

Narrative Inquiry on Bangsamoro Hijabis and their Experiences on Veiling

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Abstract:

This research explores the veiling practices among Filipina Muslim women, scrutinizing the personal and societal dimensions of wearing the hijab - a headscarf worn by Muslim women to cover their hair, neck, and sometimes shoulders. The practice of veiling reflects adherence to Islamic dress codes that extend beyond attire to encompass expected social behaviors. Employing standpoint theory as analytical framework, the study aims to address misconceptions surrounding the veiling tradition. By examining the experiences of hijabis the paper argues that their choice to wear the hijab is a rational act of individual agency rather than mere conformity to social norms. This study presents a comparative analysis of veiling within Muslim and non-Muslim communities, highlighting the hijab's integral role in the lives of the interviewees, all of whom have practiced veiling for over a decade. By purposively selecting long-term hijabis and considering their narratives, this research provides insights into the complex reasons behind the maintenance of the veil and its significance as more than just a piece of fabric.

Keywords: hijab, Islamic tradition, Filipina hijabi, veiling, religious practice, cultural identity, standpoint theory

Introduction:

This narrative inquiry delved into the personal experiences and perspectives of Bangsamoro *hijabis* in relation to their veiling practices, as well as the social and cultural contexts that shaped these experiences. In the realm of religious studies and gender discourse, the veil, or hijab, worn by Muslim women, presents an intersection of faith, identity, and societal norms. This research article seeks to dissect the complex layers of meaning and connotations that the hijab holds within the context of Muslim women's lives in the Bangsamoro region. The term 'veil' is used interchangeably with

'hijab', acknowledging the significance and sensitivity of the term within Islamic culture while exploring its broader implications.

The hijab is commonly understood to be a headscarf worn by some Muslim women which typically covers the hair, neck, and sometimes the shoulders, but not the face. The practice of veiling, or wearing the hijab, is multifaceted and often informed by religious, cultural, and personal considerations. Not all Muslim women choose to wear the hijab, and for those who do, the reasons

can encompass religious duties, cultural identity, or personal preference.

Diversity in hijab-wearing practices is found not only globally but also within specific countries such as the Philippines. This underscores the importance of examining the personal narratives of Muslim women who choose to veil. This study's exploration can provide insights into the varied experiences and significances of the hijab, extending beyond the often generalized and superficial portrayals in media and public discourse (Nisa, 2013; Williams et al., 2017).

Through this study, it is anticipated that a nuanced understanding of the act of veiling will emerge from the perspective of those who practice it. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that these experiences do not represent all Muslim women who wear the hijab. The accounts documented here reflect individual experiences and should be seen as contributions to a broader conversation that recognizes the rich tapestry of practices and beliefs among hijab-wearing women in the Philippines, particularly in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

Veiling as a Gender Issue:

Veiling is a nuanced gender issue with multi-dimensional implications for Muslim women's identities and their positioning within society. Western discourse has tended to characterize the hijab as a symbol of oppression, reflecting a limited understanding of its cultural and religious significance. This perspective often overlooks the agency that many women exercise in choosing to wear the hijab and the diverse reasons behind it.

The portrayal of the hijab as a tool of oppression can have tangible consequences. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed (1992) and Fatema Mernissi (1991) have argued that such portrayals feed into stereotypic schemata which limit the appreciation of Muslim women's complexity and diversity, reducing them to singular narratives that obscure their autonomy and contributions to society (Zine, 2006).

These analyses suggest that the discourse surrounding the hijab has not only affected perceptions but has influenced the material realities of Muslim women. By framing the hijab within a simplistic narrative of oppression, there is a risk of denying Muslim women the rights and opportunities afforded to others, which could have an adverse effect on the pursuit of gender equity.

When the hijab is viewed through a singularly negative lens, it disregards the personal, spiritual, and cultural values that many women attach to it (Hasan, 2018). Moreover, it undermines the agency and autonomy of Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab as a personal expression of their faith and identity (Jardin & Vorster, 2003). Furthermore, by considering the hijab solely as a symbol of patriarchal control, Western feminist critiques sometimes fail to account for the ways in which Muslim women themselves interpret and ascribe meaning to veiling practices. For many, it is an assertion of religious identity and a source of empowerment within the framework of their faith (Zine, 2006). It is important to recognize and respect the intersectionality within Muslim communities, where the decision to veil can be influenced by a blend of personal convictions, social environment, cultural practices, and religious interpretations. Instead of reducing the hijab to a symbol of oppression, a more nuanced view is necessary to appreciate its multiple and personalized significances (Jain, 2021). This includes considering the voices and experiences of the women who wear it, thus promoting a more informed and inclusive dialogue on gender, faith, and autonomy.

The Paradoxical Connotations of the Hijab:

In Islamic tradition, modesty is advocated as a virtue for both men and women, though the requirements for what constitutes modest dress can differ between the genders. This principle is deeply embedded within Islamic scriptures, including the Qur'an - the foundational text for Muslims, that provides guidance on various aspects of life including dress and behavior.

The Qur'anic verses specifically referring to the covering of women emphasize modesty and are interpreted by scholars and adherents as directives from God. To wit:

And say to the believing women to lower their gaze, and protect their private parts, and not to show their ornaments except what is apparent, and to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to show their adornments except to their husbands, or their fathers, or their husband's' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women or what their right hands possess, or to their male servants who have no vigor, or children who are not yet aware of women's private parts... - Qur'an, Chapter 24 an-Nuur/"The Light": 31

These verses are not merely seen as rules to be followed, but are often embraced by believers as acts of devotion that reflect a commitment to their faith. The concept of modest clothing is therefore intertwined with spiritual consciousness, and for many Muslims, adherence to these guidelines is a pathway to spiritual salvation (Hays, 2019).

The hijab, commonly understood as the headscarf that covers the hair, neck, and sometimes shoulders, serves as a visible marker of this modesty. However, the term hijab and the practice of veiling encompass more than just the headscarf. In a broader sense, hijab includes the overall attire that is intended to maintain modesty by covering the '*awrat*, an Arabic term which refers to the intimate parts of the body (both of a man and a woman) that is meant to be concealed according to the Qur'an. In many Islamic interpretations, the '*awrat* for women extends beyond the areas covered by the headscarf to essentially include the entire body except the face and hands, necessitating the wearing of loose-fitting and non-transparent clothing that conceals the shape of the body (Wazni, 2015).

It is important to note that interpretations of what constitutes proper Islamic attire, including what areas constitute '*awrat* and how they should be covered, can vary among different Islamic schools of thought and cultural contexts. Despite these variations, the underlying principle of modesty remains a constant and significant element of Islamic teachings on gender and piety.

Within the discourse of Western societies, the practice of veiling among Muslim women often carries significant cultural connotations and is frequently misinterpreted as a symbol of gender oppression. This perception is largely predicated upon selective international portrayals which highlight countries where the hijab is mandated by law or enforced through societal pressures, equating the practice with religious extremism (Rahmath et al, 2015; Bakht, 2022). For example, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria, the policies regarding female dress are often seen as emblematic of broader interpretations of Islamic law that emphasize a stringent adherence to traditionalism, which is at times conflated with extremist ideology. These countries have predominantly Muslim populations and their legal and social frameworks are deeply informed by their interpretation of the Holy Qur'an. Indeed, in these societies, the teachings from the Qur'an transcend

mere spiritual guidance and form the bedrock of civil law and policy. Given that veiling is associated in these contexts with a Divine mandate, the societal expectation for Muslim women to conform to specific dress codes is imbued with a sense of legal and religious necessity (Yurdakul, 2015).

In cases where Muslim-majority countries enact laws enforcing veiling, such as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, or Nigeria, there indeed exists a dimension of state-enforced oppression. For Muslim women in these contexts, non-compliance often results in punishment or condemnation, stripping away the element of personal choice with respect to veiling (Sunderland, 2012; Rozario, 2006). Under such strict interpretations of Sharia law, women are coerced to align their lifestyles with both the religious dictates and state policies that intrude into the private sphere, including their public demeanor and appearance. The situation can be equally oppressive in secular countries where bans on the hijab are enforced, such as in Turkey and Iran, where the ideals of democracy and secularism paradoxically result in the denial of the choice to veil. The prohibition of the hijab in these nations represents another form of oppression, now under the guise of secularism or modernity, but still restrictive of personal agency (Saied, 2018).

The situation is exacerbated for Muslim communities in diaspora, particularly within Western Europe, where cultural intolerance often surfaces. For example, in France, the legal proscription of wearing the hijab in public schools, which the government passed in 2004, has been a subject of considerable debate and controversy. This law is often criticized for targeting Muslim women and has been seen as symptomatic of a broader suspicion towards Muslim practices in public life. The ban is rooted in France's strict secularism or "*laïcité*," which calls for the absence of religious symbols in public spaces, but it notably impacts Muslim women wearing the hijab more than adherents of other religions (Hopkins, 2014).

In countries like Australia and India, Muslim communities face social pressures and at times, outright hostility. Incidences of discrimination, hate speech, and maneuvering of social narratives can contribute to a sense of alienation and exclusion. These pressures can force Muslim women to negotiate their identities in environments that may be openly hostile to their religious expressions (Kabir, 2016). In Canada, despite a

reputation for multiculturalism and inclusion, Muslim communities can still confront narratives that pigeonhole them as "foreign" or inherently "oppressed" due to their religious practices. Such perceptions fail to recognize the multiplicity within Muslim identities and the diverse reasons why Muslim women may choose to veil (Rasmussen, 2013).

Contrastingly, Islam's portrayal across the globe varies significantly, occupying a spectrum from moderate to hardline. In the stringent hardline approach, compulsory veiling is symbolic of a broader patriarchal and authoritarian imposition, as seen in some Islamist states. Conversely, Muslim women in countries with a more moderate Islam, like Egypt and Jordan, experience greater freedom and a feminist interpretation of the Qur'an more conducive to individual liberty regarding veiling. As noted in ethnographic studies of Muslim societies within these more liberal states, veiling can be an emblem of moral commitment, honor, and familial respect, based on personal discretion rather than governmental mandate (Jardim & Vorster, 2003).

These factors contribute to the widening cultural chasm and complicate the already challenging process of integration for Muslim diaspora communities. The social dynamics fostered in such environments can lead to further stigmatization, making the path towards a genuinely inclusive and just civil society more difficult. This underscores the need for better cross-cultural understanding and nuanced discussions about the hijab and the rights of Muslim women to express their religious identities freely. These constructs and policies have served to alienate Muslim communities and present serious obstacles to integration within host societies, fostering a climate of stigmatization and cultural exclusion. As El Hamel (2002) observes, such societal dynamics exacerbate the alienation of Muslim communities and impede the process of integrating into a just and civil society. This underscores the importance of understanding the intricate relationship between individual volition, religious practices, state policies, and societal norms in discussions around the veil and Muslim women's rights.

The Western narrative often fails to recognize the complexity and diversity of experiences among Muslim women with respect to veiling practices. This monolithic representation disregards the agency of women who choose to wear the hijab as

an expression of their faith, culture, and identity. Furthermore, it obscures the fact that force and coercion are not universally applicable to all Muslim-majority countries or communities and disregards the existence of voluntary veiling practices in these and other societies (Arar & Shapira, 2016). This conceptualization of veiling as an instrument of oppression also overlooks the nuanced significance of the hijab as perceived by many Muslim women themselves. For countless women, the veil represents devotion, modesty, and a means to negotiate their place in society while wielding control over their bodies and the gaze of others. These perspectives challenge dominant Western discourses and call into question the binary of oppressed versus liberated that often frames these discussions. The reality is that for many Muslim women, the act of veiling is a complex interplay of personal choice, cultural norms, social expectations, and religious beliefs, which cannot be conveniently categorized under the banner of oppression. This discourse surrounding the hijab and its association with oppression also fails to account for the personal and community resistance against such characterizations. Muslim women across the globe engage in various forms of advocacy and education to dismantle stereotypes and assert their autonomy. The hijab, in these acts of resistance, serves not as a symbol of subjugation but as a declaration of self-determination and religious identity (Ruby, 2006).

The characterization of veiling as a form of undesirable cultural difference is not uncommon in Western societies, where Muslim women's practice of wearing the hijab is subjected to scrutiny and often misinterpretation. As observed by Bilge (2010), the hijab is rendered an allegory for unwanted cultural divergence, caught in the crossfire of conflicting narratives. It is perceived by some as evidence of oppressive practices within Muslim communities, while paradoxically also being seen as a challenge to the Western ideals of modernity and a liberal culture of individual freedoms.

Against the backdrop of such stereotyping and cultural misunderstanding, it is essential to recognize that the act of wearing the hijab does not uniformly signal oppression or a threat. It is crucial, as the researcher argues, to foster a more nuanced understanding of Islamic culture and the multifaceted experiences of Muslim women through empirical research. Rather than relying on oversimplifications and flawed analyses, there is a

pressing need for evidence-based studies that can illuminate the complex realities of veiling and counter the prevailing tendencies to hastily generalize about Muslim women's lived experiences. Only through empirical inquiry can the discourse move beyond the entrenched stereotypes and approach the subject of veiling and its sociocultural implications with the care and accuracy it deserves.

Methods: Participants and Procedure:

For this study, a purposive sampling method was employed, resulting in the selection of twelve participants. Data collection was facilitated through the usages of social media due to geographical and logistical constraints. The participants were contacted via Facebook Messenger—chosen for its widespread use and accessibility—where they were cordially invited to partake in the research. Each participant consented willingly to contribute to the study. Subsequently, an open-ended questionnaire was disseminated to the participants to capture the depth and breadth of their experiences. The questions posed were as follows:

1. Why do you choose to wear the hijab?
2. What are the factors that influenced your decision to wear the hijab?
3. Have you encountered any particular situations or challenges when wearing the hijab in predominantly non-Muslim communities?

The rationale behind selecting this methodological approach is threefold: a) the researcher, being temporarily based in Cebu City, Philippines, had limited personal networks within the hijabi community; b) the dispersed geographic locations of the participants, who reside in various parts of Mindanao, Philippines, made in-person data collection impractical; and c) the selected respondents have a substantial history of hijab usage, each having worn it for over a decade, which is anticipated to provide rich insights into their lived experiences.

Given the researcher's affiliation with an institution in the province of Tawi-Tawi, Philippines, it was anticipated that the majority of the participants would be of Tausug descent, as they represent a prominent ethnic group in that region, alongside the Sinama people. The final participant composition included eight Tausug, three Sinama, and one Maranao individual.

Standpoint Theory and Its Relevance to Hijabi Women:

Standpoint theory suggests that individuals in a specific group understand their status and experiences that may not be fully understood or valued by those outside the group. Standpoint theory, when applied to hijabi women, highlights how their unique experiences as women, Muslims, and members of a visible religious minority provide them with distinct insights into the interconnectedness of gender, religion, and culture (Tajuddin, 2018).

Hijabi women encounter a complex intersection of gender, religion, and culture which influence and shape their everyday experiences. Their particular standpoint as adherents to Islamic principles and as part of a visible religious minority gives them special perspectives on power dynamics, discrimination issues, and identity concerns (al-Huraibi, 2017). The challenges faced by hijabis are varied; from overt discrimination to subtle forms of marginalization and misunderstanding. Despite these difficulties, hijabis demonstrate resilience by actively asserting their identities, educating others, and engaging in dialogues addressing misconceptions and promoting inclusivity. This proactive stance reflects a strong commitment to their beliefs despite unwelcoming attitudes encountered at times. Keeping this climate in mind, it can sometimes be consistently unwelcoming or encroaching on women's freedoms, persisting advocacy agencies. Their ongoing efforts in reclaiming narratives gradually illuminate the intricate connections between personal empowerment, cultural expression, and the complexity of cultural ideals, while simultaneously complying with religious adherence. While we regard this, we also recognize the diverse variations in diversity within veiling practices among Muslims (Alghafli et.al., 2017). Although it is important to acknowledge that hijab fulfills uniform purposes in accordance with Quranic commands, the diversity in its symbolism and physical representation varies widely across cultures and regions, and individual beliefs.

In essence, standpoint theory provides a framework for analyzing power dynamics and social positions shaping each unique experience, which is critical in recognizing, taking into account, and striving for an inclusive understanding, consideration, and appreciation of the diverse, multifaceted nature within different realities they navigate, including

identity and faith (Edwards, 2018). Conflicting identities and serene faith journeys are experiences they undergo (Small, 2009). By donning the hijab, these women occupy a social location that grants them an epistemic advantage. They can offer perspectives that challenge the normative cultural narratives often dominated by the views of the majority (Arar & Shapira, 2016). This standpoint enables hijabi women to articulate the subtleties of discrimination, the nuances of cultural expression, and the internal complexities of their faith-based practices.

Standpoint theory has been widely applied in various scholarly inquiries as a means to frame and understand the experiences of marginalized groups. For example, in feminist research, standpoint theory has been utilized to highlight women's experiences and knowledge as critical to understanding social hierarchies and power relations (Kaur & Nagaich, 2019). A notable application of standpoint theory is in the field of communications, where researchers Ferguson and Tuchman (1990) used the framework to analyze the media's portrayal of women's roles in society. They argued that women's perspectives offer a necessary counterpoint to the predominantly male narratives that have historically shaped media content. Another study by Harding (2004) applied standpoint theory in science and technology, examining how scientific knowledge and practices are influenced by social positions and power structures, bringing attention to the often-overlooked contributions of women and other marginalized groups in scientific fields (Alam, 2019).

These applications of standpoint theory across diverse disciplines underscore its utility in shedding light on the specific and situated knowledge that individuals from various social positions bring to bear on their understanding of the world. This emphasis on the importance of marginalized voices serves as a critical tool in challenging dominant discourses (Darder, 2018) and advocating for more inclusive and equitable considerations in research endeavors.

In the case of this paper, standpoint theory also the vital role that hijabi women play in countering monolithic narratives about Islam and Muslim women. Their diverse voices and stories reveal that the act of veiling is not a homogeneous practice but varies widely according to individual choice, cultural influences, and personal interpretation of

religious texts (Simon, 2001). From a standpoint theory lens, this study recognizes that the standpoint of hijabi women is not uniform; it is informed by their unique personal, social, and cultural matrices. The theory serves to accentuate the importance of empowering hijabi women to speak on their own terms, thus enriching our understanding of their decisions, challenges, and resilience in the face of adversity (Droogsmas, 2007). It validates their experiences as sources of legitimate knowledge and underscores the significance of their contributions to discussions about gender, religion, and identity within and beyond Muslim communities.

Results and Discussion:

Motivators for veiling

Central to the practice of wearing the hijab for the study's participants is the concept of religious obligation. The wearing of the hijab is interpreted as a commandment from the Qur'an, and adherence to this practice is seen as an integral part of fulfilling one's duties as a Muslim. This sentiment is encapsulated in the responses of participants, one of whom stated, *"I believe in Allah's command in the Qur'an". "I wear it because my religion is Islam."* Such a perspective demonstrates the role of hijab as a manifestation of piety and religious devotion. Participants express a deeply rooted conviction that the hijab is not merely a cultural ornamentation but a divine stipulation, whose observance is intimately connected with their spiritual beliefs and ethical commitments. The hijab, therefore, is not a passive cultural artifact; it is an active, conscious embodiment of faith. It represents a physical reminder of the wearer's dedication to Islamic tenets and a daily reaffirmation of their religious identity.

In addition to religious edicts, the hijab serves as a powerful indicator of Muslim identity. It operates as a social signal, delineating the boundary between Muslim and non-Muslim spheres, and consequently, influences the interactions hijabi women have with others. The hijab becomes a form of non-verbal communication that silently broadcasts their Islamic faith to the surrounding community. One participant's experience exemplifies this phenomenon: *"I wear hijab to identify myself as a Muslim. It helps people decide how they would treat me. Fellow Muslims would automatically greet me, Salaam. When I'm in a non-Muslim dominated area, people will tell me if a dish has pork in it without me having to ask."*

This testament underscores how the hijab can facilitate a sense of belonging within the Muslim community while simultaneously acting as a bridge of cultural respect and sensitivity among those from other backgrounds. The hijab, therefore, embodies a complex interplay of self-identification, community belonging, and intercultural interaction. It serves multiple roles in the lives of Muslim women who choose to wear it. It is inscribed with various meanings shaped by the unique cultural standpoints of these women. It functions as a marker of Muslim identity, affirming the wearers' sense of belonging to the Muslim community. Furthermore, the hijab can be seen as a way to resist sexual objectification, leading to more respect from others and preserving intimate relationships. By enabling these women to express their religious and cultural identities, the hijab acts as a bridge of cultural respect and sensitivity, facilitating intercultural interactions and understanding (Droogsmas, 2007). Additionally, a study with Arab Muslim women in the United States and France highlights that, despite Western feminist skepticism, these women express agency and personal choice in veiling and challenge stereotypes of oppression and submission, reinforcing the idea of the hijab as part of self-identification and community belonging (Zimmerman, 2014).

Factors influencing decision to wear the hijab

In an Islamic society, the adoption and practice of veiling are met with widespread acceptability and support, largely due to its normative status within the cultural and religious fabric of such communities. Respondents consistently reported a supportive familial backdrop. They felt that the hijab was not just tolerated but respected and cherished as appropriate behavior. Such familial and communal structures are crucial in fostering a sense of belonging and validation for the practice of veiling. The hijab is perceived not only as a mark of religious observance but also as an embodiment of appropriate social conduct, firmly establishing it as a revered aspect of a woman's identity (Bhowon & Bhundoo, 2016). The prevailing social norms within these communities thus reiterate the significance and ease of integrating the hijab into the women's daily lives.

For some respondents within the study, choosing to veil is deeply connected to familial respect and the notion of honoring one's heritage, especially if their parents assume a position of religious leadership or

are esteemed within their community. These individuals view donning the hijab as an extension of respect for their family's status and an acknowledgment of the communal values upheld by their elders. The act of wearing the hijab serves not only as a personal religious commitment but also as a public affirmation of their family's religious devotion and standing, reinforcing bonds of community cohesion and shared tradition (Alghafli et al., 2017).

Educational influences are also significant in guiding the practice of veiling among young Muslim women. In many Islamic educational environments, the hijab is not simply an option but a required component of the school uniform. This institutional policy instills the practice as a normative part of daily attire from a young age, thus influencing the understanding and adoption of the hijab as a natural element of a young woman's identity. Manal Hamzeh's (2015) research discusses how the hijab, within this context, is framed as an embodiment of religious and gender identity that girls learn to integrate within their personal expression as they mature. This early and regular interaction with the hijab in educational spaces helps it to become an aspect of self-expression that feels both personal and communal for those within the Islamic faith tradition.

Peer groups and family networks play a significant role in shaping individual behaviors and cultural practices, including the wearing of the hijab. Within many Muslim communities, the expectations and norms upheld by family members and social circles serve as influential benchmarks for appropriate conduct. These community standards deeply affect how young Muslim women perceive and engage with the practice of veiling. Familial encouragement or requirements to wear the hijab reinforce its significance as a cultural and religious identifier, while peers who also wear it can provide a supportive environment that affirms this practice as a shared value of the community. Such social reinforcement helps to embed the hijab within the socio-religious fabric of a young woman's upbringing, solidifying its adoption as both a personal choice and a communal expectation.

The complex relationship between social influence and personal choice is prominently featured in the decision of many Muslim women to wear the hijab. Interviews and ethnographic research, such as the studies by Uma Bhowon and Harshalini Y.

Bundhoo (2016), have shown that although peer groups and familial guidance are foundational in the initial adoption of the hijab, many women undergo a personal transformation whereby the hijab becomes a vital part of their own identity and spirituality. This internalization process often involves an engagement with Islamic scriptures, such as the Quran and Hadiths, which many believe to prescribe veiling as a moral and religious duty for personal modesty.

Through this spiritual and intellectual exploration, the hijab transitions from being an external symbol of religious adherence to an authentic internal commitment. Women describe this journey as a self-discovery process where the hijab is no longer seen as just a piece of fabric but an integral part of their Muslim identity, deeply connected to their notion of self, principles, and sense of piety (William & Vashi, 2007). This transition signifies a shift from externally motivated compliance to a personally meaningful practice, highlighting the nuanced and deeply felt relationship Muslim women can have with the hijab as an expression of their faith and values. In other words, the relationship between social influences and personal choice in the practice of veiling is dynamic. While social and familial influences may initiate the practice of wearing the hijab, many women transition to embracing it through personal conviction and desire for a deeper understanding of their religion. Through contemplation and study of religious texts, including the Quran and Hadiths, they internalize the religious teachings that endorse veiling as part of the Islamic moral code of female modesty. In the words of one hijabi: “ ... *the hijab already became a part of me. I personally have loved the hijab and all the perks that come with it.*”

Yildiz Atasoy's (2006) research supports this concept, indicating that Muslim women actively engage with their faith's doctrines to affirm their commitment to Islamic customs and teachings related to veiling. This engagement with religious texts empowers them to adopt the hijab not simply as a requirement but as an essential aspect of their spiritual expression and identity. The veil thus becomes more than a physical garment; it evolves into a spiritual and ethical choice that resonates with the individual's sense of self and morality. Muslim women often express a deep affinity for the hijab, suggesting that it is an inherent part of their being and identity. The sentiment expressed by hijabi women encompasses the virtues and values that the hijab symbolizes, as well as the communal

belonging it provides within the Islamic framework. The narrative of hijabi women signifies a deliberate and self-directed journey towards the adoption of the hijab, a journey that moves beyond the realm of collective expectations to that of personal agency and religious dedication.

Challenges when wearing the hijab in predominantly non-Muslim communities

The hijab, while an integral part of religious expression for Muslim women, can unfortunately attract undue attention and stigmatization from some non-Muslims. The respondents had expressed comparative dismay as they face scrutiny, be subjected to stereotypes, and sometimes encounter questions that associate them with violent extremism or terrorism, irrespective of their personal beliefs and intentions. These experiences reflect a societal discomfort or misunderstanding around the hijab, which goes beyond its intended purpose as a symbol of Muslim women's religious practice.

These collective tendencies of stigmatization support McRobbie's insights (as cited in Ryan, 2011) when he asserted that clothes are not neutral because it imbues an array of contradictory meanings and interpretations. In this case, the hijab materializes the said assertions of contradictions where the Muslim women then deal with a fragile social interaction because of such clothing. The visibility of the hijab makes it more than just an article of clothing; it becomes a flashpoint for a wide range of responses, from curiosity to prejudice.

The encounter with such stigmatization can create a tenuous social environment for Muslim women who wish to adhere to their cultural and religious practices through their dress. The hijab's significance to the wearer as a form of pious expression is sometimes overshadowed by the contradictory meanings imposed on it by others (Wazni, 2015). These varied and often negative interpretations complicate the social interactions of hijab-wearing Muslim women, compelling them to navigate through a landscape of cultural misreadings and misplaced judgments.

In addition, the hijab operates as more than just a symbolic expression of identity; it also functions as a delineator of permissible actions within the public sphere. The participants expressed how the hijab implicitly places limits on their engagement in certain activities that are regarded as incompatible with Islamic precepts of modest behavior. This

includes refraining from performing actions like vigorous dancing or singing in public, activities that might be construed as drawing undue attention to oneself or as not aligning with the principle of modesty that the hijab represents. One vivid narrative provided by a participant involved her experience in an educational setting where the intersection of religious practice and institutional activities posed a personal conflict. In her account of a dance performance requirement at a Jesuit university, the participant highlighted the tension between adhering to the values associated with wearing the hijab and participating in a class activity. She expressed concern that dancing in such a context would not only be incongruent with Islamic teachings on modesty but would also undermine the purpose behind her veiling. This anecdote underscores the multifaceted implications of wearing the hijab; it is an embodiment of a comprehensive Islamic lifestyle that encompasses both dress and behavior.

Nevertheless, explicit discrimination is a stark reality for many hijabi women living in predominantly non-Muslim societies. They face various forms of Islamophobia, ranging from verbal hostilities to outright physical assaults. Incidents such as these not only impose immediate fear and trauma but may also engender a persistent sense of vulnerability and alienation from the broader community. Subtler challenges manifest in misunderstandings or ignorance about the hijab. These cultural stereotypes can lead to marginalization, where hijabi women are erroneously perceived as oppressed or backward. Such misconceptions fail to recognize the hijab as an expression of faith and personal autonomy (Mahir et al., 2023). The narrative that Muslim women require saving undermines their agency and ignores the complex realities behind the decision to veil. Microaggressions are indirect forms of discrimination that hijabi women often contend with. Comments or actions that might seem benign can carry prejudicial undertones, reinforcing the sensation of otherness and the need to justify one's choices continually (Rahmath et al., 2016). Social exclusion also arises when activities or policies do not accommodate the hijab, leading to feelings of isolation or invisibility within public and professional realms.

Despite the apparent challenges and restrictions that may come with the practice of veiling, the women in this study articulate a voluntary and conscious commitment to these expectations. For

them, the hijab is a willing embrace of a set of values that define their identity as Muslim women. Their adherence to the virtues and modesty that the hijab symbolizes is self-regulated and perceived as a reflection of their faith and personal beliefs.

Conclusion:

This paper utilizes standpoint theory to challenge prevailing misconceptions about veiling practices. By considering the perspectives of those who practice veiling, the paper aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the cultural significance of the hijab.

In the context of the Philippines, where religious practices are tolerated and diversity is celebrated, Muslim women have the autonomy to decide for themselves whether or not to wear the veil. The respondents in the study, who have worn the hijab for over a decade, initially started veiling due to social and environmental influences. However, their continued practice is a conscious choice, reflecting a form of self-expression and personal will. This finding contradicts the portrayal of hijabi women in some Western narratives as oppressed or lacking agency.

ila Abu-Lughod's (2006) work provides further support for this perspective, challenging the reduction of Muslim women's diverse experiences to their choice of clothing. The decision to veil, as articulated by the respondents in this study, is seen as an act of empowerment and a fulfillment of religious obligations that does not diminish their freedom but reinforces it. Hence, the veil is neither inherently oppressive nor liberating in itself; instead, it is the context and the individual's agency behind the choice that defines its meaning (Atasoy, 2006). As exemplified by a statement from a German Muslim woman, the freedom to choose one's attire, including a headscarf, is a significant aspect of one's identity and autonomy (Rehman, 2017).

In conclusion, this paper suggests a shift in discursive contexts to better reflect the diversity of Muslim women's experiences and to dispel misconceptions about veiling traditions. By broadening cultural understanding and reframing public discourse, veiling can be recognized as an expression of faith and potentially, a feminist act consistent with women's self-determination.

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