

# Self-Concept in Muslim Adolescent Girls: Hijab and the School Experience

Eman Tiba\*, Antoinette Miranda

*Department of Psychology, The Ohio State University*

The hijab worn by Muslim women has been defined as; a sign of liberation or a constraint, obligation to God or submissiveness to men, equality or oppression, and freedom or objectification and degradation by the exploitation of men. The interpretation of the hijab has generated confusion as well as ignorance within the Western mainstream society, media and school curriculum. Previous research suggested that negative experiences of minority groups may or may not be factors that relate to self-concept. Thus far, no research exists on how negative experiences in school can be related to a Muslim girls' self-concept. This research seeks to extend the limited existing research that examines young Muslim girl's experiences in Central Ohio schools as it relates to the wearing of clothing that identifies them as Muslim. The researcher interviewed participants as part of a focus group to share their perspectives on the hijab and their school experiences. A questionnaire was developed that measured religious affiliation and included demographic information. And finally, participants were asked to complete the Harter's (1988) Adolescent Self-Perception Profile Assessment (SPPA) to measure self-concept. Results showed that participants on average received a positive self-concept within the seven domains except the Athletic Competence (average mean of 2.29). In addition, due to the small sample size of diverse ethnicities and those reported not wearing the hijab, there were no relevant relationships that presented significant results. Furthermore, this study indicated four common themes (hijab as a choice, intention, experiences in school, and the pressure to be beautiful) that were expressed in the focus groups to illustrate personal stories including exclusion in sports in school due to wearing the hijab. This study provides personal experiences of Muslim girls who wear or do not wear the hijab in schools, and implications for future research on the self-concept within this population.

## Introduction

Muslim women have been generally portrayed in popular culture and mainstream media as oppressed by male figures, following backward practices (such as veiling) and with limited freedom (Hamdan, 2007). The hijab (headscarf) is an Arabic word which means "cover"; it refers to the covering of the female body except the hands, feet and face (Dunkel, Davidson & Qurashi, 2009). Muslim women dress in modest style to fulfill the obligation in

the Quran (i.e. Islam's holy book) that God instructed women to observe as part their faith in Islam (Hamdan, 2007). The hijab has generated confusion, misunderstanding, and misinformation with respect to Muslim woman who decide to wear the hijab. Hamdan (2010) states, "For me the hijab is not a psychological or cultural 'prison' as it is falsely assumed. I wear the hijab because of my own choices and it signifies my affiliation with Muslim values of respect and integrity" (p.83). Western societies



Eman Tiba is a 2012 graduate of The Ohio State University where she studied psychology. Eman is currently applying for graduate school in school psychology as well as volunteering at Nationwide Children's Hospital.

Table 1

Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) self-concept domains (n=50).

Measures	Mean	SD
Scholastic Competence	3.26	.571
Social Acceptance	3.24	.475
Athletic Competence	2.29	.676
Physical Appearance	3.16	.679
Job Competence	3.11	.518
Behavioral Conduct	3.13	.569
Close Friendship	3.30	.625
Global Self-Worth	3.27	.594

perceive the hijab as submissive attire, but most Muslim women believe that the hijab is a safe attire that allows women to resist marginalization and the objectification of their bodies (Hamdan, 2010). Most importantly, the wearing of the hijab is a matter of personal choice, but Western societies seem to focus on some parts of the world where religious extremist by law require women to wear the hijab (Fernea, 1998).

In many parts of the world, especially in France, there have been controversies over Muslim girls wearing the hijab leading to expulsion from school (Singh & Basil, 1999). In 1998, Francois Bayrou, the French Minister of Culture, issued a decree calling for the hijab to be banned from public schools. Many French educators considered the hijab as an “ostentatious religious symbol” (Pike & Selby, 2000, p.217). The hijab was a threat to the French secular identity and if banned it would serve “as a bulwark against Islamic fundamentalism and also ‘American-style’ multiculturalism” (Ezekiel, 2006, p.2). Similarly, there have been several incidents in Canada where the hijab had turned into a political and cultural issue (Hamdan, 2010). Muslim women who wear the hijab have been subjugated to racism and discrimination. In 2001, Quebec City passed a bylaw barring women from wearing the hijab in public (Hamdan, 2010). Spooner (2001) remarked, “It is appalling to think that a Muslim woman could be subjected to possible police interrogation, required by law to explain herself for practicing her religion” (p.1). For example, in 2007, five Muslim girls from a Montreal tae kwon do team were forbidden from competing in a tournament in Quebec because they wore the hijab (Stastna, 2007). Another incident took place in Ontario, when Asmahan Mansour, a young soccer player was ejected from a soccer game by a referee because he ruled that the hijab was a safety concern for players (Hamdan, 2010). The Muslim Council of Montreal noted that many young girls, like Mansour, who wear the hijab, may feel discouraged from

participating in sports with non-Muslims (Scott, 2007).

The Quebec Human Rights Commission, a social-rights organization, indicated that the dress-codes of public schools that banned the wearing of the hijab were discriminatory (Cane, 1995). Emilie Ouimet, a 13-year-old Muslim girl was sent home because the hijab was not following the proper school dress code. Mustafa implied that Emilie was viewed as making a radical statement about her violent political ideas. To others, she is the symbol of absolute subjugation and is in dire need of rescue. For them, having such women as part of the North American landscape is frightening. She is “the veiled woman,” belonging in a foreign place, an actor on an exotic stage (Mustafa, n.d.).

Radwan Yousef, the principal of a Muslim school in Montreal argued that Emilie’s incident was biased and racist. He said, “If women are putting on a bikini and people are not harassing them, then why should they bother a woman who covers her head?” (cited in Pike & Selby, 2000, p.217). Women who wear the hijab may appear submissively attired, but they also can be seen as enjoying tremendous personal freedom. According to Husain (2001) “Independence is a state of mind and a manner of living one’s life, not the style of the dress” (p.4). There have been a number of occurrences where people actually are surprised to hear that Muslim women desire to cover their hair and body because of their spiritual beliefs. The stereotype is that “Muslim woman are imprisoned behind a veil of powerlessness” (Al-Hegelan, 1980). There are some people who think that the hijab represents the “dark” side of Islam like fundamentalism, violence, and the subjugation of women. In contrast, many Muslims believe the hijab to be “the code of modesty and chastity prescribed by Sharia,” Islam’s religious way of life (Pike & Selby, 2000, p.216).

Muslim girls who wear the hijab like the ones mentioned in the previous studies have been discriminated, harassed and ridiculed for wearing the hijab in school settings. This experience in school can lead to potential harm to the social-emotional well-being of the individual. Specifically, self-concept may become damaged due to such negative experiences. Self-concept is defined as a judgment that one holds about their characteristics of their personal self in general and within the distinct domains such as cognitive competence, social acceptance, and physical appearance (Harter, 1988). Self-concept is considered a multidimensional construct. Self-concept can also be an attempt to express and explain ourselves just as Piaget describes how people build schemas to organize our impressions, feelings and attitudes about ourselves (Woolfolk, 1995). Young people have a distinct belief about themselves

by early adolescence in at least eight domains including for example, physical appearance, close friendship, social acceptance and scholastic competence (Harter, 1988). However, each domain is valued differently by the adolescent in their proficiency level and what they think is more important and influential in the adolescents overall sense of self (Browning, 2009). The interaction of domains can result in an adolescent girl accepting the perceived opinions of others, and then using these perceived judgments to define herself as a person (Harter, 1999). For example, if the perceived judgments of attractiveness would be internalized as a physical appearance of the self, then the perceived judgments of rejection would be internalized as a rejection of the self and lead to unworthiness.

Adolescents are very much concerned about how people perceive and judge them which could affect how they perceive themselves (Harter, 1999). If the student feels that the school has a negative perception of them, then this could create a sense of shame which could lead to a negative self-concept (Tabbah, 2011). Experiences of prejudice and discrimination have been shown to be related to self-concept (Moradi & Hasan, 2004). This negative interaction with others of the majority tends to affect minorities which is known as the stigma hypothesis. The stigma hypothesis emphasized that the minority status leads to lower self-concept in minority groups (Twenge & Crocker, 2002). This status of being a minority becomes internalized with experiences of prejudice and discrimination, therefore the people of minority status end up psychologically affected (Berger & Milem, 2000, Kenny & McEachern, 2009). For example, if a girl is wearing the hijab in school with predominately non-Muslims, she may have negative interactions due to her minority status which could affect her self-concept.

There is a lack of research on the self-concept of adolescent Muslim girls wearing the hijab and their experiences in the schools. One study of 633 Muslim youth in New York City Public Schools found that Muslim students (43%) considered Americans in general to be respectful and tolerant towards them, yet a large majority (69%) felt that mainstream society is suspicious of them and nearly all of them (90%) believed that discrimination against Muslim Americans has increased after 9/11 (Cristillo, 2008). Most of the Muslim students (64%) deemed that a Muslim wearing Islamic attire would face discrimination in the workforce (Cristillo, 2008, p.12). Interestingly, thirty-six percent of public school students reported being faced with some form of a discriminatory verbal incident once or twice, while fifty-five percent of students in private school reported being the object of an ethnic slur or called a terrorist (Cristillo, 2008). Cristillo administered a

self-esteem assessment to the 633 Muslim students in private and public schools and found that girls had a slightly lower self-esteem score compared to the boys. Also, students that attended private schools had lower self-esteem scores because racial and ethnic diversity were far less than in public schools and this could downplay the Muslim unity (Cristillo, 2008).

Limited research exists on the experiences of Muslim adolescents in the United States within the school systems and how these experiences affect their self-concept. A case study was conducted by Jasmin Zine with ten Muslim students and their parents about their religious and gender identity in a Canadian Islamic School. From the narratives of the students, many of them shared how peer pressure, racism, and discrimination outside of their private school led them to feel ostracized from their Canadian community. Interestingly, students drew from the negative stereotypes formed by negative images about Islam which affected their identity (Zine, 2001). Tabbah (2011) conducted a study on Arab American adolescents that investigated three domains of self-concept (Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, and Global Self-Worth) in relation to their school experiences which included discrimination, self-perceived teacher social support, and self-perceived classmate social support. The results showed that discrimination was significantly related to students' Scholastic Competence. For example, students' with low grade point average (GPA) and less classmate support had lower Scholastic Competence, while students with higher GPA and higher classmate support had higher Scholastic Competence. Moreover, teacher social support did not significantly relate to any of the domains of self-concept, but classmate support did relate to all domains. This suggested that peer support is more critical than adult support in the development of self-concept (Tabbah, 2011).

However, recent research has formed a new approach to understanding the impact of prejudice. Major, McCoy, Kaiser, and Quinton examined self-esteem by using a new approach called the Transactional Model that looked at stress and coping. It was designed to explain how there is a significant variability across individuals adapting to a stressful response (Major et al., 2003). A key premise to this model is that the individuals responses to the stressful life event is less uniform (2003). The researchers explained that self-esteem and affective responses of being a target of prejudice are mostly determined by how individuals cognitively appraise the prejudicial event, and what coping strategies they use to deal with the event. A cognitive appraisal is a judgment between the individual and their environment and the implications that relate to their psychological well-being (2003). In this study they

argue that there are many moderators of emotional responses like optimism, group status, and threats to personal identity that impact an individual's way of perceiving a prejudice or discriminatory action. Their researcher concluded that perceiving discrimination in one's social identity is likely to protect and not hurt the individual's self-esteem compared to when it occurs in the context of a personal threat (2003). They have also indicated in their research that dispositional optimism can actually express better emotionally in a variety of stressful events than if someone is more pessimistic.

Previous theories like the Transactional Model and the Stigma theory suggests that negative experiences of minority groups may or may not be factors that are related to self-esteem. Thus far, no research exists on how negative experiences in school can be related to Muslim girls' self-concept. This research seeks to extend the limited existing research that examines young Muslim girl's experiences in the United States as it relates to the wearing of clothing that identifies them as Muslim. The researcher interviewed participants as part of a focus group to share their perspectives on the hijab and school experiences. A questionnaire was developed that measured religious affiliation and included demographic information. Lastly, participants were asked to complete the Adolescent Self-Perception Profile Assessment to measure self-concept. This study sought to answer the following questions: (a) Do Muslim girl's exhibit positive self-concept in the eight domains? (Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Athletic Competence, Physical Appearance, Job Competence, Behavioral Conduct, Close Friendship, and Global Self-Worth) (b) What are the experiences of young Muslim girls in America with respect to family, school and discrimination, if any?

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This study was conducted using a non-experimental design. A non-experimental design was most appropriate for this study because no treatment or interventions was used, and there was no manipulation of variables (Vogt, 2005). Phenomenology was used because it is a research that particularly emphasizes the experiences from the perspective of the individual, therefore enables the researcher to gain insight on individual's motivation and actions rather than making assumptions (Lester, 1999). Phenomenology research essentially seeks to describe rather than explain individual's experiences without preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). This design was appropriate for this study, because the researcher interviewed participants who

described their school experiences through their perspective as a Muslim girl (wearing or not wearing the hijab) in school.

### *Sample*

In qualitative research, samples are selected purposefully (Patton, 2002). The researcher selected a particular population which aimed at gaining insight and understanding of the phenomena under study. Unlike with random sampling, in this qualitative research the main goal was not generalizability, but to collect in-depth information regarding the specific experiences participants described in the study (Patton, 2002). A mixed purposeful sampling was utilized for this study because it combined various sampling strategies to achieve the desired sample. A criterion sampling method was initially utilized. The criterion required that all participants must be a Muslim adolescent girl in the age range of 14-18 and currently attending school in Central Ohio. Snowball or chain sampling was also utilized. This particular method identifies cases of interest from individuals who know other individuals that fit the criteria. The researcher contacted youth group leaders and outreach leaders in the Mosques (Masjids) in Columbus, Ohio, as well as the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at The Ohio State University for potential participants. The sample consisted of 50 participants (see Table 2). The average age was 15.9 (range 14-18). Participants were predominately Somali/Black (33, 66%), and the rest comprised as Arab (8, 16%), Asian (5, 10%), Kurdish (2, 4%), and Mixed (2, 4%). The majority of participants resided in Columbus, Ohio (19, 38%) and Hilliard, Ohio (19, 38%). The participants ranged closely together from 8th grade (4, 8%), 9th grade (10, 20%), 10th grade (9, 18%), 11th grade (8, 16%), 12th grade (11, 22%), and freshmen in college (8, 16%).

### *Instrumentation*

A questionnaire was developed by the researcher that measured religious affiliation and included demographic information. This measure was developed because there was no known instrument available that addressed information relative to this study. The participants were asked to answer questions on their choice of wearing the hijab, Islamic practices like the five daily prayers, reciting the Quran, and fasting during Ramadan. Questions also pertained to their experiences on being Muslim at school and if they or someone they knew had been treated differently because they were Muslim or wear the hijab. The demographic questionnaire gathered data on the participant's age, grade, grade point



average (GPA), ethnicity, and city of residence in Ohio. Self-concept was measured by Harter's 1988 Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA). The instrument was measured by the perception of the adolescents' self-concept in eight domains: Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Athletic Competence, Physical Appearance, Job Competence, Behavioral Conduct, Close-Friendship, and Global Self-worth.

The questionnaire contained eight subscales, listed above, with five items for each with a total of 45 items. For example, the format looked like this: "Some teenagers do very well at their class work but other teenagers don't do very well at their class work" (Harter, 1988). The participant was asked to decide which kind of teenager was most like her. Once she had made up her mind on which was more like her, she was asked to check the box on whether this was sort of true or really true for her. The effectiveness of this question format is bolstered by the fact that the participant's verbal explanations on their choice will give an accurate self-perception rather than the socially desirable response (Harter, 1988). Thus, the scores were computed by the total eight subscale means for a given participant. The internal consistency reliabilities for the subscales based on Cronbach's Alpha were quite acceptable with ranges between 0.74 and 0.92. The SPPA assessment has been validated in numerous studies both nationally and internationally with diverse cultural backgrounds (Harter, 1988). The researcher also developed open-ended questions for participants to discuss in the focus groups with all 50 participants in groups of five to eight participants at a time. The questions asked for participants to reflect on their decision to wear the hijab, the pressure to be beautiful, discriminatory events, and their school experiences when wearing the hijab. This process was encouraged to take as much time as needed to answer the questions and to express their stories in detail. The group interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and follow-up questions were asked when appropriate. The benefit of collecting data through the voice of the individual in-depth, offers the potential to capture a person's perspective of their experience. Focus groups are considered naturalistic because participants in this study were encouraged to say anything they liked in the session. The researcher listened not only to the content of the focus group discussions, but for emotions, ironies, contradictions and tensions (Casey, 2000). This helped the researcher learn or confirm not just the facts (as in the questionnaire surveys), but the meaning behind the facts. The reports in this focus group relied on patterns formed by words and not numbers called themes or perspectives from each participant.

## Sampling Procedure

This study utilized the non-random, convenience sample by using the snowball sampling to recruit participants. This method was nec-

essary because profiling Muslim students attending Central Ohio Schools was not appropriate and would single out students based on religion. The researcher contacted group leaders through email and met in person at Masjids across Columbus, Ohio, and leaders of the MSA group helped to distribute information on the study. Potential participants received parental permission forms, assent forms, and consent forms to take home if they were interested in participating. The group leaders in the Mosque communicated with the interested participants regarding form deadlines and the scheduling of the focus groups. The long research process was conducted at the Masjid that the participants attended (for Sunday school and youth group meetings) and at the OSU campus during the MSA meetings. The eligible participants completed the questionnaires in approximately 30 minutes. After participants completed the questionnaires they took part in a focus group with five to eight other participants to discuss the open-ended questions the researcher provided. There was no time limit for how long the focus groups lasted because participants were encouraged to talk until they had nothing more to say.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

The means of the eight self-concept domains are presented in Table 1. In seven of the eight domains the participants re-

Table 2  
Demographic characteristics of sample

Demographic	N (50)	Percentage
Grade		
8	4	8
9	10	20
10	9	18
11	8	16
12	11	22
Freshmen in College	8	16
Age		
14	12	24
15	9	18
16	11	22
17	9	18
18	9	18
Ethnicity		
Arab	8	16
Asian	5	10
Black/Somali	33	66
Kurdish	2	4
Mixed	2	4
City of Residence in Ohio		
Blacklick	1	2
Columbus	19	38
Dublin	3	6
Gahanna	3	6
Galloway	3	6
Hilliard	19	38
Pickerington	1	2
Westerville	1	2

ceived a positive self-concept (means were above 3.0). However, participants' Athletic Competence received a low mean of 2.29. This was consistent with the focus groups and the written responses in the religious affiliation questionnaire (RAQ). However, participants expressed their negative experiences in afterschool sports in school because they wore the hijab. The religious affiliation questionnaire that participants completed showed that while twenty-seven (54%) of the girls had felt they were treated differently in school, twenty-three (46%) of the girls did not. Twenty-six (52%) of the girls reported that they knew someone who was treated differently in school, while twenty-four (48%) of the girls did not. Thirty-nine of the girls self-reported that they wear the hijab always, three (6%) of the girls said sometimes, and five (10%) of the girls said they do not wear the hijab. The researcher suggested for the accuracy of the question that the girls who did not wear the hijab permanently would be added to the total of eight (16%) of the girls who did not wear the hijab. Girls were also asked whether it was their decision to wear the hijab and thirty (60%) of the girls said yes, six (12%) of the girls said they did not wear the hijab (one girl did not answer the question), and lastly fourteen (28%) said it was not their decision to wear the hijab.

### Quantitative Analysis

The researcher used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program to compute means and standard deviations and to observe moderators like age, grade, GPA and

ethnicity. The researcher looked at the self-concept subscale means in grades (eighth to freshmen in college) for each participant. Athletic Competence was low for each grade level.

Eighth graders received a mean of 2.55, ninth graders a 2.10, tenth graders a 2.08, eleventh graders a 2.28, twelve graders a 2.31, and freshmen in college received a mean of 2.6. This suggested that grade level may not be an indicator of low self-concept in Athletic Competence if the average means of participants all received below a 3.0. Grade point average was examined between different ethnicities by the total average mean. Arab participants received a mean of 3.76 GPA, Asians a 3.86 GPA, Kurdish a 3.3 GPA, Mixed a 4.0 GPA, and Somali a 3.4 GPA. The overall average Means of GPA for the ethnicities combined was a high 3.52 GPA. However, Arab participant's self-concept domain of Scholastic Competence was a low 2.68 mean; this was not consistent with the self-reported GPA. All of the other ethnicities received positive Scholastic Competence.

The researcher examined the relationship between self-concept and ethnicity and there seemed to be an indicator for this finding. Of the eight Arab participants, the total average means were below a 3.0 in all eight domains. Because four of the eight Arab participants did not wear the hijab, the researcher looked at each participant subscale means to find discrepancies. However, the researcher decided that there were no patterns or differences. Nor were there enough participants to compare subscales and to respectfully conclude any relevance

to wearing the hijab or not wearing the hijab to positive self-concept. The five participants that self-identified as Asian received a low Athletic Competence of 1.76 and a slightly low Global-Self Worth of 2.96. Four of the five Asians did not wear the hijab and the researcher concluded similarly that there were not enough participants to compare means.

Table 3  
Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD), Religious Affiliation Questionnaire (RAQ) (n= 30)

Measure	Average Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
1. Do you go to a Masjid (Mosque) during Friday prayers, Eid, Prayers, and Ramadan <b>Latewood</b> prayers?	3.40	.400
2. Are you an active member in organizations or social groups in your local <b>Mosque</b> ?	2.83	.400
3. Do you attend youth group conferences or events in your <b>Mosque</b> ?	3.33	.449
4. Do you consider yourself a practicing Muslim girl?	3.60	.219
5. *Do you wear the hijab?	3.60	.219
6. *If you do not wear the hijab, do you plan on wearing it in the near future?	3.60	.219
7. Do you find different meanings your peers when they are aware of your Islamic faith or that you wear the hijab?	2.83	1.00
8. Have you thought about what your future would entail in the next 5-10 years if you wore the hijab and whether you would be accepted?	2.83	1.00
9. Do you find that the hijab comes from the intention of the heart to be modest?	3.40	.600
10. Do you find that people see personality more and not the physical beauty when a girl wears the hijab?	2.83	1.00
11. Do you believe that the hijab is an obligation by Allah (God)?	3.60	.400
12. Do you criticize and compare your physical appearance to girls in Islamism or non-Islam?	2.80	.550

13. Do you feel pressure as a Muslim girl to look beautiful, to have the right clothes, shoes, and to fit in?	2.40	1.00
14. Are you confident in wearing the hijab or presenting yourself as a Muslim at school?	3.00	.400
15. Will you do not wear the hijab and you plan on wearing the hijab in the near future, do you know what you would wear the hijab?	-----	-----
16. Will you wear the hijab how old were you when you wore the hijab?	-----	-----
17. *Was it your decision to wear the hijab?	-----	-----
18. Do you try to recite the Quran, fast during Ramadan, and pray the five daily prayers?	3.76	.462
19. Do you feel pressure to abide an Islamic modest attire?	2.76	1.21
20. Are you proud of being Muslim and/or wearing the hijab?	3.56	1.00

Participants rated the questions as: 4 (Always), 3 (Sometimes), 2 (Rarely), 1 (Never) for each question.

\*Indicates that participants answered the question in response. Individual differences vary.

There were two participants who identified themselves as mixed ethnicity and they received a low self-concept in Physical Appearance of 2.6 but their Athletic Competence was a 3.0. The two Kurdish participants received a positive self-concept in Scholastic Competence and Job Competence, but the rest of the subscales were below 3.0. Both Mixed and Kurdish participants wear the hijab but the researcher could not make conclusions with a small sample size. Lastly, the majority of all Somali participants who wear the hijab had received positive self-concept in seven of eight domains except the Athletic Competence of a 2.32. The researcher concluded that due to the small sample size of diverse ethnicities and those who reported not wearing the hijab, there was no relevant relationship that can be statistically implicated in this study.

### Qualitative Analysis

All 50 participants took part in the focus group after they completed the self-concept questionnaire. The researcher observed that what the participants shared in the focus groups were also consistent with the written stories they shared in the religious affiliation questionnaire (RAQ). Participants reflected on their positive and negative experiences in the school environment by reporting incidents where they were taunted and bullied for wearing the hijab in school. Several participants addressed how they or someone they knew was treated differently in their afterschool sports team because they wear the hijab and were visibly noticeable as Muslim. This had affected many of the participants who attended schools with a minority of Muslims in their public schools. However, the eight participants who did not wear the hijab reported that they were also treated differently in school because of their ethnicity as Asian or Arab and not their faith as Muslims.

The researcher evaluated four themes that reflected the perspective of the participant's personal stories and responses within the focus groups. The hijab as a choice was a theme that was very relevant to understanding the participants own decision to wear the hijab. Table 3 shows the distribution of each participant's age when they first wore the hijab. Twenty-six (66%) of the girls wore the hijab before the age of 12. The girls explained that it was accustomed in Islam for a girl to wear the hijab after she reaches puberty; however, the majority of the participants of the Somali ethnicity implied that the hijab was encouraged at a younger age. They were encouraged to wear the "khimar," a longer hijab that drapes down below the waist. Therefore, when the researcher asked for further explanation to their response of "no it was not my choice to wear the hijab," overwhelmingly all the participants implied it

is their choice now to continue to wear the hijab, but initially it was their mother, family member, or their parents who had motivated them to wear the hijab/khimar. The participants stated that they currently understand and appreciate wearing the hijab now that they have matured because they comprehend the necessitated meaning of the hijab in Islam and its connection to their faith in God. This finding was primarily noticed within the Somali participants because the majority of the participants began to wear the hijab at a very young age. The researcher proposed an ethnic value to the hijab within the different cultures and societies. However, mainstream media has labeled the hijab as an oppressive symbol by observing the religious practice from one narrow culture or ethnicity.

Nonetheless, this assumption can lead to false understanding because there are many different ethnicities that practice Islam from various cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the choice to wear the hijab cannot be based on one particular cultural tenet. Some cultures are individualistic while others are more family oriented, hence a girls decision to wear the hijab can vary depending on whether it is an expectation or a family-oriented decision. However, the girls explained that the older they got, the more they appreciate their decision to wear the hijab instead of waiting to wear the hijab. An Arab participant who does not wear the hijab said, "I wish I had worn the hijab at an early age because it is very hard to get away from how I dress now." She presents the advantage to wearing the hijab at an earlier age and her struggle to start wearing the hijab because she has adapted to not wearing the hijab.

The second theme that many participants mentioned was the recognition of intention. Relatively, the majority of the participants reiterated how important the hijab was if it was worn out of intention. In the RAQ, participants were asked if wearing the hijab was out of intention and the average mean was a 3.64 (out of 4), indicating the significance to their stories in the focus groups. Both participants who wear the hijab and who did not wear the hijab had a similar understanding that there is no purpose to wearing the hijab unless it was coming from the heart. Many of the participants provided scenarios in which they described girls they knew who wear the hijab but they did not practice the teachings of Islam, whereas girls who did not wear the hijab did practice Islam. The participants that did not wear the hijab disclosed what they heard and observed from their female friends and family members. They realized that when the hijab is worn for the "right intentions" it had a positive impact in their friends and family member's lives and had brought them closer to God. The majority of the participants agreed that the hijab was more than a piece of cloth over

a girl’s head that identified her as a Muslim. In addition, they agreed that the intention or purpose behind wearing the hijab will be judged by Allah (God) and the outer appearance is solely a quick judgment that individuals have between one another. The third theme addressed was the participant’s experiences in the school. Participants were asked in the focus groups to discuss whether they had been treated differently or felt discriminated against because they are Muslim or wear the hijab.

More than half of the girls said they personally experienced or knew someone who had encountered discrimination. The participants had sensitive and personal stories of incidents of when they were called “terrorist,” “dumb,” “towel head,” and “camel jockey.” Overall, the participants were confident and proud to be Muslim and to wear the hijab, but at the same time the name calling and insults affected them in an offensive way. As one girl said, “I felt as though I was a second-class-citizen.” Participants described their experiences with their teachers and classmates in school who treated them differently because they are Muslim. A participant said, “Once I was in middle school and a group of my peers tried to tell me to change my religion because I was going to Hell. They teased me about my scarf

and tried to get me to take it off. Once during high school a teacher told a close friend of mine to not associate with me due to my religion. She [the teacher] said because of my religion, we will never understand each other. She said I was the reason.” The participant mentioned that this was an extreme-

ly sad incident because teachers are viewed as role models; however, her teacher did not accept her because of her faith.

Participants also reported having their hijab pulled off or torn by their classmates while waiting in line at the school cafeteria. A participant, a freshman in college who wears the niqab (a type of hijab that covers the face only revealing the eyes) would hear people laugh or say “she scared me.” She said it did not bother her at all because she had faith in God. Another participant shared her personal experience in high school during the anniversary day of 9/11, “the teacher asked students how they felt that actual day and what they were doing when 9/11 happened. She then suddenly asked a question and said Now let’s ask how our Muslim friends felt that day? The whole class looked at me and I felt as if I was responsible for the whole situation.”The participant felt that she was put on the spot and that she needed to apologize for the incident.

Likewise, a Somali participant who wears the hijab recalled a time when she was in sixth grade. She began her story, “I had a Spanish teacher who had low expectations for me. So, basically she thought I would do badly in her class, however I exceeded her expectations by having the highest grade in the class.” Overall, the participant’s acceptance of the hijab or being a Muslim did not affect them negatively as the RAQ scores indicated on questions 11, 14, and 20. The participants were asked in questions 11, 14 and 20 whether the hijab was an obligation by God and the average mean was a 3.86, whether they were confident in being Muslim or wearing the hijab, a mean of 3.82 and if they are proud to be Muslim or to wear the hijab, a mean of 3.96. These findings were very consistent with what the girls discussed in the focus groups. The participants described that they felt “indifferent” or “fazed-out” from all what “little-minded” individuals have to say about them because they feel that the hatred has only made them get closer to their faith and God. Their positive understanding of their faith was a positive part in their life and so the negative experiences they had encountered did not influence their overall self-concept.

The fourth theme mentioned several times was the pressure to be beautiful. The researcher had asked questions in the RAQ if the girls criticized or compared their physical appearance to girls on magazines or television, and whether they felt pressured as a Muslim girl to look beautiful, to have the right clothes, shoes and to fit in (Table 2). The average means for questions 12 and 13 showed a 2.96 and 2.44 respectively out of a 4.0. However, several participants in the focus groups counter-argued that the pressure to be beautiful was a “girl-thing” or “all women want to be beautiful,” thus in some ways it is in nature for women and men

Table 1  
Age (A) of which participants wore the hijab

Age (A)	Total
1	1
2	1
3	1
4	3
5	6
6	2
7	1
8	3
9	3
10	1
11	3
12	1
13	1
14	1
15	1
16	1
17	1
18	1
19	1
20	1
21	1
22	1
23	1
24	1
25	1
26	1
27	1
28	1
29	1
30	1
31	1
32	1
33	1
34	1
35	1
36	1
37	1
38	1
39	1
40	1
41	1
42	1
43	1
44	1
45	1
46	1
47	1
48	1
49	1
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51	1
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58	1
59	1
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67	1
68	1
69	1
70	1
71	1
72	1
73	1
74	1
75	1
76	1
77	1
78	1
79	1
80	1
81	1
82	1
83	1
84	1
85	1
86	1
87	1
88	1
89	1
90	1
91	1
92	1
93	1
94	1
95	1
96	1
97	1
98	1
99	1
100	1



to appreciate and to appear clean, attractive and healthy. The participants reasoning suggested that they felt some pressure and they might have compared themselves to other girls, but they said that as a Muslim girl they should remember that one of the attributions or names of Allah is the Beautiful and half of faith is being clean and beautiful in front of Allah. One participant explained, “To me wearing the hijab doesn’t stop me from doing what most girls my age do like look cute and dress nice. In fact it makes me feel even better knowing I am looking good and covered at the same time.”

However, in question 19 of the RAQ, it questioned if they felt pressured to abide on Islamic modest attire and the average mean was a 2.78. Throughout the focus groups discussions, the participants mentioned how being expected to cover a certain way was a cultural practice. For example, the Somali participants said their culture encouraged women to wear the “full hijab” or the khimar which is normally a black long dress that covers down to the waist. Girls are encouraged to dress in the khimar at the Masjid similar to wearing a uniform; therefore, all the girls are wearing the same garment to represent equality and respect in the house of God. The Asian and Arab participants who did not wear the hijab conferred that they also felt pressured, but it was only because of trying to mix in with their peers and attempting to dress modestly for their faith at the same time. An Arab participant shared how she still has a dress code even though she does not wear the hijab. If she wore something too short or too tight, her parents would casually tell her that they disapprove of her outfit. During the focus groups, participants also mentioned that trying to select modest clothes at the shopping mall can be difficult depending on how they prefer to dress. Several girls said they shop at popular store departments and they still purchase tank tops, skirts, fitted jeans or leggings however, they choose how to wear it in their own modest way (e.g. wearing a cardigan over her tank top or leggings under her skirt).

## Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to better understand Muslim girls who wear or who do not wear the hijab, by examining if they exhibit a positive or negative self-concept within the eight domains. The researcher also conducted focus groups to describe participant’s personal experiences with family, school and discrimination. A self-concept survey was administered to 50 participants. On average, they received a positive self-concept within the seven domains except the Athletic Competence (with a 2.29 mean). This study was consistent with Major, McCoy, Kaiser, and Quinton’s (2003) view

on how prejudice can affect the self-esteem of its targets. They suggested a third model which demonstrates that individuals do not respond consistently as a target of prejudice. The Transactional Model contends that “self-esteem and affective responses to being a target of prejudice are determined by how individuals cognitively appraise prejudicial events and the coping strategies they use to deal with those events” (Major et al., 2003). These processes are functions of the individuals characteristics, situation, personal and structural factors that vary through their effects on appraisal and coping.

Although, this present study is uniquely different from self-esteem, it is still relevant to this study, because within the focus groups and RAQ responses, participants demonstrated coping strategies and positive appraisals that allowed them to resist their vulnerability as targets. Several participants demonstrated positive coping skills in which they would not allow the bullying and discriminatory behaviors to affect them negatively. One participant wrote, “Yes, people in my school have said ignorant comments, but I’ve addressed those situations and it hasn’t happened since.” She believed that by standing up for herself it would stop the bullies from hurting other girls as well. Another participant said, “It’s always the same, starts off with the question, ‘Hey what’s that thing on your head, aren’t you hot?’ At first I hated it, but I laughed at it myself because they judge without knowing.” Similarly, another participant stated, “It didn’t bother me as much, because it was out of ignorance and not being educated.” Many of the participants did not consider the importance of what people said seriously, because they thought it was out of ignorance and without proper knowledge of the hijab. In one incident, a participant said she was told by a classmate at school to take the hijab off, but she said, “It doesn’t affect me at all or make me stop wearing my hijab.”

Similarly, a participant described her feelings when she received questions like, “Are you forced to wear that? Are you bald?” For her, the question that is most hurtful is “do you have cancer?” However, the participant said that she stands up for herself by explaining why she wears the hijab to her peers. She said, “Instead of getting angry and walking off I help people be more understanding and less ignorant. I am a very open-minded person. So when I see others who just judge, I actually just feel kind of bad for them. Being ignorant doesn’t get you anywhere. This is why I try to understand others as much as I can.” Another participant reported that after witnessing her friend facing discrimination she expressed her concerns by stating, “I felt bad for what happened and it made me want to change how people commonly view

Islam.” Similarly, a participant wrote, “I was called a terrorist both my 9th and 10th grade years. It has stopped now though, personally I think it’s because I’ve embraced Islam and I don’t shy away from it.” This attitude demonstrates how a girl’s confidence as a Muslim girl can buffer her negative experiences in school. Major, McCoy, Kaiser, and Quinton’s (2003) study even suggested that optimism buffers stressful or discriminatory actions. The participants seemed to share this quality to overcome discrimination and bullying.

Furthermore, the participants in this study revealed that they lost a lot of friends when they decided to wear the hijab, thus one participant wrote, “When I first started wearing the hijab to school some of my friends didn’t even recognize me and when they did they ignored me till this day. I was so sad.” However, several of the participants who wear the hijab explained that it was emotionally difficult for them when their long time friends did not accept them. Still a participant said, “Now I know who my real friends are because if someone approaches me in school and I wear the hijab, I know that they are not judging me for how I look, but what kind of person I am. I guess my old friends were really not true friends.” The participant’s admitted that they try to befriend individuals who are positive and accepting and to be thankful and happy with the friends they have now. One participant described that no one has said anything negative to her for wearing the hijab, but a friend of hers was harassed daily for being called a “terrorist.” The participant explained how her friend was affected by how she carried herself and how much more hesitant she was when meeting new people because she thought people blamed her for the horrific actions. The participant wrote, “9/11 impacted all of us [...] the actions of a few can’t represent a whole. I hate how the media took 9/11 and was able to twist it into what Islam doesn’t stand for. They didn’t do that for the Oklahoma bombings, so why do it for 9/11?” Accordingly, participants revealed that they or someone they knew were treated differently when they were in sport teams in school. This was consistent with the literature which revealed discriminatory actions toward Muslim girls wearing the hijab in sports in school. This may explain the low self-concept in Athletic Competence, due to the feeling that they are not adequate in athletics due to the experiences of discrimination and bullying. A participant wrote, “My sister had been booed during a track meet because she was wearing a hijab. The race starter also kicked her out of a race because she wasn’t allowed to wear ‘that thing’ in another race.” Another participant shared the same experience in high school; she writes, “I was a sprinter in high school, during a meet I was told by the

adult firing the gun that I had to take my scarf off before I ran. I was about to be disqualified for being out of uniform (wearing hijab). It was outrageous. I dealt with the problem and raised awareness, through the school media and news paper.” Another participant shared a story of a girl who was not allowed to play in her soccer team because she was wearing the hijab. The participant who wears the hijab was on the team for many years, but the other girl “was not allowed to be a part of the exception.” Another Arab participant who did not wear the hijab explained her frustration on how she observed a girl she knew who wore the hijab at track practice and was bullied. She said, “During warm-ups two girls were making fun of her doing sports while she was covered up. She quit track two days later.” An Arab participant who wore the hijab in her high school wrote, “Some people are rude and unaccepting. I joined field hockey and was bullied until I quit the team. No one would talk to me and wouldn’t invite me to anything. It was awful.” These stories provide some understanding to why the girls received a low Athletic Competence in their self-concept.

## Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There were some potential limitations in this exploratory study. As noted in the analysis, the non-random convenience sample limited the generalizability of the results within age, grade, ethnicity, and for girls who wear and do not wear the hijab. Moreover, the relatively small sample of participants was also a limitation to the study. The sample consisted of a majority of one ethnic group (66% Black/Somali) that clearly did not represent a diverse group of Muslim girls in Central Ohio. Future research should focus on purposely recruiting participants of different ethnic backgrounds in hopes of investigating a relationship to the various self-concept domains. The researcher attempted to find relationships within grade, age, and ethnicity, but the sample size and diversity was limited. Originally, the study proposed to find a correlation within self-concept domains in girls that wear the hijab with girls that did not wear the hijab. However, the researcher was limited to locations to recruit participants and the majority of Mosques and Sunday schools attendees were girls of the Somali ethnicity. Finally, self-report measures are prone to weak and bias responses, as well as difficult to control. While, Harter’s SPPA survey developed a mechanism that controlled response bias, the researchers own RAQ survey does not have that value. The researcher did not have the control for social desirability bias within participants who tended to respond to questions favorably viewed by others. For example, it is difficult to determine whether the participants were influenced by the re-

searcher or the other girls participating in the focus groups. Also, the religious affiliation questionnaire did not have certain measures for the accuracy of the responses. Future research should develop a means of collecting information by using a mechanism to control desirable and bias responses.

Even though this study contained limitations, it was the first that examined school experiences and the hijab in relation to self-concept with Muslim adolescent girls in Central Ohio. This study was an exploratory study in nature; however, it provided significant information that is valuable to understand Muslim adolescent girls, the hijab, and the experiences in the school. This study allows for a direction for future research with this specific group. Overall, these participants generally demonstrated a low Athletic Competence, which was also affirmed through the focus groups personal stories of bullying and discrimination in sport teams at school because they wear the hijab. Four themes were evaluated and observed in the focus groups which demonstrated differences

in ethnic backgrounds as well as wearing or not wearing the hijab. This study sheds light for future research within this population and provides implications for a constructive next step for the researcher to grow and improve upon.

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