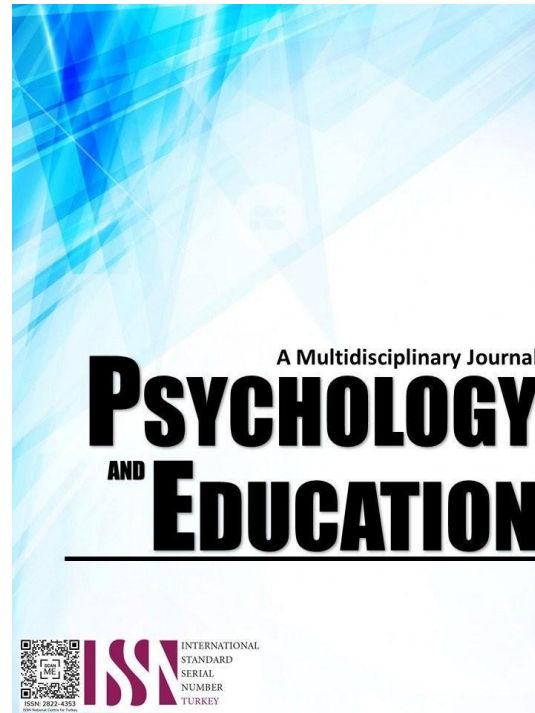


MORE THAN JUST A COVER: UNDERSTANDING THE MOTIVATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND SIGNIFICANCE OF NIQAB-WEARING MUSLIM WOMEN



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More than just a Cover: Understanding the Motivations, Challenges, and Significance of Niqab-Wearing Muslim Women

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Abstract

This research delves into the experiences, motivations, and challenges of Muslim women in the Philippines who wear the niqab. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study focuses on the perspectives of ten professional Muslim women from the Maranao, Maguindanao, and Tausug communities. The results reveal that wearing the niqab is a deeply personal and spiritual choice, closely tied to religious commitment, cultural identity, and individual preference. However, niqab-wearing Muslim women often face significant social prejudice, workplace discrimination, and exclusion, particularly in multicultural settings. Despite these challenges, they have shown resilience and regard the niqab as a powerful symbol of their faith. This study contributes to the existing literature on religious identification, gender, and social inclusion by shedding light on the Philippine context, an area often underrepresented in global discourses on veiling and Islamophobia. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing how religious expression shapes the social and professional experiences of Muslim women, particularly in pluralistic societies. The findings underscore the need for increased social awareness, greater acceptance, and the promotion of religious diversity. Practically, the study calls for inclusive policies in workplaces and educational institutions, as well as culturally sensitive community programs that affirm the dignity and rights of Muslim women who wear the niqab. Future research may explore the role of the niqab in leadership, mobility, and digital spaces to gain deeper insights into the sociological transformations it influences in modern society.

Keywords: *niqab, Muslim women, niqab-wearing*

Introduction

Islamic dress varies widely across cultures and interpretations, with the niqab being one of the most distinct forms. Unlike the hijab, which covers only the hair and neck, the niqab covers the head and neck while leaving only the eyes visible (Lacheret & Farooq 2020). Islam emphasizes the importance of modesty in dress, particularly in covering one's awrat. In Islam, awrat is a part of the body that should be concealed (Pulungan, 2023).

The Quran states:

"And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments except what normally appears. Let them draw their veils over their chests, and not reveal their 'hidden' adornments except to their husbands, their fathers, their fathers-in-law, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, their fellow women, those 'bondwomen' in their possession, male attendants with no desire, or children who are still unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not stomp their feet, drawing attention to their hidden adornments. Turn to Allah in repentance all together, O believers, so that you may be successful." (Quran 24:31, trans. Sahih International)

This verse instructs believing women to guard their modesty, lower their gaze, and conceal their adornments from those outside their circle of mahrams (close male relatives). While the Quran mandates modest dressing, interpretations vary leading some Muslim women to adopt the niqab as a deeper form of modesty and religious devotion (Suhendi & Wahyudi 2023). For them, the niqab is not merely a cultural practice but a religious expression of submission to divine will, a visible symbol of faith, and a conscious act of spiritual discipline. It also serves as a way of ensuring that their beauty remains hidden from non-mahrams, aligning with the broader Islamic principle of hayaa (modesty).

Despite its religious significance, wearing the niqab is not without controversy. In many societies, particularly those with secular or Western influences, the niqab is often debated in the context of women's rights, religious freedom, national security, and public identity (Puteri, 2022). These debates frequently position the niqab as a symbol of oppression or backwardness, rather than as a personal choice rooted in faith. However, for many Muslim women, it is a conscious and empowered decision—reflecting their autonomy and their right to religious expression. As Beevi, Razick, and Saujan (2021) assert, the niqab also provides a sense of psychological comfort, privacy, and spiritual security, reinforcing its role in both cultural and religious expressions of modesty.

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has sought to understand the experiences of veiled Muslim women in contemporary societies. Studies by Chenigle, Grima, and Prud'homme (2023) have explored how veiling intersects with issues of identity, agency, and visibility in public and professional spaces. However, there remains a notable gap in localized research particularly in Southeast Asia, and even more so in the Philippine context. Most of the existing studies focus on Muslim communities in Europe, the Middle East, or North America, leaving the experiences of Muslim women in the Philippines especially those who wear the niqab

underexplored.

The niqab, beyond its religious implications, is also shaped by regional, linguistic, and cultural nuances. In different parts of the world, terms like burqa, hijab, abaya, and chador are used to describe various forms of Islamic covering. The meanings and practices surrounding the niqab differ widely, depending on how Islam is interpreted and practiced within a specific cultural or regional setting (Ahmad, Muniroh, & Nurani, 2021). In this present study, the term niqab is used deliberately and consistently to refer to the specific style of face covering those leaves only the eyes visible.

Although the niqab is rooted in spiritual devotion, its wearers often face social challenges and stereotypes. Even among Muslim-majority populations, women who wear the niqab may be seen as overly conservative, isolated, or unapproachable (Khan, Kohli, Potsangbam & Kharshiing 2025). These perceptions can lead to marginalization in the workplace, restricted social mobility, and diminished opportunities for civic participation (Garcia-Yeste, Botton, Alvarez & Campdepados 2021). The resulting sense of exclusion can affect not only their professional lives but also their mental health, social relationships, and sense of belonging within wider society.

Given these dynamics, this study seeks to examine the lived realities of professional Muslim women in the Philippines who wear the niqab. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research probes their motivations, personal meanings, and everyday experiences. By highlighting their voices and stories, this study aims to move beyond stereotypes and provide a nuanced understanding of how religious identity is negotiated in a multicultural, predominantly Catholic society.

This research addresses a critical gap in the literature by focusing on niqab-wearing women in the Philippine context, a country where Islam is a minority religion, and where Muslim women often navigate complex intersections of faith, gender, and public life. The study is especially relevant today, as discussions on religious tolerance, diversity, and inclusion become increasingly urgent across Southeast Asia.

More than just contributing to academic discourse, this study offers practical implications for policy development, workplace inclusivity, and community engagement. By unpacking the challenges and affirming the agency of niqab-wearing women, the research promotes a more empathetic and informed perspective on religious expression and social inclusion. Through their narratives, this study aspires to foster dialogue, challenge prejudices, and contribute meaningfully to the broader conversation on identity, visibility, and the right to difference.

Methodology

Research Design

The present research employed a qualitative research approach, aiming to examine the lived experiences, reasons, challenges, and beliefs of Muslim women who wear the niqab. A qualitative approach was deemed suitable since it is concerned with comprehending human experiences, emotions, and social interactions in their natural context (Creswell, 2013). Through the application of this approach, the research aimed to describe the richness and depth of the participants' views, as opposed to using numerical data.

A phenomenological method was indeed used to study the lived meanings and individual experiences of women who wear the niqab. Phenomenology as a research tradition is concerned with how people make sense and attribute meaning to their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The method allowed the researcher to discover the reasons for wearing the niqab, the difficulties experienced by the participants, and their perceptions of societal opinions directed towards them.

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who met specific inclusion criteria aligned with the study's objectives. This non-probability sampling technique ensured the selection of information-rich cases that could provide deep insights into the phenomenon studied.

The participants included 10 professional Muslim women, aged 20 to 40, from the Maranao, Maguindanao, and Tausug ethnic groups who wear a black niqab as part of their everyday attire. These women were actively employed in various professional fields within the Philippines.

Instrument

The researcher developed a semi-structured interview guide composed of 10 open-ended questions. These questions were crafted to explore key areas such as: the cultural and religious significance of the niqab, challenges faced by niqab-wearing women in personal and professional contexts, and strategies used to maintain religious identity while wearing the niqab.

The interview guide underwent validation by three experts in qualitative research and Islamic cultural studies to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity. The semi-structured format allowed participants to freely express their experiences while keeping the discussion aligned with research goals.

Procedure

Interviews were scheduled at times convenient for participants to minimize disruption to their professional commitments. The researcher made direct contact with each participant to coordinate appointments. Prior to interviews, participants were provided with a consent form explaining the study's purpose, confidentiality assurances, voluntary participation, and their rights to withdraw at any time without penalty.

With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in transcription. The researcher carefully transcribed the recordings verbatim, preserving the authenticity of participants' narratives for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the interview transcripts, following the framework of Cristobal and De La Cruz (2017). This method involved systematically identifying, coding, and organizing patterns or themes across the data set. Given the diverse experiences of Muslim women who wear the niqab, thematic analysis allowed the researcher to capture both commonalities and unique perspectives without losing the richness of individual accounts.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this study are categorized into six themes, highlighting the motivations, challenges, and strategies of niqab-wearing Muslim women in contemporary society. The participants' experiences are supported by in vivo statements to reflect their voices authentically.

Theme 1: Motivations on wearing Niqab

Participants expressed varied motivations behind their decision to wear the niqab. These motivations are rooted in their faith, personal conviction, and social environment. The theme is organized into four subthemes that reflect the complex and meaningful reasons behind adopting the niqab.

Subtheme 1: Niqab as an expression of Obedience to Allah

One big reason the participants wear the niqab is their deep connection to Islam. They see it as obeying Allah and as a way to show their faith. For them, the niqab is more than clothing, but a way to feel closer to God.

As Participant 1 stated:

"For me personally, yung pagwear ng niqab ay hindi lang para sa akin para sa sarili ko. Para ito sa Allah subhannah wa taallah, as a way nasumusunod ako sa utos niya." (For me personally, wearing the niqab is not just for myself. It is for Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'ala, as a way of showing that I am following His command)

This kind of religious devotion aligns with the Quranic verse Surah Al-Ahzab (33:59) which states:

"O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful"

Scholars interpret this verse as a call to maintain and practice the sanctity of niqab. For the Muslim women, niqab is a sacred expression that allows them to fulfill their religious obligation. This interpretation is supported by the study conducted by Beevi, Razick, and Saujan (2021) explain that even though niqab is not obligatory and enforced, some Muslim women seen this as a form of declaration and testament of their faith not just a part of cultural identity. Likewise, Karunanayake (2024) found that Muslim women view niqab as crucial part of their way of life. These studies show that niqab holds a deeper meaning serving as a powerful act of religious devotion and commitment to Islamic principles. These studies confirm the present findings for many participants, the niqab is a spiritual declaration, not merely a cultural practice.

Subtheme 2: Spiritual commitment

Wearing the niqab is not just about the covering and appearance, it represents an act of expression of one's faith symbolizing a way of life of every Muslim woman. This meaningful connection is visible in the statement of Participant 5, who expressed:

"Isa sa mga reasons kung bakit nagsusuot ako ng niqab ay para maging mas malapit ako sa Allah subhana wataala, kumbaga yung niqab ay more than covering, hindi lang basta nagtatakip ng buong mukha, kundi pinapakita to as a commitment sa faith na meron ako."

(One of the reasons why I wear the niqab is to become closer to Allah Subhanahu wa Ta'ala. For me, the niqab is more than just covering the face — it's a reflection of my commitment to the faith I believe in)

This viewpoint supports the research conducted by Bahkt (2022) highlighted that wearing a niqab is deeply embodied in religion which reflects the spiritual journey of a Muslim woman. In a similar manner, Hanapi et al. (2023) note that other reason Muslim women wear niqab is their belief that it strengthens a deeper connection with Allah.

This theme thus reflects how external expressions like the niqab reinforce internal spirituality, illustrating the embodiment of faith.

Subtheme 3: Family as a Guide in Wearing the Niqab

The decision to wear the niqab is not merely a personal choice but it is also intertwined by external influence such as family. As one participant shared,

"Malaking bagay for me na nandon yung support ng pamilya ko nong nagstart ako magsuot ng ng niqab."

(It meant a lot to me that I had my family's support when I started wearing the niqab).

This sentiment aligns with the research conducted by Macaraya (2020) where familial support plays an essential role in decision to wear niqab. Many Muslim women find that the encouragement from the family provide confidence to fully embrace the wearing of niqab especially in the place where niqab is being misunderstood. In this context, this makes it clear that the niqab is more than just clothes, it is a powerful display of belief, trust, and being part of the Muslim group. It is not only a personal conviction but also family values being uphold. Exploring this aspect allows a nuanced understanding of the social aspect that shape the choice of wearing a niqab. Thus, the niqab can symbolize not only individual faith but also shared familial values, beliefs, and identity, contributing to a holistic religious practice.

Subtheme 4: Personal Choice in wearing the Niqab

Wearing the niqab is seen as a personal statement for the Muslim women who wear it. It is a reflection of an identity, faith and with deep conviction. It is a personal choice not a form of coercion. Yet, many critics argue that Muslim woman are being forced but those who wear it has a different reason. This is something that they are not pressured to wear niqab but it is driven by a choice to wear it alone.

As Participant 7 shared

"May mga tao ako na naecounter asking if yung pagsuot ba ng niqab ay required pero pinapaliwanagan ko sila na it is a choice, it is my choice na magsuot ng niqab"

(here are people I encounter who ask if wearing the niqab is required, but I explain to them that it's a choice, it's my personal choice to wear the niqab.)

Participant 7's response provides valuable insight into the significance of wearing the niqab as an expression of personal choice rather than a result of coercion or external pressure. She clearly articulated that her decision to wear the niqab is rooted in her own beliefs and spiritual commitment, emphasizing that it is not something imposed upon her by family, society, or religious authorities. This distinction is important as it challenges common misconceptions that women who wear the niqab do so out of obligation or compulsion. Instead, it highlights the agency and autonomy exercised by many Muslim women in making such decisions for themselves.

This perspective aligns closely with the findings of Stallone (2024) who argue that the niqab is much more than a simple garment or piece of cloth. They describe it as a powerful symbol of autonomy and self-expression, representing a conscious and deliberate act of faith and identity. According to their study, wearing the niqab can serve as a means for women to assert control over their own bodies, resist societal norms or stereotypes, and define their own spirituality on their terms. Participant 7's reflections underscore this interpretation by showing how wearing the niqab is a personal journey tied deeply to her faith, values, and sense of empowerment.

Such findings are important in broadening the understanding of Islamic dress beyond stereotypes, recognizing the diverse motivations and meanings it holds for women. It also invites greater respect for the individuality and freedom behind these choices, promoting a more nuanced and empathetic view of Muslim women's experiences with religious attire. Thus, wearing the niqab can represent critical self- agency, particularly in navigating faith, gender, and identity in a complex world.

Subtheme 5: Niqab as an empowerment

This sense of empowerment is deeply felt by many niqab-wearing women, who see it as a way to be valued beyond their physical appearance. This sentiment is echoed by Participant 9, who shared:

"Based as experience ko, mas nakakaempowered. Mas ramdam kong appreciated ako sa pagsusuot ko ng niqab, ramdam ko yung appreciation beyond my physical appearance".

(Based on my experience, wearing the niqab makes me feel more empowered. I feel appreciated, not just for my physical appearance, but beyond that.)

This aligns with El Sayed and Hotait (2024) findings, where Muslim women actively use online platforms to share their experiences, challenge stereotypes, and assert their agency. Rather than feeling restricted, they embrace the niqab as a personal choice that strengthens their faith, identity, and self-worth. Through this, they redefine empowerment showing that confidence comes in different forms, including the freedom to practice their beliefs with conviction.

In this context, the niqab becomes more than a garment. It is a socio-religious statement that allows women to define what it means to be seen, valued, and heard on their own terms.

Theme 2: Challenges Faced by Niqab-Wearing Women

Despite the niqab being a meaningful expression of faith and identity, participants shared various challenges they regularly face as niqab-wearing women. These challenges reveal how public perceptions, cultural misunderstandings, and societal biases create barriers in both social and professional settings. The data revealed three major subthemes under this theme.

Subtheme 1: Perceptions of the Niqab

This divergence in experience underscores the diversity in perceptions regarding the niqab based on where one is and what the prevailing social norms there are. In Muslim-majority regions, the niqab is widely accepted and even promoted. In multicultural or secular contexts, however, women who wear the niqab are typically misunderstood and discriminated against.

As Participant 6 shared,

"Galing kami Manila non, pagsakay at even pagbaba pa lang ng bus ramdam ko na may kakaiba na parang nakatingin sila sa akin. Nong una, baka nagkataon lang pero nong nasa baba na kami panay tingin sa akin ng mga tao na hindi ko alam kung bakit"

(We came from Manila, and from the moment I got on the bus and even when I got off, I could feel something different, like people were staring at me. At first, I thought maybe it was just a coincidence, but when we were already downstairs, people kept looking at me, and I didn't know why.)

These differences in perception may be challenging, especially in public areas where women in niqab may encounter social acceptance, communication, or conformity pressures (Hanapi et al., 2023).

Similarly, Uthman and Adesina-Uthman (2022) state that while some people accept and embrace women in niqab, other people perceive them negatively or interact with them with unsubstantiated assumptions.

These differences in perception have a profound impact on how they are treated in different situations sometimes accorded acceptance, and at other times, doubt or discrimination. This is an indication of the impact of society's perception on the experience of women in niqab and thus their self-esteem and sense of belongingness.

This subtheme aligns with previous discussions in the Introduction where social attitudes were mentioned as key influences in the lived experiences of Muslim women (Khan & Ali, 2020). It confirms that although legal frameworks may tolerate religious attire, societal acceptance remains limited and conditional.

Subtheme 2: Stereotyping Against Niqab-Wearing Muslim Women

While much of the literature ideally focuses on the experiences of women wearing the niqab, available studies, such as Ahmed and Gorey (2021), primarily address Muslim women who wear the hijab. Their findings indicate that hijab-wearing women face discrimination and stereotyping in the workplace due to perceptions of being less approachable or socially withdrawn. Although the hijab differs from the niqab, these studies provide useful insights into the broader challenges Muslim women encounter in professional environments.

As Participant 10 shared,

"Nagtry ako mag apply ng teaching position, inooffer sa akin non elem students ang ihahandle, tingin ko kaya ko naman kahit secondary talaga yung tinuturo ko, pero, may licence ako pero nandon yung question nila kasi nakasuot ka ng niqab. Yung head tinanong ako if possible tanggalin ba yung niqab dahil baka hindi magkaintindihan sa students"

(I tried to apply for a teaching position, and they offered me to handle elementary students. I thought I could manage it even though I usually teach secondary students. I have a license, but then they asked me about wearing the niqab. The head asked if it would be possible for me to remove the niqab because they were concerned that there might be communication issues with the students)

This is reflective of how biases can lead to fewer opportunities and exclusion from the workplace, on top of the demand for more awareness and inclusion in workplaces. Likewise, a study by Kistoro et al. (2020) Muslim often perceived their dress preference as a hindrance to 'professionalism' or fitting in at work.

Another participant shared Participant 10 stating:

"Nong nainterview ako nong, head ata yun pipnakamanager, nagtanong sakin hypothetically kung may chance ba na pwede ako mag alis ng niqab. Sa part na yun medyo nasad ako kasi bakit ganon parang nagdoudoubt sila sa presence ko o baka hindi talaga sanay ang tao na makakita ng nakaniqab"

(When I was interviewed, I think it was the head or maybe the manager who asked me hypothetically if there was a chance I could remove the niqab. At that moment, I felt a bit hurt because it seemed like they were doubting my presence or maybe people just weren't

used to seeing someone wearing a niqab)

Others were treated unfairly on a daily basis at their working environments. They were asked on a daily basis if they could perform their work as effectively when they wore the niqab, with other individuals doubting their professional and competence skills. Others were excluded or belittled at the workplace, with other individuals viewing them as hard to talk to or socially inept. These individuals also endured condescending stereotypes, with other individuals thinking that they were extremist in thought or had been forced to wear the niqab. These occurrences intensified their sense of isolation and estrangement.

This incident reinforces the findings of Alvi and Hoodfar (2021), who assert that the niqab becomes a site of contention in spaces governed by secular expectations. Women are often put in a position where they must choose between professional advancement and religious adherence, a reality that deepens their sense of vulnerability and exclusion.

This reflects consistency with studies cited in the Introduction which argue that public perception and workplace environments play a critical role in either validating or undermining women's religious identities (Bakht, 2022; Khan, 2020).

Subtheme 3: Discrimination and Social Exclusion

This is a theme that emphasizes the challenges of women who cover their faces with the niqab in daily and working life. The other participants feel discriminated against and excluded, and it is harder for them to feel accepted.

Another participant shared:

"Hindi ko malilimutan yung may nagsabi sa akin non, na try mo kaya mag apply pero this time wala kang ganyang suot"

(I will never forget when someone advised me to try applying again, but this time without wearing the niqab)

This is evidenced by Abdallah (2022). research, which illustrated how women who wear the niqab are marginalized and discriminated against, particularly in the workplace and in public. Verbal abuse, differential treatment, and misconceptions of Islam were predominant. Most of her respondents in her research also reflected the same issues, reporting always to feel watched and needed to shed the niqab in order to get employed or to become a better fit in society.

Moreover, recent literature by Karunanayake (2024) confirms that public misconceptions about the niqab often lead to stereotyping, with women being viewed as radical or oppressed, despite their personal empowerment narratives. These false assumptions can alienate them not just from strangers, but also from peers and colleagues, reducing opportunities for meaningful social and professional engagement.

These experiences further reinforce the assertion made in the first part that while some Muslim women wear the niqab as a personal, spiritual, and empowered choice, they are often forced to navigate a world that does not recognize or support that agency (Beevi, Razick, & Saujan, 2021).

Theme 3: Significance of the niqab in contemporary society

The niqab remains a profound symbol that continues to shape the lives and identities of Muslim women in the modern world. Participants emphasized that beyond its physical presence, the niqab carries deep personal, religious, and social significance. It functions as a visible marker of faith, a tool for cultural continuity, and a means of self-expression in contemporary contexts that are often marked by misunderstanding and diversity. The theme encompasses three key subthemes that illustrate how niqab-wearing women uphold their values, educate others, and adapt to the demands of today's society.

Subtheme 1: Upholding Religious and Cultural Identity

This is a theme that is clear in the lives of women who wear the niqab, seeing it as a powerful expression of their religion and cultural identity. Loxston and Jachens (2023) refer to the experience of identity and belonging among Muslim women, noting the challenges they face in societies that may not necessarily accept or value their religious and cultural expressions. Despite such obstacles, such women still insist on affirming their religious and cultural identities, showing much resilience in the context of societal and political pressure. The observations of Loxston and Jachens (2023) agree with the contention that genuine belonging should not require the suspension of issues pertaining to faith but should enable the affirmation of complex expressions of identity. In this regard, the maintenance of religious and cultural identity through the niqab is more than mere personal belief; it also involves the struggle for the right to express one's beliefs without the threat of discrimination. This is a theme that is supported by the salience of creating a more inclusive society where religious and cultural self-determination is recognized and valued.

As Participant 7 shared,

"Nandon pa rin yung gusto ko pa rin isuot ang niqab kahit san ako magpunta para mas malaman ng tao na Muslim ako, Muslim kami. manormalize ba"

(I still want to wear the niqab wherever I go, so that people can recognize that I am Muslim—that we are Muslims. I wonder if this will become normalized.)

This is consistent with the findings of Lipnicka and Peciakowski (2021) who emphasized the symbolic and emotional importance of visible religious expression in identity formation and belonging. Upholding one's religious identity through the niqab, even in non-Muslim spaces, reflects both resistance and a demand for inclusivity and recognition.

Subtheme 2: Education and Awareness

Participants emphasized informing the general public about the correct definition of the niqab. They believed that through open discussion, representation, and lobbying, society would become tolerant and inclusive. Other individuals also demanded that the school, workplace, and media represent women wearing niqabs in a positive and realistic manner.

As participant shared:

"Napagtanto ko na ang hirap pala magsupt ng niqab kasi mamimisinterpret ka ng tao. Kailangan ieducate mo sila to sila para maintindihan nila na oh bat ka nagniniqab, bakit yung iba hijab lang suot. SO dapat mas mapromote pa talaga yung awareness na ang pagsuot ng niqab ay iba pa sa hijab"

(I realized that wearing the niqab can be challenging because people often misunderstand it. You have to educate them so they can understand why you wear the niqab and why some wear only the hijab. Therefore, there should be more efforts to promote awareness that wearing the niqab is different from wearing the hijab.)

Kistoro et al. (2020) described the negative attitudes against Muslims wearing the niqab in schools, where they are stereotypically viewed as radical or unsuitable for schools. The biases are caused by ignorance of the religious and personal meaning attached to the niqab. To address this, women who wear the niqab refer to the need for education programs and open communication to clarify the fact that the decision to wear the niqab is made on personal religion and not a sign of being radical. Through educating others, the women aim to enhance respect and tolerance in schools and workplaces. Likewise, Mohammadi and Hazeri's research (2021) is in line with the participants' view of the need to educate others on the actual meaning of the niqab. The study indicates that Muslim women wearing the veil in America and France are biased in schools due to general stereotypes. Through the call for decolonizing the curriculum, the study explains the need for an authentic reflection of their narratives. This validates the participants' call for open conversation, positive media reporting, and institutional programs in educational and work environments for inclusivity and acceptance of niqab-wearing women.

Subtheme 3: Adaptation in Modern Society

The niqab remains a significant symbol in the current society since Muslim women navigate changing cultural and social settings while maintaining their religion. Islam lacks a single, strict dress code; rather, it demands modesty, and fashion trends change over time (Ali, 2023). This has resulted in the creation of Islamic fashion trends in the contemporary period, where Muslim women adopt contemporary fashions while ensuring that their attire symbolizes their religious values (Nasyah, Wilianca & Akbar 2024).

As one participant shared,

"Since modern na, andyan na rin mga aesthetics style. Hindi talaga yun mawawala today. Ako, tinatry ko mag adapt, andon pa rin yung pagsusuot ng niqab pero with modern na like different colors ngayon ang ginagamit ko and andon pa rin yung islamic principle on wearing niqab."

(Since we're in modern times, aesthetic styles are definitely here to stay. For me, I try to adapt by still wearing the niqab but in a modern way—using different colors nowadays—while still holding onto the Islamic principles behind wearing the niqab.)

This serves to demonstrate how most Muslim women navigate the conflicts between traditional values and modern achievements, showing how devotion to their religion does not equate to them being behind in progress. This narrative echoes the argument of Shirazi (2020), who notes that Islamic fashion has expanded to include contemporary expressions that still adhere to religious guidelines. Muslim women, including those who wear the niqab, are not immune to modern influences and aesthetic preferences—they innovate and express their religiosity within the boundaries of their belief system.

Similarly, Alkadi, Calvard and Gottardello (2025), contends that Islam accommodates evolving cultural expressions, especially when the central requirement—modesty—is preserved. Participants' experiences affirm that wearing the niqab in a "modernized" way is not a contradiction, but rather an integration of traditional values with present-day sensibilities.

Conclusions

This research provides an insightful analysis of Muslim women wearing the niqab, asserting that this dress decision is one of conscious, representative expression of spirituality, selfhood, and personhood. From an empirical engagement with the experience-based conditions of these Muslim women, it emerges that, despite physical appearances, the wearing of the niqab comes to represent autonomy, and devotion amidst widespread stigmas and external discrimination.

The findings name religious commitment, cultural tradition, and personal belief as core motivating forces for wearing the niqab. However, professional prejudices, public judgment, and misrepresentation still persist, shaping the way women who wear the niqab

navigate through different spaces. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrate strength, resilience, and resolve to uphold their beliefs, asserting that the niqab is an empowering force and not a constraining agent.

The applicability of this study is not limited to the academic community. It requires a change in attitude in society and treatment of women who wear the niqab. It also underscores the significance of cultivating social awareness. Institutions, workplaces, and public areas need to recognize the rights of Muslim women to practice their religious practices without the threat of exclusion or judgment. Subsequent research can elaborate further on what the niqab signifies in the context of leadership, social mobility, and the internet presence and therefore have an in-depth understanding of how Muslim women approach issues in the modern day. By continuing this discussion, it is possible to change narratives in society, dispel myths, and create a more tolerant society where individual and religious decisions are realized and appreciated.

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that educational institutions and workplaces implement comprehensive awareness and sensitivity training programs to foster inclusivity and reduce bias against Muslim women wearing the niqab. Policymakers should develop clear guidelines that protect religious expression and prevent discrimination in public and professional settings. Media outlets are encouraged to provide balanced and positive representation of Muslim women to counter stereotypes and misinformation. Furthermore, community leaders and advocacy groups should facilitate open dialogues to promote mutual understanding and respect for cultural and religious diversity. Lastly, future research should explore the experiences of niqab-wearing women in leadership, digital spaces, and diverse cultural contexts to further enrich the discourse on identity and inclusion.

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