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The Hijab's Effect on Perception

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U.S. and U.A.E Muslim Women's Perception of Hijabs

Do Muslim women view each other differently based on how they dress? In other words, have you ever wondered how Muslim women who do not wear the hijab (the Islamic headscarf) view their hijab-wearing compatriots? Likewise, how do most hijab-wearing Muslim women view hijabless Muslim women?

In a study by Norbert Meskó and Tamás Bereczkei at the University of Pécs, when asked to rate the attractiveness of women with varying lengths of hair, male participants rated women with long hair as more attractive. In light of this, most people would probably view the hijab, a headscarf that covers a woman's hair, as an impediment to female beauty. However, a recently resurfaced study indicates much more to the story than this simple assumption. In 2014, researcher Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi published a study that explored the "Hijab Effect," a psychological phenomenon in which women who wear Islamic headscarves are more likely to receive higher ratings for personal characteristics in Muslim-majority communities. Pasha-Zaidi compared this to the "Halo Effect," a well-known phenomenon in which people are more likely to attribute positive traits to physically attractive people. One might think that a cloth that covers all of a woman's hair would drastically reduce her chances of being viewed as attractive. After all, hair is a crucial component of female identities around the globe.

However, others could view a woman's hijab as a mark of her attractiveness by dedication to her religion. Throughout Islam's history, the hijab has been viewed as a symbol of modesty and the concealment of one's beauty. Today, although women are mandated by law to wear hijabs in only two Muslim-majority countries (Afghanistan and Iran), they continue to be imposed by social norms in a handful of others.

There are various reasons why Muslim women choose to wear hijabs. Some women may wear them out of self-esteem and pride in their religion, particularly following the September 11th, 2001 attack and the successive Islamophobic rhetoric. These women had to bear the burden of being the black sheep in many social situations, as their headscarves were dead giveaways to their membership in the religion that non-Muslim Americans came to associate with the deadliest terrorist attack on United States (U.S.) soil. Nevertheless, Muslim women continued to wear hijabs in the U.S. to combat stereotypes by honoring those who had died on September 11th, 2001 while championing their Muslim identities. One example of this advocacy is from Amirah Ahmed, a Muslim-American teenager who wore her American flag hijab during a speech she gave to her high school class commemorating the lives lost on September 11th, 2001, according to The Associated Press. Others wear hijabs as a defense against male sexual impulses.

These women often believe that hijabs are “a necessity that God has ordained to allow women to interact in the public sphere without being unduly harassed,” as Pasha-Zaidi put it in her study. On the other hand, Muslim women may abstain from wearing hijabs because they believe that it’s only male sexual impulses, rather than God, that create the need for the hijab. Also, non-hijabis are more likely to view the hijab as a product of politics and culture predating Islam, rather than as a traditional garment that rose in popularity after the religion was established. Most historians and researchers agree that head coverings for women have been worn as early as ancient Mesopotamia. However, they adopted their current role and function once Islam became a popular religion around the world.

Referencing a study conducted earlier, Pasha-Zaidi cited research from 2010 that surveyed both Muslim and non-Muslim men in Britain on the attractiveness of hijab-wearing women. The hijabis were rated lower in attractiveness and intelligence by both groups of men, prompting discussion into a Western bias towards hijab-wearing women. Nevertheless, the British study was an important milestone in research on how religious attire impacts perceptions of attractiveness in women.

According to the results, hijab-wearing participants in the U.S. were more likely than non-hijabi participants to rate hijab-wearing women as more attractive.

In her cross-national study involving attractiveness ratings for the hijab, Pasha-Zaidi used a participant pool of South Asian Muslim women living in the U.S. and United Arab Emirates (UAE). Unlike the previous study from Britain, her study wasn’t expected to achieve the same results. This is because women not only perceive each other differently than how men perceive women, but Muslim women often do not have to wear the hijab in front of other Muslim women as well. According to the results, hijab-wearing participants in the U.S. were more likely than non-hijabi participants to rate hijab-wearing women as more attractive. Also, both hijabis and non-hijabis in the UAE were more likely to rate hijab-wearing women as more attractive than non-hijabis. On their own, the results of Pasha-Zaidi’s study shed light on the existence of the Hijab Effect. They show that regardless of whether Muslim women in the UAE, a Muslim-majority society, wear a hijab or not, women from both groups are more likely to view hijab-wearing women as more attractive.

These results make sense regarding the Hijab Effect’s implications for the U.S., a Muslim-minority society. If non-hijabi Muslim women grew up in a Western environment and became accustomed to its beauty standards, it wouldn’t be surprising if they’re less likely than hijabis to view hijab-wearing women as more attractive.

However, questions on why Muslim women perceive each other differently based on religious attire remain unanswered to this day. For Muslim women in the U.S. and UAE, their views could result from social pressure, pride in their religion, or a combination of both.

A similar study by researcher Mercedes Sheen was published four years after Pasha-Zaidi’s original publication, which complicates matters further. The most significant difference between Sheen’s study and Pasha-Zaidi’s study seemed to be Sheen’s exclusive use of native Emirati Muslim women, rather than Emirati and American Muslim women of South Asian ethnicity, in her participant pool. Extracting attractiveness ratings from native Emiratis instead of South Asian women living in the UAE (most of whom could have been Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi immigrants giving in to social pressure), Sheen’s data contrasted sharply with Pasha-Zaidi’s results, with hijab-wearing native Emirati Muslim women rating non-hijabis as more attractive than both fully and partially covered women.

Being one of the most popular destinations for immigrants of diverse backgrounds (according to the Daily Vox), the UAE may seem like a Muslim-majority country with some of the most relaxed social norms regarding hijabs. Nevertheless, there have been reports of women who have been forced to both wear and discard hijabs in the country as a result of workplace guidelines. To truly confirm whether or not the Hijab Effect is real, research must be conducted in not just one, but multiple prominent Muslim-majority countries to be effective in the long run. Using a variety of methods, such as conducting both surveys and interviews, could be invaluable in future research in emphasizing the subjective experiences of Muslim women.

Moreover, for the Islamic community to achieve religious and social harmony, conversations on the significance of the hijab and its effects on perception must be had not only between hijab-wearing and hijabless Muslim women but the rest of society, Islamic or not, as well. ●●●

