

Representing Islam: Experiences of women wearing hijab in New Zealand

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An increase in commentary on the hijab, or Muslim headscarf, in Western countries can be attributed to multiple factors, not least among them the current political discourse relating to Islamic terrorism (Green, 2015). Despite Islam being a rapidly expanding religion in New Zealand, there is a dearth of research pertaining to Muslims. Here we aim to understand the everyday experiences of hijabi women in New Zealand. Six women were interviewed, and the data were analysed using an interpretive phenomenological framework. Three themes were identified: explanations for wearing hijab, interpersonal experiences, and the responses to these interpersonal experiences. Research findings point to a complex interplay of individual and socio-cultural factors which influence the everyday experiences of hijabi women.

Keywords: hijab; Muslim; Islam; discrimination; prejudice

Introduction

The intersection of private religious beliefs and practices, and the public appraisal of those beliefs and practices, is a fascinating and at times contentious dynamic. A group who are particularly familiar with this intersection are those who visibly affiliate with religion through identifiable garments such as the Sikh turban, the Catholic nun's habit, or the Jewish kippah or skullcap (Homburger & Bradley, 2015). Wearing religious symbols signals one's affiliation and exposes the individual to society's views and stereotypes about the wearer's religion (Baerveldt, 2015; Cherney & Murphy, 2016). The intertwining of religion, politics, culture, and humanity, against the backdrop of current public and political discourse, makes the individual experience of this interaction politically and sociologically important.

Within Western countries, the most frequently discussed form of religious dress is the hijab (Fournier, 2013). Hijab is the scarf covering the head and neck of Muslim women which, within Islam, signifies the upholding of respect between men and women (Hyder, Parrington, & Hussain, 2015). It is an exclusively public symbol of religion that is not worn in private with family members. Modest dress was prescribed for both men and women in the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book, to prevent attraction to anyone other than their spouse.

This is a critical time for hijabi women living in Western countries due to fear of fundamental Islam and of terrorism

(Green, 2015). While political opposition often focuses on the more substantive Muslim veils of niqab and burka, all forms of the veil, including hijab, can draw negative attention (Hyder et al., 2015). The United States-led "war on terror" was sparked by the 2001 terror attacks in New York City, known as 9/11. This war inflamed historically tense relations between "the West" and "the East" with various political, media, and popular culture sources creating a dichotomy of "us" and "them". Misunderstandings, such as non-Muslims failing to distinguish between the behaviours of extremist and mainstream Muslims, have major negative consequences for Muslims, who are often subject to prejudice and discrimination. This is particularly so for veiled Muslim women, due to their overt visual representation of Islam.

Increased focus on hijab-wearing has led to a growing tension between the normalisation of wearing hijab and its marginalisation. The increasing visibility and normalisation of hijab in the Western world was evident at the 2016 New York Fashion Week, which included the first collection incorporating hijab in every outfit (Roberts, 2016). Alongside such progressive events are acts of marginalization. For instance, contentious and widely debated laws concerning Islamic dress have been implemented in parts of Europe (Scott, 2007). In 2004, a ban on wearing any conspicuous signs of religious affiliation within the French public-school system disproportionately affected Muslims

(Fredette, 2015). Similar legislation has been passed in Belgium, Bulgaria, and the Netherlands (Bilsky, 2009). As illustrated by these examples, messages relating to wearing hijab in Western countries are at times contradictory and are influencing environments in which hijabi women are visible.

Research consistently documents that hijabi women encounter discrimination, menacing looks, angry shouting, and acts of violence (Cherney & Murphy, 2016; Everett et al., 2015; Fayyaz & Kamal, 2014; Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Hyder et al., 2015). In addition, hijabi women face discrimination in employment and career development, such as a reduced likelihood of a call back after an interview compared with someone not wearing hijab (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Robinson, 2016). Further, a study from the United Kingdom highlighted that Muslims have been treated as a "suspect community" since 9/11 through increased use of counter-terrorism strategies (Bonino, 2013). Hijabi women, who are visibly identifiable as Muslim, are at greater risk of this ethnic profiling and targeting by police.

Additionally, the hijab contradicts what is traditionally viewed as feminist in Western countries (Al Wazni, 2015). This image of feminism has been based on politics and capitalist marketing, and within this hijab has symbolised oppression towards women. The "second-wave" feminism beginning the 1960s advocated for women to reclaim their bodies and their sexuality; including encouraging Muslim women to remove

their hijabs (Al Wazni, 2015, p. 327). This form of feminism became another part of the ever-present dichotomy between Islam and the West (Saadallah, 2004). However, the evolution of Western feminist movements into the “third-wave” allow for non-white feminist ideas, a pluralistic approach that advocates for women’s choice of life paths, rather than a mono-cultural definition of freedom (Snyder-Hall, 2010).

The intersectionality of gender and feminist identity with religious and cultural identity is central to the experience of hijabi women in Western countries. Hopkins and Greenwood (2013) used Self-Categorisation theory to consider the relationship between self-identification and behaviour through analysing interview accounts of hijabi women in Scotland. They identified (among other things) complexity in the performance of the participants’ Muslim identity and other identities such as gender or nationality. For example, a hijabi woman is faced with a contradiction when she anticipates that hijab is seen as national dis-identification or viewed as a mark of oppression which may go against her gender identity. In opposition to this, wearing the hijab may represent values of religious freedom and gender equality (Scott, 2007). For some, hijab also serves as an emblem of resistance when a vocal majority seek to marginalise it.

Theories considering identity and behaviour are central to understanding the experiences of hijabi women in New Zealand. Identity Process Theory views identity as both a structure and a process, focussing on the interaction of psychological and social factors in its production (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014). Identity is regulated through processes of assimilation-accommodation and evaluation. Assimilation-accommodation refers to responses to new information (e.g. hijabi women being aware of the “Muslim terrorist” stereotype) and how this is adjusted to (e.g. presenting as polite or pious in order to avoid association between their religious practice and Islamic terrorism). This process is followed by evaluation of their own identity (e.g. a Muslim having a more negative or positive view of their own religion due to how Islam is perceived in that context). If this process identifies a threat to identity, a coping strategy is used in response to the social

context, such as a deciding to wear, or not wear, hijab.

New Zealand is distinctive from other Western nations in several ways, highlighting the importance of researching women in New Zealand. First, New Zealand is a bicultural nation based on a partnership between indigenous Māori and Pākehā/New Zealand Europeans (Mein Smith, 2011). While, in practice, the national culture remains dominated by the majority Pākehā group, government and public discourse include efforts to create a national narrative that is both Māori and Pākehā. Second, New Zealand has progressive and tolerant social ideals, as evidenced by being the first country to provide women with voting rights, and one of the first countries to legalise gay marriage (Dann, 2015; Henrickson, 2010). Third, New Zealand is strongly secular with religion being neither privileged nor barred (Kolig, 2016). In the 2013 census, 41.9 percent of people reported that they affiliated with no religion (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

Muslims constitute the fastest expanding religious group in New Zealand with a 27.9 percent increase between 2006 and 2013 (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Within this group, more than a quarter were born in New Zealand, 27 percent were born in Asia, 23 percent in the Middle East or Africa, and 21 percent in the Pacific Islands. In recent decades, immigration has been a contentious and polarized topic in New Zealand (and other Western countries), as policy changes have meant a rapid rise in immigrants from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Johnston, Gendall, Trlin, & Spoonley, 2010). While non-Muslim New Zealanders generally have more positive attitudes towards immigrants than Australian and European citizens, survey research has also found New Zealanders are more biased against immigrants from predominantly Muslim countries than others (Ward & Masgoret, 2008).

Similarly, the discursive literature on racism in New Zealand suggests racist discourse has become increasingly subtle and ambivalent (Tuffin, 2008). Research exploring young adults’ views of immigration and diversity indicate much agreement around the notion of “one” society, dominated by nationalistic discourses affirming the stereotype of New Zealanders as white and English speaking (Lyons, Madden, Chamberlain, & Carr, 2011). The rights of the “other”

were diminished through the goal of constructing assimilative goals as positive. Such goals seek to homogenise rather than celebrate cultural diversity.

Despite the growth in the Muslim community, there is little research examining Muslim experiences in New Zealand. While, in a rare counter-example, Jasperse, Ward, and Jose (2012) reported interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim groups as mostly peaceful, there is evidence of attacks towards the Islamic community through harassment and vandalism (Kolig, 2010). Further, greater discrimination has been found with visibility, that is, wearing hijab (Jasperse et al., 2012). In 2010, the majority of recorded religious discrimination complaints to the New Zealand Human Rights Commission were directed towards Muslim women based on attire (HRC, 2010). Lastly, Dobson (2012) analysed Muslim women’s narratives and found that their context shaped their experience of their faith, with influences including their minority status, migration, and resettlement. Islam served as a structure and support in the face of such challenges.

In this study, we aim to build on this small foundation to deepen our understanding of the experiences of hijabi women living in New Zealand. A cultural context of biculturalism, strong secularism, and a government known for progress and tolerance, makes the experiences of hijabi women in New Zealand interesting. We use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the meaning of wearing hijab, how the women feel their hijab-wearing is perceived by non-Muslims, and whether they have experienced prejudice and discrimination. IPA allows in-depth exploration of how the women make sense of their experience wearing hijab in New Zealand (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited through the Facebook page of an Auckland mosque. The six participants were between 20 and 50 years old, spoke English fluently, and were born overseas but now lived permanently in New Zealand. Countries of origin were Fiji, India, Palestine, and Indonesia. Five of the six participants always wore hijab in public, and one on a part-time basis, for example, during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. One

of the participants wore both hijab, and occasionally niqab.

Data collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in November and December of 2016 in locations chosen by the women including libraries, cafes, and in one case, the participant's home. Probe questions, such as "What does wearing hijab represent to you?" were used to facilitate talk, and then follow-up questions encouraged more depth. Interviews were conducted consistent with IPA principles; that is, probing, open-ended questions were aimed at generating detailed descriptions of what it is like to wear hijab in New Zealand (Smith & Eatough, 2012). The mode of interviewing allowed for unexpected issues to arise in the talk, and to be followed up with further questions. The study received ethical approval from the Massey University ethics committee, participants were advised that they could refuse to answer any question, and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

IPA emphasises the importance of respecting the experience of individuals and the ways in which they make sense of their experiences. This approach also emphasises the importance of talk and interpretive work that accompany individual accounts, while openly acknowledging the extent to which reading of participant experiences is also dependent on the researchers' interpretation (Shinebourne, 2011). Consistent with this approach, we sought to capture rich and detailed accounts of interpretations of the experiences of a small number of hijabi women.

The stages of analysis followed an IPA framework; the first stage entailed reading and re-reading the transcripts and noting initial thoughts and observations without forcing any adherence to theory, enabling familiarity with each interview and the identification of significant parts of the transcript that may have relevance later (Harper & Thompson, 2012). The second stage was more structured, identifying patterns of meaning or psychological themes in the transcripts, and focusing on more abstract concepts such as power, respect, or difference. The third part of the analysis structured and created an overview of the themes, with specific quotes from each participant noted to ensure the themes remained grounded in the actual words of the commentary (Smith, 2008). The

dominant themes are presented with extracts from the interviews to illustrate the themes. Participants are identified by pseudonyms.

Reflexivity

Active consideration of personal assumptions and cultural background is pivotal to sound research. The interviewer, the first author, is Pākehā (the dominant ethnic group in New Zealand: Statistics New Zealand, 2014). That she is a non-Muslim member of the majority group will have created a different dynamic than if she had been Muslim. For instance, participants may feel less able to be critical of non-Muslim New Zealanders. Such concerns are part of the IPA process of "double hermeneutics" or the dual interpretation process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 361). While striving for neutrality is not a goal IPA research, it was still a goal to remain grounded in participant accounts.

ANALYSIS

Three themes were identified from the analysis: explanations for wearing hijab, interpersonal experiences, and responses to these interpersonal experiences.

Explanations for wearing hijab

The analysis suggested that religious commitment was the basis on which the women wore hijab. Alongside obligation to God, wearing hijab was also a personal choice. This dual reasoning revealed tension in how the women expressed Western ideas of personal choice and freedom compared with their religious requirement to follow Qur'anic prescription.

Responses to the questions of why they wore hijab and what it represented were consistent in that it was a religious decision as prescribed in the Qur'an for modesty. Lina states:

I say to myself if I want to wear it, I have to make sure that I understand about the meaning of hijab for Muslims and I understand that it is important to me to wear it and I want to wear it because of God alone.

Lina stresses her singular reasoning for wearing hijab. The strength of her conviction is represented in such phrases as "I have to make sure". Her statement "I want to wear it because of God alone" suggests she has encountered suggestions that she also has other reasons for wearing.

Participants also expressed notions of identity relating to religion, in that hijab enabled the inner self to be made public.

Amal stated that she wears hijab so "people see you as you are," providing insight into the function of hijab to express her religious identity.

Despite the sense of hijab being a simple expression of an inner reality, the process to reach this decision was not simple. Lina's conviction to wearing hijab required deep consideration:

So uh I studied and I also read articles about hijab and things like that. Then after two years of contemplating discussions with my husband, with my sisters, with different people, I decided I want to wear hijab.

While some participants came to the decision after much consultation with family and friends, others reached the decision without the approval of significant others. Dalia said: "Actually, my family didn't want me to wear it, they weren't into religion. So my father was against it. I wanted to. It was like a challenge."

Unequivocally, the women expressed that the act of wearing hijab was personally chosen. Nabila states:

It's just that it's personal choice. You know. Some people think that husbands shove it down your wife's throat – you have to cover, you have to cover.

Nabila's description highlights how her personal choice and freedom contrasts against the stereotypical (negative) view of Muslim women dominated by overbearing husbands.

This analysis highlighted a tension around women's reasoning for wearing hijab. On one hand, the women drew upon individualistic Western ideals such as personal choice, while also expressing an obligation to God as outlined in the Qur'an. After being asked why she wears hijab, Farah described an incident of discrimination that illustrates this contradiction:

Farah: We were walking from Countdown to home, there was like some people his hair was like red, green, something like that, yellow, a lot of rainbow colours in his hair, with his girlfriend I guess, with a lot of piercings. Then he said, this is New Zealand, this is not Arab. Take it off! Stuff like that.

Interviewer: But isn't it ironic, because he's wearing what he wants to wear, so he's different to everyone else?

Farah: Yes, yeah, I understand. Then I said your hair is weird. I choose to have this; this is New Zealand; this is free country. Exactly.

Interviewer: Did he communicate back?

Farah: Yes, He said this is free country I chose whatever I want. Then I said, exactly.

From Farah's perspective, being free means she can display her religion through her choice dress. Her comments indicate that she was aware of a double standard in that her interrogator views his own unconventional choice of fashion as a manifestation of his freedom, but not her hijab.

Overall, analysis highlighted the decision to wear hijab as both a personal choice and a commitment to God, and complex - to the degree that one participant's family did not want her to wear hijab. It was clear that the women had experienced others believing hijab was enforced within Islam, and had encountered misunderstandings and double standards.

Interpersonal experiences

As illustrated above, interpersonal experiences played a significant part in much of the talk. With some exceptions, these women identified that there was a largely positive societal response to wearing hijab. They reflected upon a sense of society being unconcerned with their dress choices, being unaccepting of discrimination overall, and the political freedom of religious dress. Despite this, four of the six women described encountering discrimination, while Jasmine and Lina stated they had never experienced negativity due to wearing hijab.

Analysis showed participants viewed non-Muslim New Zealanders as being unconcerned with their private choices. Half of the women stated that people generally "mind their own business". There seemed to be high levels of awareness that they were not being subject to judgement from others for wearing hijab. Farah for example explained: "That's good, I don't care what they wear as long as you respect me, I will respect you. That's in New Zealand. In Indonesia, there's so much judgement." Farah says this in spite of some experience of hostility for wearing hijab in New Zealand.

Interestingly, Jasmine referenced post-9/11 as a time when she would expect to experience discrimination, but did not:

I've lived here in New Zealand for 13 years running and I came to New Zealand post 9/11 in [a regional city in the North Island]. It's a beautiful town, lovely people. So, I arrived

there, used to wear my headscarf, I wasn't even driving those days, I lived in [this city] for 4 years. *Alhamdulillah*, I haven't faced any kind of racist behaviour, and that was post 9/11, I came in 2002. [...] I had no problems. My kids were very small and I used to, most of the time live on my own, my husband was away on conferences, you know doctors, 2 weeks, 3 weeks. I would be home alone.

Despite concern about wearing hijab after 9/11, she felt safe and unafraid even at times when her husband was travelling overseas. At a time when prejudices were overflowing elsewhere, she experienced provincial New Zealand as a beacon of religious and cultural tolerance.

The women also discussed the experience of being able to wear hijab in a political sense. Two of the women expressed gratitude for this aspect of religious freedom. Lina said:

I think it's positive, very positive, because I mean the New Zealand environment give me the opportunity to do it freely, unlike Paris for example or in France and I'm really really grateful to be here in this country where the environment - in terms of social environment, political environment - gives me the opportunity, allow me to do this.

Lina is highly aware that in other countries she may be stopped from wearing hijab. This is pertinent considering how deeply she believes in her decision. The contrast between her ability to wear hijab in New Zealand, and legislation in France banning hijab, illustrates that this influences her interpretation of experiences in New Zealand.

There were exceptions to this generally consensual recounting of positive experiences, including accounts of public hostility reflecting negative viewpoints about Muslims as condoning terrorism and as patriarchally oppressive.

Firstly, participants described a number of incidents of discrimination, based on others connecting Islam to terrorism. Nabila owned and worked in a dairy for many years, interacting with a cross-section of people. Nabila describes one specific incident:

One day this truck driver was outside my shop. Rubbish truck. And he tipped my bin over, spilled all over, on the footpath, and I was just outside the shop. And then he yelled abuse at me (laughs). He didn't know how to

use a bin. And then he swore at me, you f-ing *Allah*-thingy, you're probably going around blowing people up. And I'm like, ok yeah. I said, "Be careful or I'll put a bomb under your truck". And then he swore at me and he told me that I must be terrorist and blah blah blah.

This depicts the presumed association between Islam and acts of terror. Nabila's laughter is significant and could serve to dispel some of the seriousness of the situation, to position her as other than a victim, or reflect a wariness of exposing her own treatment to a non-Muslim, Pākehā interviewer.

Amal, the youngest of the interviewees, elaborated on her concern for her own safety as well as her mother's:

Like I have done literally nothing to you, but you come and try to terrorize me for just existing, and then have the gall to call me the terrorist. It makes no sense and it makes me feel like crap, and also sort of scared for my own safety - or mostly my mum's I guess because she wears the hijab full time, and I can't help but wonder if or when there will ever be a time when someone tries to get physical with her because of it.

Amal describes the irony of being approached aggressively because the perpetrator believed her religion is violent. This is a defensive comment that describes fear for her own, and female family members', physical safety. This fear is speculative, although naturally follows the experience of verbal insult inciting violence.

Analysis shows that there are external pressures of wearing hijab. Lina recounts a conversation with her husband about her visibly representing Islam:

He really really respects me as a Muslim woman because I'm out there wearing hijab, people know I'm Muslim on the bus, train, where I walk, everywhere, you know. But maybe no one know he is a Muslim even though they may meet him face to face because he's not distinguished Muslim. That's why he said, oh I respect you very much. When you wear hijab. You are brave woman to be out there as a minority you know. You know, you bare yourself, like say to the world that you are Muslim.

Lina's husband believes she is at risk and wearing it requires courage. An otherwise straightforward extension of public Islamic identity now also requires

courage since it is presumed to carry risks.

Secondly, participants described incidents of negative stereotyping based on others' belief that hijab signifies patriarchal oppression. Nabila stated:

I think they would probably mean that it's oppression. That a woman is oppressed and made to do, subjugated to - Probably being treated as a slave. Or yeah. Subservient. I dunno.

Further, some participants mentioned that non-Muslim New Zealanders saw her as lacking intelligence or agency because she wore hijab. Nabila elaborated:

A lot of times when I was in the shop you know people think you're covered so you probably don't have a brain. They think your heads covered, that she probably doesn't have a brain. So they barely look at you. Then when you speak, you always get a second look.

Nabila's explanation highlights that being stereotyped as oppressed reflects negatively, depriving her of the human attribute of intelligence or voice.

An overview of the theme of interpersonal experiences indicated a positive response to wearing hijab in everyday life. However, the women encountered two forms of negative stereotyping resulting in public hostility: that Muslims condone terrorism, and that they are oppressed by male members of their family.

Responses to experiences

The women discussed three ways in which they respond to these experiences. The women often implicated media portrayals of negative Muslim stereotypes, and assumed a sense of responsibility regarding the representation of Islam. This manifested in both expressing the motivation to be an ambassador of Islam, and behaving appropriately when wearing hijab. Their religion facilitated how they coped with difficult experiences.

Firstly, media portrayals were implicated in negative stereotyping. Jasmeen described the contradictory violent nature of a specific term *jihad* as it is used in media, compared to her intrapersonal understanding of it:

Jihad is always referred to by media as the holy war. That's the term. But that's not the term, *jihad* is not a holy war, *jihad* the Arabic word means striving struggling to live in this world. *Jihad* can be used even to refer, oh I'm in a bit *jihad* – why? Because

I'm taking care of my old parents. That is the biggest *jihad* referred to by the Prophet that is the biggest *jihad*.

Jasmeen's example of the un-nuanced use of *jihad* provides insight into everyday contradictions the women experience based on media reports. When news media reports describe violent attacks as *jihad*, this contrasts starkly with Jasmeen's religious personal reality of *jihad* - as an internal struggle. While the women implicated media as the primary source behind negative stereotyping and subsequent hostility, some also attributed hostility to individual aggressor's personal situations. Jasmeen states:

You can't label everybody to be a racist because it can be situations, like, they must have had a bad day at work, family. I mean, most of us people we're just like, living life like just going by day to day chores, isn't it? So sometimes we might get angry at somebody.

Jasmeen is unwilling to view society as prejudiced and prefers to believe that her experience reflects other's struggles, and their impacts on how they express themselves. In essence, Jasmeen forgives those who express hostility towards her, suggesting that her claim that she has not experienced discrimination in New Zealand may understate her experience.

Secondly, the women responded to negative stereotyping with a sense of responsibility to represent Islam through education and communication, and imperatives to behave appropriately when wearing hijab in public. Farah states "I'm using my time in New Zealand to actually tell people this is Islam, it's not as scary as you think it is". When Jasmeen was asked what she considered non-Muslim New Zealanders believe hijab means to her, she responded:

They don't know anything about it, I guess I think they should ask a Muslim lady why she wears the hijab, some do but very rarely. I think if they do ask a Muslim person or anybody why they do what they do, not anything but just religiously why do you do what you do, it breaks so many barriers, and that would be so nice to have a good happy, you know that would be my advice, really they should come forward they should ask if they have a question if they have a doubt, communication can solve a lot of problems.

Jasmeen's description of barriers provides insight into what it may feel like to wear hijab, when others misunderstand

the meaning behind her hijab-wearing. She articulates that open discussion about why she wears hijab is necessary, to address hostility that she sees as reflecting ignorance. She sets aside the possible confrontation involved in such an approach.

Additionally, participants described being compelled to behave appropriately when wearing hijab to represent Islamic ideals. Lina stated:

You have to show other people that you are a good person. So, you have to be kind, you have to be nice, you have to be approachable – that's the word, because you want to show others that you are a good person, you know, you're not wearing hijab or something just to be, you know, different to other people.

Further, if one of Lina's non-Muslim friends encountered prejudice towards Islam, she said they would respond in a way that recognises these prejudices through knowing herself and her husband:

So people who know us, if they encounter another person who said negative things about Muslims, they will say, "oh my friends, I have a number of Muslim friends, I have Muslim acupuncturist, or have, you know and his wife", things like that for example. "But they're nice so what you said is wrong".

Here, there is a contradiction between Lina's religious reasons for wearing hijab, and her focus on being viewed positively. Although being approachable may align with Islamic ideals, encounters with anti-Muslim negativity has meant that she has focussed on her likeability as a person, rather than religious reasons for wearing hijab. Further, Lina's comment about friends' defence of her illustrates the extent of Islamophobia in society. That is, even people that are not Muslim, but are friends with Muslims, encounter negativity and misunderstanding, and are therefore prompted to speak up against it.

Thirdly, participants described using their faith to cope with discrimination. In several interviews, the response to discriminatory confrontation was to turn to the Islamic spiritual texts. Farah compared her experience of discrimination with the experience of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad: "What's actually about Islam they don't understand. So, I just walk away. It's not as bad as our Prophet Muhammad. He used to have someone pouring urine from the top floor." Similarly, Nabila stated:

To a Muslim, a *jihad* means a struggle of any sort. So wearing a hijab in a say Islamophobic society or country is actually *jihad*. Because you're doing a battle with your inner self. A lot of people post 9/11 took off their hijabs because they were scared. Some women used to have their scarves pulled off, it happened in buses and things here. Girls got abused. You know. Scarves pulled off and that. But to a Muslim that's what *jihad* is, trying to battle what others think. So to me, you know, if somebody - because maybe I'm strong like that - if somebody did say something, I do confront them.

Analysis indicates that for Nabila and Farah, negative interpersonal experiences based on wearing hijab are viewed within an Islamic framework. They adaptively cope by making meaning of difficult experiences using the same framework that drives their choice to wear hijab.

To summarise, the women often attributed the blame for negative stereotyping and subsequent hostility from members of the public to the media, and individual's personal contexts. Further, both positive *and* negative interpersonal experiences created a sense of responsibility to represent Islam, and this is understandable considering their high visibility as Muslims. However, their visibility was a surface depiction of the women's faith in God, and they described responding to interpersonal difficulties through this faith.

DISCUSSION

Using an IPA framework, analysis of in-depth interviews with six Muslim women provided a snapshot of the experience of wearing hijab in New Zealand. Interviews focussed on whether the women had experienced prejudice and discrimination, how they felt their hijab-wearing is perceived by non-Muslims, and explored the meaning of wearing hijab.

The women's typically positive experiences are consistent with research suggesting that generally interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims are peaceful (Jasperse et al., 2012; Shaver, Troughton, Sibley, & Bulbuli, 2016), a finding that may be consistent with New Zealand as a generally tolerant and progressive society (Dann, 2015). In contrast with the literature on racist talk in New Zealand, the women's responses in this research mostly did not reflect

experiences of subtle racism (Lyons et al., 2011; Tuffin, 2008).

However, there are factors that could have influenced the women's choice of whether or not to acknowledge and disclose difficulties, including their sense of gratitude for the political and social freedom to wear hijab, and the ways that they interpreted experiences that might also be considered discriminatory. In addition, a research interview is not a neutral context (Edwards & Potter, 1992). The women will be aware of the negative judgements that are made about Muslim people and about wearing hijab, and they have an interest in presenting themselves and their faith in a positive light. This issue may be particularly salient given the interviewer's identity as non-Muslim.

Nonetheless, the positivity of the women's talk was surprising, given international literature suggesting hijabi women *do* experience discrimination in Western countries (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013; Hyder et al., 2015). Although this study indicates infrequent subjectively-defined experiences of discrimination, there are clearly challenges: accounts of unprovoked discrimination including verbal insult, indicating New Zealand is not immune to erroneous beliefs about Islam.

The women's attribution of negative stereotypes to media sources is consistent with often threatening and antagonistic portrayals of Muslims in television, newspaper, cinema, and mainstream news (Rane, Ewart, & Martinkus, 2014). These portrayals allow the connection of the behaviours of extremists to the lives of mainstream Muslims. Further, in terms of the misperception of hijabi women as patriarchally oppressed, many Western media reports highlight oppressive Taliban practices or specific historical movements of veil enforcement (such as Iran in the 1970s) warranting viewers to extend this to *all* hijabi women (Weber, 2012).

Personal accounts of reasons for wearing hijab puncture the stereotype of these women as victims of patriarchal oppression. These women expressed unequivocally that the decision to wear hijab was personal *and* voluntary - a stark contrast between their personal reasons for wearing hijab and the assumption that hijab is enforced by male members of their families. Responses by the hijabi women undoubtedly align with notions of the "third wave", pluralist form of feminism that does not dictate the terms of female empowerment in Western ways

(Al Wazni, 2015). Consistent with responses from the women in this study, Rane, Nathie, Isakhan and Abdalla (2010) reported that Islam and misogynistic attitudes are not positively correlated. Similarly, a study of thousands of Muslims in 35 countries found Islamic religiosity in Muslim men did not correlate positively with the oppression of women (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

How participants believe they are seen by others may shape their identity and influence whether they wear hijab or not (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). Supporting the idea of a dynamic religious identity, one study found that Muslim women are more likely to wear hijab to affirm their identity in countries in which they are a minority (Wagner, Sen, Permandeli, & Howarth, 2012). This may be motivated by greater religious commitment in the face of prejudice, or a desire to show greater pride in their beliefs. As this study shows, this requires courage and willingness to stand out in a population where only one percent are Muslim (see also Batuman, 2016). How these women believe they are seen by others influenced their religious identity.

Throughout these interviews, the interaction between intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences is salient. Examples include the women's sense of obligation to engage in appropriate behaviour while wearing hijab as ambassadors for Islam. Increased attention on the hijab in the West may have shifted the focus for hijabi women from pious behaviour to a more emblematic function. Another example is the articulation of need for education and dialogue, to counter the stereotypical views of hijabi women. Both may be motivated by encountering prejudice or discrimination prompted by misunderstanding, and perhaps a desire to symbolically oppose such prejudice (Wagner et al., 2012). Consistent with this, Identity Process Theory conceptualises that perceived threats to identity are dealt with by modes of social representation (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014). In many ways, participants' descriptions suggest they utilise coping mechanisms against threats towards their highly visible religious identity.

Analysis highlighted that the experience of wearing hijab in twenty-first century New Zealand involves contradictions. Much of this relates to the enmeshment of personal religious identity and interpersonal experiences

affected by both dominant stereotypes and individual understandings of how they are seen by others. The act of wearing hijab has transformed from a peaceful symbol intended to communicate modesty, into what is perceived as threatening political expression involving risk of harm (Ghumman & Ryan, 2013).

Another contradiction is how the women value Western individualism (such as freedom and personal choice) while also espousing what they “should” do as prescribed in the Qur’an. Perhaps they are negotiating the differences between religious prescription and personal choices. On the other hand, perhaps to the hijab-wearer, freedom is the choice to relinquish one’s agency to God. Rather, to them the contradiction may simply be how this is viewed within the confines of individualistic Western thought, particularly considering evidence that many believe that a hijabi woman is coerced into her choice of dress (Abu Bakr, 2014).

While acknowledging these contradictions, this analysis suggests that there are both protective and vulnerability factors associated with wearing hijab in New Zealand. There was mention of the positive psychological effects of wearing hijab, which is likely to be protective in terms of interaction with vulnerability factors (Jasperse et al., 2012). This protective function of hijab makes it increasingly important for Muslim women in Western countries to be supported to maintain this practice. However, doing so renders women vulnerable to risk of stereotyping, discrimination, marginalisation, that are a reflection of the conflation of mainstream Islam with high-profile extremism (Hyder et al., 2015). Experience of discrimination is associated with poor mental health, as well as a wide range of overall indicators of poorer health (Nairn, Pega, McCreanor, Rankine, & Barnes, 2006). It may increase cognitive strength and emotional resilience in the face of difficulty beyond what would be possible without hijab, and provides an important indicator of religious identity.

This study contributes to understanding experiences of hijabi women in New Zealand. It is notable that the initial intrapersonal reasons to wear hijab were the core from which the women perceived experiences, and dictated how they responded to others. However, their ongoing choice to wear hijab in New Zealand was clearly not a static decision

but rather a complex dynamic influenced by external experiences, and in the case of these six women, seemingly strengthened particularly in the face of difficulty.

In relation to understandings of other minority groups in New Zealand, the findings of this study highlight that the experiences of underrepresented and stigmatised groups should be considered alongside their own cultural and religious motivations, political and social context, and their subsequent interpretations of prejudice and discrimination. Without consideration of these aspects, we are left with a deficit, one-dimensional understanding. The risks involved in not taking account of motivations, context, and interpretations of minority group members is perpetuation of covert prejudice and discrimination within a society dominated by New Zealand European culture. This is unacceptable in an increasingly multicultural society, and should inform all psychological practice.

Though the aim of IPA is not to render ‘representative’ or ‘generalisable’ results, this research is somewhat exploratory, and there is opportunity to build upon this work. For example, it would be desirable to understand the experiences of a wider sample of hijabi women (including those who do not have access to the internet and who are not proficient in English). A wider age range would also be valuable as participants were all younger than 50. Additionally, this research does not speak to the experience of Muslim women who choose not to wear hijab. Thirdly, a study on Māori and Pākehā responses to hijab is critical to illustrate where their talk diverges or parallels that of Muslim women, in order to foster better understandings of each other’s experiences. Finally, these findings suggest there are psychological benefits to wearing hijab, and an exploration of how to harness these benefits to support the wellbeing of hijabi women when Islam is under scrutiny, would be valuable. Certainly, the integration of hijab-wearing into New Zealand society in healthy ways is a work in progress. There are multiple avenues for hijabi women to be the focus of future research, and increased understanding will be of benefit to Muslims and enable New Zealand to function as a fair and well-informed country for hijabi women to live in.

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