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## A Qualitative exploration of the Relationship between Religion and Well-being in Young Muslim women in Greater Manchester.

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**ABSTRACT**

Religion and wellbeing have been thoroughly researched especially in regards to an aging population and a non-Muslim population (Ferriss, 2002). However, the relationship between religion and wellbeing in Muslim women in particular has been under researched, therefore this study aimed to investigate the relationship in young Muslim women in Greater Manchester, primarily focussing on the underlying processes involved in this relationship. Six young Muslim women were recruited via snowball sampling and semi structured interviews were conducted to obtain data. The findings were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Three themes emerged from the research: purpose and meaning in life in relation to well-being, power of prayer in facilitating well-being and social wellbeing: a sense of unity and belongingness. The findings indicated that young Muslim women perceived their life to be meaningful and found religion to enhance their subjective, social and psychological well-being.

<b>KEY WORDS:</b>	<b>SPIRITUALITY</b>	<b>SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING</b>	<b>COPING MECHANISM</b>	<b>PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING</b>	<b>PRAYER</b>
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## **Introduction**

The relationship between religion and well-being has been studied extensively (Akhtar et al., 2016; Lomas et al., 2014; Koenig et al., 1988; McFadden, 1995). Religion has thought to be considered as a way of life (Oman, 2013). Whereas, Zinnbauer, Pargament and Scott (1999) defined religion as broad construct which encapsulates a set of beliefs that contain rituals and acts of worship that are directed to a higher power. Well-being on the other hand, has found to be a multidimensional construct as it covers the whole life span of an individual from birth to death (Ryff, 1995). According to Taylor (2015) well-being can be defined as overall life satisfaction, feeling happy and content with life. However, religion and well-being are considered to be broad concepts thus having a concise definition of each of these terms may be challenging and difficult (Dodge et al., 2012).

## **Psychological well-being**

Psychological well-being can be defined as positive mental health, feeling happy and satisfied with life (Wnuk and Marcinkowski, 2012). Green and Elliott (2010) found that religious individuals tend to have better psychological well-being and health than non-religious individuals. Religion relieves stress and tension and offers mental stability and positivity, this thus facilitates psychological well-being (Laurencelle et al., 2002). Conversely, the self-determination theory states that satisfying feelings of autonomy, competence and relatedness are essential in facilitating psychological well-being (Mcknight and Kashdan, 2009).

Greenfield and Marks (2007) found that conducting religious activities such as prayer, attending places of worship and constant remembrance of god enhances psychological well-being. However, Levin and Markides (1988) found that religious attendance did not have an impact on life satisfaction and psychological well-being. Maltby et al. (1999) found frequent acts of worship such as prayer to have a positive impact on psychological well-being. Conversely, Bayne and Nagasawa (2006) argues that acts of worship are groundless as if god is considered as a powerful entity then he is of no need of human worship.

According to Joshi et al. (2008) happiness is greater and psychological distress is lower for those who attend religious services. Conversely, Kim and Sobal (2004) argues that religion can also have a negative impact on psychological well-being as individuals may find practising the acts of worship challenging or may find they are inadequate to perform them. McCullough (2000) found forgiveness to enhance psychological well-being, this may be because the act of forgiveness relieves stress and reduces negative thoughts.

Additionally, George and McNamara (1984) found religiosity to be a better predictor of psychological well-being especially in black men and women. However, this may be because religion may hold much more significance in black people's lives due to historical events such as slavery (Krause and Hayward, 2015). In contrary, Eaton (2015) found that wearing the hijab increased psychological wellbeing, this may be because the adornment of the headscarf desexualises women and protects them from the lustful gaze of men. Conversely, Swami et al. (2013) found that the hijab did not prevent men from staring at women, and that men found women wearing the hijab to be even more attractive than those who did not wear the hijab, thus affecting their psychological well-being of hijab wearing women as many felt uncomfortable and often targeted in social gatherings. This is supported by Diener et al. (2011) who

argues that practising some aspects of a religion may be challenging for some individuals as the difficulties may lead them to abandon their religion altogether.

Aflakseir (2012) looked at religiosity, psychological well-being and meaning in life of University students from England, the findings implicated that Muslims students perceived their life to be meaningful. This is supported by Steger and Frazer (2005) who argue that religion gives meaning in life as it guides them to fulfil their purpose, whereas Herbert et al. (2009) notes that some believers may not find that religion gives meaning in life and may find religion to have a negative impact on their wellbeing. Berger's theory further emphasized that decline in religious beliefs (secularization) can lead to one questioning their existence on earth (Tschannen, 1991).

### **Subjective well-being**

Subjective well-being can be defined as evaluation of one's life that can be either positive or negative (Diener and Ryan, 2009). Eryilmaz (2015) conducted a qualitative study exploring the relationship between religious activities and subjective well-being in high school students. The findings revealed that religious activities such as prayer, fasting and attending mosque enhanced subjective well-being. Ellison (1991) states that conducting religious acts such as prayer, attending religious services, celebrating religious holidays strengthens the faith systems and that this then leads to better life satisfaction, happiness and feeling content with life. Similarly, Colón-Bacó (2010) notes that the strength of religious beliefs has an impact on well-being, stronger religious beliefs lead to enhanced subjective well-being. However, Doane (2013) argues that frequency of religious activities enhances subjective well-being and that these activities are found to be therapeutic to the individual. Conversely, Cohen and Cairns (2011) argue that although religion has found to enhance subjective well-being, but can also be related to dissatisfaction with life, unhappiness and depression.

Furthermore, Van Der Lans (2010) found that social cohesion mediates the relationship between religion and subjective well-being. This perhaps relates to the concept of being felt belonged and inclusive within a group (Hornsey and Jetten, 2004). This is further supported by Maslow's theory of needs which states that human have need to feel belonged (Taormina and Gao, 2013). However, his theory failed to consider the concept that individuals may not feel belonged when in a group due to factors such as relationship issue, confidence or lack of self-esteem, internal judgement. Alderfer (1969) developed further on Maslow's theory and stated that humans have three needs not five and these needs do not have to follow a hierarchical structure.

Krause (2003) looked at religion and subjective well-being in older white and black American adults. The results indicated that individuals perceived their life to be meaningful and had high levels of self-esteem and optimism. Whereas, UI Haq (2012) looked at the relationship between religion and subjective well-being amongst the elderly in Pakistan, the results from this qualitative study indicated that the elderly were satisfied with life and regarded life after death to be an ultimate goal.

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality can be defined as one seeking proximity to a higher power or unity with a greater world or mystery (Gall et al., 2011). However, is it difficult to define the term

spirituality as it is often used interchangeably with the term religion, thus spirituality may be considered a concept that is overshadowed by religion (Lee and Newberg, 2005). Kirby et al. (2004) found spirituality to enhance psychological well-being in older adults. Lynn Gall and Cornblat (2002) looked at the role of spirituality in long term adjustment to breast cancer in a sample of 52 women. The findings from the qualitative study indicated that spirituality had a positive impact on well-being. Whereas, Lin and Bauer-Wu (2003) found that patients with advanced cancer had higher spirituality, this thus enhanced their psycho-spiritual wellbeing as they were able to find meaning in the experience and cope more effectively with the illness. Ahmadi et al. (2015) conducted a literature search on studies that consisted of terms 'spirituality', 'cancer' and 'subjective well-being', and out of the 16 studies reviewed 10 studies were found to have a positive association between spirituality and subjective well-being in cancer patients. However, two studies were found to have no association and 4 studies indicated both the positive and detrimental effects of spirituality on subjective well-being in cancer patients.

Furthermore, frequent engagement of conducting religious activities such as prayer, attending places of worship and engaging in acts of helping others has found to strengthen relationships, increase happiness and confidence (Bayne and Nagasawa, 2006). In a qualitative study Callister and Khalaf (2010) looked at spirituality in child bearing women and found that majority of women regarded child bearing as a spiritual process and also thought of it as a way of getting close to God and doing righteous deeds. However, it can be argued that individuals may regard spirituality as a temporary process which is only employed when life changing decisions are implemented (Callister and Khalaf, 2010).

### **Coping mechanism**

Religion can be described as a tool to help individuals cope with difficult or challenging situations. In a qualitative study Gurm et al. (2008) found prayer to be effective in helping individuals cope with breast cancer, as it made them feel close to god and relieved stress. However, Diener et al. (2011) argue that once the solution has been found to a certain problem, people then neglect religion and think of it as a useful tool in times of need. According to Boeving (2008) God should be remembered even when times are not challenging or difficult, this thus can have a negative impact on an individual's well-being as they would only maintain their relationship with god during difficult times.

Furthermore, practice of religious activities such as prayer, fasting and attending religious services have also found be effective in helping individuals cope with tough situations (Park, 2005). Conversely, this may be because individuals may see God as attachment figure, a source of protection and thus may conduct religious activities in order to maintain proximity to God (Kirkpatrick, 1992).

Ghobary Bonab et al. (2013) found that individuals commit religious rituals to show their devotion to Allah and maintain their proximity to Allah. According to Bowlby's attachment theory, the process of attachment begins at an early age, it can be argued that when an individual is attached to god, they then become attached to sacred places that remind one of God; for Muslims the attachment may be to a mosque or mecca, this may be because the religious places hold symbolic meaning (Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2004). Being close to God and attending places of

worship has found to enhance well-being as individuals feel more connected to God (Najafi and Sharif, 2011).

Additionally, Hussain and Cochrane (2003) found that Muslim women used acts of worship such as prayer and reading the holy Quran to cope with depression. Pargaments theory emphasizes the importance of conducting religious activities as they strengthen the connection between the believer and god (Harrison et al. 2001). Whereas, Meer and Mir (2014) found that combination of both psychological therapies and incorporation of religious teachings helped individuals to cope more effectively with depression. Thus implying that religious beliefs may not be effective solely in order to treat those suffering from mental health problems (Behere et al., 2013).

Previous literature (Ul Haq, 2012; Kirby et al., 2004; Krause, 2003) primarily focused on an aging population, thus this qualitative study aimed to explore the relationship between religion and well-being in young Muslim women in greater Manchester. This study primarily focused on the underlying processes within this relationship. Although previous literature has thoroughly explored this relationship, only few to none have explored this relationship regarding young Muslim women, thus this study focused on a young Muslim population to gain further insight in to the relationship between religion and well-being.

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

This qualitative study explored the relationship between religion and well-being in young Muslim women in greater Manchester. Semi structured interviews were conducted (Yin, 2015). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to explore individuals experiences and able to tackle sensitive issues (Potter and Hepburn 2005).

### **Participants**

The participants were young Muslim women aged from 18 to 24 from greater Manchester. The six participants were recruited via snowball sampling, this was because snowball sampling allows researcher to find potential participants through other participants, and it is relatively a quick way of gathering potential participants (Suri, 2011).

The participants were identified and contacted via their mobile numbers which were required of them on the debrief form. The participants were assigned a pseudonym each, this was to ensure anonymity of participant's identity and personal information. Amina a 21 year old female who is in higher education lives with her parents at home. Iqra an 18 year old female works as a retail assistant and lives with her parents. Deena a 21 year old female in higher education also lives with her parents. Saniya a 24 year old female, an international student from Iran lives with her husband, English is her second language. Zara a 22 year old female in higher education lives with her parents. Aisha a 21 year old female in higher education lives with her parents.

### **Materials**

The materials used within this qualitative study consisted of consent form, participation information sheet, invitation letter and the debrief form. The invitation letter informed the participants of the primary details of the study and the importance of conducting the study (see appendix 2). The consent form made participants aware of the study's aims and informed them about their rights within the study and what the research required of them, it also ensured that their personal information would remain anonymous (see appendix 3). However, the data would not remain confidential as it was discussed with the supervisor. Additionally, the participation information sheet made participants aware of the details of the qualitative study such as the purpose of conducting the study, why they were chosen for the study and how the data from the study would be stored and dealt with (see appendix 4). Finally, in the debrief form, the participants for their participation in the study and assured them that their data will be kept secure and anonymous, they were also made aware of their right to withdraw their data from the study and whether they wanted to attain a copy of the results from the study (see appendix 5).

### **Procedure**

The participants were contacted via their mobile numbers in which they were informed about the location of the interview and the time it would commence. At arrival a rapport was built between the researcher and the interviewer, this was executed to ensure the participant was comfortable and help the participant to ease in to the interview process. The first interview was a pilot interview in which the recording was reviewed and was used to make changes in further commencing interviews. For example, the questions were changed and adapted in a more profound a productive way and the way in which the interview was conducted.

The participants were then given an invitation letter in which they were informed about the study's aims and objectives and the content within the study (see appendix 2). This was followed by the consent form which made clear of what the study requires of them and their rights within the study (see appendix 3). After completion of the consent form, the initial interview process commenced, the participants were asked open ended questions; these allow participants to elaborate on their responses and allow rich in depth information (Hsieh, 2005). The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device and lasted for approximately an hour. After the completion of the interview the participants were thanked and appreciated for their participation in the study. The data obtained from the participants was protected using a password and the data was used to write up the transcripts and later destroyed shortly after the interviews, this was to attain confidentiality and anonymity of participant's personal information and data (BPS, 2009).

In terms of analysis of the data, a hybrid approach was employed which took in to account the social constructionist perspective and the realist perspective (Fereday and Cochrane, 2006). This is because both of these perspectives combined together allowed a wider and a better understanding of the relationship between religion and well-being. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the transcripts, the analysis involves analysing themes, patterns and trends found within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Additionally, thematic analysis consists of six simple steps: familiarising yourself with the data, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. For instance, coding involves recording or

analysing sections text or images that are linked by a common theme or idea allowing you to classify the text into categories and therefore establish a structure of thematic concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For this qualitative study, two types of coding were employed, the first level of coding described that actual content and the second level of coding looked at initiating and creating themes (Fereday and Cochrane, 2006). In addition, the transcripts were read and re-read to achieve credibility (Elliott et al., 1999).

## **Analysis and discussion**

Throughout the process of this study six participants were interviewed and their data was analysed using thematic analysis (Fereday and Cochrane, 2006). Three themes emerged from the data whilst analysing the transcripts. These were: purpose and meaning in relation to well-being, power of prayer in facilitating well-being and social well-being: a sense of unity and belongingness. The themes are further discussed below.

### **Purpose and meaning in life in relation to well-being**

Purpose and meaning in life is a concept that all individuals ponder upon throughout life (King et al., 2006). Without having a purpose in life people would question their existence on the earth, they would question their values, beliefs and dreams (Emmons, 2005). According to Whittington and Scher (2010) meaning in life is enhanced through religious practises and these practices thus enhance psychological well-being. Steger et al. (2006) argues that purpose and meaning coincide with each other and without purpose life loses meaning. Amina feels that without Islam she would have no sense of purpose in life and that she would perhaps feel lost without Islam.

Lines 6-7: *“So yeah Islam gives a meaning of life without Islam I would be like what am I doing on earth. It gives me a sense of purpose”.*

This emphasizes the importance of religion in Amina’s life and how everything in her life is somehow related to Islam. This suggests that religion gives a sense of purpose and meaning in life and is seen as a way of life (Steger and Kashdan, 2013). According to McIntosh (1995) finding purpose and meaning in life is associated with less distress and increased well-being. Steger and Frazier’s (2005) found that meaning in life mediated the relationship between religion and well-being. Whereas, Park (2005) argues that lack of meaning has shown to lead to depression and disengagement, whereas, a strong sense of meaning has shown to lead to happiness and life satisfaction. In contrary, Emmons (2003) argues that God is not necessary for meaning in life because life can be made meaningful by pursuing materialistic goods that will facilitate well-being. Conversely, the purpose theory states God provides humans with a purpose and that we must fulfil it in order for there to be meaning in life (Poettcker, 2015).

The sense of purpose and meaning is further implemented as Amina states how religion keeps her on a path and how prayer acts as a reminder of her purpose.

Lines 117-118: *“the constant remembrance of god keeps you on the right path and the right track of life.”*

Lines 121-123: *“When I pray I am reminded of my purpose, and I must pray till my last breath”.*



This suggests that religion provides a platform for individuals to stop them from deviating from the right path. Thus implying that the remembrance of Allah helps Amina to stay firm on the path of righteousness and prohibit her from swaying in to the wrong path. According to Ashraf (1987) the right path is for those who have been guided by God and God has bestowed favours upon them, not for those who have gone astray or have God's wrath on them. Malik and Razaqi (2012) argue that a path has steps which are followed in order to reach to the ultimate goal or destination. This notion of a path allows an individual to differentiate between right and wrong, good and evil.

However, Saniya feels that the purpose in life is to abstain from sins and wrongful acts in order to attain heaven in the afterlife. Saniya argues that having a purpose in life is important. This is supported by the life mission theory which states that the core of human existence is to have a purpose in life (Ventegodt et al., 2004). This is illustrated in the quotation below.

Lines 6-8: *"if I have a hierarchy in my life religion is at the top. It's because I want to go to heaven and for that I need to follow the rules of my religion and make sure I am a good Muslim"*.

Tsang and McCullough (2003) argue that religion should be viewed as a hierarchical structure as one can draw conclusions about how religious an individual is. It also acts as a motivation incentive as we are more likely to accomplish a goal if we are motivated to do it (Pargament et al., 2013). This is further supported by Maslow who argued that humans have this desire or want to fulfil the next need after a previous need has been satisfied, suggests we are always seeking to achieve or satisfy higher level needs (Neher, 1991). Additionally, Sedikides and Gebauer (2013) argue that promise of an afterlife soothes the fear of death, thus individuals feel detached from the worldly life and therefore do not overly indulge in it which eventually leads to better well-being.

Meaning in life can be discovered when an individual is going through a difficult time. According to Ho et al. (2010) meaning in life can be defined as understanding purpose in life and having a sense of coherence. Aisha was heartbroken when her dad left her, and this traumatic event made her take a more insightful look in to religion and thus ponder upon the meaning of life.

Lines 63-66: *"when my dad left me and my family I was distraught and fed up with life, I never thought that my own dad would abandon us like that for someone else. It was then that I started to look deeper in to my religion, I started to look for meaning in life, meaning in everything that happened and why it happened"*.

This is supported by Park (2005) who argues that individuals tend to look for meaning in life when they are going through extremely difficult or stressful situations. Finding meaning in life helps individuals to cope with major life events (McIntosh, 1995). 'Without meaning and purpose, there is little reason to do what is necessary to live and to endure the inevitable suffering and trials that come with life' (Emmons, 2005:735). Berger's theory further emphasizes the importance of religion as it states that decline in religion and religious beliefs (secularisation) leads to meaningless in life and that this makes us question our existence and purpose in life (Tschannen, 1991).

### **Power of prayer in facilitating well-being**

The theme of power of prayer emerged whilst analysing the transcripts. This theme implies that prayer is a powerful tool in which one can feel relieved from worldly stress and tension and can indulge in the peaceful state of mind. This is illustrated in the quotation below as Iqra feels that prayer offers a relief from physiological and psychological worries and stress, and how it heals in terms of health.

Lines 108-110: *“I think the prayers healed me because doctors had said I was close to death and how lucky I am to be alive. I still thought I was going to die. I realised how fake and artificial that this life is and how fragile it is”*.

This suggests that prayers are of great significance to Iqra as she believes that due to the power of the prayers her life was saved. Through the power of prayer Iqra felt closer to God and realised the fragility of life, thus emphasizing the importance of religion on physiological well-being. Masters and Spielmans (2007) argue that the frequency of prayer is related to psychological and physiological well-being, for example individuals who prayed frequently found a huge improvement in their psychological and physiological well-being than individuals who prayed less frequently. However, this may be because prayer offers hope and reduces the impact of negative thoughts in the mind (Poloma and Pendleton, 1990). Additionally, Sedikides and Gebauer (2013) argue that believers see God and as an attachment figure and thus use prayer to maintain proximity to God and this facilitates their well-being. This is further supported by Ghobary Bonab et al. (2013) who found that believers see Allah as an attachment figure and perform prayer to seek proximity to Allah, thus believing this will have a positive impact on their well-being especially in terms of health.

Furthermore, prayer is also regarded as a form of exercise and has found to have many benefits such as improved posture, eliciting joint pain and enhancing concentration (Ahsan et al., 2012). Deena feels that prayer inhibits laziness and encourages one to be active and physically improves health and one should continue to pray even when ill.

Lines 107-110: *“if you’re ill you’re still supposed to pray, also every time I get sick I believe my sins are being forgiven and removed, so even in pain I pray and I feel closer to god and that I’m going to be ok no matter what happens”*.

This suggests that Deena feels closer and connected to God after prayer, she feels that prayer is very important and should be performed even when ill. Syed (2003) argues that prayer diverts the mind from negative thoughts and reduces ill feeling, prayer also improves posture and overall health. Whereas, according to Iqbal (2013: 74) prayer demolishes barriers between men and is “an expression of a man’s inner yearning for a response in the awful silence of the universe” and that the posture of the body is an important factor in determining the attitude of the mind. Additionally, in Islam ill health is seen in a positive light as it is a way of gaining rewards and cleanses the soul spiritually, prayer is still encouraged during ill health as it conducted to maintain the proximity towards God (Tober and Budiani, 2007). However, Pieper (2004) argues that those who practice religious activities such as prayer experience greater anxiety. This may be because individuals may be pressurised to perform religious rituals and acts of worship or may not believe that prayer is a powerful tool in facilitating well-being (Diener et al., 2011).

Moreover, prayer can be employed to in terms of finding a spouse. This can facilitate well-being as individuals will feel less pressurised and stressed when finding a

potential spouse (Marks, 2008). Saniya used *Istikhara* (a special type of prayer which involves specifically asking for Allah's help and guidance when it comes to making a significant decision in life) to help her with making a decision a marriage proposal.

Lines 112-114: *"I prayed istikhara and asked god to help me to decide whether this proposal was right for me or not. After I prayed I felt positivity and felt like I should accept this proposal and now Alhamdulillah (thanks to Allah) I am happily married"*.

This suggests that prayer is a powerful tool in order to help individuals make important life decisions such as marriage. Saniya argues that that with Allah's help she is now happy in her marriage, thus implying she has a strong faith in Allah. However, Abd-Allah (2008) argues that this trust in Gods decision is perhaps due to the concept that dating is generally not allowed in Islam and thus Muslims have this need of asking God for help when it comes to decision making about marriage, because they do not have much experience of interacting with the opposite sex. Alghafli et al. (2014) on the other hand, found that Islam influences relationships especially in marriage, unites families and further protects women from oppression.

In addition, prayer acts as a coping mechanism, it alleviates pain and suffering and diverts the mind from negative thoughts and ill feelings (Levine, 2008). Pargament and Raiya (2007) argue that prayer is the most practical method of coping and that it offers psychological, physiological and spiritual rest, it is a way of dealing with negative life events that are related to the sacred. Amina states how prayer helped her cope with the death and bereavement of her granddad.

Lines 184-187: *"I lost my granddad, it was a really difficult time because I was really close with my granddad. It was hard but I guess it's just part of life. In some ways I do feel unlucky because I haven't really spent much time with grandparents as I would have liked to. Praying to Allah helped me so much and in a way it lessened the burden on my heart and relieved the pain"*.

Amina discusses here how she uses prayer to cope with tough situations such as death of a loved one, she states that prayer lightens the burden and relieves tension and stress. This is supported by Iqbal and Sheikh (2011) who argue that prayer offers relief from trials and suffering and reminds us that we will not abide in this world forever, thus reminding us that we should not neglect our purpose in life. Therefore, this has a positive impact on well-being as individuals feel relieved from psychological distress and worries in the world. The importance of prayer is emphasized in the holy Quran (The Cow, 2:238) "guard strictly your prayers". Conversely McIntosh (1995) argues that traumatic events can also deter individuals from religion and may attribute the event as a punishment from god rather than a test or an event in life.

### **Social well-being: A sense of unity and belongingness**

Feeling belonged and inclusive is a human need, a need that every individual desires (Mellor et al., 2008). Ysseldyk et al. (2010) argues that individual's feel belonged when they have a shared identity and can relate to certain members of a group. Zara states how Islam makes her feel inclusive and rids of isolation and enhances social well-being.

Lines 65-77: *"When I go to religious gatherings such as going to the mosque I feel inclusive and other people are there you feel a part of them. Makes you feel better"*

*because we all share the same religion, I feel happy and at peace and I also feel like I'm not isolated from everyone".*

This suggests that social aspects of religion make us feel belonged and needed, and that this has a positive effect on one's well-being. This is supported by Najafi and Sharif (2011) who argue that individuals form an attachment religious places such as mosques and this thus makes them feel belonged. Graham and Haidt (2010) argue that mosques act as social networks and offer people a sense of security in that individuals are not required to explain their religion and practices. Additionally, the belonging hypothesis states that the need of belonging is a basic psychological need as it makes us feel of worth and form close relationships (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). However, Voas and Crockett (2005) argue that believing and belonging are associated and that 'active belonging' is related to regular attendance of religious places and gatherings. This concept of social belongingness has shown to have a positive impact on one's well-being (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). According to Widman et al. (2009) belonging to the same religious group leads to better co-operation amongst individuals.

In addition, Islam creates a sense of social coherence, in Islam it is encouraged to think positively of others and help other fellow humans out (Abdel-Khalek, 2007). Amina feels that Islam teaches equality and states that everyone is equal in the eyes of God.

Lines 167-169: *"in Islam we are all brothers and sisters, we should help each other and support each other, we are all one in front of god, when we pray we are equal and this makes me happy"*

The terms "brothers and sisters" implies the strength of the bond between Muslims, Ataman (2003) argues the act of helping others is considered to be a form of worship as individuals keep others needs before their own. This is supported by Kanekar and Merchant (2001) who argue that religion binds individuals together and does not divide people in to sects. The Holy Quran (The Family of Imran, 3:103) emphasizes the importance of unity and states that "and be not divided amongst yourselves...for you were enemies and he joined your hearts in love" implying that division creates weakness in the sense of unity as individuals may feel isolated and not belonged. Conversely, Kalin (2011) argues that it is not entirely true to say that religions speak only the language of unity.

Furthermore, a sense of unity provides a platform for individuals to bond and encourages further practise of Islam amongst fellow Muslims and non-Muslims. Amina feels that due to this unity she is able to spread knowledge and inform others about Islam.

Lines 25-28: *"there is in depth knowledge of the Quran and in depth meaning such as the articulation of the Quran. I can spread knowledge over what I've learnt and I think that's a good thing in our religion because that is what the prophet said"*

Amina feels that spreading knowledge is important as it informs others of Islam and rids of any misconceptions or misunderstandings between individuals. Spreading Islamic knowledge is regarded as an act of great worth in the eyes of Allah, the prophet also encouraged this act (Nasr, 1991). Additionally, this sense of unity bonds individuals together, gives them strength to handle any situation but most importantly this sense of unity provides hope and enhances well-being (Leiken and Brooke, 2007).

However, for Zara the sense of unity was truly felt when she went to Saudi Arabia to perform umrah (a holy pilgrimage). The vast amount of people gathered in one location to pray to one god, made Zara feel that she was part of something truly amazing and magical.

Lines 110-112: *“after I came back from umrah. When I went there I felt so peaceful everyone was Muslim and everyone is praying to God. When I come here it doesn’t feel that peaceful like it does, over there is a sense of unity and the only thing we did was pray and worship god”.*

This suggests that Zara felt belonged and inclusive when she went to perform umrah, this again reinforces Maslow’s theory as it emphasizes the importance of the need to feel belonged (Noltmeyer et al., 2012). This is further supported by Tewari et al. (2012) who found that attending religious gatherings has a positive impact on an individual’s identity due to the notion of shared identity as individuals feel inclusive and belonged. Conversely, Memish et al. (2012) argues that attending religious gatherings such as umrah or Hajj can have a negative impact on well-being as individuals are more susceptible to communicable diseases due to dense crowding.

From this research and previous literature it can be suggested that religion is essential in young Muslim women’s lives in relation to their well-being and that there are many underlying processes involved in this relationship. For instance, the Muslim women found prayer to enhance their subjective and psychological and physiological well-being, many also found that religion provided them with a purpose and meaning in life, they felt belonged and helped them to cope in difficult and challenging situations. Overall religion was found to facilitate and enhance well-being in my participants, these findings are also in line with previous literature (Eryilmaz, 2015 Aflakseir, 2012; Najafi and Sharif, 2011). However, a new finding emerged from this research, that the previous literature did not mention is that religion facilitates social well-being and provides individuals with a sense of unity in that they feel inclusive and belonged.

In terms of the strengths and limitations of this research, thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, this flexible approach allows several theories to be applied across data (Fereday and Cochrane, 2006). However, thematic analysis adopts a fragmented approach when analysing the data thus only certain aspects of a participants experience are indicative in the research (Fereday and Cochrane, 2006). Additionally, there may be an issue of rigour in the quality of thematic analysis as it fails to provide multiple perspectives from a variety of people with different expertise (Fereday and Cochrane, 2006). A narrative analysis, on the other hand, employs a more holistic approach in that it covers all aspects of an individual’s experience (Stephens and Breheny, 2012). Nonetheless, thematic analysis is theoretically flexible and allows several themes to be emerged from a number of participants.

Finally, this research not only build on previous literature but further adds support to Aflakseir (2012) who found that young Muslims perceived their life to be meaningful. This current research, additionally, found religion to also enhance social well-being thus this new finding can provide a platform for other researchers to explore the relationship between religion and well-being further. For instance, majority of my participants in this research are in higher education, thus a future suggestion would be to look at a sample of participants who are mid aged and not students, thus

resulting in a more diverse sample for a study which would further add and facilitate the literature on the relationship between religion and well-being (Malterud, 2001).

### **Reflexivity**

During this qualitative study I not only learned about my participant's experiences but also as a researcher I discovered a lot more about myself. As an insider I could relate to some aspects of my participants experiences and somehow felt part of their journey and the challenges they had faced.

I expected to find religion to have a positive impact on my participant's well-being, because I myself have found religion have a positive impact on my psychological and subjective well-being and to be beneficial in terms of helping me cope with difficult situations. The first interview was a pilot interview which allowed me to make changes and apply them to the remaining interviews. However, arranging the interviews was tough to start with as many of my participants were also studying thus some interviews were postponed till a later date. Conversely, this allowed me to spend more time on developing interviewer skills and building on from previous interviews in order to attain more rich detailed data.

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