



# ASK ME ABOUT MY HIJAB

Promoting communication between Muslim women wearing hijab and non-Muslims, with the goal of increasing understanding and tolerance.

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MFA Design for Social Innovation  
Thesis Paper 2016

# Context

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## HIJAB

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Hijab is a head-covering that many Muslim women wear for a variety of reasons. Most women wear the hijab because they believe that God has instructed them to wear it, as a means of fulfilling His commandment for modesty, or to visibly express their Muslim identity.

Through our research we learned that today there is a growing number of women in the US wearing hijab. Unfortunately, western media presents a common theme of negative stereotypes about women who wear hijab, including the idea that they are oppressed.

The narrative of hijab is being misrepresented to the American mainstream, causing negative perceptions and social attitudes towards the women who choose to wear it.

## MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

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Islam is currently the world's second-largest religion after Christianity, and is the fastest-growing major religion. If current demographic trends continue, the number of Muslims is expected to exceed the number of Christians by the end of this century.

In the US, Muslims are a fast-growing segment of the population. This reflects the breadth of this country's racial, ethnic, and multicultural heritage, and includes American-born Muslims of diverse ethnicities, immigrants from many countries and regions, and converts from various backgrounds. By the year 2050, Muslims will make up 2.1% of the US population, surpassing people who identify as Jewish on the basis of religion as the second-largest faith group in the country.

Many Muslim women, although by no means all, practice hijab.

**RESEARCH  
& ANALYSIS**

**69%** of women wearing  
hijab reported discrimination  
compared to **29%** of Muslim  
women who don't

# Talking with our audience

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***“By assuming that all veiled women are oppressed, we belittle the choice of those that want to wear it. Even when women are vocal about wanting to wear the hijab, they are conveniently unheard or silenced. The truth is that for many women, the hijab allows them to reclaim their bodies and have full control over them, and that makes a lot of people uncomfortable.”***

***- H.A.***

We started our research by interviewing 20 Muslim women from diverse backgrounds. Through our interviews, we wanted to gain an understanding of why they continue to wear hijab, even though it adds more struggle to their lives. What prevents them from taking it off? What does hijab really mean to them?

They all believed that the idea of hijab representing the oppression of women is from a western perspective not from a Muslim woman's perspective. People who see them as victims are “forcing” them to take their hijab off. For many women in the US, wearing hijab is actually a statement about how they can make their own choice.

Many of the women we spoke with also felt that their personal qualities were being overlooked, because people only see the scarf and the stereotype that it symbolizes.

## MODESTY POP-UP SHOP

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The Modesty pop-up shop was a one-day event held by one of our interviewees, Zahra, who owns an online store selling modest clothing for women. Based on the insights we gained through our interviews, we made a survey to give to customers at the shop.

We shared the survey with hijab-wearing women while having conversations with them in the shop. What we learned is:

- They all feel the need to specify that it is their own choice to wear the hijab to anyone ask them about their hijab
- Even though there is strong political symbolism, they women don't let it deter them from wearing their hijab. If anything, it motivates them even more.

## Do you wear Hijab?

Please answer these quick questions

What are your reasons for choosing to wear the headscarf?

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In your opinion, what does wearing a headscarf signify politically?

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As someone who wears hijab, how is the political connection tangible to you? Where do you see it?

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How does the political aspect weigh in on your decision to wear the headscarf?

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What attracted you to this event?

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Which fashion icons do you follow for modesty/hijab tips?

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How do they make modesty/hijab more approachable?

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Your name:

E-mail:

***“When people try to take away my freedom to do something that’s not harming anyone, then my feet will stand firmer in the ground. I will fight for my right.”  
- S.K.***

## DICHOTOMY

In further examining the discourse from the Muslim womens perspective, and that of the western media, we identified a dichotomy.

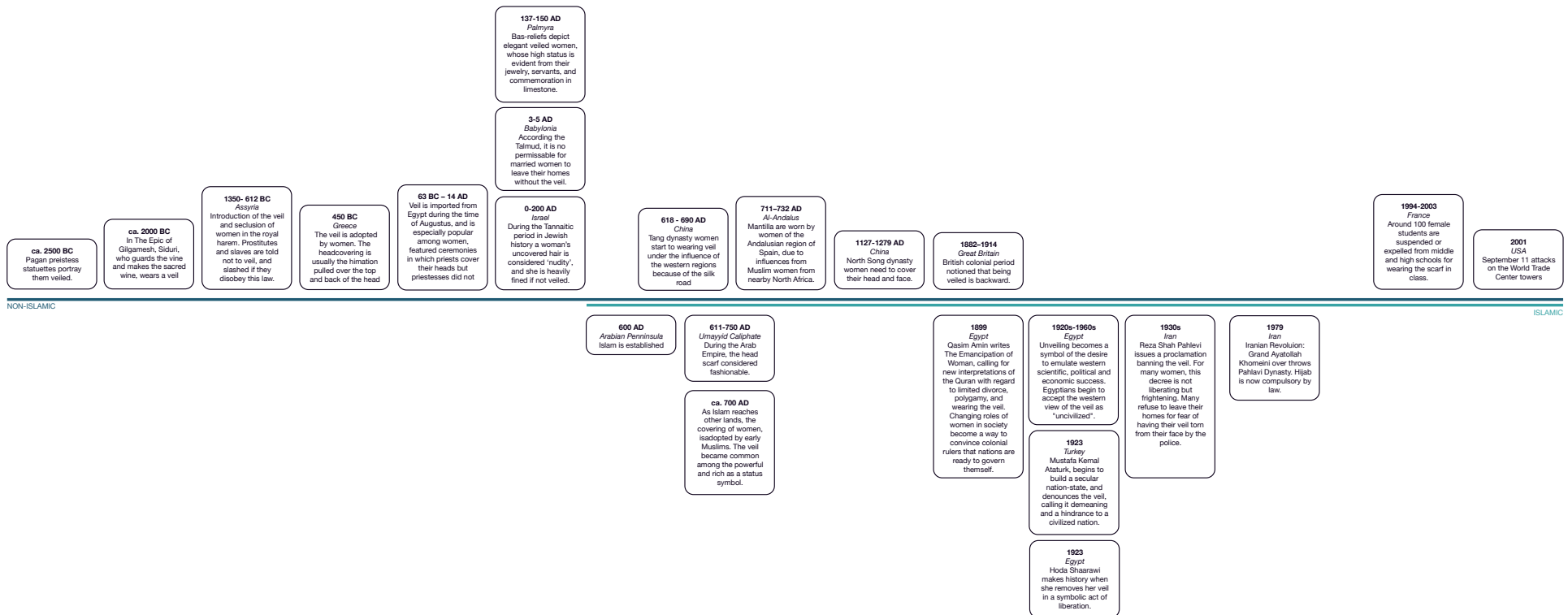


*“A few years ago a hairdresser shepherded me into a back room for a private cut, away from public view. ‘You’re in America now, honey,’ she confided, trying to help me. ‘You don’t have to wear that thing on your head.’ My hairdresser was trying to liberate me from hijab. But for me, hijab is liberation. It is the freedom to assert my identity and live according to my values.”*

*- H.H.*

A woman has the right to expose her body and be liberated	A woman has the right to choose who she finds worthy of looking at her body
Hijab takes away from a woman's freedom to express herself	Women want to express their intellectual ability rather than their sexuality
Hijab is a reminder that women should be in the home	Muslim women use the hijab as an instrument of agency, to engage in pursuits in the public sphere
By wearing hijab, women accept responsibility for their own sexual victimization	Hijab provides them with a sense of security

# HIJAB HISTORY



In order to understand how hijab became a political symbol, we starting looking into its history. We found two crucial turning points.

At the turn of the 19th century, British Colonial thought notioned that hijab is a backwards practice, and people started to see veiled women as oppressed.

The second point is the 9/11 attacks in New York. In a radio

address by First Lady Laura Bush, she painted the “war on terror” as a fight against the oppression of women. This opened up a Pandora’s box for the negative political image, and people began targeting Muslim communities. Women wearing hijab became an easy target.

Today, hijab is commonly regarded as a symbol representing the oppression of women in Islam.





## HIJAB IN FASHION

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In the fashion industry today, designers are becoming more interested in hijab. For example, high fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana launched a hijab collection in January 2016. Similarly, Uniqlo launched a new modest wear collection that includes head scarves and abayas in February 2016. We thought that this could be an entry point for us. Hijab fashion bloggers already have a huge audience. By teaming up with them, we could launch a campaign that spreads the true meaning of hijab.

However, through further research, we realized that fashion is all about marketing, and the western fashion industry doesn't have a market for hijab, since it's a piece of clothing based on religion. Also we realized that by saying the hijab is just piece of fashion we would be watering down the real meaning behind the hijab. In trying to remove the political symbolism of hijab, we would also be oversimplifying what hijab means to these women.

Overall, we concluded that using hijab as a fashion statement to depoliticize it is not our best option. Fashion needs a market, while hijab is too specific to religious belief. It won't get the attention we need to succeed in the western world.

**Instead of trying to redefine the hijab, we need a platform for women to share the nuanced meaning it holds for them.**



The narrative of hijab is being misrepresented to the American mainstream, causing negative perceptions and social attitudes towards the women who choose to wear it



## TRYING OUT HIJAB

After all the articles and statistics we found, we began our journey to understanding this issue by trying to experience what it feels like to wear hijab. We wanted see first hand what it would be like to walk around New York wearing hijab. And while we did notice people staring, nobody actually spoke to us.

It was at this point that we realized we can't learn in just a week or two the breadth of the struggle women wearing hijab face in their whole lifetime. We were trying to experience something that we couldn't possibly orchestrate.

**However, we learned that, going forward, we would have to be the ones initiating the conversation.**

**PROTOTYPING**

# Prototype 1

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## HYPOTHESIS

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If we create a way for our users to make a bold statement about how wearing hijab is their own choice, people will change their perceptions about hijab. We need to highlight how hijab is in fact empowering them.

## OUR APPROACH

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We designed a series of items our testers could wear or carry saying “My Hijab, My Choice”. We also designed a set of cards that our testers could hand out to people whenever they feel they are being judged negatively for wearing hijab.

We asked our testers to carry them around the city for a week, and document other people’s reactions. We were particularly interested in what conversations these items could generate.

## LEARNINGS

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For the wearable items (t-shirts, head-scarves), we learned that our users didn’t want to be tied to wearing a specific article of clothing that might not fit into their personal style, or their outfit for the day. They were more receptive of items they could carry with them everyday, like a phone case or tote bag. They wanted something practical and functional in their daily life.

With the cards, our testers struggled to identify the idea moments or situations in which they should use them. They found it difficult to be certain that people were thinking negative thoughts about them. We also learned that even though they really wanted to share their perspective, they didn’t feel comfortable confronting people with the cards. Specially when there was no prior conversation between





them. Additionally, Once the card was passed to the other person, the interaction was over. It didn't generate further discussion that we were hoping for.

Overall, these ideas failed to address the broken connection between our users and people around them.

**We went into our first prototype thinking about making a bold statement. And left thinking that maybe what we needed was more of an invitation.**

## Prototype 2

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### HYPOTHESIS

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We need to design a visible item that invites open conversations, while being convenient enough that our users could carry it all the time.

### OUR APPROACH

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For our second prototype, we explored ways to share our users' perspectives--their stories--in a less confrontational way.

Responding to our testers' feedback about wanting a functional item, we designed a new tote bag with a more inviting prompt: "Ask me about my hijab." We wanted to create a more welcoming environment for opening a conversation.

We tested a video idea where our user creates a short video in which she shares her reasons for choosing to wear hijab, posts it to her social media and calls on a friend to make a video too, creating a chain.



We also designed a website to make a space for women to share their stories, and find strength and inspiration through the stories of others. We also used the website to introduce our mission and vision for the project, and to share more information about hijab. Additionally we set up an online store where people can acquire a tote bag.

## LEARNINGS

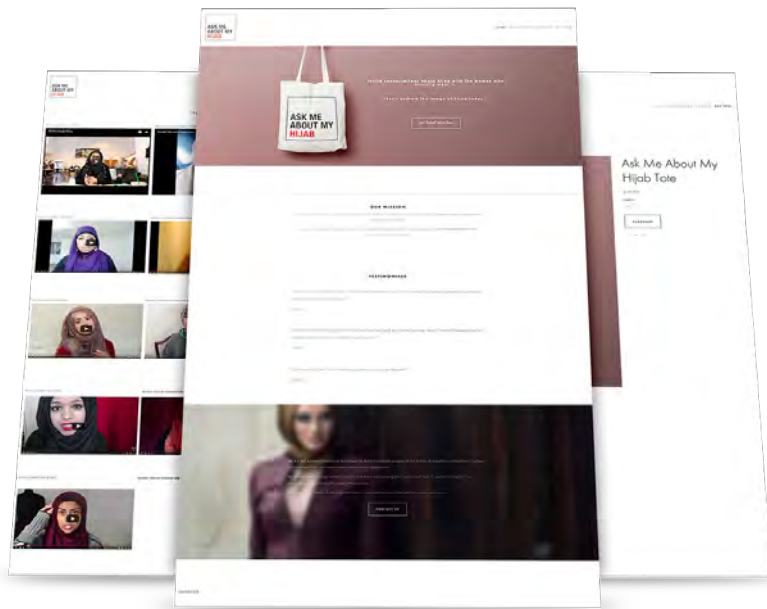
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The testers carrying our tote bag gave us positive feedback. They found carrying the bag very exciting. They want to have conversations, so they can share their perspectives on hijab.

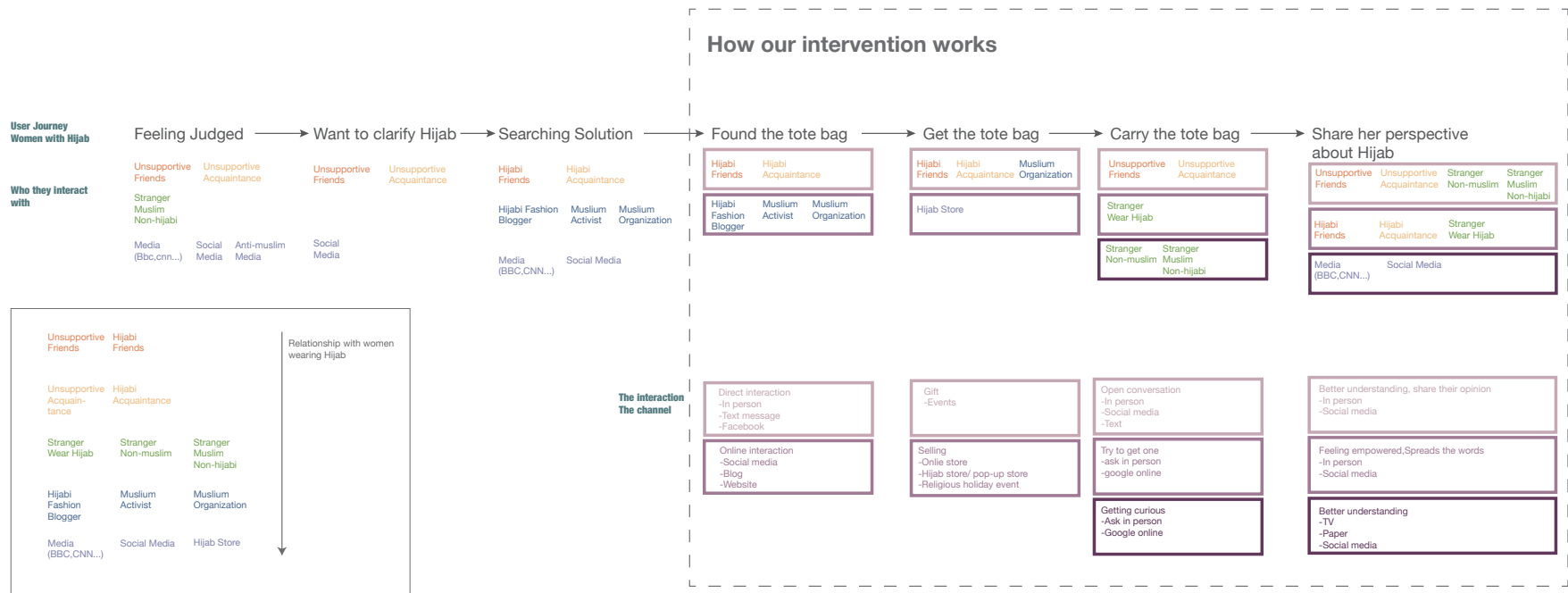
However, even though people noticed the bag, strangers still won't approach them in the street. This got us to thinking that college campuses could be a better entry point, since they already have an open environment for conversations.

While testing the video, we found that when people make video for a general reason about why they wear hijab, they will have less focus and their story will be less compelling to other people. After testing the website, we felt that a website doesn't serve the purpose of the interaction. They want to share their stories and videos where people can see them, and to engage in the conversation.

The website didn't serve the purpose of adding more interaction. Our users still wanted to share their story and video, but want to be able to engage more with other people.



# HOW THE TOTE BAG WORKS





**“When I’m carrying this tote,  
it feels like wherever I go I’m  
so ready to answer people’s  
questions about my Hijab.  
It’s exciting!”**

# Prototype 3

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## HYPOTHESIS

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Teaming up with an existing Muslim student organization will make it easier for us to reach college students, and for them to participate.

Sharing a story in the video will make it more focused and deliver a stronger message.

## OUR APPROACH

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**Teaming up with Hunter College:** Based on our new thinking that a college campus would be a more receptive environment for having conversations about hijab, we teamed up with the Muslim Student Association of Hunter College. Through this connection, we started getting more people interested in our project.

**New video ask:** We adjusted the topic for the video to sharing a story about being asked about hijab. We found that the storytelling element added focus to the videos and made them more engaging.


**Moving from a website to Facebook:** We began to explore Facebook--since it is a platform our users already use--in order to make interacting with them more fluid. We built a community page through which we can share news relating to hijab, and where they can share their stories and engage more with other users.

The facebook page also directly links people to our website if they want to get a tote bag for themselves.



Facebook page header for "Ask Me About My Hijab" with navigation links: Feiyuan, Home, Find Friends.

Invite conversations about hijab with the women who actually wear it.  
Let's redraw the image of hijab today.



**Ask Me About My Hijab**  
Community

Learn More Liked Message

Timeline About Videos Photos Likes

Search for posts on this Page

95 people like this  
Amer FreeSyria Jandali and 7 other friends

Invite friends to like this Page

**ABOUT**

We are on a mission to reclaim hijab from the negative representations in the media, and share the perspectives of the women who choose to wear it

Status Photo / Video

Write something on this Page...

**Ask Me About My Hijab** thinking about making a change.  
April 5 at 10:04pm

Assalamu Alaykum...  
Let's get the conversation started! How do you share your hijab with the world? What do you say when people ask you about your hijab?

April 14 at 9:40pm

I had the pleasure of meeting Barbara last week and learning about her Ask Me About My Hijab project! It's a great way to clear stereotypes that are made about Muslim women regarding hijab. The tote bag gives others the chance to learn about hijab and clear up common misconceptions.  
PC: Shifa Quraeshi



April 8 at 10:44pm

Ask Me About My Hijab is a great initiative to clear stereotypes that are made about Muslim women in regards to the hijab being oppressive. Carrying this tote bag is a great way to provide a conversation starter and give people the opportunity to hear it like it really is from the one who practices it. Hijab is one of the biggest blessings in my life, and it is indeed my crown. #HijabIsMyCrown #AskMeAboutMyHijab



A month after launching our Facebook community page, we have over 90 active members.

25 women have reached out to us for a tote bag of their own.



## SHIFA

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Shifa is one of the students we were working with at Hunter College. One of the times we were meeting with Shifa at her campus, a classmate of hers passed by and noticed her bag. He was curious and approached to ask what hijab is really about for her.

He shared that he once traveled to the Morocco, and for the first time encountered people walking around in hijab, but wasn't sure if it would be ok to approach them and ask what it was. He was happy to find this opportunity to ask his classmate, knowing that she would be open to answering his questions.

After this incident, Shifa confided that she felt somewhat underprepared, and therefore felt less confident about being approached by strangers.

We encouraged her to make the video. She thought it was a useful exercise that made her feel more prepared to answer if someone asked her again.

## LEARNINGS

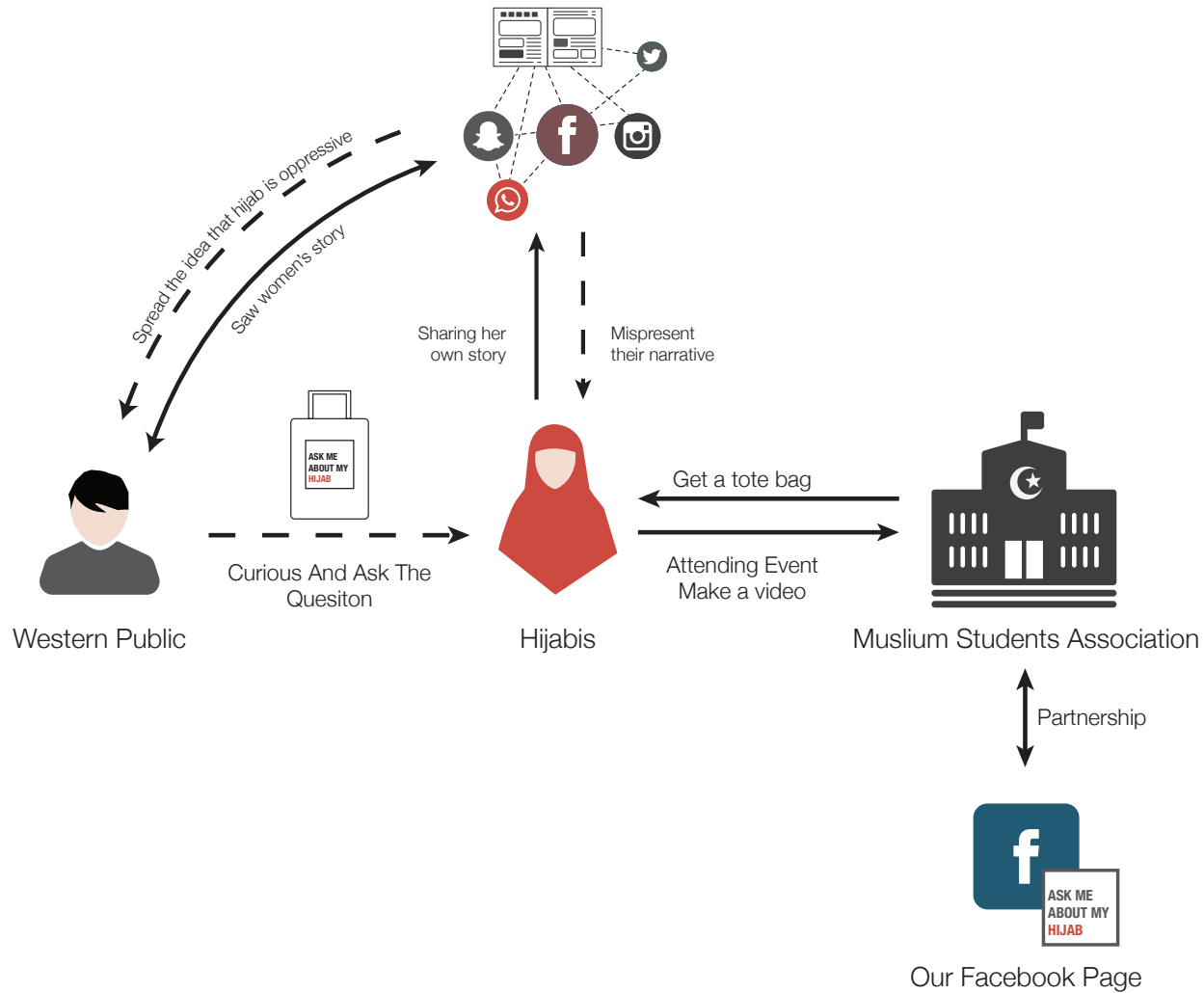
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When we are talking to them, some of our users experienced nervousness at the thought of strangers randomly approaching them. They don't feel confident enough that they will be able to explain their thoughts clearly. But, ultimately they want to participate anyway because the conversation is important to them.

We learned that even though most of our users know what they want to say, they still need help preparing for the conversation.

# Next Steps

Going forward, we plan to collaborate with Muslim Student Organizations to design workshops that better prepare students to have these conversation, so we can ease some of the nervousness they experienced.



“Carrying around the tote made me realize that perhaps I need to grow thicker skin. I can’t always be afraid to express myself simply because of the possibility of negative feedback. I want to become stronger and be able to walk through the city with this tote slung over my shoulder, unafraid to face any challenges head-on.”