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Muslim Women and Body Image: Body Conceptualisation Beneath the Veil

Naeemah Chabdu

## Muslim Women and Body Image: Body Conceptualisation Beneath the Veil

**Abstract**

**Building upon past research, this study aimed to explore body image among Muslim women who wear the full-face veil in the UK. Five Muslim women who wore the full-face veil aged 22-30, participated in a semi-structured interview. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted to analyse the interview transcripts. The themes that emerged from the interview transcripts include: 1. Veiling and the importance of modesty, 2. Protection from Western body image pressure, 3. Battling stereotypes of the veil and 4. The veil and Islamic identity. The findings and literature review reveal that many Muslim women conceptualise their body differently to the dominant ideas in Western society. The group of women in the study viewed covering with full-face veil as a fundamental part of Islamic dress and as a religious responsibility. The main reasoning for veiling was to remain modest and protect one's beauty. The limitations and implications of the study are also discussed.**

Key words:	Body image	Muslim women	Full-face veil	Qualitative	IPA
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## Introduction

The lack of attention on the diversity of women's body image experiences has led researchers to investigate the body image concerns of different cultural groups (Spitz, 2006; Hesse-Biber et al; 2010; Lamb and Plocha, 2015). However, there is still limited attention on the prevalence of body image concerns among Muslim women (Tolaymat and Moradi, 2011). The 2011 Census reported a 2.71 million Muslim population in the UK (Ali, 2015). The way Muslim women present themselves and their choice and meanings behind Islamic dress, has become increasingly important (Kopp, 2002.) Some Muslim women choose to wear the full-face veil or niqab, which is a face and body covering with eye openings (Botz-Bornstein and Abdullah-Khan, 2014). Consequently, such dress has implications on Muslim women's body image.

Unattainable Western ideals can create negative body image concerns relating to body dissatisfaction, depression and disordered eating (Pinkasavage et al, 2015; Ra and Cho, 2017; Grogan, 2017). Alternatively, studies concerned with the effects of Islamic dress on Muslim women's body image have found they experience a lower pressure to attain the thin-ideal (Dunkel et al, 2010). Veiling has also lead to lower levels of body checking (Wilheim et al, 2017). Overall, the higher the strength of faith, the lower satisfaction, body self-objectification and dietary restraint displayed (Mussap, 2009). The following literature review will explore research on body image, cultural diversity and the impact of Islamic dress on Muslim women's body image.

## Body Image

Body image consists of the individual's cognitive appraisal, their associated emotions regarding their appearance and the degree of their appearance investment (Szymanski and Cash, 1995). The way individual's view reality is based on their subjective bodily experiences (Cash, 2004). It is important to consider self-perceptions when examining the implications of both positive and negative body image on psychological and physical health (Bakhshi, 2011). Individual's internal self-concept and view of their body concerning weight, size, shape and capabilities, can easily become negative (Veerman, 2013). Negative body image has been repeatedly related with body dissatisfaction, depression and disordered eating (Pinkasavage et al, 2015; Ra and Cho, 2017; Grogan, 2017). There are many forces which play a role in negative body image however, one of the most prevalent is the media's construction of women (Grabe et al, 2008). Increasingly thin ideals which dominate Western media can lead women to re-evaluate their body image and can cause damaging views of the self (Frederick et al; 2016; Veerman, 2013).

Alternatively, positive body image involves body appreciation and protective processing styles (Halliwel, 2013). Women with positive body image showed higher appreciation of their unique beauty, highlighted their personal bodily assets while minimising negative perceived imperfections and filtered damaging information sources such as media use (Wood-Barcalow et al, 2010). Tylka and Augustus-Horvath (2010) found that when women processed mostly positive sources of information and rejected those that were negative, overall body evaluation became increasingly healthier. Positive body image is also reciprocated through social relationships with other women who promote body acceptance, love and health.

### **Culture, Body Image and Cultural Ideals**

'Ethnicity forms the basis for understanding values, beliefs, and perspectives from a given cultural group based on ties to the culture in a particular nation' (Chan, 2016:569). It is a subjective concept which combines participants beliefs, perceptions, understanding and identifications (Brubaker et al, 2004). The role of culture is being increasingly applied to body image research, highlighting the importance of cultural values on the self-concept (Altabe and Thompson, 1996). Our cultural influences impact our mental constructions of the body, as well as our body image ideals (Spitz, 2006).

Women identifying as black perceive bigger and thicker body types as the ideal (Lamb and Plocha, 2015). Many studies of Black women's body image suggest they experience less pressure to attain the thin ideal and have overall higher body satisfaction compared to their White counterparts (Hesse-Biber et al, 2010; Kronenfeld et al; 2010; Quick and Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014). In contrast, Hispanic and Asian Americans tend to endorse thinness ideals and report higher levels of body dissatisfaction. In a meta-analysis of 98 studies, Grabe and Hyde (2006) compared American, Asian, Black, Hispanic and White women's body attitude to test whether there are significant differences between different cultural groups and body dissatisfaction. Women from Black communities demonstrated greater acceptance of different body shapes leading to greater body satisfaction. Asian American and Hispanic women were more likely to conform to mainstream beauty standards similar to White American women.

Poran (2006) alternatively argues that young Black women do feel body image pressures like the thin ideal, as well as competition amongst other black women. Psychological research may be adding to the misinterpretation of young Black women and those of other ethnic-minorities, adding to the body image struggles they already face. Sociocultural values from industrialised societies which are communicated through media, have provoked cultural change (Alves et al, 2009). Swami (2015) suggests that the Western beauty ideal is widespread in most socio-economically developed countries due to modernisation which has brought about cultural changes that promote Western ideals. The "promotion of slenderness" through mass media is narrowing the differences between body image ideals across the world (Edmonds, 2012).

### **Islam and Women's dress**

'Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted' (The Quran, 33:58-59). This Islamic quote has been interpreted in many ways but overall, highlights the importance of modesty (Wills, 2017). Muslim women consequently adopt different styles of Islamic dress including (1) the hijab, or head scarf, (2) the niqab, a full-face veil with openings for the eyes and (3) the burka which covers the whole body, including the eyes (Ahmed et al, 2016). It is important to note that there are many definitions of veiling within psychological research. The following study will use the following definitions of the abaya and niqab when referring to the veiling. To cover the body, the abaya which is an all-covering black cloak is used. This is often worn with the niqab which is a facial covering that leaves only the eyes on display (Botz-Bornstein and Abdullah-Khan, 2014).

The English word 'veil' is commonly used to refer to Middle Eastern and South Asian women's traditional dress which covers the head, face and body. El Guindi (2003) suggest that the word comprise four dimensions: the material, spatial, communicative and religious. In the West, veiling reflects a general association with the Middle East, religious fundamentalism and patriarchal oppression (Rasmussen, 2013). Interestingly, Allen (2015) suggest that the veil leaves Muslim women to be viewed as 'invisible', de-humanising and de-individualising them.

These generalisations could be influenced by Western culture which holds a common belief that physical beauty leads to more benefits in life. Women who internalise media ideals and appearance related dissatisfaction, are more likely to link positive life rewards with looking like society's ideal (Engeln-Maddox, 2006). However, by internalising the observer's primary view of their physical self, women are socialised to treat themselves as objects (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Internalising thin ideals and sociocultural standards of beauty can be very damaging for women, leading to a mediating relationship between sexual objectification and body surveillance (Watson et al, 2013). However, Tolaymat and Moradi (2011) found that for some women, sexual objectification experiences alternatively lead to the promotion and internalisation of their own cultural standards of beauty. There is a gap between dominant understandings of the Islamic dress and its symbol to wider society. While often regarded as a sign of oppression and restriction of mobility, Islamic dress has been reported to make identities distinct. Veiling has allowed women to take control of their body while creating a sense of belonging to a wider Muslim world (Ruby, 2006). Women who wore the headscarf reported lower levels of sexual objectification that was not linked to body surveillance, body shame, or eating disorder symptoms (Tolaymat and Moradi, 2011). It can therefore be interpreted that the hijab and other Islamic modest dress, acts as a protective factor from poor body image.

### **Muslim Women and Body Image**

Whilst one of the main reasons of Islamic dress is to distinguish Muslim women from non-believers (Wills, 2017), it also has great psychological impact in terms of body image. Quantitative research on body image focusing on Islamic dress and Muslim women's body satisfaction have produced consistent findings. Dunkel and colleagues (2010) found that Muslim women who did not wear Islamic dress were more likely to feel the pressure to attain the Western-ideal standard of beauty compared to the Muslim women who veiled. Women who were unveiled also reported more body checking then those who were veiled (Wilhelm et al, 2018). Muslim women with high faith experienced lower body dissatisfaction, body self-objectification and dietary restraint. Adherence to Islamic teachings may subsequently protect women's body image from appearance based public scrutiny (Mussap, 2009). Overall, females who practiced stricter Islamic dress had improved body satisfaction and self-esteem, and lower feelings of depression (Rastmanesh et al, 2009). Veiling can therefore be translated to have a protective effect on psychological health. However, quantitative methodology is considered confirmatory and deductive (Atieno, 2009). Research on body image often looks for relationships between certain factors, failing to acknowledge the full complexity of human experiences. Furthermore, Rastmanesh and colleagues (2009) suggest there is a chance that self-reported questionnaires can collect incorrect responses about Western body image ideals, leading to inaccuracy within the research findings.

Whilst dominant literature shows a strong relationship between women who veil and their increasingly positive body image, qualitative methodology can allow the in-depth exploration of personal experiences of wearing the veil in Western society and its effect on body image.

Odoms-Youngs (2008) used structured interviews to explore African-American Sunni Muslims experiences of veiling and how they effected body image. Social expectations, cultural norms and values, and religious beliefs all played a role in how the body was viewed. There was also a great emphasis on the relationship between the spiritual and physical self and the guidelines regarding Islamic dress and appearance. However, structured interview can be considered ridged, limiting the scope of data which could be collected. A more flexible schedule can provide the participant and researcher with the freedom to develop on the research area as the topic of conversation flows (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006). Wagner and colleagues (2012) method of unstructured interviews helped elicit Muslim women's experiences of wearing the veil in both Muslim majority (Indonesia) and a Muslim minority societies (India). Women from the Muslim majority country talked about the veil in terms of convenience, fashion, and modesty, viewing the piece as a way of affirming cultural identity. The method allowed for the diverse responses of Muslim minority women who reflected upon their religiously inspired arguments of veiling. This included the convenience of veiling and how it opposes negative stereotypes and discrimination. Research which focuses on Muslim women's veiling experiences in the UK found that the voluntary practice of Islamic dress created female empowerment, Muslim identity and body confidence (Al Wazni, 2015).

Despite this growing body of work, a number of issues still limit our understanding of veiling and its relationship with body image. Firstly, the veil has been measured in an inconsistent manner throughout studies (Swami, 2015) with different definitions of what the veil actually is. Research fails to clearly distinguish between the different types of veiling, as there is a common misinterpretation of what types of Islamic dress are being addressed in research (Everett et al, 2014). Research heavily focuses on the hijab as a primary method of veiling (Tolaymat and Moradi, 2011; Swami et al, 2014; Al Wazni, 2015). There is also a lack of research on the experiences of full-face veiling in the UK. This study will therefore build on past research and aim to explore body image amongst a group of Muslim women who wear the full-face veil in the UK, using semi-structured interviews to provide an in-depth analysis of experiences.

### **Research Questions**

Why do a group of Muslim women choose to wear the Islamic full-face veil in Western culture?

How do experiences of wearing the full-face veil effect a group of Muslim women's body image?

How do a group of Muslim women conceptualise their body beneath the full-face veil?

### **Methodology**

#### **Design**

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the idea of body image among Muslim women who wear the full-face veil. A qualitative approach stresses the nature of reality being socially constructed. This involves looking at how social experiences are shaped and given meaning (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, the qualitative method was best suited to understand the reasoning and meanings behind why Muslim women chose to wear the full-face veil and how this affects their body image.

### **Participants**

Five British Muslim women who wore the full-face veil were recruited through opportunity sample. This sampling method was most appropriate as a specific inclusion criterion was required (Etikan et al, 2016). To be considered for the research, participants had to be a Muslim woman who wears the full-face veil and is over the age of 18. Samples for qualitative research are typically small (Marshall, 1996). This allows large amounts of subjective data to be gathered for the in-depth understanding of a particular topic (Howitt and Cramer, 2011).

Difficulties were faced when recruiting participants due to the researcher's limited access to women who wore the full-face veil. The minority Muslim population and women's reluctance to participate affected the recruitment process. The researcher began by approaching family members and friends who wear or know women who wear the full-face veil. Those who showed interest in the study were sent an invitation letter, information sheet disclosing the research aims and were required to respond with their contact details so arrangements could be made with the researcher.

### **Procedure**

An Application for Ethics Approval Form was submitted and accepted before data collection commenced (Appendix 1). All interviews took place in participant's home to provide them with a sense of comfort and ease when talking about their body image. In order to ensure researcher safety, a fellow companion was noted of the location in which the interview was being conducted.

The aim of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the body conceptualisation of women who wear the full-face veil and therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. This type of interviewing is most similar to a naturalistic dialogue (Drew et al, 2006). It was best suited to elicit participants conversation on personal, religious and body related matters. An interview schedule was developed consisting of open-ended questions to guide the interview. The use of open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on responses (Breakwell et al, 2011). In comparison to structured interviews, the semi-structured interview allows flexibility, enabling the researcher to elaborate upon any topics emerging in the present interview (Harrison et al, 2011).

Before the interviews began, participants were given an information letter to read and a consent form to sign. They were also given the opportunity to ask any questions relating to the research being conducted. The interviews lasted between 30-50 minutes and were carried out at participant's homes. They were recorded on a mobile device. After the interview was conducted, participants were debriefed and



thanked for participating in the research. Once the interviews were transcribed, the recordings were deleted.

### **Data analysis**

The transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The method involves the researcher discovering the participant's life-world through exploring their personal experiences (Smith and Osborn, 2007). Research using IPA tends to focus on understanding participants perceptions (Reid et al, 2005). Dimler and colleagues (2017) used phenomenology to focus on individual accounts of lived experiences to study their positive body image through the interview method. IPA was carried out to gain subjective reports on how the body is conceptualized in Muslim women who wear the full-face veil. This was deemed as the most appropriate analysis method as experiences of veiling differ amongst all women.

IPA offers a *new way of seeing* to help illuminate certain themes in the lives of particular individuals (Eatough and Smith, 2017). Meaningful patterns in the transcripts were found by using line-to-line commentary on the data like suggested by Larkin and Thompson (2012). IPA allowed for the analysis of Muslim women's experiences of wearing the full-face veil to look for common emerging themes.

### **Ethical considerations**

The research was carried out in accordance with the BPS Ethical Guidelines (2009) and ethical approval was gained by the MMU ethics committee. A consent form was given to participants which enclosed ethics information and contact details needed. Once the interview was done, participants were debriefed. This included the aim of the study, all ethical considerations and right to withdraw. The participants were also aware that the results of the research would be available to them if they were interested. The participants were then asked if they had any questions about the study.

All participants personal information such as names were anonymised, and participants were given a pseudonym to hide their identity. A mobile phone was used to record the interviews and once transcribed, they were deleted from the password protected device. All participant information was deleted after the interviews were carried out. While participant's data was anonymous, it was not kept confidential as interviews and quotes have been shared with the research supervisor and have been written within this report. However, participants were made aware of this in the consent form and debrief. Once the degree comes to an end, the interview transcripts will be destroyed. The interviews were carried out in participant's homes to offer them comfort in their natural environment. Whilst this jeopardised the researcher's safety, a friend of the researcher was aware of the interview locations and times. Participants were also the researcher's friends or acquaintances; therefore, a good relationship was more easily developed.

### **Analysis & Discussion**

After carrying out an IPA on the interview transcripts, four themes emerged: 1. Veiling and the importance of modesty, 2. Protection from Western body image

pressure, 3. Battling stereotypes of the veil and 4. The veil and Islamic identity. These themes are discussed below.

### **1. Veiling and the importance of modesty**

Many of the participants highlighted upon the religious significance of the veil. The Quran writes that women's garments should hang low and cover their body (The Quran, 33:58-59). While this has been interpreted in many ways (Ahmed et al, 2016), the following group of participants chose to wear the full-face veil to remain modest.

Rizwana explains how veiling is a way of living:

'... our religion teaches us how to live in a more civilised world and everything has a reason behind it. Women should remain covered whilst men should lower their gaze.' (Rizwana, 19-22)

'Now I wear it because I know the reasoning behind why Muslim women wear the full-face veil. I wear it to remain modest.' (Fahima, 81-82)

Remaining modest is a fundamental part of Islamic dress and most participants viewed covering with full-face veil as a religious responsibility. The responses are in line with Bhowon and Bundhoo (2016) who found veiling was an Islamic obligation, carried out to preserve women's modesty. Participant's internalisation of religious teachings led to their decision to wear the full-face veil. There was a general consensus that veiling brought them closer to Islam. Rizwana and Fahima's choice to remain covered contradicts the dominant beauty standards in Western culture which believe physical beauty to be related to more benefits in life (Engeln-Maddox, 2006). The choice to veil in Western society can be related to the modesty of one's privacy and morality, which is encouraged in the Quran (Chioco, 2017). This is seen as more important than displaying one's beauty for an audience outside of their religious duty.

'... if you had something really precious, you'd keep it hidden. Like a diamond ... you wouldn't keep it on display for everyone to touch. A woman is very precious in our religion.' (Rizwana, 25-27).

Rizwana suggests that veiling goes beyond the physical covering of the body; the full-face veil represents the value of women in Islamic culture. Odoms-Youngs (2008) emphasises the significance of religious beliefs in how the body is viewed. There is a relationship between the spiritual and physical self. The participant's interpretation of protection was integrated into both her meanings attached to the veil and her internal commitment to veiling. This reference to the diamond was similarly found by Droogsma (2007). For many Muslim women the body is considered as precious, deserving great care and protection. Veiling allows women to grant access to only those they wish to share their body with, proving women who veil have greater power over their bodies.

Aiysha found that her intentions and understanding of veiling developed overtime:

'It becomes a part of your nature, like now, I feel so wrong being in the presence of men I shouldn't be in' (Aiysha, 31-32)

Rasmussen (2013) explains how changes in veiling over the life-course are common. Aiysha describes how overtime, she feels wrong in the presence of men. The idea of the embodiment of Islamic dress was explained by Entwistle (2000). It was found that experiences of veiling influenced the individual's position in their social world. It can be interpreted that Aiysha's ritual practice of covering has become embodied through her experiences and consequently, the veil has become a part of her nature.

## **2. Protection from Western body image pressure**

In Western society, the pressure to attain a certain ideal is widespread (Swami, 2015), with the media acting as a key influencer in developing negative body image concerns amongst young women (Grogan, 2017). Alternatively, many participants found that veiling created a lower drive for such beauty ideals.

'... what I see in the media, it doesn't really affect me. I think because I'm covered, I'm not as bothered. ... I feel more free. It doesn't matter what I am wearing or how I am wearing it, I feel more comfortable in the way I am' (Aiysha, 39-43)

'When I'm covered, no one can really see what I look like underneath. I feel like I'm happy with the way I am anyway' (Shadia, 53-54)

Whilst Aiysha and Shadia were aware of how the media's construction of women can create negative body image (Grabe et al, 2008), Western media ideals were not internalised and did not create negative body image concerns within the participants. Wood-Barcalow and colleagues (2010) suggest that women who are happy with their body image filtered damaging information sources. Most participants were aware of the negative impact the media can cause and decided to limit its consumption. The responses also suggest that being physically covered offers protection from observers' judgement. This is similar to Litchmore and Safdar (2016) who found Muslim women viewed the veil as offering protection from the public, as well as the unwanted advances of men. This lack of judgement from others, consequently made some women feel more free.

Few participants also focused on the importance of physical health rather than beauty:

'I am healthy, and I don't feel like I need to change myself' (Fahima, 50-51)

'I was so skinny that clothes didn't fit me, that became a problem. That's when it used to bother me ... when I wasn't completely wearing it. But after I started wearing the face veil, I wasn't bothered what people thought about me. Now, I'm just comfortable the way I am ... I am happy with the way my body is.' (Hana, 82-88)

The responses suggest that there is a shift in focus from a desire to conform to Western ideals, to the need to be physically healthy. Cash (2004) explains how the

individual's subjective experiences of their body reflects how they view reality. Hana's own personal struggle with weight is in line with Cash's findings. Hana does not chase the Western ideals that are not based on reality. Her reflection on health-related experiences revealed that being physically healthy was most important. This contradicts research which has found women in Western society to engage in disordered eating to match media ideals (Pinasavage et al, 2015). The veil can allow women to focus on their physical health rather than jeopardising it to match unattainable standards of beauty.

Aiysha also explains how she would feel more conscious without the full-face veil:

'If I didn't have it on, I wouldn't feel comfortable at all. I wouldn't be myself, I'd be constantly looking at myself thinking that everyone is looking at me. When I'm wearing the veil, I feel like no one is looking at me' (Aiysha, 63-67)

Allen (2015) highlights the negative stereotypes of veiling which leaves Muslim women to be viewed as 'invisible'. Aiysha alternatively sees this as a positive, as being on display for others to see would otherwise make her feel more body conscious. Wilhelm and colleagues (2018) found that Muslim women who were unveiled reported more body checking than those who were veiled. Adherence to Islamic dress can indirectly protect women's body image from appearance based public scrutiny. The stricter a woman practises Islamic veiling, the higher her body satisfaction and self-esteem (Rastmanesh et al, 2009). The veil can therefore be interpreted to have a protective effect on psychological health.

While stranger's opinions do not affect Hana's body confidence, she alternatively feels more of a pressure in the presence of other Muslim girls:

'Even your abaya, like how you accessorise it. If you don't, people would be like "look at the way she's dressing" ... the jabbah and abaya have become so common now, like a fashion statement.' (Hana, 118-121)

Hana found that the body image ideals portrayed in her own community affected her. This is supported by Spitz (2006) who suggests that our cultural influences impact mental constructions of the body. Similar ideas have been discussed by Saghir and Hyland (2017) who suggests that sociocultural pressures are often internalised by those part of that culture. The Western ideal was not internalised by Hana, however a pressure to conform to the fashion standards within the Muslim community were apparent.

### **3. Battling stereotypes of the veil**

In the West, veiling reflects a general association with the Middle East, religious fundamentalism and patriarchal oppression (Rasmussen, 2013). One issue some participants found was battling the misconception of what the veil really represents.

'I think it's hard for women who wear the veil, I feel like I get objectified as a woman who doesn't speak. Someone who is completely within their faith, probably isn't open minded and is oppressed' (Shadia, 62-64)

'There's a lot of misconception that women are forced to wear the veil, it's completely not true. I have complete freedom and choice. My sister and mother don't wear the veil, but I chose to wear one' (Rizwana, 27-29)

The veil is commonly associated with women's oppression and limited freedom (Blakeman, 2014). Participant's experiences within society and media representations have led Muslim women to believe that the public considers them as being controlled by either religion or men. This is supported by Posetti (2006) who argues Muslim women are portrayed by Western media to be veiled victims which lack the freedom of choice. From being labelled as women with little choice, many participants explain the flexibility they have with the full-face veil:

'... if I do feel uncomfortable, I do take it off too. It just depends on where I am. I don't want to put that pressure on myself, it's not a nice feeling to be uncomfortable' (Shadia, 35-37)

'I don't wear it at work, I work in an office and it's hard having something on your face for so long and when I used to work with children, I couldn't wear it then'. (Rizwana, 7-9)

While the full-face veil is interpreted as a women's lack of choice, Blakeman (2014) explains how living in a Western society can give women the choice of veiling which may not be available in their home countries. This is supported by Al Wazni (2015) who found that women who exercised their choice of Islamic dress contradicted mainstream Western ideas. Choosing to veil in American society led to the development of female empowerment and liberation not necessarily associated with Islam. Similar ideas were discussed by participants who expressed the flexibility of the veil. From veiling in the workplace to feeling uncomfortable in public, the veil can be taken off at any time.

'I've never been body conscious so that hasn't changed for me. What's changed is the way women [who wear the veil] are portrayed. That's what makes me uncomfortable' (Shadia, 95-97)

'Killing one person is like killing the whole of humanity, that's in the Quran. ... I do find that since all this terrorism, it's caused loads of people to become really aggressive towards us. If they see someone who is wearing a veil, they think that they are an extremist or something (Rizwana, 96-100)

A couple of participants referred to recent terrorist attacks and how they have affected their experience of wearing the veil. The wave of recent terrorism in the West has left Shadia feeling uncomfortable and stereotyped as an extremist. Shadia also had concerns about the way Islam and Islamic dress was being portrayed through the media and interpreted by the public. The way Shadia feels is supported by findings by Zine (2006) who found that outsiders commonly associated Muslim girls who veil with terrorism. Rizwana aimed to explain the true Islam and how such acts are condemned in the religion.

For Rizwana, veiling affects how she interacts within society. Due to the recent attitudes of the public, she feels a responsibility of representing Muslim women in a positive way:

‘... when I wear my veil and I see someone in need, it makes me want to help them more because I want other to know people that we’re just normal human beings. I want to make it so people can approach us.’ (Rizwana, 49-51)

For Rizwana, an important part of veiling is how the rest of society view her. Kapur (2002) explains that while there are multiple meanings of the veil from a range of different cultural and historical contexts, the image of terrorism is continually associated with Islamic dress. Therefore, Rizwana feels an increasing desire to represent the real Muslim women through acts of kindness. As a Muslim woman who veils, she feels a responsibility to make positive lasting impressions on the wider public.

#### **4. The veil and Islamic identity**

Wagner and colleagues (2012) found that the veil was used by Muslim women to affirm their cultural identity. Islamic dress therefore distinguishes Muslim women from non-believers (Wills, 2017). All participants highlighted upon the religious significance of the veil and how it develops identity.

‘... you have your own identity. People know just from looking at you what faith you’re from and they’ll have that respect for you as a Muslim woman’ (Shadia, 22-23)

‘It forms my identity, and I’m dressed in a way which makes people treat me more respectfully. When I’m out and about people know who you are, and I’m recognised as a Muslim woman’ (Aiysha, 34-36)

For the participants, the veil represents women of Islam. This is supported by Chapman (2016) who found that veiling reinforced a shared sense of Muslim identity. The full-face veil is clearly distinguishable from other cultural dress. Rasmussen (2013) suggests that veiling creates stereotypes. The public associate women who veil to be oppressed or a religious fundamentalist. Both Aiysha and Shadia alternatively view the veil as giving them more respect. This is in line with El Guindi (2003) who focuses upon the sacred privacy the veil offers. This is best described by the sanctity-reserve-respect concept which highlights the relationship between veiling, respect and sin. Reputation within the Muslim community is a cultural investment which needs to be maintained and this involves behaving respectfully towards women in Islam. The respect the participants gain is an important part of the religion.

Some participants also reflected upon how veiling makes them feel closer to the minority Muslim community of their hometown:

Hana explains how wearing the veil gives her: '... a sense of belonging ... especially because we live in Chorley, we have such a small Muslim community and you feel closer to them' (Hana, 66-68)

'The Muslim community where I live is quite small so wearing the veil makes me feel a part of that. It's also a positive because the veil is a norm in my family, so I feel proud to wear it' (Shadia, 100-102)

Hana and Shadia's experiences of veiling allowed them to feel closer to the small Muslim community in the town they are from. This is in line with findings of Ruby (2006) who suggests veiling creates a sense of belonging to a wider Muslim world. Veiling can be a way of affirming cultural identity (Wagner et al, 2012) and can further heighten participant's sense of belongingness to the minority Muslim community in the UK.

However, some participants also highlight upon the responsibility veiling creates in their community:

'I was really conscious as I was working in a place where I'd be seen by children's parents. I felt like people would judge me for mixing in, I was conscious about what the Muslim community would think about me working there' (Hana, 208-210)

'When I wear the veil, I have an image to withhold, like a responsibility' (24-25)

Both Hana and Shadia believe that the Muslim community holds certain expectations of women who veil. This is in line with Göle (2003:21) who suggests that control of the public sphere can cancel out individual choice by 'determining lifestyles, monopolizing the cultural code, and instituting an Islamist form of the colonization of the self'. There is fear of the judgement of others within the community, as veiling comes with a responsibility. Peterson (2016) suggests that Islamic dress can create anxiety over Muslim women's bodies, appearances and emotions. Participants consequently experienced a conflict between the positive feelings of belongingness and the pressure to uphold a certain image of the Muslim community.

## **Summary**

From this research and literature review, it can be suggested that Muslim women conceptualise their body differently to the dominant ideas in Western society. The group of women in the study viewed covering with full-face veil as a fundamental part of Islamic dress and as a religious responsibility. The main reasoning for veiling was to remain modest and protect one's beauty. Consequently, veiling acts as protection from Western beauty ideals as many women in the study found a lower pressure to conform to body image ideals. Furthermore, some Muslim women found importance in battling the stereotypes of the veil relating to patriarchal oppression, lack of choice and religious fundamentalism. Overall, the choice to veil can help women integrate within the Muslim community whilst also affirming their Islamic identity within wider society.

## Limitations and implications

The study aimed to build upon past research on Muslim women, veiling and body image. The use of IPA was beneficial as it allowed the researcher to study the meanings behind particular experiences and make sense of participant's personal and social worlds (Smith and Osborne, 2007). Smith et al (2009) recommend the use of small samples to allow rich, in-depth analysis of phenomenon to take place. However, the use of smaller samples in IPA can become a limitation of research (Pringle et al, 2011). The current study only interviewed five Muslim women who wear the full-face veil, aged between 22-30. All participants were also from the same town and had similar experiences in terms of being a part of a small Muslim community. Future research could explore the experiences of full-face veiling in a wider sample for a more thorough analysis.

IPA involves using a hermeneutic circle which encourages the researcher to use a dynamic, iterative and non-linear approach to interpreting, allowing full immersion into the data (Eatough and Smith, 2017). One problem this produces is the richly subjective researcher interpretations of text (Frosh and Young, 2017). It is important to be aware that multiple researchers will interpret texts differently depending on personal and social positions.

Despite the growing body of work which explores Muslim women's experiences, there are still issues which limit our understanding of veiling and its relationship with body image. The veil has been inconsistently measured throughout studies (Swami et al, 2013) and therefore, this research aims to clearly define veiling with the niqab and how it affects the body image of a group of Muslim women in the UK. The findings of the study build upon Al Wazni's (2015) research which found that the voluntary practice of Islamic dress in Western society created female empowerment, Muslim identity and body confidence. By using IPA, in-depth exploration of Muslim women's experiences found that the full-face veil lowers Western body image pressures while affirming religious identity.

## Reflexivity

An important part of qualitative methodology is the reflexivity which questions the researchers social position, personal experiences and professional beliefs, to strike a balance between the personal and the universal (Berger, 2013). Reflexivity consequently increases the credibility of research findings by outlining the researcher's values, knowledge and biases (Cutcliffe, 2003).

I was interested in researching why a group of Muslim women in the UK decided to wear the full-face veil and how it affected their body image. As a Muslim woman myself who has made the decision not to veil, I was intrigued to understand how the body was conceptualised by women who decided to hide it. I am also affected by the Western body image pressures portrayed in the media and wanted to explore if Muslim women who wear Islamic dress have similar experiences.

The researcher's social relations with the participants can affect both the topic question and the knowledge gained (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017). Taking an insider position as a fellow Muslim was advantageous as I was better able to understand



and represent Muslim women's experiences of veiling. This is particularly important in research with groups which are under-represented or socially marginalised (Zempi, 2016) such as Muslim women who veil in the UK.

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