AN EXPLORATION OF THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS IN THE ADOPTION OF VISIBLE SIGNS OF GROUP IDENTITY

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Rapid pace of industrialization, social mobility and the forces of globalization have resulted in a complex multicultural society. It is difficult to find a homogeneous society where there is only one basis of social categorization of its citizens. The group to which one belongs not only is instrumental in the development of self concept but it also influences the perception of others leading to group comparisons. Thus, the notion of identity involves locating oneself in the social space and experiencing belongingness to a preferred social category.

Tajfel (1978) observed that our group membership plays a significant role in determining who we are, of what we are like, and how we are similar to and different from others. According to the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) individuals derive part of their self-concept through belonging to these social categories. The term identity subsumes both personal (i.e., individual/relational) and social (collective) levels and is shaped by social context (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner & Onorato, 1999).

Studies suggested that individuals exhibited a strong tendency to enhance their identity through differentiating their own group from out group (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to the social identity theory positive social identity is generally based on favorable intergroup comparisons (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). SIT’s central assumption is that threatening intergroup situations motivate people to maintain or restore a positive and distinctive social identity e.g., through increasing the difference between ingroup and outgroup. Literature suggests that negative stereotypes, cultural differences, and the extent to which outgroups are perceived
threatening to the integrity of the ingroup plays an important role in motivating people for distinctiveness (Hagendoorn, 1995; Verkuyten et al., 1996).

Often it is noticed that people adopt symbols that is associative with their group's identity. Different groups try to preserve their unique characteristics or adopt something unique so that they are identifiable as members of that group, and as is the case of religious groups for example Muslim cleric spot a beard while the Sikhs carry a kirpan and Christians wear the cross. Many such markers enable the group to maintain their distinct social identity. Dress code is another such identity marker. Sometime it may not be a personal choice but a collective one and can be seen as a collective or political form of identity management. It not only conveys a meaning or message to the public but it creates visibility. Thus, the reason may be purely social, psychological or both. The present research attempts to unravel the factors responsible for adoption of these identity markers.

The study was conducted in three phases. At first phase a quantitative study was done to understand the meaning which veil had for educated Muslim females and following this the second study quantitatively tried to explore the social psychological factors that contributed in the adoption of veil. The third study extended the research to three religious namely Hindus, Muslims and Christians studying in traditional schools with traditional dress-codes.

For study 1 data was collected on 30 females who adopted the veil/headscarf on a regular basis. An open-ended questionnaire was used where the respondents were asked to respond to questions related to their veiling/veil practice. The main findings show that females adopted the veil not only for religious purpose but also as an
expression of their Islamic identity. Apart from the Islamic angle the veil appears to serve various other functions. It had a psychological angle as it gave them confidence and satisfaction and was associated with positive affect. It also served a social purpose where it got associated with a sense of security, convenience and protection. Interestingly females wearing headscarf saw it as a healthy practice as it protected them from the sun and pollution. They denied the argument that head covering was a sign of women's repression and that it curbed their autonomy at home or on the job.

In the 2nd study an attempt has been made to explore the identity angle associated with the veil. Also we got interested in exploring as to what extent it was an attempt to differentiate themselves from other group. Finally whether this sense of being distinct was somewhere influenced by degree of identification with group or due to the perception of threat in an intergroup situation. For this study 307 Muslim females were approached. All of them were students and belonged to various faculties of the University (MBA, Engineering, Arts, Social Science, commerce, Science etc). Of the total sample 199 adopted the veil and 107 did not practice any specific dress-code.

To measure personal identity a scale constructed by Rosenberg et al., (1995) was used whereas a collective self-esteem scale by Luthanen and Crocker (1992) was used to measure social identity. To measure intergroup threat the scale of Stephan & Stephan, (1985) was used. It has three dimensions namely realistic threat, symbolic threat, and intergroup anxiety. To measure the level of distinctiveness a six item scale was constructed and the religiosity scale by Deka and Broota (1985) was used to assess the respondent's level of religiosity. The main findings of the study revealed that females practicing veil differed from those females who did not practice veil with
respect to religiosity, social identity, symbolic threat, intergroup anxiety and distinctiveness. It was found that females practicing veil were more religious, strongly identified with their group, perceived greater symbolic threat and had greater desire to enhance their distinctiveness compared to females who did not wear veil.

After exploring the social and psychological reality behind the veil, it was decided to extend the research to other groups for whom dress code was an embodiment of their religious identity. Hence, the third study attempted to explore the bases of identity among different religious groups in India. It was noticed that almost all religious groups in India, Hindus, Muslims and Christians have traditional educational institutions where specific dress codes have been prescribed. For example, *Saffron robes* are used by Hindus, a typical white *kurta pyjama* with a unique *scarf* by Muslims and a white *habit* is worn by Christian students studying in their respective traditional schools. These dress codes are not simply a uniform prescribed by the school but they also embody their religious identity. Just like the veil symbolizes the Muslim identity, similarly these other dress codes also are symbolic of their respective religious identity. Hence, the objective of the study was to explore the factors that influenced the adoption of visible markers of group identity by these groups.

Respondents for this study were taken from traditional schools with emphasis on religious teaching along with modern education. 117 Hindu students were contacted from various traditional schools in Rishikesh, 97 Muslim from the Madrasa in Muzzaffarnagar and 59 Christians from a missionary school in Meerut.
Similar measures were used as in the second study to measure personal identity, social identity, symbolic threat, realistic threat, intergroup anxiety and distinctiveness. The results of this study reveal that respondents from Muslim group indicate greater religiosity, social identity, perception of symbolic and realistic threat and distinctiveness compared to Hindu and Christian group. Muslims have stronger sense of identification with their group while Hindus had stronger personal identity. Muslims were also high in exhibiting a desire of differentiating their group from others compared to Hindus and Christians.

The overall findings indicate that identity markers adopted by different groups serve various social psychological purposes. At one point it helps in asserting identity and at the other end it helps to maintain distinctiveness for the group members.