

Veil Journeys Unveiled: Exploring Muslim Women's Veil Experiences among Malaysian Women in France

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Abstract

Muslim women's experiences with the veil in France elicits diverse feedback yet little research has been conducted on the veil experience of Southeast Asian Malaysian Muslim women who have resided in France for more than a year. In response to this gap, the study identifies the controversial meanings of veiling experiences and explores the complexities of veiling practices among Malaysian Muslim women in France. Six Malaysian Muslim women residing in France were interviewed. Interpretive phenomenological analysis approach (IPA) revealed that Malaysian Muslim women in France shared accounts of receiving respect, finding acceptance within their work environments, and encountering a general atmosphere of tolerance towards their religious and cultural identities. They also believed that the opinion of the locals in France towards the act of veiling are different depending on their geographical location. Some interviewees are certain that the locals in rural areas are more paranoid of women in veils than the locals in urban areas. The findings support the importance of exploring the discourse of veiling experiences among Malaysian women in France and the need to highlight the intersection of cultural practices, religious identity, and the challenges faced by Muslim women who choose to wear the veil while residing in a non-predominant Muslim country like France.

Keywords: Hijab, Veiling Experiences, Veiling Experiences in France, Controversial Meanings, Complexities

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, a piece of fabric has become a powerful and divisive symbol worldwide. The veil as worn by some Muslim women has assumed iconic proportions around the globe. To some it symbolises piety; to others, oppression. To some, it is a religious statement supporting Islam as a way of living; to others, a political statement supporting violent Islamists (Hochel, 2013). Muslim women may have a variety of veiling experiences, some of which may be shaped by their personal circumstances, particularly when they are residing in a predominantly non-Muslim country like France. The meanings of the word "hijab," according to Lane (1984), are: something that veils, conceals, hides, covers, or protects because it forbids seeing or beholding; something that restricts, inhibits, debars, or precludes. In reference to what Muslims and non-Muslims refer to as the hijab, or the Muslim women's dress code, this is known as the hijab, veil or the act of veiling. Veiling experiences in short are the events that occurred to a person during their veiling journey. Islam was not the first culture to practise veiling their women. Veiling practices started long before the Islamic prophet Muhammad was born. Societies like the Byzantines, Sassanids, and other cultures in Near and Middle East practised veiling (Slininger, 2014)

By utilising the newly contributing corpus on Malaysian Muslim women in France about their veiling experiences, we implement a more dynamic approach behavioural in-depth interviews to the study of intersection of cultural practices, religious identity, tourism experiences and the challenges faced by Muslim women who choose to wear the veil while navigating to reside in France.

Discourse about veiling has intensified over the years, not only in France. Most of the time, this revolves around the stereotype of the Islamic veil oppressed Muslim women (Katz, 2013; Staeheli & Nagel, 2008). These narratives are based on cultural prejudices and impact on veiled Middle East Muslim women's lived experiences especially affecting Muslim children, teenagers, young adults who veiled, government workers, and university students (Glapka, 2018). While research has been conducted on Muslim women's experiences of veiling, fashion and everyday racism (Dwyer, 2008; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2012; Kwan, 2008; Listerborn, 2015), the relationship between religious centrality and perceived discrimination among veiled muslim American women (Hashem et al., 2022), and also some recent studies have sought to understand the Islamic veil from the point of view of Muslim women who wear it (Alvi et al., 2003). there has been relatively little work that has explored Asian Malaysian Muslim women's veil experiences as a woman residing in Europe.

In terms of religious cultural domains, the importance of the intersection of cultural practices, religious identity, and the challenges faced by Muslim women who choose to wear the veil while residing in a non-predominant Muslim country like France has been demonstrated over several decades. Research focusing on multiple aspects of veiling experiences among Muslim women, highlighting the prejudice and stereotypes they often encounter (Garcia Yeste et al., 2020; Ash et al., 2019; Abdelhadi, 2019; Najib & Hopkins, 2019). While another substantial body of literature also suggests that the experiences of oppression have changed the embodied strategies of veiled women who either feel the need to be strong and integrated, or more discreet and less visible, especially through their clothes (Najib & Hopkins, 2019; Othman, 2006; Dwyer, 2008; Gökarıksel & Secor, 2012; Kwan, 2008; Listerborn, 2015). In addition to Muslim women's experiences on veiling, other research has shown that autonomous motivation for wearing a veil (e.g., for self-expression) related robustly to more positive and fewer negative affective experiences, and exploratory analyses suggested autonomous motivation for the veil predicted women's life satisfaction (Legate et al., 2020; Ruby, 2006; Theodore Gabriel, 2011; Yusuf Jailani, 2016)

An important gap that still remains in this growing body of research, however is the somewhat limited scope on which existing findings are based, in that vast majority of studies to date have been carried out on veiling experience of the muslim women residing in a (Western) developed country (Al-Ansi et al., 2022; Ash et al., 2019; Baniani et al., 2019; Garrod & Nicholls, 2022; Najib & Hopkins, 2019). A paucity of research exists, exploring the veiling experience of muslim women throughout their journey in other developed Asia countries like Korea, China, and Japan (Eum, 2017; Obuse, 2019; Yeon Koo, 2018). Exceptions include related research in Singapore (Zainal & Wong, 2017) and Sri Lanka (Siriwardane, 2014) where the former reported the veil debate in Singapore by drawing upon the lived experiences of Singaporean Malay-Muslim women whose daily lives are fraught with a constant negotiation between their identities as veiled women and the institutionalised constraints. While Siriwardanee (2014) found that while meanings around spiritual piety and socio-moral propriety are often presented as a false dichotomy in expressing motivations around veiling, majoritarian ethno-nationalist discourses have served to erase nuances to ongoing "veiling" practices in Sri Lanka.

Against this backdrop, we attempted to address two specific concerns in the current study. First is the need to identify the controversial meanings of veiling experiences; second is the need to explore the complexities of veiling practices among Malaysian women in France. The use of such measures allowed us to tease out the cultural debates surrounding the adoption of the 2004 French law on religious signs using key concepts of cultural and identity (Heine, 2009) but also understanding veiled Muslim women navigating the veil's visibility as a marker of difference with strangers. In this way, we attempted also to analyse and visually represent the injurious, overlapping and conflicting discourses that veiled Muslim women encounter in public spheres (Iddrisu, 2007)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Veil Journeys, Veil Practices and Religious Practices

Muslims follow the teachings of the Quran as their primary source of religious guidance, followed by the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, which are transmitted to them via Hadiths and the Prophet's close and reliable companions (Fred, 2007). Although wearing a veil has come to represent Islam and Muslim women as a religious symbol in recent centuries, wearing a veil was a common practice in many other ancient cultures before Islam was founded. For example, veiling for religious purposes was originally introduced by Judaism (Das & Shirvani, 2013), and many Orthodox Jewish women still cover their heads and wear modest clothing;(Croucher, 2008; Das & Shirvani, 2013).

According to Roy (2004), the banning of the veil upset women of traditional families who were comfortable following the custom. To illustrate, tensions between Islam and the secular French state were becoming more and more evident in France alone, as seen by disputes over the wearing of the Muslim veil. The debate over the veil prohibition became a major topic of conversation throughout the country. In 2004, the CBC reported that the French government has chosen to outlaw any obviously religious clothing and signage, such as huge Christian crosses, Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps (yarmulke), Muslim headscarves, and Jewish turbans.

Recent politically sensitive images of Muslim women donning veils—a range of hair- and body-coverings—especially in Western nations have given rise to unfavourable presumptions about the impact these images have on the women who wear them (Ogan et al., 2014). Consequently, the majority of Western Europeans favour some limits, at the very least, on the veiling of Muslim women (Paw Research Center, 2018; Williamson, 2014). However, a veil allows many Muslim women to express themselves and present themselves to family, friends, and other people how they would like to be seen (White & Hernandez, 2013).

Much evidence exists for links between indicators of negative veiling experiences. Likewise, links exist between contra-indicators of veiling practices including feeling secure due to multiculturalism and diversity. For example, studies have shown that veiling experiences for Muslim women in France include about Islamic culture, attitudes, perceived advantages, and sentiments (Al-Ansi et al., 2022). Moreover, recent work has found support for causal linkage between veil and the lens of cultural racism as well as oppression (Blakeman, 2014; Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Rahmath et al., 2016; Ash et al., 2019; Baniani et al., 2019). However, one of the positive experiences and feedback of veiling has been connected to the sense of security brought about by multiculturalism (Heine, 2009; Moufakkir, 2020; Baniani et al., 2019; Najib & Hopkins, 2019; Zainal & Wong, 2017). According to (2019), Arab Muslim Women in Southern California believed the multiculturalism and diversity in Southern California make it easier for them as veiled Muslim women to feel more included compared to many other states with less diversity. Therefore, for Muslim women who veiled, the sense of security that is promoted by diversity and multiculturalism is a counterintuitive benefit, illuminating the intricate relationship between social settings and cultural norms.

Muslim Women's Perceptions on Veiling, the Hijab Controversy and Complexities

Plethora of Muslim women believe that veiling defines who they are as a person and is an essential component of their religious, cultural, and personal identity. (Yusuf Jailani, 2016; Zempi, 2014). A huge number of these women also embraced veiling, as they could foster the desire to be known and identified proudly as a true muslim by doing so (Litchmore & Safdar, 2016; Yusuf Jailani, 2016; Zempi, 2014). Furthermore, many Muslim women, especially those in the West, view the veil as a means of liberty and empowerment. (Ruby, 2006; Theodore Gabriel, 2011; Yusuf Jailani, 2016; Zempi, 2014) Women who veiled often feel liberated to engage in social interactions without fear of judgment for their appearance and safe from unwanted attention and sexual harassment (Beckmann, 2014; Ruby, 2006; Yusuf Jailani, 2016; Zempi, 2014). However, a great deal of people and world leaders find the veil to be extremely unsettling and frightening, to the point where numerous political initiatives and legislation to outlaw it have been put in place. According to Heine (2009), the Hijab controversy has generated a lot of debate and discussion in France, which has resulted in the passing of regulations like the 2004 French law on religious signs, which outlawed the veil and other ostensibly religious signs in

public schools. The existence of these controversial ideas has brought up complexities to the Muslim women who went to these non-muslim countries.

Plethora of evidence has shed light on the indicators of negative controversial meanings of veiling or the hijab controversy. Muslim women who veiled frequently become the objects of racial and religious prejudice, with society regarding them with distrust and linking them to victimisation, terrorism and radicalization (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Garcia Yeste et al., 2020; Heine, 2009; Slininger, 2014). According to research by Slininger (2014). Due to this prejudice, some nations, like France, have banned the wearing of veils, which has sparked discussions about religious freedom and cultural identity and demonstrations. However, there is evidence that shows veils are not necessarily associated as a symbol of cultural racism, which includes locals viewing veil as empowerment and respect, as well as demonstrating acceptance and political freedom to let Muslim women veils (Ash et al., 2019; Das & Shirvani, 2013; Blakeman, 2014; Ruby, 2006; Zainal & Wong, 2017). According to Ash's (2019) study, the women tended to have pleasant interaction and experiences with non-Muslims, indicating a harmonious coexistence. Consequently, despite the ongoing controversy surrounding the wearing of veils, a variety of viewpoints and life experiences emphasise the intricate interactions that exist between religious liberty, cultural identity, and societal acceptance. This suggests that thoughtful conversations and policies that uphold individual liberties and promote understanding between people are necessary.

Following the growing diversity and disputes relating to racism and Islamophobia, European nations are asked to protect the right to equality in the expression of differing opinions considering the current situation (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017). Several scholars have recently pointed out that the conventional concept of *laïcité* (secularism) contributes to the exclusion of some minorities from the public sphere, as in the case of women wearing headscarves (Barras, 2010). Considering this, (Fernández & Rodriguez, 2013) argue that a new multicultural secularism is required to guarantee that everyone's right to freedom of choice regarding their beliefs is upheld when they engage in society and that their decisions are honoured and acknowledged equally. Thus, multicultural secularism suggests that the democratic and equitable advancement of today's countries is contingent upon the respect and equal participation of other religions and cultural traditions coexisting inside a community.

Furthermore, the interconnectedness of the exclusionary experiences encountered by Muslim women who wear headscarves makes the feminist viewpoint essential when examining the mechanisms that might help modify them (Tariq & Syed, 2018). Dialogic feminism (Puigvert, 2001) offers a framework for discussing this issue that is predicated on women's autonomy over the use of religious symbols. The equality of differences implies acknowledging that 'true equality includes the very right to live in a different way' (Flecha, 2000). Dialogic feminism suggests giving varied women the chance to come together to fight for equality for all women, regardless of their skin colour, race, religion, or educational background. (2013) state that egalitarian discussion may be used as a strategy to reach agreements based on the merits of the arguments put forward, rather than the participants' race, religion, or status as leaders. This concept places a strong focus on everyone's involvement, especially those whose voices have traditionally been marginalised.

Setting the Scene: Veiling Experience in France

Concerns over Islamophobic acts against Muslims, especially in America and Europe, have been palpably raised after the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Consequently, these events sparked a variety of political and cultural debates between Muslims and Western countries about a range of topics, including the rise of Islamist political mobilisation, terrorism, the status of Muslims in the West, and the relationship between Islam and the West. In 2004 the French government voted to outlaw religious clothing, including huge Christian crosses, Sikh turbans, Jewish skullcaps (yarmulke), Muslim headscarves, and other obviously religious garments and emblems (CBC reports)¹. The prohibition of Muslim headscarves, or hijabs, was the primary target of the outcry against the law, though. Growing hostilities between Islam and the secular French state were shown by disputes over the wearing of the Muslim veil.

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news2/background/islam/hijab.html>

A major topic of discussion in the country is the debate over whether to outlaw the veil. Three girls in Paris were dismissed from their school for not taking off their veil, a veil that covered their hair and head but left their faces uncovered (Das & Shirvani, 2013). Approximately 3,000 protesters marched through Paris's streets in December 2003 to voice their opposition to the French government's decision to outlaw religious clothing. This was followed in January 2004 by a global protest that took place in towns all throughout North America and Europe (CBC News, 2004)². Similarly, in another instance, two women attacked two pregnant Muslim women, tried to rip off their veil, and used racist slurs (Sherazi et al, 2023). Resultantly, the victims of this anti-Muslim bigotry suffered miscarriages.

The subject came up again in 2004, and on September 2, 2004, religious symbols and clothing were outlawed in public schools. Many Muslim organisations believed that the protest was focused on removing Muslim religious symbols from public schools via equivalent legislative limitations, rather than targeting other religions. Within the Muslim community, conflicting opinions have surfaced since the ordinance was approved. One group said that Muslim women's religious beliefs were their means of self-expression, and that the legislation hindered them from doing so. The opposing Muslim faction maintained that the prohibition freed women from oppressive Islamic ideology that dehumanised them and allowed them to establish autonomous identities.

THE CURRENT STUDY

This study had two main goals: to identify the controversial meanings of veiling experiences and explore the complexities of veiling practices among Malaysian Women in France. Based on prior research, veiling experiences have been linked to diverse experiences such as religious fanaticism, brutality, violence, and terrorism and radicalization (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012; Garcia Yeste et al., 2020; Heine, 2009; Slininger, 2014). According to research by Slininger (2014) amongst women, controversial meanings of veiling were expected to significantly affect most people's views on women with veils. The complexities faced by Muslim women in other non-predominant Muslim countries have shown real gaps between acceptance and rejection, which includes acts like open discrimination that leads to shunned Muslim communities in most western countries. Because prior research has been mixed regarding the positive and negative experiences of veiling, it is unknown which way the result of this study would lean towards. Furthermore, due to the lack of prior research, we have attempted to carry out research on Asian Malaysian Muslim women's veil experiences as a tourist in Europe.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

We sought different individuals from the range of youth in Malaysia, which according to The National Youth Development Policy of Malaysia³ aged from 15 to 40. We selected Muslim women who have resided in France for a minimum duration of one year as our respondents. As we sought to include diversity of opinions, we intended to do a purposeful sampling. Emails were sent to 10 Muslim women that had stayed in France as students, employees or immigrants, enclosing a participant information sheet and consent form. 7 (70%) responded and were interviewed: 3 did not respond to get a variety of answers as well as reactions. Interviewees were picked to represent a diverse group of women who practised veiling of different styles. All gave written consent and agreed to the interviews.

Data Collection

Prior to full data collection, we sought each interviewee consent by signing an agreement letter to ensure enclosed procedures. Next, we attempted to assemble the questions for interviews. The questions were generated from literature reviews of 15 articles and replicable questions from those literature reviews.

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news2/background/islam/hijab.html>

³ <file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/National%20Youth%20Development%20Policy.pdf>

Finally, the final questions were generated from 9 articles chosen from different literature reviews (Baniani et al., 2019; Eum, 2017; Glapka, 2018; Heine, 2009; Hochel, 2013; Moufakkir, 2020; Najib & Hopkins, 2019; Oktadiana et al., 2016; Rahmath et al., 2016) ([Appendix](#)). Then, emails were sent to the 7 interviewees regarding the times and date of when the interview will be held. Then, semi structured and behavioural, in-depth interviews were conducted between 12th February to 23rd February via Zoom Meeting Platform. The semi structured guide (Table 1) was agreed, informed by the existing literature and areas of divergence. The participants were given these questions in advance, and the 7 interviews were then taped, and transcriptions were done in accordance with university guidelines. According to IPA guidelines, interviews were carried out with the purpose of eliciting in-depth accounts of what it's like to wear a veil in France (Eatough & Smith, 2012). The interviewing technique made it possible for unforeseen topics to come up throughout the conversation and be followed up on with further inquiries. Each interview duration took from 50 to 75 minutes. Transcriptions were not returned to the participants and there were no repeat interviews.

Table 1: Interview Questions

Questions
How do you think the locals in France view the practice of veiling?
Can you share any personal controversies or challenges you faced while wearing a veil in France?
How have your experiences been shaped by the choice to veil or not to veil in France?
Have you encountered any situations that made you reflect on the complexities of veiling practices?
Have there been moments you needed to adapt your veiling practices to navigate cultural differences in France?

Measures

According to Smith et al., (2009), IPA emphasises the value of respecting each person's unique experience and the ways in which they interpret it. This method also highlights the value of conversations and interpretive work that go along with individual experiences; while candidly admitting how much reading participant experiences depends on the researchers' interpretation (Shinebourne, 2011). In keeping with this approach, we conducted a concerted effort to record in-depth and comprehensive narratives that interpreted the experiences of a limited group of veiling women in France. The stages of analysis followed an IPA framework; the first stage of the analysis involved reading and rereading the transcripts and making initial notes and observations without forcing any adherence to theory. This allowed for familiarity with each interview and the identification of important portions of the transcript that might be relevant later (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). The second stage was more systematic; it involved going over the transcripts to find psychological themes or patterns of meaning and concentrating on abstract ideas like difference, power, or respect. The third stage of the analysis organised and produced an overview of the topics, noting particular quotes from each participant in order to guarantee that the themes remained based on the actual words of the remark (Smith, 2008). The dominant themes are presented with extracts from the interviews to illustrate the themes.

Analysis

Four themes were identified from the analysis: the influence of geography on beliefs and attitudes, personal controversies of veiling, bureaucratic discrimination as well as veiling practices amid cultural integration.

Result

By utilising IPA, the results achieved are divided into four main themes which are the influence of geography on beliefs and attitudes, personal controversies of veiling, bureaucratic discrimination as well as veiling practices amid cultural integration. Each theme has their own subthemes. The table below will specify each derived theme.

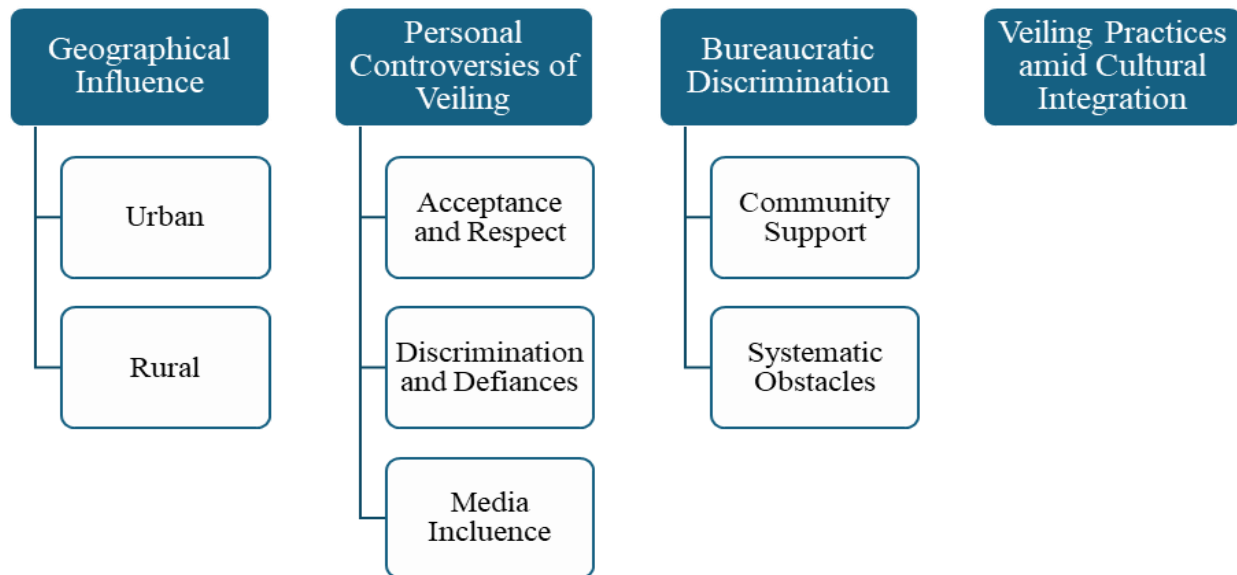


Figure 1: Themes

Geographical Influence

There is ample evidence that the opinions of French residents regarding veiling vary and are impacted by their specific geographic location. The majority of respondents concur that resident of particular places, especially the rural areas, behave in a certain manner based on their upbringing in that location. Some, however, asserted that while these individuals have the same upbringing, certain individuals are just receptive to new ideas and cultures. Nevertheless, French residents who live in metropolitan, urban or touristic locations are said to be more accepting of women with veils since they frequently come across them in their daily lives.

Table 2: Urban

Respondents	Quotes
Respondent 1	"[...] Since I lived in Paris[...], people are more open and even compliment my veil[...]"
Respondent 3	"[...]Students in my school are acceptable of them (of people wearing a veil)...Chambéry is not really a rural area so locals do not care..."
Respondent 4	"[...] in Toulouse, the French I met have so much respect [...] Since veil [...] signifies our religion, most French people will respect you [...]"
Respondent 6	"[...]Here(Grenoble)... people value diversity [...] locals sometimes view people who wear <i>tudung</i> (veil) as people who has religious conservatism but most often, they don't care. [...] It depends on people you meet and the location you're in to experience oppression..."

Table 3: Rural

Respondents	Quotes
Respondent 2	"[...] Wearing a veil is an act that will be accepted depending on the location of where you are [...] I lived in a small city in Besancon 15 years ago and the locals there are very scared of Islam in general. [...]"
Respondent 5	"[...] French locals have this double standard [...] depending on location, like people in rural areas will judge if you wear something different than them [...]"
Respondent 6	"[...] It depends on people you meet and the location you're in to experience oppression [...]"

Personal Controversies of Veiling

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that Muslim women living in France were forced to preserve their own culture while assimilating the core of another. Two respondents had lived in France for a year, two more for four to five years, one for thirteen years, and one for twenty-three years. They all agreed that they all experienced different types of controversies even though most of them are positive. The sub themes of acceptance and respect as well as discrimination and defiances were discussed thoroughly in the tables below.

Table 4: Acceptance and Respect

Respondents	Quotes
Respondent 1	"[...] <i>Alhamdulillah</i> in my 13 years living in France, there are no bad experiences [...] People are more acceptable (now) [...] Locals are not discriminating, they are just paranoid [...] I was never confronted for the bad reason, but I have people coming up to me and ask for advices [...] Most time, you need to compose yourself and choose to assimilate and blend in with the locals to feel accepted [...] Even in my kid's school, there are a lot of (female) parent who veiled, so no... I never have been discriminated"
Respondent 3	"[...] I mostly stay with my muslim friends aaa... and go around with them when we were visiting around [...] so people thought of us as a tourist and not immigrant [...] they even complement our <i>kurung</i> because we're wearing it..."
Respondent 4	"[...] I rarely experienced any controversies while veiling here [...] people (locals) are very respectful when they know you are a muslim [...] my friends will never ask you to hang out with them in bars or go drinking [...] there's one time, my classmate (local) even ask what food can me and my friend (another veiling Muslim) eat like in terms of meat [...]"
Respondent 5	"[...] I have 2 daughters who choose to veil from an early age [...] As for now, they never experienced discrimination and I hope they will never experience it in the future. [...]"

Table 5: Discrimination and Defiances

Respondents	Quotes
Respondent 2	“ [...] I always felt like there’s an eye on me, not most of the times but a lot of times [...] There’s one time, I was cursed and dragged by my veil by an old lady [...] Another time [...], a wine was dropped on my head (in school) [...] Even as tourist, when I went to Royaume, people give me this look cause I was all-covered while they sunbathing...”
Respondent 5	“[...] My mother-in-law (pure french) hate it when I started wearing <i>tudung</i> when I first start wearing [...] she always asks me everytime why did I put that ‘thing’ on my head and what is the need of it [...] mostly, the closest one who questions my decision of veiling (her mother-in-law and her husband)....”
Respondent 6	“[...] one time, in a tram, there’s an old lady ask (us) why wear veil but luckily there is another french local answering her(the old lady) and backing us up [...] it never happens to me but my friend [...] a lady ask her to take off her veil and just wear it (veil) when we go back to Malaysia [...]”

Table 6: Media Influence

Respondents	Quotes
Respondent 1	“[...] The media always portray bad stuffs about muslim which caused the locals to be paranoid and act certain ways towards the veiling community”
Respondent 6	“[...] the news from the local medias here are very one-sided [...] most locals believe what they read in the media [...] muslims are always described so badly[...]”

Bureaucratic Discrimination

As women who veiled, these women experience some complexities that hinders them from experiencing the same conversance as other women who resided in France since most of their actions are calculated and involve complicated rules and procedures. Tables below will specify the sub themes which are, community support and systematic obstacles.

Table 7: Community Support

Respondents	Quotes
Respondent 1	“[...] Working experience has been flawless for me [...] with 10 years above experience working with french people, they’re kind [...] just like everyone know, people in France never really care about your life outside of work so <i>Alhamdulillah</i> how <i>labuh</i> (long) my <i>tudung</i> is, it never bothers them [...] no such discrimination happens to me”
Respondent 6	“[...] I often work with different clients everyday as a business owner and my veil never bothers them, instead they show support by becoming my loyal customer”

Table 8: Systematic Obstacles

Respondents	Quotes
Respondent 2	"[...] we have to went through so many process and most of the company will ask for a picture of you without veil [...] there's a place to find job in France known as ' <i>pole l'emploi</i> ' [...] 1/10 women with veil is chosen from there [...]"
Respondent 3	"[...] when I want to make my student card, it is my most confusing moment (Respondent is an exchange student in France) [...] It is mandatory to not wear veil or any sorts of cloth that covers your head when taking a picture for student card, but I don't want to take my veil off"
Respondent 4	"[...] it was so hard for a veiled woman to do internship in France because we need to unveil to do so [...] its always hard for me to choose to put my picture without veil or with veil on my resume every internship [...]"
Respondent 6	"[...] It's kind of hard to explain to the family why with girls we can free-hair but why cannot do the same with guys.."

Veiling Practices Amid Cultural Integration

Despite residing in a foreign country which does not share any cultural similarities, these women claimed that integrating their veiling experiences with the culture is difficult depending on certain reasons. Most women agreed that they never need to adapt their veiling practices as they are accepted as it is but some beg to differ to this opinion.

Table 9: Veiling Practices amid Cultural Integration

Respondents	Quotes
Respondent 1	"[...] I never have to adapt my veiling practices despite living here [...] Islam is like an image to me eventhough i have to cater to the culture here [...] Yes even in festivals, when I go to festivals like christmas, I enjoy like the locals but I never forgot my faith..."
Respondent 2	"[...] depends on your belief, it is easy to make friends even through all the discriminations I am still not isolated, veiling is never the problem for me [...] you can integrate culture even while wearing a hijab, scarves, shawl, khimar or others... [...]"
Respondent 3	"[...] I believe protecting my veil is like protecting my dignity as a Muslim [...] what I like here is I can easily join any clubs or activities even though with a veil..."
Respondent 4	"[...] I did adapt (veiling practices) when I first come here, the visa needed a free-hair picture, also the student card, and the resume [...] best if you think it is what you need to do, then you adapt [...] In my first year, we have to join an association and the association often gave out foods in church, [...] there are some club members ask us to not wear veil and respect but they said that nicely since that is the rules there so we adapt by wearing beanie and a hoodie..."
Respondent 5	"[...] that's why I wear shawl like I wear now! [...] since I meet new clients every day, we never know which kind of people we meet [...] I always adjust my shawl and adapt to different styles... so that it is not obvious that I am actually veiling [...] I don't wear veiling styles like you do but my kids do, they don't care..."
Respondent 6	"[...] I never think of taking off my veil actually [...] it is hard to integrate among the students mostly because students here (locals) go to parties, bars [...] difficult to merge in community and make friends with locals [...] so we take initiative to invite them to our house and eat together [...] there is always an alternative way to adapt and integrate without taking off the veil..."

DISCUSSION

Using an IPA framework, semi-structured interviews with six Malaysian Muslim women in France revealed their experiences of wearing a veil. The study focused on personal controversies and complexities of veiling practices among these women. While previous research has addressed veiling, this study uniquely highlights its multifaceted nature, illustrating how cultural and religious factors intersect both Malaysian and French contexts. This exploration offers a fresh perspective on the significance of veiling experiences for these individuals.

Moreover, our study empirically validated the relationship between the diverse motivations behind veiling, ranging from expressions of religious identity to responses to social pressures and perceptions. Previous empirical research on veiling experience was primarily conducted among Muslim women residing in developed countries such as New Zealand, Canada, United States, United Kingdom and Asian countries like Korea, Japan and China (Al-Ansi et al., 2022; Ash et al., 2019; Baniani et al., 2019; Eum, 2017; Garrod & Nicholls, 2022; Najib & Hopkins, 2019; Obuse, 2019; Rahmath et al., 2016; Yeon Koo, 2018). the roles of geographical influence, personal controversies of veiling, bureaucratic discrimination and veiling practices amid cultural integration among Malaysians residing in France have not yet been investigated.

The results indicate that, while the women's generally positive experiences are consistent, the primary factor influencing Malaysian Muslim women's experiences with racism in their daily lives is their geographic location. Whether or not they can experience it relies entirely on where they reside. There is a realisation that Muslims living in the countryside are experiencing more difficulties than in the city, especially in the greater Paris (Najib & Hopkins, 2019). Therefore, spaces and places are at the centre of interrelationships between environmental, social, economic, political and cultural processes (Cresswell, 1996; Ehrkamp, 2008; Forrest & Dunn, 2010). Nevertheless, one of our respondents indicated that residing in the countryside is not a problem to them as it doesn't hinder their capability to socialise with the locals.

Burchardt et al. (2015) notice how Muslim integration into urban society has evolved over time, leading to the creation of two distinct perceptions of Islam: one that is segregationist and rejects integration, and the other that is compatible with both local social harmony codes and Western values. In relation to our research, locals residing in urban areas like Paris are more likely to accept the act of veiling because they are exposed to it more than people from the rural areas. For people in rural areas, they might find the act of veiling to be odd and out of place. Therefore, Malaysian Muslim women who reside in France agree that the geographical location does influence the way the locals perceive them.

Personal controversies of veiling were influenced by acceptance and respect as well as discrimination and defiances. The result shows that French locals respect and accept Muslim women who wear veils in their community. This is in line with the previous study that highlights the interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims are peaceful (Jasperse et al., 2012; Shaver et al., 2016). However, In recent years, the discussion over Muslim inclusion by locals has revolved around the extremity of their religious beliefs (Navarro-Granados et. al, 2024). While Doyle (2011) notes that the acceptance may in fact be part of an attempt to bring the practice of Islam under the control of the state. Nevertheless, these women do experience some discrimination and defiances that becomes a challenge for them subsequently. Baniani (2019) indicates that veiled women will always be the target of prejudice and discrimination if they are clearly identified as Muslims by wearing the scarf. According to Hamdan (2007), Many young Muslim have reacted to the prevalent racism and discrimination in French society by reaffirming their Muslim identity.

Media also undoubtedly influences how people perceive Muslim women who veils. The development and dissemination of ideas, as well as the general cultural production of information are significantly influenced by the mass media (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Our result shows that Muslims are consistently portrayed negatively in the media. Muslims found it challenging to dispel myths about them due to the media's persistently negative portrayal (Rahmath et al., 2016). For example, a dominant construct of terrorist Islam is amplified through textual discourse and casual conversation. Moreover, films and television shows further distort perception of audiences that place Muslim groups in "weaker" or "flawed" positions which indirectly instil a sense of inferiority within a hijab wearer (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005)

The issue of bureaucratic discrimination refers to how these Muslim women from Malaysia were constantly denigrated simply for the way they dressed. This type of discrimination occurred when these women's acts were deliberate, examined and judged for their appearance as well as when their acts were judged by intricate rules and processes. This aligns with the research of Baniani (2019) which stated that the women were often discriminated against at work, mostly in the form of microaggressions. Even before they applied to work, they were already disqualified from it and some employers explicitly mentioned the veil as a reason. Nevertheless, Muslim women do experience community support despite microaggression. According to Malhotra (2023), veiled women actively negotiate to find a place on a continuum between fashion and religion, two seemingly incompatible tensions, consequently helping them to be received by the community. One responder noted that they experience less discrimination at work because the veil is viewed as something that is fashionable.

However, there are also events when their rights are denied. Bullock et al. (2000) points out that Tunisian and Turkish governments banned the veil and many women refused to go to work or attend the universities. This happens frequently in France where students or job employees need to take off their veil to apply for student cards or jobs through *pole emploi*. Despite the community support, systematic obstacles are what hinders these women to experience a great working or studying environment. Systematic obstacles such as the banning of veils in the workplace or while applying for jobs are one of the main issues why these women experienced bureaucratic discrimination. According to El-Geledi (2012), a prohibition on veils in public places like the workplace, schools, healthcare facilities, commerce, and public spaces has been imposed by dominant majority public policy decisions for security, secular, gender, and symbolic reasons.

In terms of veiling practices amid cultural integration, it sure is paradoxical to integrate one's veiling practices and morale especially in a non-predominant Muslim country like France. Unlike in Malaysia, veiling is absolutely welcomed and celebrated though Malaysia is a multiracial country. Most respondents indicated that they never need to adapt their veiling practices while integrating the culture in France. Hoodfar (2003) makes the argument that we should realise the veil is not antagonistic, despite the perception that it is. She contends that a more comprehensive view of the veil as a voluntary act with a variety of purposes and connotations is necessary. Lean (2012) however, points out that "many people have been critical of Islam and Muslims" due to the widespread belief among Americans. They believe that immigrants are either incapable or unwilling to assimilate into the cultures of the new nations they relocate to. The researchers consider that this belief should be more investigated as willingness to assimilate depends also on the individual's choice.

CONCLUSION

This article has intersected and unravel the two objectives we aimed to achieve. We were able to successfully achieve the first objective which is to identify the controversial meanings of veiling experiences among Malaysian Muslim Women in France which derives themes like acceptance and respect also discrimination and defiances. These two themes illustrate some of the acts of discrimination committed against these women by French locals and the positive feedback they gain from living as a veiled woman in France.

Other than that, we can conclude that objective 2 is also achieved as we were able to explore the complexities of veiling practices among Malaysian Muslim Women in France which includes bureaucratic discrimination like systematic obstacles in terms of applying jobs, as well as media influence that feeds on these negative stereotypes and leads to French local's paranoid of veiling women.

Nevertheless, there are several limitations inherent in this study. The first limitation for the study is related to the number of participants. We firstly sought 6 participants from the start as Creswell (2018) suggested that the minimum informant suitable for qualitative studies would range from three to seven people depending on data saturation that occurred during the upcoming study. However, we reasoned that if we include a wider spectrum of individuals in terms of ages and races, the result of this study will be much varied. For instance, it would be preferable to investigate this subject in the future via a quantitative survey that includes over 100 members of the French veiling community. Roscoe

(1975) suggested that a sample size greater than 30 and less than 500 is suitable for most behavioural studies. Therefore, we aim to grasp only 100 participants to ensure a more prominent result.

Secondly, these findings are limited using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) considering the main objective is to explore more complexities of veiling practices among Malaysian Muslim Women. Thus, it is better to conduct this study within their own circle. Therefore, future research should conduct an ethnographic study maybe to widen as related to the method of study. We believe that if given the chance, conducting an ethnographic study will be much more thorough after spending time there for more than 6 months to conduct this study. Ethnographic research is about understanding how others behave and think on their own terms (Hochel, 2013). Thus, by conducting ethnographic study, more participants could be interviewed freely and more authentically in their own domain area.

Ultimately, these results imply that wearing a veil has psychological advantages. It would be beneficial to investigate ways to utilise these advantages to help veiled women's wellness when Islam is questioned. Hijab wearers are undoubtedly still working to integrate themselves in healthy ways into French society. Future research on veiled women may take many different forms, and as a result, Muslims would gain from a greater understanding of the issue and France would be able to continue serving as an equitable and knowledgeable nation where veiled women could reside.

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