

Does the Muslim headscarf boost body image?

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(RNS) In non-Muslim societies, a woman in a headscarf is often perceived as less approachable and sociable, according to past research, and some see the head covering as a means of repressing women.

But a new British study concludes that for many Muslim women, the headscarf, or hijab, is correlated with a positive body image—whether the woman is particularly religious or not.

“It makes sense,” said Viren Swami, a psychologist and the lead researcher on the University of Westminster study. “Part of the reason why women start wearing the the hijab is to non-sexualize the female body. Women who wear the hijab probably experience less objectification.”

The hijab may also give women a sense of control over the image they project to the world, and enhance that part of self-esteem that is rooted in a strong sense of identity, as some previous studies have suggested.

Swami and his team asked nearly 600 Muslim British women to answer questions about their satisfaction with their bodies and their weight. They also measured how these women were affected by popular images of women’s bodies.

The results, published in the August edition of the *British Journal of Psychology*, revealed small but significant differences between women who chose to wear the hijab and those who did not.

“Participants who wore the hijab generally had more positive body image, were less reliant on media messages about beauty ideals, and placed less importance on appearance than participants who did not wear the hijab,” the study concluded.

Uzma Farooq, a Sufi Muslim living in the Washington, D.C., area who wears the hijab, said the new report rings true to her because wearing her headscarf gives her a sense of peace, and allows her to focus on inner beauty.

People are beginning to see that the hijab can mean different things to different women, she said. It is “ever-transforming and evolving communities against stereotypes and shaping the feminine image of Islam.”

And at times, she said, it’s a relief to put on a hijab and not worry that you haven’t colored your hair recently.

But Farooq, vice president of the nonprofit Muslim Women’s Coalition, rejects the idea that a hijab makes a woman feel good because it gives permission to neglect her appearance or subsume her femininity.

“Wearing a hijab does not mean you have to look drab,” continued Farooq. “There are some beautiful hijabs out there.”

Jenahara, 29, a fashion designer in Jakarta, Indonesia, who has a line of stylish hijabs, said the head covering is not only an article of clothing but also an article of faith.

“Wearing the headscarf is something that helps remind you of your religion,” Jenahara said. “I mean, if you’re wearing the headscarf, really? Are you going to be going out drinking alcohol or doing other things that the Qur’an strictly prohibits? It’s something to remind you and keep you track.”

Swami and his team also controlled for the religiosity of the participants, to find that it was the wearing of the hijab itself, not necessarily a commitment to religious observance, that was linked with better body image.

But that doesn’t mean that women—Muslim or otherwise—should don hijabs to counter anxieties about their own bodies, Swami added. The study demonstrates a correlation between headscarf wearing and satisfaction with one’s body, but not causation: It doesn’t prove that the hijab is making the women feel good about their forms.

Neither should anyone conclude that the results would hold for women forced to wear the hijab, or those who live in societies where wearing a hijab is restricted, he added, since an important aspect of the group studied is that the 600 women had

the choice to wear one. About 400 said they did at least sometimes, and about 200 said they never did.

In nations where women have to wear the hijab, "I don't expect we would get the same results," but that might be an interesting follow-up study, Swami said.