: 20). Some of the woven linens were extremely fine (Geijer 1982: 13), and may even have been translucent, but they certainly were not very elastic. The elasticity of a textile fabric is defined both by the yarns used, and also the structure of the fabric. For example, wool is a more elastic material than linen, but both are far less elastic than some modern artificial fibres. The structure of woven fabrics, unless the material is cut diagonally, is not stretchy, because woven threads lie straight in the fabric. Consequently, a woven fabric is typically only as flexible as its yarns are. A knitted fabric, on the other hand, is formed of thread loops and thus the structure itself is more flexible than that of a woven fabric.

The earliest manner of clothing the body was to wrap and drape uncut pieces of cloth around it. This technique was due to factors such as a lack of effective cutting tools and unwillingness to waste fabrics that required a significant investment of labour and raw material. In medieval Europe, sewn garments started to appear instead of clothes made of draped fabrics. This eventually led to the emergence of tailoring, which means the use of cutting and patterns in order to create (more or less) body-fitting shapes (Tortora 2015). But even when patterns were developed to create more tightly-fitting forms, these shapes were prone to restrict the movement of limbs: imagine wearing a tight-fitting t-shirt made of an inflexible material. The relative lack of elasticity of the fabrics available determined the limits of wearability, bodily posture and bodily movement. When wool instead of silk came to be used for male dress in the early nineteenth century, more body-hugging forms of dress also emerged (Wilson 1990). This new fit was enabled through the higher elasticity of wool fibre in comparison to silk.

Many textiles and garments that exist today would not exist without the development of industrial knitting tools. It is unclear when knitting was invented, but it was practised on a large scale only from the late medieval era onwards (Matković 2010: 125), while weaving tools were well developed already in pre-Islamic times across the centre of the Eurasian landmass (Geijer 1982). Early knitted objects were small, most commonly woollen or cotton socks (Turnau and Ponting 1976). When the demand for knitted garments increased in Europe, especially from the sixteenth century onwards, knitters organised as guilds and increased production levels. Fashionable knitted garments, such as men's silk stockings, drove the development of knitting techniques and technologies (Turnau 1982).

It is noticeable that the increasingly tight-fitting and body-shape-revealing forms of dress that developed in Europe were repeatedly sources of moral and religious concern, stimulating the creation of new moral norms and religious understandings (Ribeiro 2003). As novel garments

appear on the scene, they need to be addressed – either approved or condemned – by moral and religious leaders. The same dynamics are at work across the Muslim world today.

Especially since the 1920s, Euro-American fashion and garment making has taken material and stylistic influences from sportswear, and this has in turn encouraged the development of new fibres (Gale and Kaur 2004: 22), such as Lycra spandex, invented in the late 1950s. The most remarkable quality of Lycra spandex is that, as a blend material, it both allows free movement through elasticity, and also lets the garment keep its shape due to reversibility. Since the 1950s, the Euroo-American fashion industry has increasingly become based on flexible fabrics of blend fibres (Blaszczyk 2006). Today it is possible to cover one's skin completely, and yet fully reveal the shape of the body (and I have occasionally observed such hijab styles in different locations).

The Islamic doctrinal question as to how the female body should be covered is a question partly mediated by the very long-term, complex development of tools, technologies and fibres. This, then, is the essentially modern dilemma of a hijab wearer in contemporary Europe and beyond: *What to cover and how, given the huge range of possibilities?* New forms of hijab require new doctrinal statements from religious authorities as to acceptability or otherwise. Garments and ways of wearing them provoke and require reactions, and in turn come to shape social realities and relations. Doctrinal veiling debates are not only religiously- and socially-driven, but are also spurred by certain material and technological developments, which clerics and other figures must respond to, in order to provide up-to-date advice for believers to follow. At the same time, these religious responses in the form of dress advice are subject to reflection on the part of believers. To come back to the example of socks I gave in the beginning of this section, some women choose to react very differently to given doctrinal advice. In Synnøve Bendixsen's (2017) study of Muslim youth in Berlin, one young believer declared that on the question of socks and feet, she would simply follow different doctrinal advice than her peers

did, in order not to wear socks with her sandals. Religious advice may be offered but is not always followed.

The fashion system in Europe developed particularly strongly in times when different social spheres became increasingly independent in terms of their inner logics, and religion in particular lost its power over other spheres, such as the aesthetic sphere (Inglis 2016). Because fashion follows a different logic from religion, it rarely bends to religious requirements today. The Islamic fashion industry with its distinctive logics is a major exception to that rule, because of the interconnections it involves between garments, politics and religion (Almila in press). Following Max Weber, we could say that it is not just that the spheres of politics and religion interfere with the world of fashion; it is also the case that fashion, in terms of new technologies and designs, also interferes in the sphere of religion, in manners that are always 'political' in one way or another. New forms of sartorial materiality are constantly being developed, which then religious authorities and believers have to deal with. If religious authorities want to retain control of people's dress aesthetics and practices, they have to take into account the wider sphere of fashion that operates according to its own specific rationalities. It seems to be more useful to introduce and support 'modest fashion', and give religious guidance that is easily adaptable to circumstances, than to demand believers pay no attention to fashion at all. This is indeed what is done in Iran, for example. Run by Shi'a religious leaders, the regime has accommodated itself to the fashion system and promotes Islamic fashion shows, rather than trying to fight all forms of fashion (Shirazi 2017). Similarly the Indonesian government has been recently motivated to support and fund Islamic fashion initiatives (Jones 2017).

But the question still remains as to how internalised by individual believers such religious guidance is. After all, to say that one 'knows' that one's hijab is imperfect indicates that one is not sufficiently concerned with the issue to change one's dress preferences. But when religious-moral concerns are strongly internalised into the habitus, the experience of such 'imperfection'



is much more pronounced. While wearing not-so-perfect socks was of little concern to the woman mentioned above, other elements of her dress were much more intensely felt.

*Finnish convert, age 43:* I feel uncomfortable sometimes when I go out wearing a too short top.

*Interviewer:* What's too short?

*Interviewee:* One that's down here [*indicates just below the buttocks*]. When you bend over just a little your bum shows. Or, if one wears tighter trousers it shows. [...] Sometimes when I wear a [too short] top, I have to pull it down all the time like this [*mimics pulling a top down, wriggles*]. That's how it feels like.

She *knows* her socks are 'not perfect' but she *feels* her top is 'too short': this indicates a fundamental difference in her attitude towards these defects. Partly this difference is explained by the importance of covering feet versus covering buttocks. But partly it is explained by how deeply certain religious rules are integrated into an individual's habitus. A Somali woman whom I mention in the following section not only covers her feet with socks, but also ensures that her hems cover her feet too, for not doing this would cause her discomfort. When elements of dress are integrated as part of an individual's habitus – both in terms of knowledge and of practice – the power of dress to act upon an individual is significant. But where this integration is imperfect, knowledge on its own, when it is not deeply felt, has far less power. After all, the most powerful elements of habitus are usually the most unconscious ones (Bourdieu 2004), so to *know* something is 'wrong' is not the same as to *feel* it is so. As we see in the following section, it is precisely 'feeling' that is central for individual garment-wearing experiences.

### **Garments and Textiles Shaping Bodily Experiences**

According to scholars in the field of clothing physiology, two things matter for the experience of physical comfort: the sensory experience of textiles against the skin, and the 'fit' of the

garment on the body. The former refers to factors such as ‘thermal insulation, the capacity to absorb moisture and the limit from which the material is perceived by the wearer as being wet’ (Schmidt et al 2009: 8). The latter refers to the ergonomic qualities of the garment, that is, its ‘fit’ both in stable and dynamic positions.

But talking about how a textile actually ‘feels’ is far more complex than that. How an individual ‘feels’ is a matter defined by individual biography. If sensations – or ‘affects’ – are physical and emotions are social, then feeling is an experience that requires both an individual history that frames the ‘feelings’ being experienced, and also a language through which to make sense of those ‘feelings’ (Shouse 2005). How something feels is, therefore, far more than just physical sensations and socially shared emotions. Experiencing something is a mixture of the physical, social and individual in which ‘affect plays an important role in determining the relationship between our bodies, our environment, and others, and the subjective experience that we feel/think as affect dissolves into experience’ (Shouse 2005: unpaginated). All these factors are important when making sense of individual experiences of wearing garments, experiences often described by people through phrases like ‘comfort’ and ‘feeling right’ (or not).

One of the most significant factors influencing dress choices in Finland is the climate. Temperatures in Helsinki may go below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  in the winter and above  $+30^{\circ}\text{C}$  in the summer. Comfort and climate are fundamentally intertwined through the materiality of garments. Tightness may cause unnecessary warmth in the summer, and the movement of air between the body and the material is often welcomed by most people. In the winter, air between layers of fabrics keeps the body warm, but wind and humidity cannot be allowed to get to the skin in order to avoid feeling too cold, while perspiration from the skin should not make clothes feel damp. Obviously different kinds of garments are variably suitable for each of these climactic conditions. This was interestingly reflected in descriptions of climate-driven problem-solving:

Somali women tended to focus on dilemmas of winter wear, while for veiling Finnish women, summer wear was more challenging.

*Somali woman, age 29:* If you have a khimar, it looks silly, [it] hangs asymmetrically if you wear a coat on top so you must put a coat underneath [in winter]. I know that many women have body-hugging tight coats underneath and then the khimar on top. Or they have many layers of sweaters, cardigans and a light coat.

The khimar is ‘a headcover that covers the hair and extends low to the forehead, comes under the chin to conceal the neck, and falls down over the chest and back’ (El Guindi 1999: 130-1). Khimars come in different lengths, from a short garment covering the upper part of the body, to a full-length garment with sleeves that covers the whole body, except for the face. The fabrics used are typically rather thin, with no warmth-insulating capacity. In other words, these garments were not designed at all for Finnish winters.

In the summer, a brush of air on bare legs under one’s skirt may be a very pleasing sensation, yet the movement of air can also be treacherous.

*Finnish convert, age 39:* In the summer if it’s windy and [one is wearing] a light skirt, one must always consider whether one should wear something underneath. If [the skirt] rises, it feels – when one’s not used with walking with bare legs – it feels wild that the skirt might rise accidentally. ... Abaya-style dressing is easy ... although also with that there have been situations where the wind has made it stick to the skin.

Why an abaya – a long, loose dress that covers the body from neck to the wrists and feet – would be preferable for the control of hems in windy weather, is explained by the different cut of these kinds of garments. An abaya’s hem is often cut so that the hem is no wider than the waist, or is slightly narrower, but many summer skirts have wide hems that are more easily disturbed by sudden draughts. Therefore a wide skirt is more likely, in Gell’s (1998) terms, to turn the agent into a patient, a powerless object instead of a subject with agential power.

Because such ‘dress betrayals’ are intimately linked to religious morality and an experience of discomfort, this has various consequences for the wearer’s sense of security and comfort.

Other scholars have argued that bodily shame and embarrassment are situational, and also result from the habitual wearing of clothes (Rouse 2007), and that clothes protect us not only against the physical environment but also against moral danger (Flügel 1966). Therefore this woman’s discomfort with bare legs is partly connected to her usually not baring her legs in public, and partly to her ideas as to what is appropriate coverage of the body. Feelings of shame, noted Simmel (1904: 147), rest ‘upon isolation of the individual’. That is, unexpected and undesired conspicuousness created through dress mishaps causes embarrassment and a sense of failure, because it sets the individual apart from others, making them a potential target of unwanted attention and possible moral condemnation. Another Finnish convert woman (age 43) told me that she is more conscious of the danger of a sudden exposure of her body if seen by other Muslims rather than by other Finns, for her fellow Muslims would be aware of the religious-moral concerns connected to covering the female body. A dress mishap in front of her Muslim peers would set her apart much more than it would in front of a non-Muslim Finnish audience.

The movement and position of the body – walking, bending and sitting – influence how garments cover the body. The experience of how garments fit when the body moves brings together both physical and social factors, both the garment’s pressure on the body and the potential exposure of certain body parts.

*Finnish convert, age 56:* If I go to an event where I must sit on the floor, I prefer putting on something long rather than sitting on the floor cross-legged and [feeling that] my coat is tight and doesn’t cover my legs.

A space that is defined such that users of the space must sit on the floor, such as a mosque, creates different kinds of challenges from spaces where activities are associated with standing

or sitting on chairs. Therefore the nature of the spatial environment, and of objects in space (or lack thereof), may both have consequences for garment choices and experienced (dis)comfort. In order to feel comfortable with the movement of textile materials and the body, women develop dress strategies that take such movements into consideration, such as wearing garments made of stiff fabrics to avoid the disarrangement of hems or preferring sleeves with ribbing cuffs to avoid the exposure of arms. They also manage the movement of material through bodily techniques, explained below. Balancing these two elements, so that one does not need to be overtly careful when sitting, running or doing more extreme physical activities, is crucial for women's feelings of security and comfort.

In this vein, for some Somali women especially, fully covering their body was of such great importance that they preferred long hems, even if coping with them required specific bodily techniques.

*Somali woman, age 26:* I wear long [dresses], preferably longer than I am so that when I walk or move, my socks don't show. So that it doesn't look too short.

A dynamic fit of a garment differs from a static fit: although the dress may look long enough when one stands still, walking makes the hem move upwards and may give the wearer feelings of discomfort. But for many Finnish convert women, the bodily techniques required by such garments are challenging.

*Finnish convert, age 26:* In the winter I don't like wearing abayas, especially with the pram. It's really annoying when one pushes the pram in the snow and the abaya is under the feet all the time. You trip over the abaya all the time, and if there's slush or it's raining, the hem's always soaked.

As many of the Finnish converts had not worn long skirts before their conversion, coping with the hems was a bodily technique (Mauss 1973) that required learning in adulthood, and most of these women either chose to continue wearing trousers instead of learning new techniques

of movement, or made sure to select skirts that do not hinder their movements. A dress that does not fit acquired bodily techniques causes practical problems, and hence the types of frustration that few women are willing to put up with in the long term. These techniques are formulated through habituation, and what would seem impossible for one woman – e.g. pushing a pram wearing a long abaya – is easier for another woman. The above-mentioned Somali woman actually goes jogging with a pram, wearing an ‘over-long’ abaya. This is not to say that every Somali woman chooses such over-long garments – indeed, many prefer slightly shorter skirts of stiffer materials such as denim, that are less easily disturbed by wind and movement – but it is far more likely that a Somali woman would do this than her Finnish counterpart.

The meanings associated with long skirts differ greatly between Finland’s Somali community and the wider Finnish society. Women’s trousers are considered as highly suspicious by Finnish Somalis, while mainstream Finnish women do not commonly wear skirts of any kind. Therefore the social meaning embedded in the technique of wearing a long skirt is very different for Finnish convert women, whose main point of comparison in terms of dress practices is non-Muslim Finns, and for Somali women, who tend to reflect upon their dress in terms of the norms of their own ethnic community (Almila 2016). Garment-wearing techniques are both specific to individuals and embedded in wider community practices and expectations. Such a seemingly simple choice as to whether to wear a long skirt, or trousers and tunics, is in fact guided by individual’s bodily techniques and the desirability or undesirability of such techniques in her specific cultural context(s). At the same time, such garment choices reproduce visual and social differences between Finns and Somalis.

Somali women and Finnish convert women also considered different textile materials and cuts comfortable: while the Finns tended to favour natural fibres, and considered synthetic fibres

sweaty and uncomfortable, many Somalis preferred garments of a very loose cut made of light synthetic materials.

*Somali woman, age 28:* [shows me a khimar made of thin, synthetic fabric] [The material] should be comfortable. I don't wear very thick [fabrics]. It must be light [and] of good quality, but it shouldn't be so heavy that it presses [my] head.

*Finnish convert, age 45:* In the summer if it's horribly hot, the material [should be] such that one doesn't sweat. Cotton or linen would be nice to wear. ... Synthetic fabric isn't nice in the summer.

Experiences of physical comfort are socially and historically mediated (Blaszczyk 2006), and the concept of comfort has culturally-mediated meanings, as well as physical elements too. Both these dimensions of comfort in terms of textile material would be recognised by clothing physiologists, given that a variety of qualities of fibre, fabric and garment together are seen by them to mediate sensory comfort, and one material is not automatically more comfortable than another (Schmidt et al 2009). It is understandable that for the Somali woman, the lightness of material has a different significance than for the Finn, for the garments she wears are loose full-body robes where the whole weight of the garment rests on her head. Her garments also allow for air to get between the garment and her body, which is comfortable especially in warm weather, provided that the air does not disturb the garment in undesirable manners. The Finnish woman, conversely, typically wears tailored trousers, tunics and scarves, and therefore the fit between her garments and her body creates very different experiences of comfort. As less air is allowed to interfere, it is more important that the textile material 'breathes', in order for perspiration and humidity to move away from the skin.

Often the most tightly covered part of the body for both Finnish and Somali women was their head. The new kinds of hijabs that emerged as part of the 're-veiling' trends from the 1970s

onwards were meant to be worn in mixed-gendered environments that women now more regularly entered, like universities and offices (MacLeod 1987), and therefore took different forms from previous styles. These were headgears that needed to stay in place for long time periods, instead of being flexibly manipulated depending on who might be present (Almila 2017).

*Finnish convert, age 37:* It's good if [the scarf] stays [fastened] without pins, so that I don't have to fix it during the day when I work [in classrooms]. [...] I've taken a fancy on cotton jersey scarves; they're really comfortable to wear. [...] They don't press or make my head sweat [and] I don't need pins at all.

Another Finnish woman (age 19) showed me her collection of under-scarves – small scarves meant to be worn as the first layer of head-covering, often under a more elaborate, larger scarf. This particular woman made all her under-scarves herself, using soft cotton knits, which pressed her ears less than other materials, thus causing less physical discomfort. The scarves are sewn into shape, so need not be bound and tightened. A young Somali woman had a different knack.

*Somali woman, age 19:* I tie the [under-]scarf above my ears, like this [so that the scarf covers the ears but does not press them].

The scarf in this case was made of thin, blend-material (mixed natural and synthetic fibres), woven fabric. So, while the experiences of physical discomfort were similar for these women, their solutions were different, indicating variability of individuals' practices within the same community.

Beyond this immediately experiential level, my analysis also indicates that the histories of design and the textile trade are expressed in the preferences of individuals, without them necessarily being aware, much or at all, of such histories. Since the 1950s it has been increasingly common that clothes in the Arabian Peninsula have been made of imported



synthetic fabrics (Lindholm 2010). Thereafter these garments arrived in Somalia with Arabian settlers<sup>2</sup>, and have become increasingly popular among the locals since the 1970s (Akou 2010b). These garments are typically sewn, not tailored, meaning that they do not closely follow bodily shapes. Because of their looseness, the garments are not considered to be too hot or sweaty. Conversely, Finnish convert women typically prefer cotton and linen to synthetic materials, perhaps reflecting a national dress identity that is historically strongly built on natural fibres, especially cotton (Lönnqvist 2010). Although cotton does not grow in Finland, it has been cultivated in factories in the country since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the country was part of Russia (Yli-Hinkkala 2009).

It is also the case that the characteristics of the material partly define how garments appear, and how well or not a garment either hides or reveals parts of the body. Awareness of this may influence fabric preferences.

*Finnish convert, age 23:* I favour linen, it's lovely. ... And often linen clothes are, they aren't tightly fitting, it's easy to find good clothes [made of] linen.

Linen clothes are often of relatively loose cut, as the fibre is very inflexible and the fabric wrinkles easily. Linen is also a relatively robust material that hides body shapes well, as it keeps its distance from the skin. Although stretchy blend linen fabrics do exist, the kinds of loose-cut linen garments popular in Finland are typically made of either 100% linen or linen-cotton blends. But linen garments are rather expensive and therefore not accessible for women in lower socio-economic positions. It is clear that economic capital matters for dress preferences (Crane 2000), even if the choice of materials would not be framed in such a manner by the women themselves. Many clothes made of synthetic materials are cheaper than natural fabric garments, particularly those made of linen. Somali women in Finland are in general in possession of low levels of economic capital, and consequently are far more concerned with the price of garments than are their Finnish peers, so it is unsurprising that many of them

favoured more economically affordable materials. The difference is illustrated in the following examples.

*Finnish convert, age 38:* As not all clothes [in shops] fit, when one finds something suitable, one is ready to spend more money on it than [one would] if there was a wider choice. If you find a really nice scarf, oops, 75 euros! Well, you don't know if it's there next week so you just buy it.

*Somali woman, age 23:* I buy from my compatriots. The information travels, one [hears] that someone's brought clothes [into the country]. [...] There are private [channels] that you need to know. [...] Abayas like this, black ones, I order. French websites [sell] reasonably priced good design abayas one can wear for celebrations.

The price one would expect to pay for an abaya online is some tens of Euros. But even this was too much for some. I was informed by a Somali woman (age 25) who was on maternity leave while her husband was a student, that the same abaya that may cost 40€ in Finland is available, fitted, for 10€ in Dubai, which was why she preferred to buy her clothes when abroad.

Yet many Finnish convert women with lower economic capital still stated their conviction that natural fibres were more comfortable than other, more affordable materials. This created different kinds of economic dilemmas.

*Finnish woman, age 19:* One should try to find things within a reasonable budget. Often I notice that long tunics and long clothes in general are horribly expensive. I don't wish to pay over 100€ for a tunic.

While all these young women shared a precarious financial position typical for many young people, their understanding of high prices and affordable garments varied considerably. What seems to operate here is habitus orienting each woman towards a 'comfortable' position as regards her choice of both garments and textile materials (Bourdieu 1992).

Clearly habitus is at work in individual garment and textile preferences. Yet there is more than just a simple ‘correlation’ (Bourdieu 2004) between the body and its clothing. Considering the connections between materiality, the physical body, bodily techniques and cultural-material histories helps us to push further the understanding of how bodily habitus is formulated and how it in turn formulates experienced realities. Bourdieu has argued that ‘it is essentially through bodily and linguistic disciplines and censorships ... that groups inculcate the virtues which are the transfigured form of their necessity’ (1991: 89). In other words, habitus works to transform social necessities into perceived virtues. In this vein, it is the case that veiling women choose their garments in light of their financial circumstances, and their interpretations of religious knowledge, as well as their individually, culturally and historically mediated interpretations and experiences of garments and textile materials. At the same time, textile materials have physical characteristics which operate on the wearer’s body both visually and physically, and these come to shape individual interpretations and experiences of garments and comfort alike.

### **Conclusion: Towards a Sartorial Sociology**

In this article, I have considered data drawn from textile histories and interviews with hijab-wearing women in Finland in order to work through and develop some more general principles of what I call ‘sartorial sociology’. Different forms of materiality – textiles and their characteristics, technologies, garment objects, physical bodies and physical and spatial environments – are all shown to be crucial for this analytical framework. Moreover, different kinds of histories – biographical, social, cultural, embodied, trans-national – are at work in how material objects are experienced and understood by wearers and observers alike. But importantly, unexpected situational factors also play their part in how individuals experience the wearing of garments. Paying attention to the histories of these multiple phenomena,

focussing on different kinds of materialities, and paying attention to situational factors that disturb both garments and their wearers, I have sketched a framework that allows for an analysis of dress phenomena at multiple levels, accounting for micro-sociological elements as well as macro-level social and cultural forces. Hopefully the framework has shed some new light on veiling practices, illustrating how all of the factors above are involved in complex but mappable interplays, which underpin and allow Muslim women to veil as they do.

The significance of this kind of framework for the future of fashion studies is two-fold. First, I have sought to create a sociologically-grounded framework for future analyses of everyday dress phenomena. Second, I have sought to demonstrate that, while some of Bourdieu's ideas have indeed been a part of the problem of the 'immaterialisation' of fashion studies, his work can – and in my view should – be used to solve these kinds of problems too. I believe that the theoretical rigour that has previously been provided for fashion studies by social scientific tools (Riello 2011) can be further deployed in analyses of embodiment, materialities and technologies today. Sartorial sociology can work *for* fashion studies, offering new substantive perspectives for research, and productive and novel methodological vistas.

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<sup>1</sup> The number of Muslims in Finland is currently estimated to be around 70 000, 1,3% out of a population of 5,47 million. The majority of Finland's Muslims live in the Greater Helsinki area.

<sup>2</sup> Somalia joined the Arab League in 1974.