



A qualitative exploration of the meanings, reasons and perceptions of the hijab among young Muslim hijab wearing women in Greater Manchester

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### **ABSTRACT**

Building upon past research this study aimed to explore the meanings, reasons and perceptions of the hijab among young Muslim hijab wearing women in Greater Manchester.

Six young Muslim hijab wearing women aged 19 to 23 participated in a semi-structured interview. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the interview transcripts, three themes emerged: 1. Avoiding sexual objectification. 2. Experiences of being stereotyped. 3. Hijab and the Importance of dressing modestly. The findings and literature review demonstrate, that for Muslim women living in a Muslim minority culture the hijab is seen as a feminist statement and a tool to exert control over their own bodies. Although, initially the hijab is worn for god, it is seen as a way of opposing the western societal norms and stereotypes attached to them. Limitations and implications of the research are discussed.

<b>KEY WORDS:</b>	<b>HIJAB</b>	<b>QUALITATIVE</b>	<b>DISCRIMINATION</b>	<b>MUSLIMS</b>	<b>IDENTITY</b>
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## Introduction

There are approximately 2,706,066 Muslims in which 1,296,776 are Muslim women in England and Wales (Census (2011 cited in Ali, 2015)). The Hijab is an Islamic clothing which Muslim women wear to practice their faith (Hopkins and Greenwood, 2013). However, the reasons of wearing the hijab would differ for individuals, some women define the hijab as modesty (Ruby, 2006) others define it as freedom (Read and Bartkowski, 2000). Mixed interpretations of the hijab have caused controversies in the West (Tiba and Miranda, 2013). A lack of research looking at the meanings of the hijab (Jasperse et al., 2012) increases the complexity of defining it.

Esposito (2010) defines the hijab as covering the hair in public by a Muslim woman. This definition is broad, but there is no universally accepted definition of the hijab as it can differ depending on culture (Roald, 2001). Therefore, a broad definition is sufficient to give an overview of what the hijab means. However, Ali and Bagheri (2009) suggest that the hijab can involve the covering of the body with a modest dress, the covering of the face known as the niqaab and the headscarf (hijab) which covers the hair. As the headscarf is more commonly worn by many Muslim women in Western Europe (Solihu, 2009), in this literature review the emphasis will be on the headscarf, and thus the word hijab will refer to the headscarf.

## Discrimination and stigmatization towards Muslims

After 9/11 and recent acts of terrorism that Muslims have been associated with, Muslim minorities in Western Europe have faced an increase in discrimination (Abbas, 2004) and hate crimes (Metropolitan police, 2015). Muslim women wearing the hijab (headscarf) have created a lot of controversy (Hancock, 2008) and have faced the most discrimination (Ghumman and Ryan, 2013), because they choose to openly declare their Muslim identity regardless of all the stigma associated with Muslims (Kunst, 2012). An example of a recent act of discrimination against a Muslim hijab wearing woman was when a 40 year old was abused by two young women and thrown off the bus (Dean, 2015).

Clay (2011) found poor mental health amongst Muslims due to discrimination however, Jasperse et al. (2012) found that religious practices in this case being the hijab can buffer the negative impact of discrimination. This is supported by Leondari and Gialamas (2009) who found a positive relation between religious practices and mental health, suggesting that even though the hijab can cause discrimination it can also buffer the negative impact of it. However, it is important to understand that relationships between two variables cannot be interpreted as cause, as environmental factors (good family relationships) (Pichler, 2006) may have influenced Leondari and Gialamas's (2009) findings.

Discrimination is caused by stigma, stigma are negative labels we associate to individuals or groups. Manning (2004) analysed the media's representations of the hijab in 12,000 news articles, findings suggested Muslims were talked about in a negative tone. These negative representations in the media of the hijab can cause stigma which can result in discrimination. Carr (2011) suggests Muslims have been categorised as terrorists and fundamentalists, the hijab has also been associated with such (Winter, 2006). Muslim women are often viewed as submissive in Western stigmatized stereotypes (Abu-Ali and Reisen, 1999). Media discourses show Muslim women as outsiders that refuse to integrate with the Western culture, this maybe

through wearing the hijab (Meer et al., 2010). However, the whole media cannot be generalised as being anti-Muslim (Rawlinson, 2015).

### **Hijab and identity**

Honohan and Rougier (2011) suggest Muslim women wear the hijab because it makes them feel like a part of the Muslim community and is seen as a representation of Muslim identity. Hopkins and Greenwood (2013) looked at the reasons to why Muslim women visibly declare their Muslim identity. They found the theme of hijab as an identity consolidating performance, in which participants suggest they wore the hijab to let other Muslims (in-group members) know that they are a Muslim and was seen as identity confirming. The findings can be explained using the self-categorization theory (SCT) (Turner et al., 1987) conceptualised, by Klein et al. (2007) who suggests group members consolidate their group membership by openly performing their social identity, in this case wearing the hijab. However, the question that arises is why do Muslim women choose to visibly declare their Muslim identity which is stigmatized (Kunst, et al., 2012)? Hopkins et al. (2007) suggests that members may openly express characteristics of the in group, in order to challenge the out group stereotypes of them such as submissiveness (Abu-Ali and Reisen, 1999) with Muslim women.

In the Western society where there is a diverse range of religions the hijab can be seen as a piece of clothing that distinguishes Muslim women from others (Jasperse et al., 2012). Although other religious groups do wear headscarves it is not practiced as commonly as compared to Muslims (Furseth, 2011). In the west Muslims face issues with identity, this is usually due to the clash between Islam and Western values (Abbas, 2007). Where the Western culture emphasises freedom, many believe the hijab is inflicted upon the Muslim woman (O'Brien, 2009). A study carried out by Javed (2014) found that Muslim women wear the hijab because of personal choices. However, it was also found that family pressure were the main causes of wearing the hijab. Conversely, many Muslim women, decide to wear the hijab without the influence of their parents (Furseth, 2011).

Ruby (2006) argues that identity is not only developed by how we present ourselves to others it is also about how others perceive us. However in the Western society the hijab has been seen as a mark of negativity and has occasionally been associated with terrorism (Haddad, 2007), thus the Muslim identity has been seen negatively by others. However Droogsma (2007) suggests that the hijab has progressed from it being seen as a mark of oppression and piety to a symbol of pride and freedom.

### **Islam vs Feminist views of the hijab**

The Quran (holy book for Muslims) is seen as a guide for Muslims (Ali and Bagheri, 2009). The hijab according to the Quran means something that obstructs and protects (Ruby, 2006), the differing meanings of hijab in the Quran has led to debates. In the Quran the hijab is ordained for believing Muslim women because they are seen as fitnah (Roald, 2001), meaning they are seen as sexually tempting to men. However, Fadl (2001) claims the word fitnah has many meanings in the Quran and can relate to non-sexual temptations such as money, thus there are mixed interpretations. There are also mixed opinions about wearing the hijab amongst Muslims (Shadid and Von Koningsveld 2005). Some Muslim women

believe that the hijab is not compulsory, whilst others see it as obligatory (Javed, 2014).

Roald (2001) suggests that Muslims have put forward the idea that women are accountable for an immoral society and many non-Muslims believe the hijab is forced upon women and are seen as oppressed (Cloud, 2004). Although the decision to wear the hijab is influenced by family (Omkar, 2007). However, many wear the hijab against the choice of their parents, suggesting their decision is voluntary (Ali, 2005). The hijab has led to debate amongst feminists who believe women are treated unequally in Islam and are commanded to dress modestly (Bartkowski and Read, 2003). However, this may not be the case as in the Quran men are also told to practice modesty, such as guarding their private parts and lowering their gaze (The Holy Quran, Light 24:30 ).

Conversely, hijab wearing Muslim women would see themselves as feminists, they believe the hijab empowers them and gives them freedom (Bouma and Brace-Govan, 2000). They believe wearing the hijab de-sexualizes them and they can be judged based on their personality rather than on their sexuality (Tolaymat and Moradi, 2011), as a lot of women in the west are portrayed as sexual objects by the media (Smith and Choueiti, 2010). Feminists in the west believe Muslim women are obedient, submissive and modest (Siraj, 2011). However this is contradicted as many hijab wearing Muslim women are educated (Smith-Hefner, 2007) and wearing the hijab offers them freedom with access to social spaces (Droogsma, 2007). Afshar (2008) suggests that women should be supporting Muslim women in their choice of dress (hijab) and should appreciate their freedom, rather than debating on the hijab.

### **The hijab in Muslim minority and Muslim majority cultures**

The meanings and reasons around wearing the hijab would differ from culture to culture as the hijab has multiple meanings (Williams and Vashi, 2007). In the west the stereotypes of the hijab are influenced by eastern views of the hijab such as oppression and submissiveness which is rarely seen in Muslim women in the west (Deshpande, 2001; Oddeh, 1993; Fernea, 1993). Furthermore, many studies assume that the reasons of wearing the hijab and the meanings are the same in both cultures however, this may not be the case (Reece, 1996). In the Muslim minority culture where the hijab may not be worn by a lot of Muslims, the reasons may be personal preferences and religiosity (Daly, 2001). Whereas in the Muslim majority culture it would most commonly be worn due to peer pressure and culture (Javed, 2014).

The meanings of the hijab are however similar across cultures, studies carried out by Javed (2014) in a Muslim majority culture and Siraj (2011) in a Muslim minority culture, found participants associated meanings of protection and modesty and respect to the hijab. However Roald (2001) suggests the meanings of the hijab can differ depending on culture, maybe more studies need to be conducted looking at the meanings of the hijab (Jasperse et al., 2012) to paint a better picture of the differences and similarities across culture. Wagner et al. (2012) has looked at the reasons of wearing the hijab in a Muslim majority culture (Indonesia) and Muslim minority culture (Indian) using in-depth interviews. It was found that in Indonesia the hijab was worn for fashion, convenience and modesty. In India the hijab was worn in

opposition to stereotypes, religious reasons and to confirm their cultural identity. This is supported by Read and Bartkowski (2000) who found Muslim women wore the hijab against the wish of male family members to deal with being seen as outsiders in the Western society, so in a way providing them with freedom.

Wagner et al. (2012) suggests in minority cultures individuals are forced to construct their cultural identity, in order to symbolize them as belonging to a certain group. Thus, suggesting that in Muslim majority cultures the hijab is not forced upon the women. Whereas in the Muslim minority culture Muslim women are in fact forced by others to wear the hijab rather than wearing it because of personal preferences. Therefore the Western culture itself can be seen as the oppressor which forces a Muslim woman to develop her identity so that she can be seen as the "other" through wearing the hijab (Carr, 2011), and so that she can be seen as an out-group member. However, Zayzafoon (2005) suggests that Muslim women wear the hijab by their own choice in order to fight against these negative views, therefore it cannot be assumed that they are forced to wear the hijab.

Studies carried out in the Western Muslim minority cultures have been seen as beneficial, because in the west a lot of Muslim hijab wearing women face discrimination (Abbas, 2004) which effects their mental health (Clay, 2011). These studies can educate non-Muslims about the meanings, reasons and perceptions of the hijab. Ruby (2006) carried out a study looking at Muslim women immigrants in Canada and looked at how they perceived the hijab and the meanings they associated to it. Focus groups were carried out in which it was found Muslim women wore the hijab to express their identity and so that others could see them as a 'respectable person'. However focus groups may affect participant's responses. It may be the case that many of the participants would feel uncomfortable to talk in front of the other participants and share their personal views on the hijab (Smithson, 2000), therefore it would be difficult to get rich in-depth data. A better qualitative approach for data collection would be one to one interviews in which the participant can comfortably discuss their views with the interviewer and can clarify any questions that are not understood (Lavrakas, 2008).

Siraj (2011) used structured interviews to look at the meanings Muslim hijab wearing and non-hijab wearing women attached to the hijab in Scotland (A Muslim minority culture). It was found that some saw hijab as virtue, admiration and modesty, others saw it as being worthless. The hijab wearing participants wore the hijab, because of religious obligations, and to de-sexualize themselves. Although structured interviews used in Siraj's (2011) are reliable, the quality of the data is reliant upon the quality of questions asked and the interviewer cannot change the questions in order to explore an area further. However, semi-structured interviews are a better option especially when exploring the meanings, reasons and perceptions of the hijab, because it would allow probing deep in to the views around the hijab whilst giving some structure and producing rich in-depth information (Barriball and While, 1994).

The literature demonstrates that the hijab is misinterpreted and stigmatized (Cloud, 2004). This can result in mental health problems for the hijab wearing Muslim women (Clay, 2011). Therefore to reduce the negative effects non-Muslims should be educated on what the hijab means. As Githens-Mazer and Lambert (2010:8) suggest 'For us, the method to counter islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crimes is clear: education'. Furthermore, it is important to understand how Muslim hijab wearing women believe others view them (Peek, 2005), because they choose to wear the

hijab regardless of all the stigma associated with it (Kunst, 2012). It is important to look at minority Muslim cultures as they are more prone to discrimination (Abbas, 2004). Research looking at minority Muslim cultures (Siraj, 2011; Ruby, 2006) use data collection methods that are not suitable to explore the hijab. This study will therefore build on past research and aim to explore the meanings, reasons and perceptions of the hijab among young Muslim hijab wearing women in Greater Manchester (minority Muslim culture), using semi-structured interviewing.

### **Research Questions**

Why do Muslim women decide to wear the hijab and make their identity visible?

What does the hijab mean to them?

How do they believe others perceive them?

### **Methodology**

#### **Design**

A qualitative research design was employed because meanings, reasons and perceptions on the hijab were looked at. Therefore, a quantitative approach was not suitable as it does not produce in-depth information like qualitative studies, which looks at human behaviour in its social context and sees it as being dynamic (Litchman, 2006).

#### **Participants**

Six hijab wearing Muslim female university students were recruited, aged 19-23. A small sample size was used because it allowed the researcher to be engaged in the research and have a close relationship with the participants, allowing identification of the finer details of their experiences (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006). Gaining finer details allowed valid data to be collected and having a small sample size allowed the researcher to build a close relationship with each participant individually, in order to make them comfortable to share their views, resulting in rich detailed information.

#### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited through opportunity sampling as it was the most convenient option (Howitt and Cramer, 2007) as the sample of Muslim hijab wearing women were easily accessible. Participants were approached outside a university campus in greater Manchester, only the individuals wearing the hijab were recruited. Participants were told about the aim of the study and were asked to take part. An invitation letter was given to keep alongside the information sheet. The information sheet contained details of where the interview would take place. Participants contact details were given to the researcher, so that the researcher could contact them with information on the date of when the study would be carried out (contact details asked for in the invitation letter).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, because the primary aim was to gather data that could give an understanding of the participants views (Silverman, 1993). Semi-structured interviews were more suitable for looking at the meanings,

reasons and perceptions of the hijab compared to focus groups used previously by researchers (Ruby, 2006). Focus groups may make participants feel uncomfortable to share their personal views on the hijab in front of other individuals (Smithson, 2000), making it difficult to get rich in-depth data. Therefore one to one semi-structured interviews were seen as a better data collection method, which allowed participants to comfortably discuss their views and can clarify any questions that were not understood (Lavrakas, 2008). Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allowed probing deep into topic areas, whilst allowing some structure to the interview (Barriball and While, 1994).

Interviews that lasted 40-50 minutes were carried out at a university in Manchester, with the researcher alone. Before the interview participants were given a consent form to read and sign and were given the opportunity to ask questions. The interview schedule consisted of 15 topic areas that were discussed with the participant, these were derived from previous literature. The interview was audio recorded on a mobile device. After the interview was completed, participants were given the debrief sheet. The interview was then transcribed and audio recordings were deleted.

### **Data analysis**

The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:79) 'Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.' It was used because the meanings, reasons and perceptions on the hijab were looked at which may vary for individuals (Droogsmma, 2007; Javed, 2014). Therefore, thematic analysis allowed flexibility to identify common themes across all transcripts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was carried out as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcripts were read and codes were generated which allowed development of themes (Thematic maps were used). The codes were then organized into broader themes, which were reviewed to ensure that the themes clearly defined all codes.

The themes identified were interpreted from a realist and constructionist epistemological perspective. Research epistemology guides the theorization of data (King and Horrocks, 2010). The realist approach allows theorization of meaning and reasons, whilst the constructionist approach allows interpretation of this taking the participants social context into consideration (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The data was analysed using both theory and data-driven approaches to ensure rigor. To ensure credibility, the interpretations made from participants responses were supported with evidence from literature (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Furthermore adequate information of the background of the research is provided, so that the reader can decide whether the findings of the research are transferable to other settings (Shenton, 2004).

### **Ethical considerations**

The ethical guidelines were followed as suggested by BPS (2009) and ethical approval was gained by the MMU ethics committee. Participants were given a consent form to sign and date before the interview, which covered all ethical considerations and researchers contact details. The debrief was given after the interview. This included the aim of the study, all ethical considerations, right to

withdraw and that the results would be available to participants if interested. Participants were also able to ask queries about the study.

Participants name and any other information (i.e. place names), were anonymized, participants were given a pseudonym. The interview was recorded on a mobile phone device and the interview was deleted once transcribed. The mobile phone was password protected and included participants contact details which were deleted after the interview was carried out. The data was not kept confidential as it was shared with the research supervisor and was used to write up this report (participants were warned in debrief and consent form). The transcriptions will be destroyed at the end of the degree however, they may be passed on to the supervisor for safe keeping if used for publication. For the safety and comfort of both participant and researcher the study was carried out at a university, and a rapport was built.

## **Analysis/Discussion**

After carrying out thematic analysis on the interview transcripts, three themes emerged: 1. Avoiding sexual objectification. 2. Experiences of being stereotyped. 3. Hijab and the Importance of dressing modestly. These themes are discussed below:

### **1. Avoiding sexual objectification.**

Many of my participants wore the hijab to avoid sexual objectification and to prevent the lustful gaze of men. They were aware of the western media portraying women as sexual objects. Sexually objectifying a woman goes against Islamic values, because in Islam Muslim women should cover and protect their beauty from men (The Holy Quran, Light 24:31):

“...in the media women are seen as a sexual object.” (Hina, lines 1416-1417)

“...the hijab gets rid of the sexual objectification because it covers a woman’s beauty...” (Sana, lines 719-720)

“...another benefit is that you’re not displaying your beauty for everyone to see and you leave it for your husband, who can only see you without the hijab...” (Rabia, lines 164-166)

These responses are in line with the findings of Tolaymat and Moradi (2011) and Ruby (2006), in which they found that Muslim women wear the hijab to prevent being sexualized and to protect themselves from the lustful gaze of men. This demonstrates control as the Muslim women in the present study have the power to cover their beauty from men whilst preserving it for their husbands by wearing the hijab. Thus, the hijab can be seen as a tool allowing them to exert control over their own bodies and the sexuality of males (Al-Swailem, 1995; Ruby, 2006). This contradicts the feminist ideations of the hijab being seen as oppressive (Siraj, 2011).

In line with this, one participant acknowledged the western feminist views on the hijab and suggested:

“...feminists aren't even helpful because they fight for a woman's right yet they can't stop them from being sexualized. Feminists always say that Muslim women are oppressed because they have to wear the hijab, but I think Islam gives us that freedom and right to being a human being rather than a sexual object which would make me a feminist wouldn't it?” (Hina, lines 1426-1431)

Hina acknowledges the label of oppression attached to the hijab by feminists and argues the hijab allows “freedom and right to being a human rather than a sexual object which would make me a feminist wouldn't it.” thus, allowing desexualisation. Her response demonstrates her desire to create a pro-hijab feminist meaning from the hijab and supports Zimmerman (2015) and Medina (2014). They found that Muslim hijab wearing women put forward arguments against stereotypes of oppression held by western feminists and saw the hijab as a feminist act. Similarly Botz-Bornstein (2015) suggests that Muslim women who wear the hijab define it as a form of empowerment as they have control over their own sexuality through the hijab. This can be seen as pro-veiling feminism.

Although the motivation for wearing the hijab for the participants was to prevent the lustful gaze of men, some participants noticed that the hijab didn't fully prevent men from staring:

“...men still stare even if you're wearing the hijab which kind of diminishes the purpose of wearing the hijab.” (Mariam, lines 929-931)

This response opposes research carried out by Ruby (2006) who found that for many Muslim women, wearing the hijab prevented the male gaze. For my participants they felt the hijab didn't fulfil its purpose of avoiding attention from men. This maybe because men usually find it difficult to control their sexual urges (Siraj, 2011) and may also find Muslim hijab wearing women attractive (Mahmud and Swami, 2010).

While participants suggested that the hijab didn't prevent men from staring, they felt at ease knowing that they themselves were covered and following the command of God:

“...men should also lower their gaze, but if they don't then that's between them and god, like I won't be questioned for that and me wearing the hijab is between me and god. It's a way of me accepting all the obligations put forward by god, so I can become spiritually closer to god and more religious.” (Samara, lines 280-284)

This supports findings of Furseth (2011) who found Muslim women wore the hijab because it was gods command. The response in the present study reveals that the hijab is about the relationship between the participant and God. By being obedient to God it allows her to become more spiritually connected to God creating a ‘...inner relation with God...’ (Furseth, 2011: 371). This contradicts Medina (2014) in that the hijab is not worn to help Muslim men lower their gaze and protect them from temptation, instead the hijab is worn for god only.

## **2. Experiences of being stereotyped.**

Many participants reported that they were seen negatively by non-Muslims and were negatively stereotyped:

“...some girl from Greece came up to me, she wasn’t Muslim, she started talking and then she said to me I thought Muslim girls can’t study and have an education and I said why? And she said I read a lot of books, that men force Muslim women and don’t let them go out...” (Sana, lines 675-678)

This response suggests that participants encountered non-Muslims that attached certain labels to them, based on them being a member of the Muslim community rather than as an individual. Thus, supporting Wagner et al. (2012) who found that Muslim women who wear the hijab are judged by others. Kunst (2010) suggests Muslim hijab wearing women are more likely to be judged dependent upon their community identity because they visibly declare their Muslim identity, which is stigmatized. Although, a majority of my participants did feel stereotyped by non-Muslims a minority believed that “...some non-Muslims are accepting.” (Rabia, lines 74-75).

However, being stereotyped can thwart a British Muslim woman’s identity, Ruby (2006) suggests that an individual’s identity is developed by how others perceive them. If Muslim hijab wearing women are stereotyped by others this can cause damage to their ‘British’ Muslim identity. This is demonstrated in the following response:

“...I felt like I didn’t belong at the place where I was doing work experience. It’s just little things like this that make me feel down, it’s like I’m not an outsider I was born here in the UK this is my country too...” (Rabia, lines 83-85)

In Rabia’s response she asserts that United Kingdom is her country too, yet being rejected by non-Muslims makes her feel like an outsider. This supports Wagner et al. (2012) who suggests that the Western society usually conceptualizes women from different cultures, that being the Muslim culture as ‘others’ resulting in them feeling like outsiders, this can be through stereotyping. However, a minority of my participants didn’t feel this way and suggested that being stereotyped did not affect them:

“...I follow my religion for myself and for god and not for others, so what others think doesn’t really affect me and wouldn’t result in me taking the hijab off.” (Imaan, lines 1279-1281)

Regardless of being stereotyped my participants suggested they wouldn’t take the hijab off, because they followed their religion for god and not for others. This response contradicts Hussein (2007) who found that negative experiences of being stereotyped can stop Muslim women from wearing the hijab.

The majority of my participants that were stereotyped wore the hijab to challenge the stereotypes associated with Muslim hijab wearing women. They believed that they were representing their religion by openly declaring their Muslim identity through wearing the hijab:

“...I’m wearing a headscarf, which represents my religion Islam...” (Rabia, lines 37-38)

“...she said I read a lot of books, that men force Muslim women and don’t let them go out and I was like you can see me I wear the hijab and I’m here studying so whatever you read was false.” (Sana, lines 677-679)

“...because I wear the hijab people come to me and ask questions about why I wear the hijab and in a way it’s like me giving them beneficial knowledge on Islam it’s like educating them.” (Hina, lines 1490-1492)

In the response by Sana we can see that she tries to clear any misunderstandings that others have about Muslim women by using herself as an example. In the response by Hina it can be seen that she acts as an educator, educating people about the ‘real’ Islam and the purpose of the hijab (Zevallos, 2007). Thus, participants portrayed themselves as representatives of their religion by wearing the hijab (Zevallos, 2007) and used this to challenge the stereotypes around the hijab. Hopkins et al. (2007) suggests that members may openly express characteristics of their group (being the hijab), in order to challenge the stereotypes of them held by the outgroup.

### **3. Hijab and the importance of dressing modestly.**

A majority of my participants in the present study defined the hijab in terms of modesty and highlighted the importance of modesty and suggested that the hijab was not just about covering their hair, but was also about dressing modestly in a way that covered the body:

“...the hijab I would say it gives you choice, feeling proud, having freedom, respect and modesty.” (Sana, lines 483-484)

Samara suggests hijab is a “...piece of cloth that covers every strand of your hair, but I also think if you wear a headscarf it’s not enough you should also cover your body and dress modestly...” (Lines 286-288)

“The clothes shouldn’t show all your body shape, it should be really loose.” (Sana, lines 650-651)

These responses support Ruby (2006), who found participants interpreted the hijab as covering ones hair but also by wearing clothing that were modest. The female body according to the Quran must be covered as it can cause sexual arousal in males (Tseelon, 1995). Thus, emphasising the importance of dressing modestly, as women are told to cover their bosoms with a veil (The Holy Quran, Light 24:31). Shadid and Van Koningsveld (2005) suggest that a head-cover and a long gown which loosely covers the whole body, are seen as modest Islamic dresses that are commonly worn by Muslim women. Although, in contradiction David and Ayouby (2002) suggest that Muslim women usually wear the hijab with tightly fitted jeans which contradicts the purpose of the hijab. However, this maybe because there is some debate around whether the whole body should be covered or just the hair, due to mixed interpretations of the Quran (Shadid and Van Koningsveld, 2005).

One participant suggests how she wore the hijab with tightly fitted jeans and then later decided to dress more modestly:

“I mean I remember before when I was in college I’d wear jeans with the hijab and I felt like a hypocrite because you could see my legs yet I was covering my hair, I then decided to dress modestly.” (Mariam, lines 967-969)

Here the jeans which are westernized clothing can be seen as harmful to the participant’s religious identity, which she displays through wearing the hijab (Dwyer,

2000). This maybe because Islam encourages modest dressing (i.e. loose clothing) and the western clothes contradict this notion (i.e. tight clothing) (Oksenvag, 2008). This may be why Mariam feels like a hypocrite and suggests she decided to dress modestly, this can be seen as 'separation' in which an individual holds on to their own cultural values (Modest Islamic clothes) but rejects the host culture norms (Westernized clothes) (Berry, 2003).

However, many of the participants like Mariam, suggested they wore westernized clothes such as maxi dresses and jeans and tops, but ensured that they were loosely fitted:

"...you can easily find something that's both covering and English clothing, like full sleeved loose and long in length, I usually wear like a loose top with full sleeves that's covering my back with jeans. I mean because if you're wearing the hijab like covering your hair, you should also be careful of what you wear because you don't want to be seen as hypocrite by others if you get me, like covering one thing and having the other on full display so you need to make sure your dressed modestly." (Samara, lines 389-396)

The above response demonstrates that participants had restyled western clothes around the Islamic values of modesty such as wearing a long loose top. Thus, they had 'integrated' the western and Islamic values (Berry, 2003) creating a hybrid identity (Bhabha, 1990; 1994). This can be seen as their attempt to maintain their religious identity whilst following the western societal norms. Ramadan (2005) suggests that this is especially common in young Muslims as they try to alter what it means to be a Muslim in the Western society. My participant's responses contradict the stereotypes of Muslim hijab wearing women being seen as those who refuse to integrate into western society (Meer et al., 2010).

However, wearing modest westernized clothes was looked down upon by other Muslims. One of my participants suggests how her cousin was shocked at seeing her wearing jeans with the hijab although, she had modestly restyled the westernized clothes:

"...my cousins were so shocked by what I was wearing because in Somalia they wear the hijab with a long abaya, but I had a hijab with like a long top and jeans. My cousin was like how could you wear jeans with a hijab, it's not right in Islam your just turning westernized." (Hina, lines 1462-1465)

This demonstrates the conflicting ideations on what is seen as modest dressing. In Somalia they would see the abaya (a body veil that is a long, loosely fitted black dress (Al-Qasimi, 2010)) as modest clothing whereas, for Hina living in the Muslim minority culture she would see a long top and jeans as modest clothing. This is supported by Kopp (2002) who suggests that the style of Muslim dress is different in different countries. Furthermore, Bhui et al. (2008) suggests that adopting another culture (westernized clothing) can create conflict with members of the community and this is demonstrated in Hina's response as her cousin argues that it's not right in Islam to wear jeans with the hijab, and that she is turning 'westernized', demonstrating how westernized clothes can be seen as damaging to the religious identity (Dwyer, 2000). However, Edross (1997) found that some women found a combination of western and Islamic dress as acceptable to wear.

## Summary

From this research and literature review it can be suggested that Muslim women primarily wear the hijab to maintain a close relationship with god. Additionally, the hijab may be worn in opposition to the Western societal norms, such as the sexualisation of women, to challenge and educate others in opposition to the western stereotypes of the Muslim woman. Therefore, the hijab maybe defined as a feminist statement and as a tool to exert control over their own bodies and the sexuality of men. Many of the Muslim women emphasise the importance of dressing modestly when wearing the hijab. Many Muslim hijab wearing women create a hybrid identity through restyling the westernized clothes in accordance to the Islamic values of modesty. Furthermore, what is seen as acceptable modest clothing is a disputed issue within the Muslim community. Overall, for Muslim women living in a Muslim minority culture the hijab can be seen as a form of empowerment, however wearing the hijab does not come without being stereotyped and judged.

## Limitations and Implications

If this research was to be built upon a much more diverse sample of participants could be used (which is essential in qualitative studies (Allmark, 2004)), in terms of age and educational background. In this study only 19-23 year old university students were used, if uneducated older Muslim hijab wearing women were used, they may have associated different meanings and reasons to the hijab.

The use of thematic analysis in this study was beneficial as it allowed the identification of commonly occurring themes across all data sets, however there was a risk of ignoring detailed information (Guest et al., 2012). On the other hand narrative analysis takes a more holistic approach and provides an in-depth exploration of a single person and their life story, taking every aspect into account (Wright and Blair, 2015). Thus, future research could combine the two methods allowing data analysis to be carried out both generally, looking at commonly occurring themes and particularly (Shukla et al., 2014). This would allow a much more thorough analysis.

Findings of this study build on and provide support to Ruby (2006), who found that Muslim women suggest the hijab is not only about covering the hair but is also about dressing modestly. The present research demonstrates the complexities of dressing modestly in the western society and how Muslim hijab wearing women create a hybrid identity by restyling westernized clothes, around Islamic values of modesty. Furthermore, the present study also suggests that what is seen as acceptable modest clothing is a disputed issue within the Muslim community.

## Reflexivity

Reflexivity in qualitative research is important as it allows researchers to become conscious of how their personal experiences can influence the research process (Russell and Kelly, 2002), thus limiting researcher bias (Choak, 2011).

I was interested in exploring the hijab because I commonly experience being stereotyped, I believed by carrying out this research it could give others an insight in to the true meaning of the hijab through the voices of Muslim hijab wearing women. The findings provided support to previous literature although, I was expecting

participants to report being forced to wear the hijab. Nonetheless, I ensured I carried out my interviews and thematic analysis without the influence of such expectations.

Being an insider into this area as I wear the hijab, I understand that my experiences may have influenced my interpretations of the participant's responses. However, being an insider was advantageous as rapport was built easily with participants, making them feel comfortable. It was also easy to understand my participants, without passing judgement (Bell, 2005; Aguilera, 1981).

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