



Wearing the Veil in the Web: Transformations of Social Norms and Everyday Practices in the Digital Sphere Within the MENA Region

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Accepted: 5 April 2025
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Abstract

In the digital era, the meaning of different kinds of veil, including the hijab, undertakes significant transformations due to the interaction between laws, norms, everyday practice, and digital technologies. At the same time, the digital sphere intensifies the manifestation of diverse cultural expressions, including veiling practices, leading to new trends, meanings, and layers of complexity. Through the lens of the semiotic of culture, this contribution aims to explore how these practices, traditionally associated with certain notions of modesty and religious identity, are now subject to new translations and dynamic reinterpretations within digital spaces. The digital sphere appears as a semiotic continuum where the veiling practices are negotiated, affecting their perception, and creating hybrid cultural identities. Furthermore, these digital interactions influence the relationship between laws and social norms surrounding veiling practices. The various veiled forms of female dress-code move across semiospheres, where they are revalorized and often recontextualized, challenging established norms and suggesting a new paradigm for the study of these conventions. In this sense, such digital interactions prompt a reassessment of regulatory frameworks and cultural expressions. Drawing on Lotman's theory of cultures, these dynamics tend to be seen as cultural translation processes across semiotic boundaries. By exploring these dynamics through the semiotic analysis of a corpus of digital representations of the veiling practices within the MENA region, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural adaptations that are leading to negotiated identities, offering a perspective on how the evolving nature of cultural symbols translates into legal frameworks and societal values.

Keywords Online veiling practices · Social norms · Laws · Semiotics of culture · MENA region

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Published online: 27 May 2025

1 Introduction

The essence of who we are and how we become part of society is deeply intertwined with our culture, customs, and practices. These aspects are often showcased in our dressing. Doubtfully, pieces of clothing have meanings other than fulfilling certain societal needs and rules. They also bear a specific set of values, norms, and identities [5]. For example, in cultures where social status, ritual context, religion, gender, etc., are valued, clothing acts as a form of communication and a vehicle for interpreting and perpetuating changes in gender roles [10]. However, the course of history, with its linear and abrupt socio-cultural transformations and the process of globalization, spread these cultures and traditions, resulting in a more hybrid culture. This gave rise to new forms of identity where traditional norms and practices are fused with global influences [38]. More specifically, the veil has undergone a transformation as it negotiated and impacted a range of dynamics relating to history, politics, and society [3]. Numerous scientific articles published in recent decades have explored the meaning of traditional clothing from various perspectives: intercultural, sociocultural, and gender identity. This has also coincided with a growing body of research interested in the meaning of the veil across different cultures and according to different disciplines. However, despite the growing awareness of how these meanings and perceptions are evolving, less attention has been given to the relationship between these transformation processes, their representation, and the norms that regulate them. In this context, the semiotic approach functions as a connector between the veil, the digital space, and the legal sphere. Furthermore, we view the veil to be a complex matter of social and individual discourses and practices. It embodies an interplay of similarities and differences, individual and collective, singular and multiple, and fixed and transgressive. Conversely, the rise and spread of social media, the Internet, and globalization have transformed how people operate. The veil has been reinterpreted and re-negotiated away from what meaning it used to hold. This has brought about new ways of expressing culture and cultural hybridity. The spread of the Internet and social media has opened up new spaces for social interaction, in which the traditional meanings associated with the veil are renegotiated, generating new cultural expressions and hybrid identities. In this context, the veil is no longer just a symbol of modesty or religious identity but becomes a dynamic element, subject to reinterpretations and re-contextualizations that challenge consolidated norms.

This research is part of a broader project on cultural heritage, gender representation, and media discourses in the MENA region. It utilizes a comprehensive research approach that considers various cultural texts and combines different perspectives, such as the semiotics of culture, ethnography, and social sciences. Additionally, taking into account the role of one of the researchers as an expatriate across the Gulf countries over the past seven years and, therefore, the possibility of observing the changes happened on the media level but also on the level of everyday practices, for instance in academic settings and among autochthonous university students. In light of these considerations, we can state that the veil

represents a cultural symbol filled with political, religious, and gender meanings that go far beyond its material dimension. Veiling practices in the region, such as the use of the hijab, are undergoing significant changes, considering the influences arising from complex semiospheres of laws, social norms, and digital technologies. Within this scenario, new forms of interaction, enabled by the development of digital platforms, started a process of cultural negotiation of the meaning associated with traditional practices.

By embracing Lotman's concept of *text* as a complex mechanism of socio-communicative functions, the paper aims to understand how the digital representation of the veil could be considered a place for the reinterpretation and re-contextualization of its meaning that challenges consolidated norms. The semiotics of culture as a qualitative method helps us understand the meaning of the veil, considering its central role in the dynamics of cultural interaction and in the processes of identity construction. By means of a theoretical framework that employs concepts of autocommunication, hetero-communication, and self-description, Lotman's theories (2005) allow us to analyze the veil not only as a religious symbol but also as a complex cultural text, generator of new meanings and, in turn, in its media representations, capable of altering the cultural context of the MENA region.

The representation of veil practices in the context of the MENA region is intrinsically influenced by a series of interconnected factors, such as religion and politics, but also globalization and economics. In fact, while in some contexts, the veil is used as a sign of identity resistance, in others, it is attributed to the meaning of conformism or oppression, making communication between different semiospheres complex. It is at this crucial point of a profound reflection on veil practices that the element of translanguaging comes into play as a paradigm, as it allows us to look at the representation of the veil from the point of view of individual and identity practices. In this sense, if we consider the veil not merely as a symbol but more as a semiotic assemblage, we can explore the different practices and identities that relate to it, generating a complexity that, even if such, is able to activate a mechanism of understanding the other. Through the semiotic analysis of discourses in the digital *semiosphere*, we can explore discourses and languages, considering such texts as syncretic, used to talk about the veil, through its uses but also the attribution of meaning or the values attributed to it. At this point, translanguaging emerges as a crucial element because it allows us to understand how the practice of the veil and its representation are used to communicate complex messages that transcend the limits of a binary interpretation of victim versus perpetrator, oppression versus freedom.

In this context, we can recognize how these interactions influence not only individual perceptions of habits and customs but also the relationship between social norms and institutional laws. Although traditionally located within specific cultural contexts, as a symbol of modesty and religious belonging, the veil moves across different semiospheres and, in doing so, is revalorized. This process of cultural translation, as suggested by the concept of border developed by Lotman, allows the practices of veiling to be channeled as an evolving phenomenon, which requires, due to this reason, an evaluation of the relationships with the other elements of the semiosphere, such as cultural expressions and regulatory frameworks. The veil is

transformed into an element full of complex cultural values within the digital space. These spaces become places where the semiosphere, as defined by Lotman [36], expands and hybridizes, creating a contact zone, the border, between local traditions and global dynamics. The hijab, as part of this transformation, finds itself at the center of a symbolic negotiation that reflects tensions and adaptations related to the globalization of culture.

1.1 MENA Region, Veiling Practices and Digital Representation

The practice of veiling in the MENA region is a complex topic, and its representation on the web is influenced by social, cultural, and political factors. More generally, it refers to different ways of covering the head and body, including the hijab, the niqab, and the burqa. Each of these has different connotations and practices, also depending on the cultural context. However, due to limitations in space and the availability of the research object, we will focus on hijab related practices.

The representation on the web, as highlighted by the selected cases, is often conflicting. Websites and blogs present various facets of the phenomenon, trying to connect it to the global dialogue. Social media such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube host a diversity of content ranging from influencers wearing headscarves promoting feelings of pride and belonging to debates on freedom of choice and women's empowerment. Hashtags, from #womeninhijab with 1000+ posts to #hijabista with 5 million posts, show how many women are re-appropriating the narrative on the veil, presenting it as a symbol of female identity and empowerment. However, the analysis shows that the contents also reflect stereotypes and prejudices. Videos and articles dealing with the topic often generate polarization, with both positive and negative representations, depending on the cultural or political perspective of the authors, especially where women's subjectivity is expressed through the removal of the veil.

From a cultural perspective, the hijab represents a symbol of modesty, worn by Muslim women around the world and in various styles. This diversity reflects a cultural peculiarity as well as the most recent manifestations of personal preference. Nonetheless, even at the level of cultural context, each country interprets veil practices on the basis of different factors that influence materials, uses, and colors, such as traditions, climatic zones, and cultural norms.

In the MENA region, veiling practices have been subjected to a diversity of perspectives based on different social norms, cultural transformations, and regulations. If we look at the specificity of the countries and compare some of them, such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Egypt, we can see how the speed of the socio-cultural changes significantly affects how traditional garments are worn and perceived.

For instance, sociocultural changes are happening at different levels in Saudi Arabia. These include the lifting of the ban on women driving, the introduction of non-religious tourism, and the opening of cinema. As a result, there have also been transformations at the dress code and regulations level. However, in some of the Gulf Countries, national women wear a black or colored hijab and sometimes an abaya,

which can also be colored. According to a field study conducted by Lacheret and Farooq [28], the proportion of local women who do not cover their heads is significant in other countries, such as Bahrain or Kuwait. The authors highlight that these women appear to be not under pressure from their social circles of families or peers, as well as religious and state establishments. In Egypt, for example, through Nasser, there have been no bans issued, but cultural production was supported to empower and emancipate women. These differences across the MENA region reflect a *collective idiosyncratic behavior* able to influence social norms.

From social media to online forums, nowadays, digital platforms constitute a privileged place for the expression and discussion of veiling practices. If we consider contexts where the hijab is legally and socially subjected to restrictions, such as in France and Belgium, we can see how social media become a tool of symbolic resistance. Indeed, the use of platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube by women wearing the veil is more often devoted to challenging hegemonic narratives and activating forms of participation. Self-narratives and artistic expressions are employed to claim an instance of self-determination [35] and translate the meaning of the veil, often perceived in Western discourses and media languages as linked to the figurative and thematic isotopy of oppression and passivism. At the same time, in a context where the hijab is considered an integral part of the culture and pertains to social norms, such as in the United Arab Emirates, there are occasions where digital platforms offer a space to understand and build connections between tradition and modernity.

Furthermore, in these contexts, the hijab is far from being relegated to an unchanging symbol of the past, a static element of the country's cultural heritage; it is revalorized throughout the dialogue with other expressive forms and languages, such as fashion, advertising, visual art, and digital representation. In this respect, exemplary cases can be seen at the intersection of influencers' identity, advertising, and visual arts. Exemplary, in this respect, are the social media profiles and the advertising campaigns that combine traditional clothing with contemporary design, emphasizing and promoting the aesthetic value of the hijab and other garments, such as the abaya. Compared to before, these elements highlight how veiling practices, particularly the most traditional ones, are no longer limited to the private sphere. Still, they are open to the public sphere allowing a more personal expression. At the same time, they are now exposed to the global sphere through the cultural texts generated within the local sphere. Through these dynamics, veiling practices are constantly rethought through audience interaction, redefining the boundaries between aesthetic and ludic values, private and public spheres, and traditional and modern assets.

In this scenario, in which the growing development and uses of digital platforms have transformed the way in which the veil is perceived, represented, and discussed in the MENA region, the present study, as part of broader research on the influences of digital and emerging media on the traditional contents of these cultural contexts, aims to explore how digital representations of the veil are also influencing debates on the legal sphere. On the basis of these considerations, we will refer to a rich theoretical framework that is based on the semiotics of culture and on a corpus of examples considered representative. These are exemplary cases, such as the

commercialization of modest fashion, for example, in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the digital activism movements in Morocco, and the legal debate linked to TikTok in Egypt. For the analysis of how these practices are redefining the meaning of the veil and its normative implications, we will employ an approach that integrates Lotman's cultural semiotics, Greimas's structural semiotics, and socio-semiotics.

2 2. Research Question and Theoretical Framework

Founded on the socio-semiotic perspective and Lotman's theory, with particular attention to the concepts of *semiosphere* for the analysis of the cultural translation processes that occur on the border between semiotic systems, the research intends to investigate how the digital sphere is transforming meanings and perception related to veiling practices, and the ways in which these transformations interact with legal norms. More specifically, we intend to question the translation processes through which digital contexts, which we recognize here as global semiospheres, contribute to the process of negotiating individual and collective. If we think about the digitalization of veiling practices and their perception across different typologies of culture [34], we realize that these practices do not have to do solely with aesthetics as a founding value emerging in the narrative of the self but also concern legal and regulatory dynamics. In fact, if we analyze the digital discourses that raise questions about the current state of certain regulations, we realize that these laws belong to pre- or extra-digital contexts, colliding with a transforming representation of the veil practices, which in turn influences perceptions and generation of meaning. Additionally, we want to emphasize the veil as a canvas for self-expression and self-determination and work on the trans-cultural significance [38], specifically focusing on the digital space.

Here, translanguaging, as a dynamic practice, serves as a paradigm to understand the transformation of the veil within the digital context of the MENA region. In fact, what is interesting in the dialogue with semiotics is the review of the rigid boundaries between different languages and the possibility of making choices in the act of communicating and interpreting information that would create new spaces of identity [15]. In the same way, within the digital context, the veil emerges as a semiotic element capable of crossing various semiospheres, fostering dialogue, and generating new meanings. Consequently, the symbol of the veil becomes a dynamic entity that does not respond only to traditional or religious logic but is revalorized through digital forms of social interaction. It is a process of cultural translation which takes place within the global semiosphere. In this regard, considering the concept of the border as theorized by Lotman, this process implies a passage of the hijab through multiple semiotic borders that separate and, at the same time, unite different systems of meaning: from the local to the global, from the private to the public, from the analogic to the digital, and from the religious to the political. In these passages, the translation of the meaning of the hijab takes place, it is modified and enriched, generating a symbol that is evolving through the semiotic continuum. From a cultural

artifact, it is resemantized as the result of a negotiated identity generated by the tension between cultural heritage and social transformations.

In the co-construction of meanings, as highlighted by Umberto Eco, the veiling practices represented through digital media also highlight the role of the audience. As actors, users contribute to the definition of the meaning of veiling practices, amplify visibility, and participate in their re-interpretation. The dialogic space built through such interactive practices is where norms and meanings are subject to contestation and renegotiation, bringing such practices from the personal to the collective and from the local to the global.

Through the semiotic analysis of a corpus of digital representations, we highlight the importance of considering the digital sphere as a semiotic ecosystem in which transformation occurs. The socio-semiotic perspective helps us understand these dynamics as catalysts for political and legislative changes.

The importance of the present research lies, in fact, in the possibility of taking a step toward understanding how the transformations of veiling practices and their representation offer a window for the analysis of the evolution of cultural identities in a digital context in which narratives multiple, making cultural boundaries more porous. Furthermore, this perspective is not limited to generating knowledge but also aspires to have practical relevance. Considering the implications of such representations for social norms and legal frameworks allows us to think about developing more inclusive policies that understand and consider cultural diversity more meaningfully.

2.1 The Semiotics of the Veil: A Semiotic Assemblage Between Autocommunication and Heterocommunication

The concept of a semiotic of the veil, as articulated by Massimo Leone [30], is essential to this discussion, as it highlights the importance of studying the veil as a complex meta-semiotic mechanism rather than as a mere garment. This perspective would aid in delineating the theoretical framework and the trajectory of understanding that the presence or absence of the veil can carry opposite values, depending on the socio-cultural contest.

The semiotics of culture, developed by the Tartu-Moscow School, offers a unique approach to analyzing the complex symbolic meanings linked to the veil. Lotman defines culture as the hereditary memory of the community and a semiotic space that is heterogeneous and composed of multiple languages and codes [35], components that interact in dynamic and transformative relationships. In this regard, we consider the veil as a semiotic object deeply implicated in these interactions, where its meaning varies depending on the communicative, historical, and social contexts in which it is observed. Therefore, we focus on the transformation occurring in the relationship among different elements, considering the concept of *translation semiotics* as “an important instrument in interpreting communication processes as cultural autocommunication. Culture translates itself to itself in order to constitute and keep its identity” [40].

In fact, another fundamental element of our reflection is the concept of *autocommunication*, as it leads us to understand how the veil is used within the community in order to strengthen its identity and preserve its values. Lotman states that there is an organic link between culture and communication [35], p. 20). In this sense, the concept of *autocommunication* is ascribed to a process through which the culture speaks to itself using symbols and practices to define the “self” in relation to the “other”. With reference to the veil, the practice connected to it builds it into a visible sign that codifies shared religious, moral, and social values. This role is particularly evident in contexts where religious traditions are closely intertwined with cultural identity.

However, Lotman argues that no culture can be considered an isolated element. This refers to the processes of exchange and transformation that occur at the border that, with its permeable nature, allows such translatability between different semiotic systems. In particular, we are referring here not to the languages themselves but to the entire semiotic space of culture, in which each element functions based on its interaction with the other elements. Lotman explores this idea by stating that the semiotic space works as a complex web of interactions among various elements. He wrote that.

At the same time, throughout the whole space of semiosis, from social jargon and age-group slang to fashion, there is also a constant renewal of codes. So anyone language turns out to be immersed in a semiotic space and it can only function by interaction with that space. The unit of semiosis, the smallest functioning mechanism, is not the separate language but the whole semiotic space of the culture in question. This is the space we term the semiosphere. The semiosphere is the result and the condition for the development of culture” (1990, p. 125).

According to Lotman, it constitutes, therefore, a broader context, precisely the *semiosphere*, which functions as a product of cultural evolution as well as a prerequisite for its development. It is, then, necessary to approach the reflection on the veil from two perspectives, as Lotman suggests when he talks about the diversity of the elements that occupy this space. Therefore, we should also look at the veil as an instrument not only considering it a component of autocommunication, but looking at it as an instrument of heterocommunication. Through this lens, we are able to identify and describe the dialogue between different cultural systems.

The concept of the semiosphere also introduces a perspective on the diversity of the languages interacting within the semiotic space and engaging in diverse functions. The idea is, in fact, further developed by including the concept of heterogeneity. In this regard, Lotman posits that.

The semiosphere is marked by its heterogeneity. The languages which fill up the semiotic space are various, and they relate to each other along the spectrum which runs from complete mutual translatability to just as complete mutual untranslatability. Heterogeneity is defined both by the diversity of elements and by their different functions. (1990, p. 125).

Furthermore, this leads us to reflect on the reinterpretations of the veil within its community of origin, between center and periphery, outside the boundaries of the given semiosphere and across different periods. These are the spaces in which the meaning of the veil is reinterpreted and takes on new and sometimes conflicting meanings [16], considering that it occupies only a part of a semiosphere in which all other types of structures, equally traditional, continue to exist.

Lotman's commentary on the temporal dynamics of different languages highlights the complexity related to how various elements coexist within the semiosphere. By considering and comparing different forms of expression, he states that they circulate at various speeds.

But then we have also to take account of the fact that different languages circulate for different periods: fashion in clothes changes at a speed which cannot be compared with the rate of change of the literary language, and Romanticism in dance is not synchronized with Romanticism in architecture. So, while some parts of the semiosphere are still enjoying the poetics of Romanticism, others may have moved far on into post-Romanticism. So even our artificial model will not give us a homologous picture across a strictly synchronic section. This is why when we try to give a synthetic picture of Romanticism to include all forms of art (and perhaps also other areas of culture), chronology has to be sacrificed. What we have said is true also of the Baroque, of Classicism, and of many other 'isms'. Yet if we talk not of artificial models but of modelling the actual literary process (or more broadly, the cultural process) then we must admit that—to continue with our example—Romanticism occupies only a part of the semiosphere in which all sorts of other traditional structures continue to exist, some of them going way back into antiquity [35], p. 126).

This framework can be applied to contemporary practices. For instance, the practice of hijab in Western contexts continues to be perceived as a symbol of women's oppression, although, at the same time, it asserts itself as an act of cultural resistance and self-affirmation [38]. Other interpretations are generated in other semiotics, such as the legal one, whose interpretations develop through the same synchrony section, not generating a homogeneous image of the veil. However, the tension between them highlights how the veil functions as a porous "boundary", a contact zone between parts that synchronously belong to the same semiosphere.

Besides, at all stages of development there are contacts with texts coming in from cultures which formerly lay beyond the boundaries of the given semiosphere. These invasions, sometimes by separate texts, and sometimes by whole cultural layers, variously effect the internal structure of the 'world picture' of the culture we are talking about. So across any synchronic section of the semiosphere different languages at different stage of development are in conflict, and some texts are immersed in languages not their own, while the codes to decipher them with may be entirely absent [35], p. 126).

If we look back at the research question, the veil as a complex practice and its influence on the legal sphere takes on the appearance of a conflict generated by

several factors. These include the presence of various languages across different layers of the semiosphere, especially with reference to the representations of veiling on Social Media and in official legal regulations, as well as also the absence of codes useful for deciphering them.

In fact, the link we seek here between translanguaging and semiotic analysis of the representation of veiling practices online is based on the notion of *semiotic assemblage*, as proposed by Pennycook (2017). In this sense, and in an evident connection with Lorman's proposal of the semiosphere discussed above, Pennycook extends the concept of translanguaging beyond its linguistic boundaries to include different multimodal resources. As said above, translanguaging initially theorized as a dynamic communicative practice that occurs in multilingual contexts [15], is here employed as a tool linked to the semiotic perspective and, therefore to the study of the text as a complex system, as in the case of the representation of veiling practices online, in which different languages interact: visual, textual, video, audio, etc. Moreover, the concept of semiotic assemblage developed by Pennycook refers to a combination of linguistic resources, bodies, objects, and spaces capable of generating hybrid meanings. This concept aligns with the cultural semiotic idea of dynamic cultural text, within Lotman's reflection of the elements that circulate within the semiosphere, interacting with one another, and that, for this reason, cannot be considered as isolated. Moreover, the translation occurring on the border between semiospheres creates new meanings.

2.2 The Veil as Cultural Text and the Practices of Self-Description

In Lotman's thought, culture can be seen as a complex text composed of a plurality of subtexts interacting with each other and as a non-hereditary collective memory (1971). In light of this perspective, the veil can also be read as a multilayered cultural text, whose meaning depends on multiple factors linked to the context in which it is interpreted. We believe, therefore, that the veil, in its role as a cultural text, represents social norms and religious values but, at the same time, embodies the political, historical, and identity narratives that have led it to be a component of legal discourse. If we look at some of the signifiers assumed by the veil in the colonial period, for example, in North Africa, we realize how much it was loaded with political meanings. In fact, the veil was a symbol of the tension between the perception of the colonizers, who attributed to it the meaning of backwardness, and the vision of the autochthones, for whom it represented an act of resistance and activism in response to the cultural assimilation process [4].

In this direction, a study that looks at the veil as a cultural text requires a semiotic analysis capable of taking into account the polyphony of the meaning. Hence, following Lotman's invitation, the need to consider cultural texts as part of a whole, which is not an empty space, but rather a broader semiotic system [40]. Nonetheless, in a *glocal* context, such as that of digital technologies, the veil can be interpreted in a plurality of ways, for example, as a sign of belonging to a religious community or a specific country, as well as a political statement or symbol of gender identity.

Another central element of Lotman's theories from which to draw for the study of the practices of the veil, its representation, and its connection with the sphere of the law is the concept of *self-description*. Through it, a culture narrates and represents itself. Lotman takes us one step further to reflect on the formal organization of the semiosphere; therefore,

The highest form and final act of a semiotic system's structural organization is when it describes itself. This is the stage when grammars are written and customs and laws codified. When this happens, however, the system gains the advantage of greater structural organization, but loses its inner reserves of indeterminacy which provide it with flexibility, heightened capacity for information and the potential for dynamic development (1990, p. 128).

The process of self-description would therefore be affirmed as selective, that is to say that some elements are emphasized to the detriment of others, which on the contrary are marginalised, in response to the diversity which the semiosphere must cope with by self-regulating. In fact, Lotman states that.

The stage of self-description is a necessary response to the threat of too much diversity within the semiosphere: the system might lose its unity and definition, and disintegrate. Whether we have in mind language, politics or culture, the mechanism is the same: one part of the semiosphere (as a rule one which is part of its nuclear structure) in the process of self-description creates its own grammar; this self-description may be real or ideal depending on whether its inner orientation is towards the present or towards the future. Then it strives to extend these norms over the whole semiosphere (p. 128).

In the case of the veil, we can observe this process, especially in media and discursive representations. In Muslim societies, as in the case of the declarations issued in the Gulf countries, the veil is described as a symbol of modesty and religious devotion, also emphasizing its conformity to religious principles. However, in other systems, such as the media one, this narrative is enriched with further meanings, leading the actant of the discourse to assume a function not only of self-description but also of personal self-determination [38].

This ability of the veil as a cultural text to act as an element of cultural self-description on a collective level and self-determination on an individual level underlines its centrality in the processes of construction of cultural identities. This brings us back to the idea that each culture uses its own signs to distinguish itself from others, but also to define, more specifically, what is considered normal and deviant, internal and external to the semiosphere.

A literature of norms and prescriptions comes into being in which the later historian will tend to see an actual picture of real life of that epoch, its semiotic practice. This illusion is supported by the evidence of contemporaries who are in fact convinced that they indeed do live and behave in the prescribed way. A contemporary will reason something like this: 'I am a person of culture (i.e. a Hellene, a Roman, a Christian, a knight, an esprit fort, a philosopher of the age of the Enlightenment, or a genius of the age of The Semiosphere 129 Roman-

ticism). As a person of culture I embody the behaviour prescribed by certain norms. Only what in my behaviour corresponds to these norms is counted as a deed. If, through weakness, sickness, inconsistency, etc., I deviate from these norms, then such behaviour has no meaning, is not relevant, simply does not exist.' A list of what 'does not exist', according to that cultural system, although such things in fact occur, is always essential for making a typological description of that system [35], pp. 128-129).

In this perspective, the veil, as a visible sign full of cultural meanings, becomes a focal point in these interactions, a tool to be used for a more in-depth analysis of the identity negotiation processes and to understand the changes that occur at different levels of the global semiosphere, such as in the legal one.

Hence the cultural paradox generated by veil practices and the discourses surrounding them. It takes on the characteristics of flexibility and dynamism by positioning itself on the periphery, but it is also an integral element of the center from which the rules that regulate it take shape. As Lotman pointed out regarding the centre/periphery relation within the semiosphere, stating that while in the centre, the description of the texts generates the norms, the periphery is occupied by the norms that "actively invading 'incorrect' practice, will generate 'correct' texts in accord with them" (p. 129).

As a result, in the centre of the cultural space, sections of the semiosphere aspiring to the level of self-description become rigidly organized and self-regulating. But at the same time they lose dynamism and having once exhausted their reserve of indeterminacy they became inflexible and incapable of further development. On the periphery—and the further one goes from the centre, the more noticeable this becomes—the relationship between semiotic practice and the norms imposed on it becomes ever more strained (p. 134).

On the one hand, the veil is, in fact, a symbol of *conservatism*, which recalls religious values and stable social and legal norms. On the other hand, it is also a symbol for *activism*, reinterpreted and renegotiated in response to different dynamics. For example, the movement that gave rise to World Hijab Day supports the practice of the veil as a symbol of modesty "in recognition of millions of Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab and live a life of modesty", but in doing so it accompanies it of a further value, namely that of the right to choose. In the "Our Story" section, the site states: "Given the current climate, World Hijab Day is of even greater importance. We must stand up and clearly say that women have a right to choose what they want to wear-whenver, wherever, and however. World Hijab Day is an event that we should be proud of celebrating, not just for religious tolerance but for women's rights around the world.¹"

When we say that one of the mechanisms for recoding is the cultural tradition, we must bear in mind that 'tradition' as a code is different from 'contemporaneity'. 'Contemporaneity' when it encodes (interprets) a text is as

¹ <https://worldhijabday.com/>

a rule realized in the form of the language, i.e. by the norms, rules, prohibitions, expectations—i.e. prescriptions, according to which texts which have not yet been created (or those which are 'incorrectly' interpreted from the point of view of 'contemporaneity') are to be created (or interpreted). 'Contemporaneity' is oriented towards the future. 'Tradition' is always a system of texts preserved in the memory of the given culture or subculture or personality. It is always realized as a partial occurrence which is regarded as a precedent, norm or rule. (...).

The dichotomy *tradition/contemporaneity* mirrors the opposition *centre/periphery*, which indicates the mechanism through which the memory of the veil, preserved in the legal texts and realized in forms of prescriptions and expectations, is re-interpreted and, in turn, enters the legal sphere generating new meanings and transforming the norm or rule. Lotman pointed out this process that we ascribe to the veil as tradition, realized in the form of the language of the rules and expectations, coming to life through contemporaneity. This dynamic interaction between tradition and contemporaneity is well captured by Lotman's assertion that the relationship is not just articulated on a passive transmission, but it is rather a dialogue generating new meaning.

Moreover, texts which form part of 'tradition' are not for their part inert ones: when they come into the context of 'contemporaneity' they 'come to life' revealing their previously concealed meaning-potential. So the picture we have before us is that of organic interaction, of a dialogue, in the course of which each of the participants transforms the other and are themselves transformed under the action of the other; the picture is not one of passive transmission but of the lively generation of new messages [35], pp. 70-71).

In this active transmission, the veil and the attributed practices acquire new meanings as an element of contemporaneity and, therefore, often the subject of political and legal controversies, especially in contexts where religious issues clash with secular ideologies. France and Iran are examples of how the practice of the veil, regulated by law, is the subject of tensions between different conceptions of cultural identity [38].

Based on this theoretical framework, the analysis we propose here of digital representations of the veil looks at how they deconstruct the traditional dichotomies of local/global and religious/secular. This process occurs through the construction of syncretic texts composed of hashtags, cultural references, images, multilingual texts, videos, etc. In doing so, they operate a constant negotiation of the meaning of the veil across the continuum of the *semiosphere*. Such transformations are stimulated by processes of auto-communication in which users attribute different values to the veil that becomes a border, a porous limit through which the creation of new meaning occurs [36].

3 The Related Literature from the MENA Region

Through traditional dresses, individuals, as part of a specific cultural context, express their heritage, reinforcing their identity and preserving the collective memory. As a visual representation of cultural identity, these garments reflect not only the history but also the collective values and beliefs [10]. In this context, the clothing varies depending on the sphere, whether it is public or private. For instance, traditional dress for Emirati women includes a black abaya, a hijab to cover the head, and a niqab to cover the face, leaving the eyes visible [33].

Numerous studies have addressed the issue of clothing as an expression of belonging and cultural heritage in the MENA region. Pioneer studies in the field emphasize that veiling can embody personal agency, identification, and cultural identity, underlining the ways they decenter from the Western perspective embedded in the narratives that impose a uniform interpretation of the veil [22], Amhed, 2011; [37]. One of the prominent ideas developed in pioneering studies about veiling practices sheds light on veiling as a lived experience characterized by contradictions and enriched by multiple meanings [25], p. 5). By focusing on specific contexts, some researchers analyzed the use of clothing in the private and public spheres for women to express themselves. Interesting is the study of Saudi Arabian women in constructing and presenting their identity across the two spheres [39].

The reflection developed further in different directions due to the socio-cultural changes happening in these countries. In recent years, research on clothing and its cultural and religious meanings has experienced significant development from a theoretical and methodological point of view, particularly in relation to digital media and the technological transformations underway. There are several studies that emphasize the capacity of representations of veiling practices to generate new forms of cultural textuality. With regard to the monetization of traditional garments, Lewis states that the Internet allowed the market of online modesty to develop due to the possibility for women to express what modest dress means for them and achieve recognition in interpreting the religious and cultural elements (2013b, p. 2).

Furthermore, social platforms allow forms of expression that challenge the traditional dichotomies of sacred/profane, innovation/tradition, and public/private. In this regard, the suggestion of a “meta-semiotic device” for the understanding of the veil seems to be a functional framework for the understanding of the veil’s essence of a multi-faced entity that could “mean even opposite set of values in different socio-cultural contexts” [30], p. 276), remaining an element of the semiosphere that functions as porous border crossed by a multiplicity and diversity that evokes its complex nature. The visual representations of the veil, particularly in contexts where it plays a crucial role in defining everyday life practices, connect with a series of socio-cultural transformations. Additionally, the specific aspect related to online identities has been explored by Guta and Karolak [23]. By focusing on young Saudi Arabian women, the authors argue that the use of social media has played a significant role in providing them with a platform to

express their voices and agency. Additionally, the use of digital platforms “destabilized the portrayals of them as victims of longstanding patriarchal oppressive practices” (p. 124). On the other hand, by considering the specificity of the hijab, Hassan [24] documented how clothing practices have taken on new meanings in relation to the identity challenges of Muslim women using social media in the process of negotiating references to beauty in the Western world. This study highlights how practices such as Muslim women use social media and, in doing so, challenge Western stereotypes and build new forms of digital subjectivity. These representations function not only as symbols of the traditions of the specific context but also as tools for reimagining diversity and highlighting the active role of women through their faces and gaze. This can be seen in advertising campaigns launched in Saudi Arabia before and during the lifting ban on women driving, where the online advertising representations surrounding the societal transformations show a veiled Arab woman wearing traditional clothing (black niqab and abaya) but acting in an unconventional way: driving the car and orienting the gaze to the audience [17]. More recent studies on social media representation of Arab veiled women reinforce the idea of self-determination and the diverse ways in which these women communicate their identities. Hurley [26] develops a feminist semiotic theorizing of Arab women’s modest self-representations and analyzes four social media. The author states that “these self-presentation practices both merge and expand traditional representations of Arab women” (p. 798) and that they “possess diverse agency to potentially create new signs for self-presentation that are fluid and highly political” (p. 799). The element related to the various ways in which Arab women utilize social media and other platforms to assert their identities contributes to a broader discourse on feminist concern that overcomes simplistic ideas and narrow definitions. On the other hand, Karakavak and Özbölük [27] explore the intersection between the concept of modesty and fashion with particular reference to the hijab, analyzing how social media and influencers are transforming the meaning of the veil and its perception. The authors argue that “the hijab has turned into a commodity, not a symbol of preserving the Muslim female identity in the globalized world” (p. 2922).

In this sense, the concept of digital *semiosphere* leads us to conceive social media as a space of cultural translation where traditional meanings are constantly renegotiated and transformed. However, not enough has been written on the relationship between the representation of the veil online and the social norms. To address this theoretical gap, the research will investigate a corpus of representative examples of magazines websites, and social media accounts, exploring them from an axiological perspective and through the lens of the concept of *semiosphere*.

4 The Methodology and the Corpus. The Statement of a Bricoleur

As above-mentioned, the analysis of the representations of the veil in the MENA region and their role in redefining the cultural and social meaning of this practice, as well as the legal and political norms that regulate them, invite us to adopt a methodology that integrates cultural semiotics, structural semiotics and socio-semiotics [19,

29, 36]. This approach allows us to analyze how digital representations contribute to creating new meanings around the veil and how the narrative of the veil online modifies collective perceptions and normative structures, questioning traditional models and paving the way for complex intersecting dynamics with religious identity and social norms [1].

The methodology adopted involves identifying and collecting digital materials selected from different digital platforms. The materials include images, photos, and discussions about the veil, collected considering a specific time frame from 2018 to 2024. This temporal selection is justified by the fact that from 2018, it is possible to observe the effects of some socio-cultural changes and legal events that have occurred in the countries of the MENA region, such as the opening to tourism and the removal of the driving ban for women in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, to answer the research question on the semiotic representation of veiling practices, such as hijab, in the digital context of the MENA region, the selection of corpus was selected based on their representativeness in terms of geographical (MENA countries), thematic and discursive relevance (contents that represent or discuss the veil), with particular attention to the emerging dynamics in the Gulf countries (Tarlo & Moors, 2013). Opportunity criteria guided the selection as these digital representations appeared particularly suitable for illustrating current trends and the potential to understand them through an interdisciplinary approach, combining the above-mentioned perspectives and the legal framework. Additionally, semiotic tools will be used to describe the function of *communication* and *signification* as the main objective of a semiotic study [9]. By adopting Greimas' theory of the elementary structure of signification, which is visually represented by the "semiotic square" [21], the research will use the model developed by Jean-Marie Floch [13] to identify and systematize the set of values with which these cases invest the veiling practices within the MENA region. Additionally, it will explore the texts through a figurative, thematic, and axiological analysis and the visual level exploring the semi-symbolism constructed in the images.

Analyzing the semiotic transformations of the veil in digital spaces can generate significant insights into the changing nature of cultural meanings in the MENA region. An approach of this type allows us to identify how different semiotic elements contribute to constructing complex cultural meanings.

Considering a semiotics of culture and socio-semiotics perspective, since the images and, in general, the digital representations of the veil are never isolated, we consider them as incorporated within *enunciative archipelagos*, which discuss them, reinterpret them in a broad cultural, religious, social and political-legal discourse. Starting from this assumption, the need for an approach that selects cases not on the basis of a single typology but as part of a vast multimedia and syncretic whole, therefore made up of photographs online, videos, and posts on social media in continuous and mutual interaction as communicating elements of the semiosphere. In this sense, the corpus appears as a more complex *bricolage*, embracing Floch's idea that:

By organizing and reorganizing the material and images provided by the signs he or she collects, the bricoleur produces meaning by super-segmentation and

establishing paradigms found in a semi-symbolic semiosis. This means that the bricoleur makes ‘new from old’ by playing with the formal harmonies and disharmonies suggested by the sensory effects of the signs collected. Bricolage therefore presupposes that we must pay attention to the sensory world, a world already given by history and culture (1995, 2000, p. 5).

There is, therefore, a promise of being the bricoleur, the one managing and paying attention, particularly to fragile existing objects, such as the ones of veiling practices, values, sensory effects, and norms pervading and surrounding them.

5 The Analysis. Digital Semiotic Transformations and Contaminations

The diffusion of images linked to the practice of veiling on the Internet represents the first element to consider from a socio-semiotic perspective and in light of the interactions between the various elements of the semiosphere. The mechanisms through which contamination occurs between digital representations, media discourses and social norms and regulations of the veil from a legal point of view can involve different levels of investigation from a semiotic perspective. Movements finding expression in the digital sphere provide various examples in this regard. In the collective imagination, the veil represents a religious and cultural symbol that, in some contexts, is often associated with the submission and passivity of women. However, in the selected examples, this imagery presents itself as a space of authenticity and self-description. These representations are, in fact, made up of recurring figures, roles, and values that have decreed their social affirmation. Media representations in recent years have contributed to affirming the veil as an expression of a dominant model and its affirmation, redefinition, and rejection.

5.1 The Illustrative Function

The evolution of practices connected to the veil is shown as a history of understanding, creating, and re-creating *tactics*, in de Certeau’s terms, which juggle between styles, the sensitivity of doing and being, in response to the *strategies* of the collective constraints (1984).

Compared to the discussion that we intend to carry forward in the MENA region, Saudi Arabia represents an emblematic case where fashion bloggers, media discourses, and visual representations on fashion websites have transformed the veiling practices from an aesthetic point of view but also from a symbolic level, attributing to it the sense of luxury and modernity. These figures are present on social media, creating a new narrative that blends the traditional code of modesty with the contemporary aesthetics of fashion. Taking up the concept of self-communication [36], these narratives reinterpret cultural practices to satisfy new identity needs. Furthermore, from the point of view of the commercial role of these representations, we observe a tendency to use international brands in the

contents, a factor that underlines a commodification of the veil, which, in addition to its cultural meaning, takes on a meaning of consumption.

The movement called Modest Fashion is a significant example of this mechanism as it reinterprets traditional clothing (tactics), including the veil, and inserts it into a global movement. It is a movement that combines the values of modesty with contemporary expressions more focused on individuality and its manifestation through design. To return to Lewis' idea, the advent of blogs, social media profiles, and interactive websites has given these women the opportunity to express their conception of modest dress and, above all, what it means not only for the culture of belonging but also for themselves (2013b). This movement is integrated into an even broader framework, which includes other elements of the semiosphere, which give rise to the *conservation/transformation* dichotomy through other cultural texts and expressive forms, as in the case of the "Modest Fashion Week Saudi" events in Saudi Arabia. Added to this is the presence of Social Media bloggers on the Internet who support the concept of modest fashion and self-description.

We find it in various digital representations, such as *The Chapter Hijab* on the Vogue Arabia Website or among the online pages of *Arabian Diaries*, precisely in the definition of the Saudi Hijab Style between Tradition & Trend and the different styles.

In such digital representations, the visual component does not have an exclusive role but is the most pervasive and evident. However, the verbo-visual relationship reinforces the meaning underlying the tradition/innovation dichotomy, where practicability is the third most utilitarian value [13]. As the same website indicates on the page dedicated to the different uses of the veil, "Mastering the Saudi hijab style is not only about adhering to cultural norms but also embracing individual creativity and expression. Experiment with different fabrics, colors, and wrapping techniques to discover a style that reflects your unique personality while honoring tradition". In this sense, the representations of the woman wearing the veil support a narrative trend that manifests a thematic-figurative isotopy, which affirms positive values such as that of connection with traditions and self-determination (Fig. 1).

The discourses that develop through these representations focus on the relationship, assumed as possible, between *conservation* and *transformation*. This



Fig. 1 Screenshot from www.arabiandiaries.com

relationship promises to fill an absence or consolidate an ongoing change, evoking a winning image of the woman who remains faithful to her traditions yet embracing new trends and placing emphasis on the meaning that the veil takes on for the wearer.

The image depicting women in a supportive attitude evokes the aforementioned values linked to the use of the veil. On a figurative level, the element of coherence is given by the orientation of the gaze, which generates an effect of calling into question the observer, in this case, the user.

The face, therefore, takes on a fundamental role. It incorporates the dualism of identity/diversity and, through the gaze, it constitutes an appeal to the user. The gaze is directed towards the foreground, involving the user and leading to a re-semantization of its diegetic position. Therefore, the enunciating instance invites us to take a deep look, asking us to go beyond the object “veil” and the diegesis connected to it and infer the symbolic relationship between the enunciative choice expressed by the gaze and the narration of the veil. This metalinguistic component invites us to make a further effort on the interpretive level, especially in cases where the veil is an absent-present. The discourses refer to the use of the veil, while the image evokes its absence or the evident choice not to wear it.

Therefore, the emphasis is on the pathemic involvement of the recipient. In fact, through the gaze that evokes pride, determination and courage, the recipient is not only called into his role as observer, but is introduced to all intents and purposes into the virtual space that the text delimits. For this reason, even when the element of difference, the absence of the veil, is inserted, coherence is found in the deeper discourse halfway between aesthetic values and existential values.

Through their narratives, the online representation of veiling practices, whether they are part of a collective campaign or a social media profile, communicate a set of values, creating recognizable and, at the same time, different worlds in which feelings such as belonging, pride, and revenge prevail. However, these representations do not always coincide with what actually happens within the social frame and, above all, at a macro level.

From a structural perspective, and referring to Greimas’ theoretical model (1989), the veil appears as a cultural object that passes through a complex narrative. In fact, the models described in the narratives of the veiling practices primarily focus on the concept of choice. The subject is defined only in terms of the categories of modal competencies, being able and wanting to be and to do, in opposition to having to be or to do, and topical roles. Actions and states so define the subject; it can choose, for instance, to merge cultural heritage with fashion and elegance or combine it with creativity, such as light colors and less usual textures. It is also represented through the thematic role of the empowered woman, for example, the one in sport, or through the thymic category of what could be considered euphoric or dysphoric, which is the choice not to wear it. In fact, it seems that other models’ tendency to wear the veil is represented in a minority way.

This aspect contributes to the diffusion of preconceived and generalized ideas, not necessarily real, on situations, cultures, and phenomena. These are additional meanings attributed to the veil compared to its starting point, such as stereotypes, that, from a semiotic point of view, can be studied through the *veridiction*

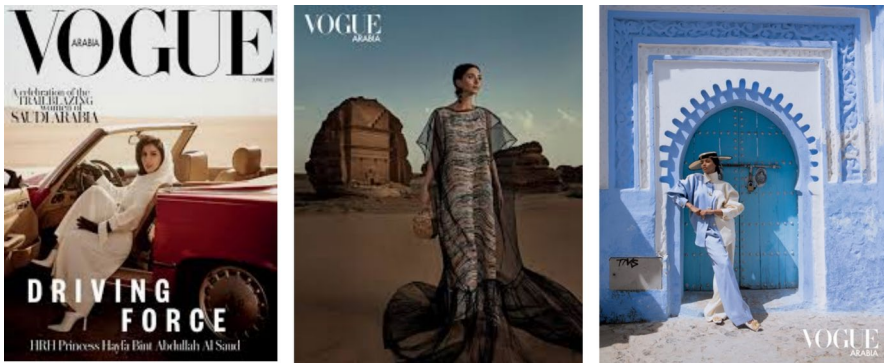


Fig. 2 Screenshot from www.voguearabia.com



Fig. 3 Screenshot from www.voguearabia.com

contract as a mechanism capable of exploring the relationship between belief and truth [19]. In response to this, the emergence of female figures, such as Zahra Lari, Emirates Figure Skater Champion Zahra Lari and ambassador of the Nike Pro Hijab, represents a point of intersection between individual and collective identity, which tends to revalorize the veil. Her figure symbolizes a new paradigm linked to the use of the veil, challenging traditional conventions in both Arab culture and the realm of sport. In this case, the veil stands as a polysemous sign in a semiotic key. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a symbol of social and individual limitation, but on the other it transforms into an emblem of empowerment.

Another example of the way in which the veil is represented with all the complex dynamics connected to it is the Vogue Arabia website, one of the most influential magazines in the fashion scene in the MENA region, which has played a significant role in redefining the image and imagery linked to the hijab and veiling practices in general. The visual narratives offered by the magazine highlight themes such as adaptation to different contexts and change as a form of social

redemption and self-description. They also recall the imagery of a country whose constantly and rapidly changing.

A photoshoot set in the desert features the princess driving in a white dress, marking the occasion of the lifting of the ban on women driving. Another example includes scenes in Al-Ula that showcase women without the veil. The background includes iconic landmarks of the Saudi landscape, coinciding with the opening to non-religious tourism and the country's sociocultural changes (Fig. 2).

The several covers dedicated to the Somali-American model Halima Aden are an example of this. Its appearance, which occurred for the first time in 2017, refers not only to the beauty but also to the thematic isotopies such as those of the celebration of inclusiveness and the link to the cultural identity through the integration of architectural and landscape components (Fig. 2, 3).

Intertextual references to cultural identity also represent a recurring element linked to the representation of the veil. Clear examples of this are images that combine recognizable elements of traditions with components of an avant-garde aesthetic (Fig. 3).

Visual iconography and symbolism are crucial in reflecting the pressures for change by means of an illustrative function. The images published by Vogue Arabia tend to balance the past and the future, showing the veil as an integral part of an evolving cultural identity. For example, they used settings that recall Islamic architectural heritage alongside futuristic cityscapes, creating a visual narrative that celebrates the complexity and duality of identity in the MENA region.

In this direction, the magazine has shifted the emphasis from the representation of such components of traditional clothing from well-known luxury brand names, such as Dolce & Gabbana, to established designers from the MENA region, such as Hatem Alakeel, who often combine elements of the Arab tradition with the most global trends, also in this case representing women without necessarily the veil.

The identity issues linked to self-description and self-affirmation emerge through the articles and interviews with influential women in the region, also on the front of activism movements against the obligations imposed on the veil and forms of extremism. On a visual level, this is confirmed by the thematic figurative isotopies found throughout the project and across the region, as in the case of Vogue Arabia Morocco, which emphasizes the theme of diversity despite not mentioning it directly. Here, too, the absence of recognizable cultural references and the presence of topical themes allow the face and, with it, the gaze to play a structural role. They serve as elements that evoke deeper meanings on both the image's figurative and plastic level of the image, particularly through the gaze orientation and the varying colors of the lips in opposition to the black total black of the hijab. Additionally, this meaning is convoked by the verbo-visual relationships through the slogan "Arab Girls Rock", reflecting all together themes such as diversity, inclusion, autodetermination of new generations, and women empowerment (Fig. 4).

The tension between cultural expectations and individual choice emerges, positioning the veil as a symbol of belonging but also of strength.

This focus has allowed Vogue Arabia to become a platform for modest fashion and insights into ongoing changes, activism movements, and new cultural aesthetics.



Fig. 4 Screenshot from www.voguearabia.com

From a socio-semiotic perspective, the diffusion of images of the veil on the Web and through magazines such as *Vogue Arabia* activates a process of reevaluation of local cultural signs at the level of global aesthetic language. We could, therefore, talk about an aesthetic hybridization that is received by the public both as a sign of cultural belonging but also as an openness towards the global values of inclusion and diversity. It is in the digital context that this dialogue is actually possible. It occurs and develops in various forms through the visual component but also through the participatory culture fostered through audience comments and interactions. These interactions validate the representation of the veil, underpinning its social function within the realm of fashion as a space of cultural negotiation.

The global isotopy of negotiation runs through several recent representations of the veil. An example is the campaign by Hadia Ghaleb, which launched the Modest Swimwear Line. From a visual point of view, the meanings associated with the veil are multiple. In fact, it represents a step forward in the debate on diversity and cultural identity. The idea of a modest swimsuit line is not only a fashion-related issue but also a cultural statement that conjures up additional meaning, and connotations that indicate defiance of traditional norms and acceptance of various lifestyles. These images highlight that coexistence is possible and takes place: that of the veil and the absence of a veil (Fig. 5). At the level of connotations, this component visits, together with slogans, such as the one that tells the story of the project, "I Want To Highlight the Diversity and Beauty of Arab Women", the meaning of plurality of experiences and personal choices is what emerges mostly. This approach brings us back to the idea of choice, which moves from the choice to wear the veil and to associate it with meanings such as strength, creativity, fashion, and pride but also that of not wearing it. The commercial campaign, therefore, also stands as a manifesto of female empowerment, which encourages women to express their identity through



Fig. 5 Screenshot from www.hadiaghaleb.com

beauty. In photographic images, even in the absence of a verbal text that clarifies it, the emphasis is placed on the opposition presence/absence of the veil.

In doing so, the narrative shifts from the self, the Arab women, to the other, the stereotypes associated with them, including elements that break the models presented so far and, therefore, address a more varied audience. Beauty as diversity is thus elevated to a key value that crosses different reference models. In this sense, the campaign and the images it produces build a narrative that opposes the representations of Muslim women who wear the veil in the media, where there is a tendency to frame them in stereotypes or one-dimensional representations.

5.2 The Testimonial Function, the Thimic Dimension, and the Body

By means of such semiotic mechanisms, that range of possibilities of web representations of veiling practices unfolds not only as a reflection of society but also as its agent of change. This is evident in the media discourses that occur at the level of personal profiles, which have more to do with the social fabric. There are many examples of social media influencers who, through their posts, present models that mix colors, innovative materials, and modern accessories, maintaining the traditional structure of the veil, and who, in doing so, have contributed to changing its perception, as highlighted in the research field conducted by Karakavak and Özbölük [27].

We will focus on some examples which, on the contrary, have attracted particular attention not necessarily for the combination of conservation and change but for the way of discussing the veil and its practice, this time from a subjectivity, displaying the reasons linked to its use and its renunciation, always as a personal choice, and the reactions it generates.

Following the actantial model, the woman appears as a subject who uses the veil (object) to define a new image of herself, supported by social media and designers (helpers), while facing the resistance of norms that tend to maintain a static vision of her role (opponents).

A particular aspect to consider that is often present, but with different results, both in texts clearly attributable to autocommunication and in examples that could be considered real testimonies, is the use of the thymic component of the experience within the text. Since visual language is recurrent in digital texts, leading us to talk about the *re-writing of memory*, it is worth addressing this question since it allows us to understand even better. At a deeper discursive level, the dynamics of *hybridization*, which we referred to above, raises the complex nature of the concept of 'authenticity' of narrative with respect to photographic images and media texts above-analyzed.

In fact, the analysis highlights the profound diversity in the use of visual material and in the overall meaning effect generated by it, giving rise to different representations of the veil and the practices connected to it on the web. The images, with specific reference to photographs and videos on the web, allow the user not only to imagine the meaning conveyed by them and the daily practices but also to see the "truth" of current veil practices. If we observe social media profiles, we realize that they constitute an anchor to the reality of the characters and places to which speeches refer, both in the most commodified manifestations and in media texts. These materials work as indices with the aim of documenting everyday practices, allowing us to create a trace with a testimonial function in opposition to the illustrative function explored above. An example of such use of verbo-visual material in the representation of veiling practices is the social media content of influencers who discussed their choices regarding the hijab.

The designer and YouTuber/fashion blogger Dina Torkia, better known on the Web as Dina Tokio, is originally from Egypt but half-English and half-Egyptian. She is known for fashion and videos around styling the hijab in various ways and in a loose turban style. She worked with brands like Nike, Westfield, and VeryUK. She is an interesting case as her social media profile and narrative surrounding it dimostra il cambiamento avvenuto riguardo alla pratica dell'hijab e alla decisione di non indossarlo piu' condiviso sui social media. Known for her book called "Modesty" and promoting hijab fashion, Dina Tokio has built an empire on modest fashion and hijab-related creativity, becoming famous for it and selling products related to it. Her videos on YouTube have highlighted that there is another narrative linked to the Hijab, which is not that of the empowered hijabi woman or the bond with traditions and its connection with new trends, or that linked to being proud to wear the hijab in contexts where laws oblige or sanction its use.

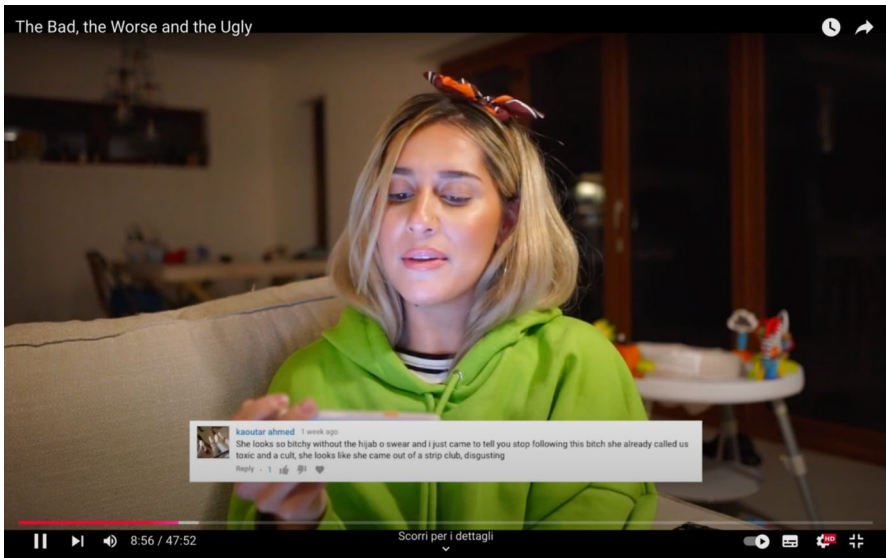


Fig. 6 Screenshot from @dinatokio (Dina Tokio YouTube profile)

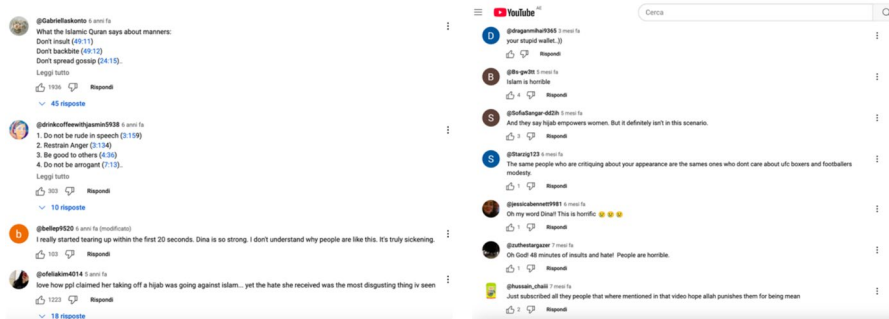


Fig. 7 Screenshot from @dinatokio (Dina Tokio YouTube profile)—Users' comments (2019/2023)

In particular, an interesting example from a semiotic point of view is the YouTube video in which Dina reads hateful comments in response to her choice to remove the veil (Fig. 6).

From a semiotic point of view, three different systems coexist here: the verbal system of the comments reported within the video, the audiovisual system and the system of the comments under the video (Fig. 7). These three systems maintain *intertranslation* relationships. In fact, the visual system reports salient comments through the screenshot images read aloud by the blogger; the audio-visual system names but simultaneously shows the subject's facial expressions, enhancing the thymic and *dysphoric* components. Added to this is the verbal system of comments, which has a double translation function of the audio-visual system and acts as an interpretant as it connects the video to biographical elements, extends the speeches

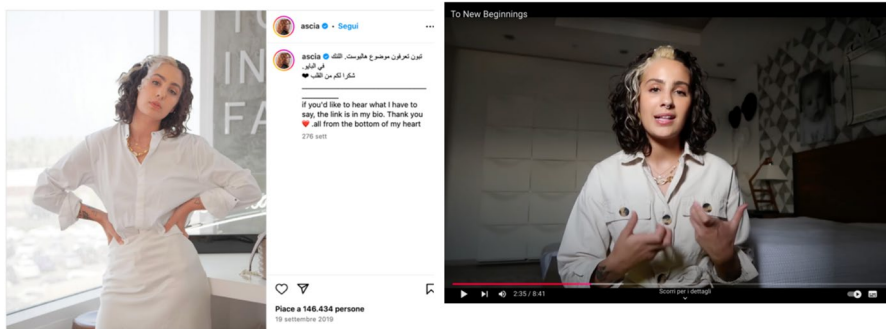


Fig. 8 Screenshot from @ashia and @The Hybrids

also on a temporal level with more recent comments, acts as a connector between the media sphere linked to the hate speech against the choice to remove the hijab and the religious and in some cases even legal sphere.

They function as indicators of relevance and relevance, selecting certain discourses, such as religious, social, and political discourses, even though they are not illustrated in the video.

An interesting aspect linked to this intermediation is the role that it comes to assume from the point of view of the reading process and its temporality: in fact, it can be read and understood over time, even after years, and generate a coherence of the text in a continuous back and forth between pre-selected comments, the video showing the blogger's expressions when reading them and the comments under the video. The comments cover a time span from the most popular ones posted in 2019 to the most recent ones published in October 2024.

The meaning effect generated by the interdependent relationships between these semiotic systems is truthful. The comments support the subject's autobiographical narrative. The truthfulness and authenticity of the choice are reinforced. In terms of social impact, this event created a sort of rupture in the existing narrative, encouraging other bloggers to talk about the issue.

In the same direction, a relevant case in the MENA region is represented by Ascia Al Faraj, a Kuwaiti fashion blogger, model, and stylist. Al Faraj, with over two million followers on Instagram, is considered one of the most influential bloggers and social media influencers in the Middle East, one of the first influencers in the region to promote modest fashion, becoming an internationally recognized face and collaborating with luxury brands. In September 2019, Ascia publicly announced her decision to stop wearing the hijab, sharing her choice with her 2.7 million Instagram followers (Fig. 8).

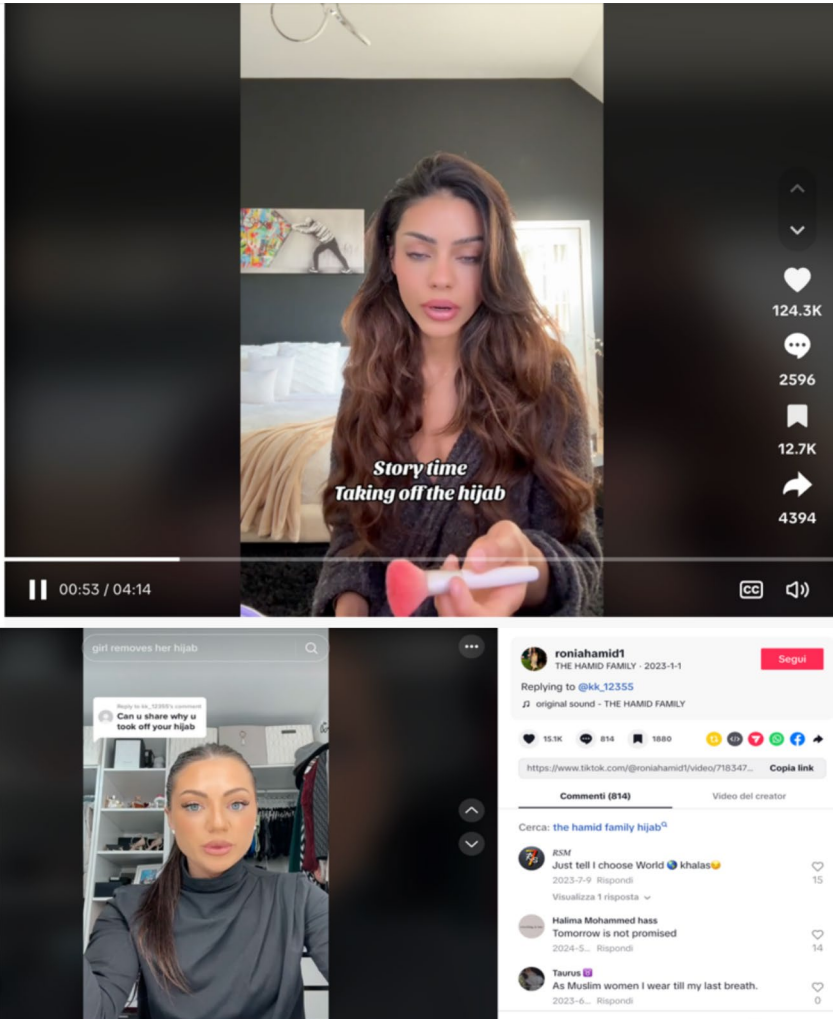


Fig. 9 Screenshot from @dinakhaaa and @roniahamid1

Her decision to remove the hijab reflects a personal journey and a search for *authenticity*,² as she explained in a YouTube video, where she discussed the challenges of her identity and representation online. This decision sparked a wide range of reactions, with many supporting her for her courage and others criticizing her, highlighting the social and cultural pressures associated with wearing the hijab in the region. However, the comments on YouTube for this video have been disabled.

² The notion of authenticity is complicated and can be interpreted in different ways. Some foundational anthropological and philosophical works related to this topic are the ones of Beauvoir [7], Adorno [2], and Lévi-Strauss (1958). Here, we intend to refer to “authenticity” associated with the meaning of “being yourself” expressed through different levels.

This example builds a powerful narrative concerning the concept of authenticity amidst the often contradictory signals surrounding cultural and social identities.

Another significant case is that of Dina Khalil (@dinakhaaa), an Egyptian influencer and model known for her work in the fashion sector and her presence on social platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. An ambassador for fashion brands such as Fashion Nova, with over 560,000 followers on TikTok and over 1 million on Instagram, Dina Khalil is best known for content related to promoting trends, fitness, fashion, and hijab styles. Her entrepreneurial approach and sharing of her personal experience have led her to be a leading figure among fashion influencers. Among the interesting contents from the point of view of our research is the sharing of a video that narrates the personal experience regarding the decision to remove the hijab in a testimonial key and calls the user into question by means of visual verb expedients, like the look into the camera and the pathetic dimension. In fact, in a video, the model and influencer explain the reasons that led her to this choice (Fig. 9).

In the same direction, the social media profile of @roniahamid1, known as "The Hamid Family" on TikTok, highlights her role as a motherhood, lifestyle influencer, and activist for women's rights (Fig. 9). This narrative brings together themes such as self-determination and personal freedom. The themes of the challenge and social pressure linked to choosing whether to wear the veil also emerge in the narration of the subject.

The video released in 2023, where the influencer talks about her choice in the form of a testimony, sparked a debate on the platform, with reactions of support but also criticism from the online community questioning her choice or showing disappointment, such as "Can u share why u took off your hijab" or "Just tell I choose World – Khalas".

The debate on the hijab found a significant voice through social media even before the tightening of the law which in 2022 strengthened the restrictions and sanctions on head coverage and modest clothing, extending the field also to social media profiles. Among the best-known activists is Masih Alinejad (@masih.alinejad), who

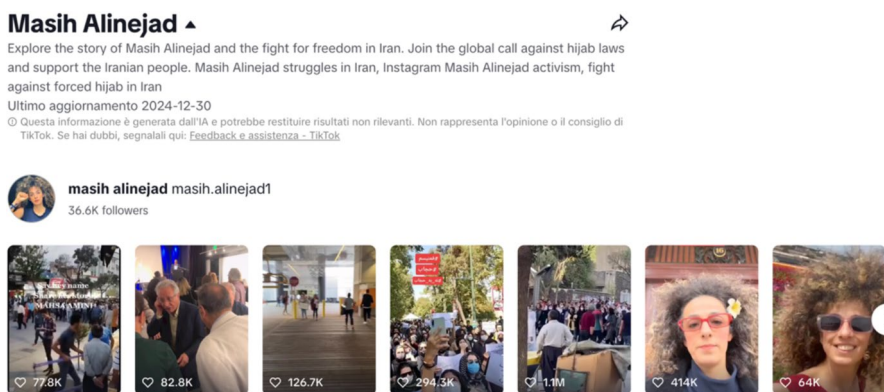


Fig. 10 Screenshot from @masih.alinejad

Fig. 11 Screenshot from @Omid_M



has shared her experiences through social media, such as TikTok, documenting violations of women’s rights and calling for support (Fig. 10).

This enforcement from a legislative point of view has actually led, at the level of cultural texts, to an increase in the narrative of resistance even in the digital sphere where social media are used for this purpose, generating an increase in creativity as a mode of expression and discursive expedient to challenge norms and regulations. In this case, the analysis of visual and symbolic aspects triggers a veridiction contract. In these videos and images, as in the case of @masih. alinejad, the female body takes on a central semiotic role and allows us to generalize compared to the rest of the corpus. From the point of view of its semiotic status, the body can transform an individual narrative, like those analyzed so far, into a collective symbol. Deprived of the veil, in its media representation, the female body becomes a means of expression and not a regulated space. The depiction of uncovered hair exceeds aesthetic detail to embody a universal symbol of choice. The body manifests itself as visual narration. These representations extend in other directions, with global repercussions through hashtags and shares in supporting online activism (Fig. 11).

Gestures and posture further amplify this centrality. In the videos and images posted on social media, the gesture is almost ritualistic, full of meaning, becoming a performative act that condenses the subject’s passions such as anger, desire, and courage. The posture of the subjects also reinforces the semi-symbolic status of the narrative. The posture of the protagonists, often standing, with their gaze turned towards the space intended to be occupied by the recipient, generates an impression of reality and activates mechanisms of audience involvement, entering into a process of emotional resonance. The depiction

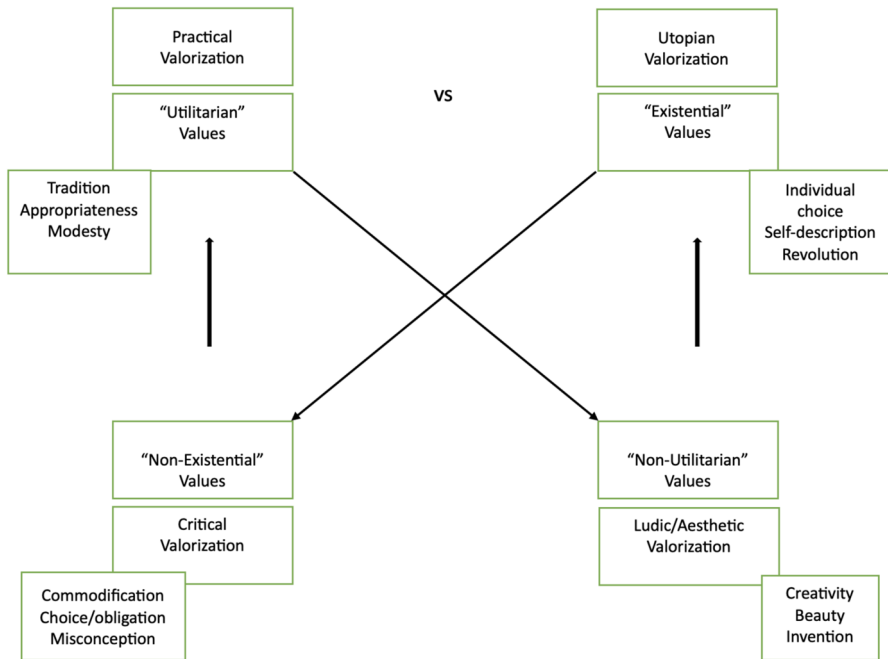


Fig. 12 Axiological Square of the online veiling practices

of the body in its relationship with the veil as the object of value, its position within the space, for example, public space, and the gesture connected to it evokes archetypes of rebellion that resonate transversally in different cultures, becoming that porous border that, in Lotman's terms, allows translation between different semiospheres.

6 Findings. Narrative Transformations and Emerging Values

From the point of view of Greimas' generative semiotics, the axis of desire plays a crucial role here. The subject enters into a relationship with the object for which he feels the desire or the redefinition of identity through the veil, whether it is an element maintained or removed. The veil, therefore, becomes a means to express one's subjectivity while maintaining cultural connections with the community.

On the communication axis, however, the evolving society acts as a recipient that stimulates the subject to achieve the redefinition of identity, or the object of value, impacting the entire community, in which the norms are constituted as the opponents. From the point of view of narrative modalities, women's competence in navigating this tradition/modernity dichotomy is manifested through the performance in the act of reinterpretation of the veil and its representation on the Internet, as opposed to the manipulation phase that occurs through comments and the

influence of fashion and media, up to sanction by media discourses, legal and social recognition.

Narrative Transformations are found here. In fact, the veil from an object perceived as passive of tradition is recognized as an active subject of change. From a symbol of oppression it is perceived as a tool of personal expression. The global isotopies encountered across the various representations are those of *Tradition vs. Modernity*, *Oppression vs. Liberation*, and *Individuality vs. Collectivity*. This in-depth analysis highlights the complexity of the process of social change in the examples considered.

On a more superficial level, in terms of discourse strategies used by the various forms of digital representations of the veiling practices online to showcase their perspective, the Greimas' semiotic square,³ as applied by Floch (2001) to identify the different values pursued by the subjects and recognize the pertinent expressive features concurring in the production of a meaning effect (2001, p. 137). The projection of two categories, through the application of Floch's *axiological square*, helps us analyze the various values driving representations online about the veil employed by different subjects (Fig. 12).

The axiological square displays the *practical value set* based on *utilitarian values* and on *referential strategies* aimed to present the discourse as *true*. In this case, the digital representations of the veil are associated with familiar and recognizable traditional symbols, tradition, modesty, and appropriateness. Conversely, it is possible to identify *utopian values* based on *existential values* and implemented by a *mythical strategy*. In our corpus, this can be found in images and discourses that evoke utopian values, common to almost all the examples, such as individual choice, self-description, and revolution. In relation to complementarity, we can find an eloquent illustration of the *ludic/aesthetic value set* based on *non-utilitarian values* and *oblique strategies*. Indeed, it stands in contradiction to a practical value set focused on creating the discourse as true. This perfectly applies to the digital representation of the veil; for example, when it implies a second meaning behind the use of particular styles, exalting the aesthetic/ludic pleasure experienced by the subject towards an innovative representation and aesthetic pleasing images of the hijab and its association to fashion trends. We can find values such as creativity, beauty, and invention in this position. Finally, the critical value set is based on non-existential values and denotes a substantial strategy. We can find it in the dichotomy of choice/obligation, commodification, and misconception, where some of the characteristics linked to the veil and its practices are amplified.

Through this continuous variation, as highlighted by the selected cases, the representation of veiling practices in recent years seems to fill every discursive position, from the ludic to the existential one, from the practical to the critical, denoting a dynamic movement of the different values that can influence how veiling is perceived across various spaces of the semiosphere, including the normative one. It reflects the multifaceted nature of the veiling practices and the complexity highlighted by their online representation of culture, collective identity, and individuality.

³ For an in-depth understanding of the theoretical model of the semiotic square, we recommend consulting Greimas, and Courtès [21].

The texts, therefore, are resolved in the relationship between figures who must account for the meaning effects that occur on the surface. We are talking about the semi-symbolic system, i.e. the correspondence between categories of the level of content and categories of the level of expression, whose canonical formula is conceived by Greimas in his analysis of Maupassant (1976), through the projection onto the quadrant of the air-shaped figures. earth-water-fire, and later in Floch's works on visual semiotics (1985, 1986), conceived as a general condition of the significance of textual phenomena. On the level of content, we find diversity/homogeneity, which corresponds, on the level of expression, to the multichromatic/monochromatic categories of the plastic level, black and identical hijab/lipsticks of different colors, or tradition/change, which on the level of expression corresponds to different categories traditional/fashion, covered/uncovered, social imposition/individual choice, authorization/denial, acceptance/rejection, as for example in negative comments in different forms and discourses (media, legislative, social, political).

In fact, as informed by the analysis, some discourses view veiling practices as a symbol of oppression, while others consider it a personal belief and a powerful expression of identity. This discourse invites an exploration of how the norms intertwine and are reshaped by the narratives surrounding veiling and how they have been changing.

7 Discussion

7.1 Normative and Legal Reflections

The narratives that emerged from posts and comments highlight a heated debate between those who support individual rights and those who defend traditional norms. While Lotman's [36] cultural semiotics allowed us to interpret online representations of the veil as a dynamic text that evolves within the cultural semiosphere, Greimas's [19] semiotics allowed us to analyze the narrative conflicts that emerge from these practices and the different valorizations connected to them. Finally, socio-semiotics have allowed us to connect online discursive interactions to social and normative contexts, highlighting how digital platforms can act as fertile ground for change and reflect social tensions that can influence public discourse and local regulations [29]. The transformation of the veil, highlighted by the corpus, from a religious symbol to an element of consumption, from an instrument of control to a means of empowerment, represents one of the many challenges that the countries of the MENA region must face in the context of digital modernity. Media discourses reflect and incorporate elements of other spheres, such as the religious and legal ones. In fact, in the countries of the MENA region, the veil, seen as a symbol of modesty but also of personal affirmation and belonging to a specific cultural identity, is also influenced by sociopolitical factors. For example, in Saudi Arabia, women have been required to wear the veil in public for decades, including wearing the abaya with a head scarf and the black niqab to cover the body except for the eyes and the hands [33]. However, while there is no specific law mandating the wearing of the hijab or abaya for local women, societal norms and expectations play a significant role in influencing women's attire. Since June 2017, however, when Mohammed bin Salman

was appointed crown prince, several changes have also affected the sphere related to easing laws that limited women's rights. In fact, in 2018, women were allowed to drive and choose their own clothing [17]. The Public Decency Law, implemented in 2019, also emphasizes modest dressing without prescribing specific garments.

The new laws have led to the possibility of abandoning the abaya and the black veil or in any case, choosing decent clothes as an alternative, such as long cardigans (Abdulaziz, 2019), and have coincided with a greater presence of women in dominant roles, such as positions of leadership (Alshoabi, 2018). However, women continue to wear the black abaya and different forms of veiling, also based on the context, which can differ despite being within the same city. In other countries, such as Tunisia, attitudes towards veiling practices are more nuanced. In fact, it is considered a personal choice, and its use is not required by law. However, it should be underlined that, historically, the country has gone through oscillating and contrasting periods between pushes for liberalization and pushes for restriction also with regard to women's clothing, influenced by transformations on a social and political level. The spread of the veil does not coincide, however, only with the laws that impose it but also with the social norms linked to it. For example, the veil is widespread in Egypt, but its adoption varies. In this case, the choice would seem to be influenced by external factors such as economic, educational, social and exposure to different influences. Lebanon also presents a variety given by the very nature of the country, characterized by cultural, religious and linguistic plurality. However, more conservative currents exist where the veil is more commonly accepted and practiced.

The comparison between the countries of the MENA region, therefore, highlights a range of cultural and regulatory approaches. For example, the veil is not legally required in Kuwait and Qatar. However, it is a choice that reflects cultural and religious practices. Most Muslim women opt to wear it, although it is not a legal requirement, and institutions may require it in specific contexts. This also happens in the United Arab Emirates, where the veil is not mandatory by law but is often worn in more conservative environments and on official occasions as a sign of respect and decorum, as in the case of universities and public, where the dress code for Emirati students is represented by traditional clothes. In Qatar, although the use of the hijab or niqab is common, women can decide without legal consequences for those who refuse it. In Bahrain and Oman, wearing the headscarf is generally accepted but not mandatory, allowing for some diversity in individual choices. In Yemen, the practice of veiling is strongly rooted but varies depending on urban areas and more conservative areas, where practices such as the burqa can prevail over other uses. On the contrary, in Iran, the imposition of the veil is a law with which the government promotes the hijab as a symbol of modesty, creating social tensions and protest movements among women who challenge this obligation. In 2022, the government became more concerned with the enforcement of the hijab and chastest law, mentioning the possibility of dismissal for female government officials whose social media photos do not comply with Islamic regulations. The Hijab and Chastity law mandates the covering of the hair and dressing modestly. More specifically, the articles define various forms of wearing hijab improperly and establish different penalties according to it varying penalties depending on the type of "hijab people are accused of wearing. For instance, article 47 specifically addresses individuals accused of dressing "immodestly" (*bad pooches*). This includes both genders referring to wearing tight

clothes and exposing part of the body below the neck, above the ankles or the forearms, while for a man wearing tight clothing exposing parts of the body below the chest and above the knees or exposing shoulders. The law also extends into the digital sphere by penalizing behaviors that promote violations of hijab regulations online.⁴

The analysis results show how digital representations of the veil communicate with regulatory reforms in the MENA region, leading to greater acceptance of the diversity of styles and, in some cases, greater liberalization of veil laws. However, significant tensions also emerge, such as those observed in some contexts where headscarf laws or traditional norms clash with new digital expressions. For example, in Morocco, digital activism has promoted greater awareness of individual rights [22].

7.2 A Precluded Aesthetic. The Veil Among Myths Today

From a sociosemiotic perspective, which considers a wide range of communicative modalities as objects of study, and as our analysis has indicated to us, the problematic nature of the autonomy of meaning of objects that are designed to circulate in their communicative context is highlighted, but which inevitably end up circulating in other communicative contexts. These objects, in fact, with the complex web of meanings and values that they carry with them, are inserted into environments and communicative situations that are extremely diversified compared to that of patency, such as that of the legal sphere, from which they obtain semantic resonances, but at the same time they manipulate to return them modified. This observation applies to photographs, posters, television commercials, and works of art that travel between international exhibitions. This also happens when it comes to a recognized speaker, as in our cases, the large online magazines, sports personalities, reference figures in the world of fashion, and social media influencers, who, however, encounter texts, such as the norms legal, produced by an official enunciator, strong, with defined objectives and often stable in the long term. However, their destination and the context in which they infiltrate are variable and difficult to control, making it difficult to anticipate and simultaneously study their impact on the other elements of the semiosphere, and the actual meaning that they have altered.

The analyzed cases have emphasized the role of aesthetic expressions correlated, in our case, to the practices of the veil. As Greimas [20] outlined, this practice is configured as an act intrinsically linked to the social constraints and cultural dynamics that influence gender identity. The concept of *precluded aesthetics*, as explored in Greimas' post-structuralist work *De l'imperfection* [20], here can be tested as a lens through which to read online veiling practices. In fact, its application allows us to delve deeper into the formation of the pathetic dimension and the opposition between natural needs, the rules, and norms of decorum. The woman, in her

⁴ The website www.hrw.org extensively explores the law and the articles concerning veiling practices in physical and virtual spaces.

clothing, does not act arbitrarily but is oriented towards functionality that responds to the expectations of the social environment to which she belongs, taking into account the circumstances to be faced. In this context, natural needs intertwine with cultural ones, giving rise to a balance that can be compromised by failures perceived as bad taste. Evaluating what is convenient extends far beyond the mere aesthetic aspect, involving know-how, rules of decorum, and ethics. Secondly, a passionate dimension emerges: a woman's desire to shape her body image, to define herself through a certain way of appearing, reveals a strongly intersubjective personalization. This interaction between the different simulacra and their representations, mediated by distinct cultural codes, leads us to a cognitive sphere in which aesthetics is intertwined with psychology and social relations, making the boundary between the aesthetic and the everyday complex.

The analyzed examples showed us how the media representations of the veiling practices are linked in various ways and according to different meanings to the topical theme of *choice*. Following Greimas' perspective, and moving towards the practice of the veil considered as a choice to wear, we find ourselves faced with features of a figurative nature, which are part of the information shared by the subjects and which are subjected to judgment, such as the colors of veil, the shape, the gestures of the wearer and the attitudes. For example, simple lines, traditional patterns, black or multicolor, rigid or loose. These elements ask to be evaluated and endowed with conceptual meanings, such as those of simplicity, modesty, refinement, innovation and negotiation. Additionally, come abbiamo visto Cio' avviene nella rappresentazione della relazione tra corpo e velo e nelle pratiche che li riguardano. Il corpo raffigurato nella sua relazione con il velo, la sua posizione del corpo nello spazio e il gesto assumono una valenza universale.

Returning to Greimas' thoughts in *De l'imperfection*, we can reflect on the concept of reading grids to analyze the semiotic status of the representation of the web on the web. As highlighted by the analyses conducted on various levels and through different manifestations, this indicates the presence of interpretative schemes that allow us to understand the meanings within a cultural text. At the same time, the socio-aesthetic dimension, that is, that of the languages that convey certain social connotations, such as the visual, medial, legislative, and religious ones, refer to the myths explored by Barthes, leading us to consider the practices of the veil as today's Myth [6]. In fact, the analysis of the representations of the veil, in its various visual and verbal forms, through reference to comments, have shown themselves to be imbued with social, stereotypical, and ideological meanings, which contribute to defining and redefining our perception of the world.

8 Conclusion

As highlighted in the introduction to the article, cultural negotiation processes such as those related to veiling practices occur in liminal spaces, that is, the border on which, according to Lotman, translation takes place, in our case, between *global* and *local*,

tradition and *progressivism*. The theoretical lens of translanguaging encourages us to look at the terms of *adaptability* and *complexity* of the veiling practice and its translation into other areas, such as social norms and the legislative sphere. The analyses highlighted that the representation of the veil operates as an assemblage that includes textual elements, such as the hijab, the abaya, and the niqab, and those related to postures, colors, visual contexts, such as urban space versus heritage space, private sphere versus public sphere, but also interactions with systems, models and technological objects, such as comments, hashtags, reactions, etc. We could say that the representation of the veil in the digital sphere and in its various forms and practices—from traditional views to liberal interpretation, full of existential and critical values—plays a fundamental role in influencing the audience, especially younger generations, operating a kind of pressure in other spheres, such as legislation, and impacts global issues, such as women's rights.

This coincides with the advent of digitalization and the spread of social media in the MENA region, which has guaranteed a space for expression, even in cases where this is a manifestation of existential values, connotations of information that could not easily be expressed in other ways. The challenge to social expectations and regulations offers an alternative narrative that, through videos, images, and viral campaigns, promotes an image of emancipation and self-determination expressed through the value of "choice". Indeed, regardless of its connotation, the emphasis falls on the choice: the veil worn but not imposed on a social or legislative level, the choice to wear it, the decision not to wear it, despite the reactions it may generate.

The social pressure generated by these new forms of undeclared activism pushes countries to reevaluate regulatory approaches, even in the Western context. Indeed, in some contexts, the debate on women's rights has directly impacted legislative reforms and greater consideration of women's needs at the level of social and legal norms, encouraging critical reflection on existing regulatory frameworks. However, the opposite is also true. As highlighted by the analyzed examples, the reactions to these reinterpretations of the veil are not always positive both at the social and public levels. While some countries embrace a trend toward change, others tend to resist, creating a constantly evolving and fluctuating dimension that deserves equally constant observation and analysis. In a context where stringent obligations were enforced, public opinion responded by implementing activist reactions as tactics, which altered everyday life practices, as opposed to the strategy coming from the top, and fostered a cultural dialogue regarding social norms.

In the cases encountered, even beyond those selected for this contribution, culture communicates with itself and not only with others, reinterpreting the veil as a symbol of modesty combined with self-description. Returning to Lotman's concepts, auto-communication occurs in the process of redefinition within the *semiosphere*, when the veil becomes a dynamic element capable of moving in multiple directions, crossing borders, and reflecting the plurality of female identity. At the same time, cultural self-description manifests itself in the representation of this image to the world through global platforms such as Vogue Arabia, generating a third space in which the concepts of tradition, modernity, and personal choice connected to the veil are redefined.

The examples analyzed demonstrate how digital platforms are not simply spaces of representation but real laboratories where cultural meanings are actively negotiated, transformed, and revalued. This study extends the literature by examining

the representation of veiling practices in the digital sphere in the MENA region, employing the concept of semiosphere to deepen the reflection on the socio-cultural complexity of the veiling practices and the identification of the values at play as connected to the affective dimensions of the experience.

The semiotic approach proves valuable for understanding these dynamics, offering theoretical and methodological tools that allow us to analyze how cultural meanings are translated and transformed through digital practices and at different levels of depth. Future research aspires to benefit from a further study of the specificities of the different representations and their influences on the meaning and translation methods in the legislative field. This can be addressed with greater access to available information and an ethnographic approach to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of these influences, focusing on the sensory effects and the role of the thymic dimension in responding to or catalyzing transformations between knowing and believing.

Furthermore, examining the online representation of the veil, in conjunction with social norms and the legislative field from a semiotic perspective—while also considering its connection with the theory of translanguaging—provides an epistemological bridge, which highlights distinctive features of the object of study.

This multifaceted analysis aims to establish guidelines for future research, particularly drawing from three components. First, the *fluidity* of semiotic conflicts allows us to view the veil and its associated practices no longer as fixed and isolated signs but as dynamic, evolving processes. Second, the *agency* of the self, as the bricoleur of this re-assemblage of cultural resources, contrasts with dominant ideologies and orientalist stereotypes while also reshaping social norms and re-evaluating laws. Lastly, the *situated* nature of these *semiotic assemblages* is intrinsically tied to specific digital spaces, such as Instagram and TikTok, and to practices, such as remixing and virality.

Funding Open access funding provided by Università degli Studi di Torino within the CRUI-CARE Agreement.

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