Adolescent Perceptions and Experiences of the Hijab: a Qualitative Canadian Study

Abstract

In this study, we used a phenomenological method to explore of adolescent experiences of hijabs in a medium-sized Canadian city. Using a focus group for data collection, six Muslim adolescents (two hijabi girls, two non-hijabi girls, and two boys) aged 12-15 shared their experiences regarding hijabs in a public school environment, and described occurrences involving peers, teachers, and expectations. Findings suggested that adolescent girls consider many factors when choosing whether or not to wear a hijab, including practicality and an individual sense of style, along with more internal reasons. Both girls and boys saw wearing a hijab as a way of representing Islam, and discussion about the hijab led them into a broader discussion about being Muslim and their related concern that Islam is often misunderstood. This paper offers insight into adolescent perceptions of wearing a hijab and being Muslim in a largely non-Muslim community.

Introduction

Wearing a hijab is a visual marker of Islam and instantly identifies a girl as Muslim.[1] Teachers, classmates, curriculum, and school environments are some of the factors that influence adolescent opinions, actions, and decisions regarding the hijab.[2] This qualitative study offers insight into how school environments impact the experiences and decisions around wearing or

not wearing a hijab for Muslim adolescents in a largely non-Muslim community. School plays a major role in adolescent development, and incidences of intolerance in such a prominent time in their developing lives have the potential to inform adolescents' lifelong perceptions of their own identity as Muslim.[3] This could have serious consequences on their quality of life in later years.[4] Thus, it is important to understand the experiences and perceptions of young people in school environments related to the hijab. While it is imperative that a discussion about the hijab in school settings be led by girls, Muslim boys, too, have opinions and many care deeply about this topic because girls and women who wear (or choose not to wear) the hijab are their mothers, sisters, classmates, and friends. Their ideas also contribute to this study.

Islam and the position of Muslim females

Islam is currently the fastest growing religion in North America.[5] According to Statistics Canada, Canada had just over one million Muslims in 2011, who represent 3.2% of the nation's total population. While Canada prides itself in being an open and inclusive country, Islam is regularly framed negatively within news media and this impacts public opinion.[6] "Islamophobia" is a term that is used to describe the negativity surrounding Islam and Muslims; Zine defines it as "a fear or hatred of Islam and its adherents that translates into individual, ideological and systemic forms of oppression and discrimination."[7] Concerns about extremism have created a version of what it means to be Muslim that includes, and in some cases emphasizes, violence and hate. Nearly every day, negative and stereotyped images of Islam are portrayed through media, creating what Said refers to as a "static image."[8] Said notes that media increasingly manipulates the image of Islam and Muslims, creating an "intense focus" and using an even "more exaggerated stereotyping and belligerent hostility."[9]

   The position of Muslim women is particularly interesting because within the Western "static image" of Islam, they too are subjected to the negativity that Islam allegedly produces. Muslim women are constructed as passive and oppressed, subjected to strict demands for modesty.[10] While modesty is associated with Islam, there is no definitive answer on what it means to be modest. For some women, modesty means covering their head in a veil or their entire body with a burqa, for some modesty does not correspond with specific dress requirements, and for others, modesty is not important in their lives.[11] Modesty is often associated with hijab, an Arabic word that comes from "the root verb *hjb* that means to cover, shelter, and establish a boundary, or border."[12] The word is most commonly used to describe the veil or scarf some Muslim females wear on their heads to cover their hair. Mernissi argues that the hijab is comprised of three dimensions: visual, spatial, and ethical.[13] The visual hijab refers to how females who wear the hijab visually present themselves through dress and how the hijab as a piece of cloth communicates "Islam."[14] Scholarly commentary regularly focuses on experiences related to the visual hijab, but Mernissi theorizes that the hijab can be understood more fully by also considering spatial and ethical phenomena. The spatial hijab limits female's activities in public spaces, often due to the presence of males, and the ethical hijab protects females from "harams," forbidden actions such as physical or sexual encounters with males outside of marriage.[15] Hijabi females' experiences can be framed and examined through these three hijabs.

   The hijab is a "cultural signifier of difference" that suggests "social and political meanings" as representative of the Islam.[16] Being easily recognizable as Muslim due to the visual nature of a veil puts girls at risk for what Hamzeh describes as "hijabophobia," or "an underlying sexist/racist discourse within Islamophobia that is complicit in essentializing

constructions of Muslim women and mainly those who are visible with the headscarf they are wearing."[17] Muslim girls in North America regularly feel the effects of Islamophobia and hijabophobia firsthand; stories of girls getting spat on or called a terrorist by classmates are not uncommon.[18] In observing a Muslim female who wears a hijab, one brings their previous knowledge, experiences, and biases surrounding Islam.

While the "static image" of Islam might suggest otherwise, for many girls, the conscious adoption of the hijab is often both liberating and empowering.[19] As the veil is a clear visual symbol, it can create and reinforce empowerment by strengthening a sense of personal identity and forming a visual representation of communal religious identity.[20] The veil can also play a role in the construction of girls' sense of self, affecting religious, feminine, moral, and communal identities, amongst others.[21] Contrary to popular Western stereotypes about women's rights in Islam, Western Muslim families do not regularly force their girls into veiling. Numerous studies have found that Muslim girls choose whether or not to veil and that they feel it would be wrong for a parent to force their daughter to veil.[22]

Unfortunately, Muslim girls' choice to veil is often met with unsupportive or hijabophobic reactions. In 1994, 12 year old Emilie Ouimet from Quebec, Canada, captured national attention when her school sent her home because her hijab conflicted with their dress code that prohibited any "clothing or accessories that would marginalize a student."[23] When she refused to comply, she was expelled from school. Her principal felt justified in his decision, claiming "the wearing of a distinctive sign like the hijab or neo-Nazi insignias could polarize the aggressiveness of students."[24] In this statement, he discriminatorily "[equated] the hijab with facism," thereby perpetuating stereotypes of "fear and repression."[25] The teacher federation agreed with his decision, and voted in favour of keeping the hijab out of French public schools, a

decision that was later retracted.[26] In 2003, 16 year old Irene Waseem, also from Quebec, was

expelled from her private Catholic girls' school for wearing a hijab.[27] Girls who wear a hijab

have also been barred from tae kwon do,[28] soccer,[29] and refereeing.[30] A 2015 hate crime in

Toronto, Ontario left a Muslim woman beaten and robbed after attackers tore off her hijab,

punched her, called her a "terrorist," told her to "go back to [her] country," and stole her money

and cellphone.[31] The event occurred just outside a public school; it was 3PM and she was headed

to pick up her children. The majority of news stories surrounding Muslim girls and women in

Canada are focused on veiling and discuss the limitations of those who veil or the hate that

surrounds veiling practice.

Purpose/Rationale

Muslim women and the veil is a popular topic of academic research. In recent years, media

representation and political commentary has instigated debate about what it means to veil[32] and

what locations (if any) should permit veiling due to a popularly held association of veiling with

patriarchal values. For example, in March of 2015 then Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper

stated that wearing the niqab, a Muslim veil that covers all of the face but the eyes,[33] is "rooted

in a culture that is anti-women" and that it is "offensive" for someone to cover their face using

clothing like a niqab during the citizenship ceremony.[34] As a result of such debates, qualitative

and quantitative research regarding Muslim women's veiling practices is a growing field

worldwide.[35] However, the perspective of adolescent girls is rarely considered. Researching the

perspectives of youth with regards to any religion is important, as their experiences may differ

from that of adults. Young Muslim girls are conscious of religious practices and the ways in

which they affect their lives, and frequently willing to provide honest opinions and insight.[36]

Additionally, though the number of scholars writing about experiences of Muslim girls is increasing,[37] there is considerably less work that considers Canadian girls' perspectives.[38]

Research surrounding Muslim women's experiences of veiling primarily considers the voices of hijabi women: those who wear a hijab. Including voices of both hijabi and non-hijabi Muslim girls is important in strengthening research because non-hijabi participants can provide insight into why they elect not to wear a hijab and whether or not their decision was influenced by negative reactions of non-Muslims. This study also includes adolescent male voices. Muslim boys hold a distinctive position within a discussion on veiling. They are insiders, due to their identity as Muslim, and they are simultaneously outsiders, due to their position as non-females. Thus, they hold insights and viewpoints that differ from that of insider Muslim girls or non-Muslims. Including hijabi, non-hijabi, and male adolescent Muslim participants brings a range of perspectives to the goal of understanding the experiences of young people in school environments related to the hijab.

Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child gives all children the "freedom to manifest one's religion" and Article 8 declares the right to "preserve his or her own identity."[39] For some girls, wearing a hijab is both a way of establishing their religion and expressing their identities, and this study takes seriously the perspectives of youth regarding their individual reasons behind wearing or not wearing the hijab and the social reactions to hijabs and their association with Islam in a school setting. This in also in keeping with Article 12, which recognizes children's right to have their views represented accurately in all matters that concerns them.[40] If an issue is to be studied that pertains to young people, there is an obligation on the part of researchers to provide them with an opportunity to engage and to express their opinions and

views. All of these articles provide an important impetus for research that considers adolescent voices related to veiling.

Methods

This phenomenological study was part of a larger qualitative study that aimed to understand adolescent perceptions of spiritual health. Phenomenological inquiry originated in philosophy and has been guided by the work of Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, among others.[41] The goal is to study and describe the "essence" or "lived experience" of a phenomenon, with the purpose of gaining understanding of the participant's own perspectives and perceptions.[42] The objective of this specific sub-study was to understand Muslim adolescent experiences and perceptions related to the hijab.

Sampling Procedures

We used a criterion-based approach to sampling, and six participants shared the common criteria of self-reported commitment to Islam, with two thirds of participants being female. All participants were between the ages of 12 and 15 years. All female participants had the experience of wearing the hijab in some settings, however only two out of the four female participants chose to wear the hijab to school on a regular basis. In order to facilitate conversation, all participants were recruited through the same Islamic Centre in hopes that prior relationships among group members would facilitate meaningful conversation. All participants lived in a medium sized city in Ontario and attended public schools. Participants were recruited using "snowball" sampling strategies.[43] Letters of information and consent were given to the youth leaders at the Islamic Centre, as we predicted they might be aware of potential participants. We invited them to circulate the study information in their community.

Data Collection

Data collection was done through one focus group. Despite their limitations, such as the potential for moderator bias and the lack of depth in comparison to interviews,[44] focus groups are a highly effective way of generating insight into a topic of interest. A focus group format allows respondents to interact and build on one another's responses and provides opportunity for the researcher to interact with participants and ask for clarification when needed. [45] They are an appropriate and useful tool for gaining data from children.[46] Focus groups give children peer reassurance, which encourages them to speak more freely than they might in a one-on-one interview.[47] Within this focus group, we asked open ended questions surrounding participants' experiences of wearing the hijab (for girls) and their experiences and perceptions of watching their adolescent siblings and peers wear the hijab (for boys). Sample questions included: What does the hijab mean to you? Do you feel like your teachers treat you differently when you are wearing a hijab?

Coding and Analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. Initially, we performed a first level of line-by-line coding of the entire transcript in order to ground our analysis in the data. A second level of coding was then applied in order to understand emerging patterns in the data. Finally, a third level of axial coding was applied, and larger concepts were identified from the first and second level categories. In this way, understanding about the essence of the lived experience of wearing the hijab was built. Three researchers were involved in all aspects of coding, and had regular, iterative conversations about findings in order to minimize researcher bias. Rigour was further enhanced by theoretical memoing and theoretical sensitivity.

Ethical considerations

This study received ethics approval from the Health Sciences Ethics Board of Queen's University (approval number EPID-538-16Romeo #6017552 Amendment Approval). Participants and parents were given verbal and written information about the study and a telephone number to contact if parents had more questions about the study. All parents gave written, informed consent prior to the study, and all participants provided written informed assent prior to the study and verbal informed assent at the time of the study.

Results:

The sample consisted of four Muslim girls and two Muslim boys, all aged 12-15, each of whom lived in a medium sized Ontario city. All female participants had the experience of wearing a hijab when in a mosque, but at the time of the focus group, two of the four girls self-elected to regularly wear the hijab to school (hijabi) and two did not (non-hijabi). The study population (n=6) is described in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Sex	
Girls	4
Hijabi	2
Non-Hijabi	2
Boys	2
Age (years)	
12-13	2
14-15	4

Analysis of this focus group provided insight into ways that both female and male Canadian adolescents directly (girls) and indirectly (boys) experience and perceive the hijab. Through analysis, 27 unique codes were identified. They were organized into seven distinct categories (see Figure 1). From these categories, two higher order concepts emerged: 1. Reasons that adolescent girls choose to wear or to not wear the hijab and 2. The recognition that the hijab is a

representation of Islam, and concern that Islam is misunderstood by those around them and by the media. Both of these concepts are explored below. The category of internal benefits and motivations relates to both of these concepts, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Perceptions and Experiences related to the hijab in school contexts
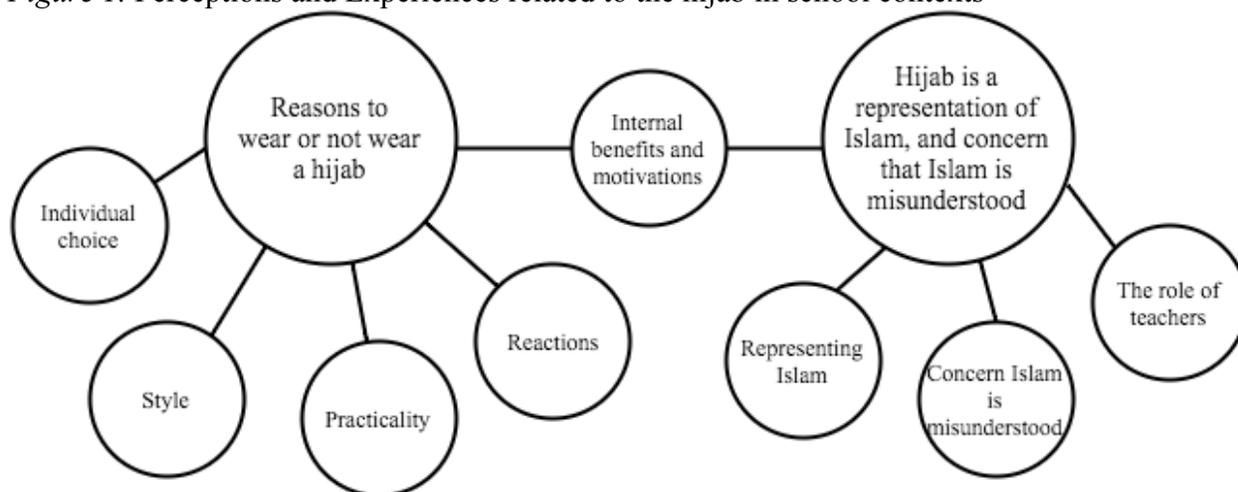
When held together, these two concepts depict participants' experiences and perceptions of the hijab in school settings.

1. **Reasons to wear or not wear a hijab**

Individual Choice: All participants believed females should be allowed to choose whether or not they wanted to wear a hijab. Two participants were concerned that Muslim girls and women were treated differently in that their appearances were controlled by being barred from wearing hijabs in certain situations. As one of the girls put it, "…it is as simple as someone saying you are not allowed to wear glasses. It's just a scarf on top of your head. It doesn't really make any difference." She believed that a hijab does not affect anyone but the wearer. Though none of the girls shared an instance in which they themselves were not allowed to wear a hijab in a situation, one of the girls said her mom had been told she could not wear a hijab in her workplace.

None of the girls reported that their parents pressured them to wear or not wear a hijab. Two female participants shared their individual reasons why they wore the hijab and the other

two female participants shared reasons they do not wear a hijab, but would possibly wear it in the future. Regardless of whether they did or did not veil, their choice was accepted and respected by all participants, including the boys. One non-hijabi girl explained she felt that "You should be able to choose the time when you start wearing a hijab because...you grow in your own time with things." The other said, "I might wear it when I get older." One of the hijabi participants felt that "It doesn't matter if you choose to wear one or not. It is your choice in general." Clearly, the boys did not have experiences related to wearing or choosing not to wear the hijab, however they listened attentively to the girls' perspectives and affirmed that girls should independently choose whether or not they wanted to veil. Aside from this, they did not comment on reactions to veiling or the meanings behind hijabs, and thus it is the voices of the female participants that are reflected in this section.

Style: Both hijabi girls expressed that both Muslims and non-Muslims viewed, and should view, their hijab solely as a piece of clothing. Conversation frequently returned to the belief that wearing a hijab was "just wearing clothes." One of the girls explained that the hijab is "just a scarf on the top of your head" and does not change anything about who you are as a person, except for the fact that you visually look different due to a new style choice. Hijabi girls indicated that a benefit to choosing to wear a hijab as a style is that it helped them to be liked and appreciated "for more than just [their] looks and shape." One of them said, "A hijab is just an extension of your clothes. It does not make you any different in here [gesturing to her heart]; it just makes you different out here [gesturing to her face and body]." The other added that she believed no person should be judged by their external appearance, as this is less important than "your personality and what you say" and the hijab is useful in helping others focus on internal qualities.

Both hijabi girls felt that wearing a hijab is like choosing to dress in any other manner, since deciding to wear a hijab is "…just someone creating a different style for themselves. So maybe one year you end up being Goth or something like that. It is a big change but you are not any different." She later added, "I don't say to some person, hey you should not wear short shorts. Oh you should not wear a crop top. So why should they tell me not to wear a hijab?" All participants agreed that every person had the right to choose how to dress without being judged or insulted by their outward appearances. One girl explained,

> People should know that if you ask me why I wear a hijab, then I am going to ask you why are you wearing the clothes that you wear. It is essentially the same thing. Why are you wearing pants? Why are you wearing a t-shirt?

Both hijabi girls explained that the hijab was a style choice that had no place for outsider opinion. The girls who did not wear a hijab listed many stylistic reasons for choosing not to veil as well. One of the non-hijabi girls said one of her reasons was that "Sometimes for graduations or something I would like my hair down or in a style and with the hijab I can't really do that." The other non-hijabi participant said one of her reasons for not veiling was that she liked to wear t-shirts and would have to cover her arms if she wore a hijab. Non-hijabi participants felt the decision to wear a hijab would alter their other clothing choices in ways they felt were limiting and therefore decided not to veil.

Practicality: Another clear theme to emerge related to practicality. The girls did not find they needed special accommodation in any aspect of their school experiences, and they listed few practical implications or difficulties caused by the hijab. One hijabi girl said that gym class could sometimes be difficult while wearing a hijab as it "gets hot" and can fall out of place, but that teachers and school environments "give us enough outlets to help us out in that sort of thing."

For example, all participants said they did not have a uniform for gym class and were allowed to wear whatever they wanted, so long as they could move freely. Gym classes were segregated by sex, leaving the hijabi girls less concerned about their hijab; if it slipped, they could go to fix it in the bathroom without worrying about being seen by a male. None of the girls in this study shared any instance where they did not feel comfortable in any aspect of gym class due to modesty or any other religious barrier. Freedom in clothing expectations and the sex separation within gym classes minimized possible religious conflicts, allowing girls to participate fully alongside the rest of their peers.

No other classes in their public school environments were segregated by sex, but this did not pose any issues. While the hijabi girls agreed a hijab as a piece of clothing visually communicates a need for physical space, both hijabi and non-hijabi participants felt that boys respected their space, not because of a hijab, but simply because they are human. One of the girls explained, "No one makes any comments and no one disrespects my space because everyone is entitled to space. If you want to hug someone you ask them to hug. You want to shake hands then you hold your hand out. You just don't force someone into something." The girls agreed that each individual is different and has a different perspective of what physical space they need to feel comfortable, but that consent should always be respected, for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Reactions: Participants reported that the visibility of the hijab incited questions from non-Muslims about when and why it is worn. One participant said the reason she chose not to wear a hijab was because of questions her hijabi friend was asked by classmates that she deemed annoying, such as, "Do you shower with that, do you sleep with that, do you ever take it off?" When asked how their classmates reacted the first day they went to school wearing a hijab, one

of the hijabi girls said, "…people would ask questions like, why are you wearing all that? But other than that I have not really had any problems with it at school." However, she did sometimes feel like people's questions were "insensitive" and that though they wanted to learn, it is important to "respect people's differences in class." The other hijabi participant said when she began to wear a hijab to school, classmates "…just went on with it. They asked me a couple of questions but barely any…It wasn't that hard of a time when I first started to wear a hijab. They just rolled with it." She explained, "I like being able to educate people on why I do things in my life" and she therefore appreciated the few questions people asked and their positive reaction to her choice. Though peers' questions had the potential to become uncomfortable, the majority of experiences both participants had included acceptance and minimal questioning.

Neither hijabi participant shared any stories about personally experiencing name-calling or blatant discrimination. Several participants agreed that "the mentality over in Canada is pretty good" and most reactions to wearing a hijab were positive or neutral. However, one hijabi participant said that she felt one of her teachers treated her differently than the other children in her class. This teacher did not comment on her hijab or ask about her religion, but she felt there was an underlying misunderstanding. As she explained, her passion was evident in her voice:

> They have to realize that this is a way that I express myself and my religion. And it has nothing to do with my race. It has nothing to do with different types or groups of people that are stereotypical of the group that I am in.

This participant appeared to be concerned that wearing a hijab may have caused her teacher to see her as a stereotype of "Muslim" or "Arab" due to her appearance.

Internal Benefits and Motivations: This category bridges what participants shared about why they choose or choose not to wear a hijab and their ideas about the hijab as a reflection of Islam.

Hijabi participants said wearing the hijab made them feel "protected," "safe," and "connected to [their] religion," which was a personal advantage that encouraged them to veil. These feelings also served as motivation to positively represent their religion and the courage to do so despite negative stereotypes. One of the hijabi girls said, "Wearing a hijab reminds me that I am a Muslim." They saw themselves as role models, finding that wearing a hijab encouraged them to follow the pillars of Islam even more closely. The other hijabi participant explained, "People have told me I am nicer and calmer when I am wearing a scarf than when I am not." While both girls felt the hijab itself was just a piece of clothing, wearing it encouraged them to embody and practice "the goodness" of Islam, both consciously and subconsciously. All participants were conscious that wearing a hijab instantly identifies a girl as Muslim, which leads to the second core concept.

2. **The Hijab represents Islam, and triggers concern that Islam is misunderstood**

Representing Islam: While all participants (boys and girls) reported that they tried to be "good" Muslims, both hijabi girls were conscious that every decision they made could potentially be used as a representation of Islam. Both hijabi girls tried to make use of their visual identification by striving to "represent [their] religion in the best way possible" by being "the best person [they] could be." One hijabi girl compared representing Islam by wearing to hijab to going on a school trip. She explained:

> I feel that it is like, let's say you go on a school trip and the teacher tells you beforehand to act nice because when people see you it is like you are representing our school and you should act nice. So it is kind of like wearing a hijab. When people see you they will judge you first of all because you look different than everyone else. But once you get to know them and act nice they are like, oh these Muslims are not that bad. They are pretty good

and stuff. So we are representing [Islam] to society and saying that we are not bad people,

we are just different.

By acting kindly and being conscious that their actions could change an outsider's opinion of

Islam, these hijabi girls felt determined to prove that "different" does not need to equate to

"bad." To non-Muslims, the hijab is a scarf that communicates "Muslim," and participants were

simply concerned that what came to mind when an outsider thought "Muslim" supported their

own conceptions of Islam that they felt correctly represented their faith group. While boys did

not have the experience of wearing the hijab, they articulated very similar apprehensions about

Islam being misjudged in contemporary Canadian culture.

Concern Islam is Misunderstood: When asked what the most important take away should be

from the focus group, every participant responded with something to do with the diversity found

amongst Muslims and their concern that Islam not be misrepresented. Indeed, discussion of the

hijab seemed to elicit an underlying discussion about what it means to represent Islam. All six

participants repeatedly discussed concerns that the act of one Muslim or Islamic group would

represent all of Islam. They felt they needed to prove to friends, teachers, and other non-Muslims

that Muslims are not what they are portrayed to be in the news. One of the male participants said

it was important to remember that if members of ISIS claim to be Muslim, then "They might still

be Muslims, but they are not good Muslims." They were clear that within Islam there are

countless interpretations, beliefs, and experiences, and that this diversity was part of what

connected them to their religion. The individuality of each practicing Muslim made it unfair and

untrue to take the terrorist acts of few and associate those with all other Muslims. One of the

girls felt that stories about extremist groups should be considered entirely irrelevant to

Canadians, explaining, "We are in a completely different place in the world. And it does not

affect us as much because we are not part of it. We are just normal people doing our normal things." One of the boys felt that regardless of whether it relates to the Canadian context, the media representation of Islam was not very accurate:

Especially with the news and Canada and stuff, Islam is represented a lot of the time by a negative thing and a violent act. But that is not at all the truth. I would tell someone to look more into it and actually find the deeper understanding and meaning of what you are looking at. Don't just judge a book by its cover. That is, 99 times out of 100 you are not going to find the true meaning of something…[Islam] is not always what it seems like on the media. We all know that media always misinterprets stuff. That is what media is. They do stuff that is not usually right. If you are not going to take media for being truthful about a celebrity or about how someone acts then it is not always fair to take it about a religion, any religion that is. So don't always think about the media as something that is true. Find a different resource that is unbiased to find the true meaning of something.

Several participants agreed that the diversity within Islam was not different from the diversity within any other faith as they all have the potential for followers who said they were members of the religious group but were acting in a way that was not reflective of the majority. Hijabi participants did not want their hijabs to be associated with Muslims who were harming others. They felt it was unfair to group all people of any religious belief together. One participant elaborated:

The thing [is] that being diverse is good. Not every person from any religion is the same. Let's say Christianity, not every Christian person is the same and not every Jewish person is the same. We are all different because we are all different people. Not one person is the

same. So if there are certain people who are doing the bombings or are being terrorists

that does not mean that the people in this group would be because not everybody is the

same. There are no two people who are alike.

All participants believed there is diversity within faiths that should be acknowledged. Despite the

fact that the focus group questions concentrated on the hijab, participants were very concerned

about the representation of Islam in Canada and felt this was a result of treating Muslims as a

homogenous group.

The Role of Teachers: Participants agreed that teachers and schools could help to combat

misrepresentative stereotypes about Islam and other faiths. They were aware that media

representation of Islam is regularly negative and worried that non-Muslims judged them because

of this. Three participants spoke about the importance of learning about a variety of religious

groups in school. One of the girls said learning about different religions helped her to feel

connected to other people. She asserted,

Let's say there is someone who is Christian and you want to learn more about that, then it

could help me feel more empathic for them because before I didn't know how their life

was. But if I connect with them and share some experiences with them then I could learn

things about Christians and how they live and stuff.

Participants thought it was helpful when teachers encouraged this kind of learning in the

classroom. By observing diversity within many different groups, they believed there would be a

greater sense of understanding amongst classmates and in the school environment.

Rather than get their information about Islam from the media, one of the boys said: "It

would just be better [for teachers] to ask a Muslim who is practicing the actual goodness instead

of just taking these actions from the not so good ones and putting in on the whole society of

Muslims." Another said if a non-Muslim had a question about Islam, he "would tell them to come to a mosque and ask someone. And they will give a full explanation of what Islam is." Participants said they did not want to speak about Islam or on behalf of Muslims to their classmates. One participant said she had a teacher ask her about Islam, but she did not mind because the teacher did so privately, not in front of the class, and "when a teacher is asking they actually want to know and to learn from it about how to make you feel more comfortable as a student." By learning about Islam through one of these outlets, teachers could help to combat negative stereotypes surrounding Islam and as a result help to combat negative stigma and stereotypes surrounding their hijabs. While concerned about the experiences and perceptions of Muslims in Canada as a whole, participants found their own school environments to be generally inclusive. Though participants thought their teachers and peers were sometimes uninformed, they had not experienced any anti-Muslim comments or actions within the school environment. They did not feel the need for much change, aside from having peers who are educated about the diversity amongst Muslims. Hijabi girls liked when a teacher or peer would let them know if their hijab had slipped in gym class, but aside from this, they felt it was appropriate to keep questions and comments to a minimum within a school context.

Discussion

Participants in this study provided in-depth information regarding their understandings of the purpose and meaning of the hijab, and the ways it affects their adolescent lives and why they choose to wear or not to wear the hijab. Through this discussion of the hijab, a second strong theme emerged related to the way that the hijab represents Islam, and the participants' concern that Islam not be misunderstood. These two themes contribute to an understanding of the

experiences of Islamic adolescents in a mid-sized Canadian city, regarding not only to the hijab, but to the religion it represents.

It was striking the way findings from this study contrasted from some key literature in this research area. With regard to Mernissi's theory of the visual, spatial, and ethical hijabs, participants' understanding of the hijab as a piece of clothing relates directly to the visual hijab. The visual hijab represents the physical hijab one sees, and reactions from non-Muslims when the hijabi participants began to veil were sparked by the visual change. The non-hijabi participants' reasons for choosing not to veil were primarily visual and based on style. All of the four female participants in this study felt they were free to choose independently how they visually present themselves and did not experience outside pressure to dress in a particular manner. This is in contrast to Hamzeh's study of four Muslim girls in the South-Western United States, who were forced into wearing a hijab by their parents and often challenged the visual, spatial, and ethical hijabs when away from their parents by taking off their hijab or dressing and participating in activities their parents would not have approved.[48] Hijabi participants in this study chose to wear a hijab themselves and felt no desire to challenge any of Mernissi's hijabs.

When considering girls' experiences of gym class and other components of school, the hijab as a piece of clothing also relates to Mernissi's spatial and ethical hijabs. Contrary to qualitative studies that detail Muslim hijabi girls' struggles in gym class and physical activity due to conflicts with these two hijabs,[49] the hijabi girls in this study did not see gym class as a major issue at school. One of the girls in Diab's study of hijabi girls in public high schools in Windsor, Ontario was teased for wearing track pants under her uniform shorts out of modesty,[50] but due to the freedom in dress for gym class, participants in this study had no such ethical issues. Participants made no mention of bullying or hate, contrary to many of the experiences

discussed in the introduction. While Hamzeh found Muslim girls had many physical activities

"veiled-off" to them by their parents,[51] girls in this study had no such spatial or ethical issues and

were able to fully participate in physical activities. Furthermore, though Zine's research situated

in Toronto, Ontario found that male students did not respect the space of female hijabi students,

as boys touched, hugged, and stood uncomfortably close to hijabi girls,[52] participants in this

study found boys respected the space of all girls, Muslim or not. We speculate these differences

could be because of the liberal nature of the community in which the participants lived.

Additionally, it is possible that the Islamic community in Toronto is large enough that they are

able to become more insular, whereas in a community of this size this is not possible for any

minority group, creating an environment that is more respectful of difference.

All participants were very clear that the hijab was important because it marked the wearer

a representative of Islam. It seemed as though participants saw the hijab as iconic of Islam;

conversation repeatedly returned to the idea that Islam is misrepresented. This reaffirmed the

notion that the hijab is a visual marker of Islam. The connection between the hijab and

representing Islam motivated the hijabi girls to act in ways they thought would positively

represent Islam, such as independently choosing to dress modestly. While many women feel

pressure to cover their bodies/veil so as to be a "good Muslim,"[53] girls did not think that they

must dress modestly or wear a hijab to be "good," but rather that *because* they wore a hijab and

represented Islam they must be "good." Their experiences confirmed the fact that wearing a hijab

and choosing to act as they felt a hijabi girl should was an expression of their agency as an

adolescent Muslim, not practiced because of demands from their parents. Wearing a hijab was an

opportunity to consider and make use of the ethical hijab to show non-Muslims that there is

diversity within Islam that includes many positives, not something chosen out of a desire to avoid being "bad."

Implications

The importance participants placed on acknowledging the diversity within Islam holds implications within the field of education. Teachers should be aware of religions and multiple meanings behind religious behaviour so as not to stereotype or unintentionally hold bias; misinformed teachers create misinformed learning spaces that have the potential to influence other students.[54] It is beneficial for teachers to be aware of the reasons behind wearing a hijab, its requirements, and concerns some wearers may have, thereby helping them to better understand their hijabi students' beliefs and needs. Should this education incite questions about their students' individual perceptions regarding hijabs or Islam, participants felt it was easier when a teacher asked them a question about their faith than when a student did, as they knew teachers "actually want to know…how to make you feel more comfortable as a student." Additionally, they suggested if non-Muslims had questions about Islam they should go to a mosque and ask someone. Their views that everyone deserves space, not to be judged by what they wear, and that every religious group is internally diverse can be supported within a classroom environment by teaching about other faiths and not judging or holding bias against students due to preconceived associations regarding their identities. Participants thought it was important to learn about any faith and they appreciated when teachers provided the class with "outlets to educate themselves on different religions" because it helped them to feel more connected and empathetic to practicing members by learning about their experiences and finding similarities. A way of incorporating this idea into classroom is to follow the idea provided by participants and invite a member of a mosque into the classroom. Curriculum designers should consider including

components that consider religion in more depth, thereby creating an opportunity to teach empathy and understanding within school environments.

Strengths

This study has many strengths. Participants were articulate and engaged. Since all participants knew each other prior to the study, a high level of rapport was already established before the focus group occurred. Participants were comfortable together and eager to share their experiences and ideas. The study explores a relevant social issue and has significant practical value. Having boys share their experiences as well as girls further enriched the discussion. Data is textured, rich, and nuanced, and was generously shared. This is an emerging conversation of great social importance in Canada, and around the world. It has primarily been dominated by adult voices. Though small, this focused study makes an important contribution to this conversation as it intentionally includes and empowers the adolescent voice.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its size and scope. It is limited to one focus group in one community. It is unlikely that findings are generalizable to a full spectrum of Muslim young people in Canada, and certainly we would not expect it to be generalizable to Muslim young people in other countries. Further, a limitation to focus groups is that sometimes responses of one participant can alter that of others in the group;[55] as participants were not interviewed individually, this may have occurred. Although their voices are important to include within studies on perceptions of hijabs, it was difficult to encourage boys to participate during the discussion. Additionally, a broader consideration of the Muslim community, as well as research involving teachers and non-Muslim students, in this medium sized city could have been useful in further understanding the context of remarks.

Conclusions

Muslim veiling is an important area of research, but the voices of young Muslims are not often invited into this conversation. Participants believed that hijabs are a piece of clothing, chosen by the individual, which are a visual symbol of Islam. This symbol made the hijabi girls representative of Islam, and as such they were compelled to represent Islam in the best way possible to counteract negative associations. As agents of change, hijabi girls were dedicated to shifting the stereotype of Islam into one that better reflected the goodness they found within their faith. Non-hijabi girls as well as boys cared deeply about this conversation and all participants shared the common concern that Islam be represented well in their school contexts and in the larger world. Findings from this study offer important insights into adolescent experiences of wearing the hijab, as well as considerations for educational settings. This study is aimed to inspire further, more extensive research surrounding Muslim youth and the hijab in a school context, and promote the value of listening to the voices of young people regarding this important issue.

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