

## The levels of body esteem among veiled and unveiled women

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The present study was targeted to measure and differentiate the levels of body esteem among veiled and unveiled women. The inquiry included 400 conveniently selected women from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Franzoi and Shields' (1984) body esteem scale was used to measure the levels of body esteem. It was hypothesized that veiled women would have higher levels of body esteem as compared with those who did not veil to cover their heads and faces. The results supported the hypothesis on highly significant differences.

*Key words:* body esteem, veiling, veiled unveiled women

Covering face has been a traditional practice by women in many parts of the world. The practice, as being perceived in our times, has not necessarily been associated with Muslim women only. It is rooted back to 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and women from almost all cultures and religions are recorded to veil as a common dress code (Brenner, 1996). Veiling has been considered an ideological religious practice by Christian and Jew women. Hindu women were also accustomed to cover their faces (Keddie, 1990). It was in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when veiling by women was considered culturally unnecessary and women were encouraged to be more visible for men. Thus, while looking back at history, it can be easily observed that covering heads and faces is not at all a Muslim-only or a religion-specific tradition; hence women belonging to all religions and cultures were inclined to veil for cultural purposes.

Veiling, in some countries, is now considered illogical and illegal. It is sometimes seen inappropriate for safety and anti-terrorism measurements. Due to the efforts of Albanian government, veiling is significantly reduced (Rahimieh, 1993). The government of Kosovo has banned headscarves in girls' schools (Rahimieh, 1993). Eight states in Germany have shown reservations on veiling by women (Bowen, 1997). Turkey has considered headscarves as old-fashioned and a barrier for secularization (Treacher & Shukrallah, 2001). The urban administrations in Belgium have community laws which condemn the use of niqab and burqa and veiling results in a fine of 150 Euros in France (Woodlock, 2009). Veiling, to summarize here, is a social and political debate and dispute among various societies.

Body esteem is an image that a person develops about his / her body. This image is developed on the basis of the feedback s/he gets from others (Schilder, 1935). It is a person's observation of the aesthetic and sexual charm of his/her body (Hashim, 2010). Body esteem, body image and self image are sometimes interlinked (Powell & Kahn, 1995). Some researchers have associated body esteem with self

esteem (Friedman, Dixon, Brownell, Whisman & Wilfley, 1999). Psychologists argue that the ideal body as described by the media should not be the objective of a person. People should rather alter their body images as they imagine (Moody, Kinderman & Sinha, 2010). Clothing, on the other hand, is an important contributing factor in developing body esteem. Researchers argue that clothing have a great impact on how people think about themselves. Covering face, speaking psychologically, is not about physical concealing; it is rather related with personal attitudes and feelings. Neuburger (1997) is of the opinion that veiling is a way of protection for women.

The current study focused on measuring the levels of body esteem among veiled and unveiled women. Some researchers (Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk & Posavac, 2005; Frost & McKelvie, 2004; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2000) have already tried to correlate veiling with body esteem and its contributing factors e.g. sexual attractiveness, physical condition and weight concern.

Veiling may take many forms and intensities. Covering only the head is called "hijab" and covering the face along with head is referred to "niqab". Veiling in the current study was taken as "niqab" and the group of respondents who were referred to veiled was using "niqab" to cover their heads and faces both. It was hypothesized that veiled women (covering both their heads and faces) would project higher levels of body esteem as compared with their counterparts.

### Method

The participants of the study were 400 randomly selected women of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. They were all adults ranging from 20 to 40 years of age. All of them were at least graduated i.e. have completed 14 years of education. They included both students and working women. The ones who were considered as "veiled" used to veil on permanent basis and the ones who were considered as "unveiled" used to stay without veil on permanent basis.

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**Instrument**

**The Body-Esteem Scale (Franzoi & Shields, 1984)**

Franzoi and Shields (1984) developed the scale. The scale consists of 35 items and is divided into 3 sub-scales. The first sub-scale is associated with sexual and physical attractiveness. The second sub-scale refers to body strength and weight concerns. The third sub-scale intends to measure the overall physical condition. The scale was considered highly valid and reliable whereby the internal consistency was .78 (Franzoi, 1994).

**Demographic Information Questionnaire**

It contained information about the status of veiling by the participant i.e. veiled or unveiled.

**Procedure**

The researcher approached the participants individually in different educational institutions and public offices situated at the districts Peshawar, Abbottabad, and Mansehra of the understudied province. Each respondent was involved in the study by taking her prior consent. The respondents were briefed about the purpose of the study. All the respondents were educated enough to understand the questionnaire. The identities of the participants were not asked and the data collected in the study remained confidential. SPSS was used to analyze the data.

**Results**

Table 1

*The reliability of Body esteem Scale and its sub scales*

Scale	No. of Items	Alpha
Body esteem	35	.928
Sexual Attractiveness	16	.985
Weight Concerns	10	.984
Physical Condition	9	.987

The Body esteem Scale is established reliable in the current study. The Cronbach’s alpha reliability for the overall scale and its sub scales is found excellent.

Table 2

*The levels of Body Esteem*

Group	N	M	SD	t-value
Veiled	200	155.70	15.54	49.22
Unveiled	200	62.51	21.79	

df= 398; p<.001

A highly significant difference is revealed between Veiled and Unveiled women on Body Esteem Scale. The findings project that veiled women had higher body esteem as compared to Unveiled women.

Table 3

*The levels of Sexual Attractiveness*

Group	N	M	SD	t-value
Veiled	200	70.15	8.03	45.40
Unveiled	200	28.38	10.23	

df= 398; p<.001

A highly significant difference is revealed between Veiled and Unveiled women on the Sexual Attractiveness section of the Body Esteem Scale. The figures project that veiled women had a greater sense of sexual attractiveness as compared to Unveiled women.

Table 4

*The levels of Weight Concern*

Group	N	M	SD	t-value
Veiled	200	40.20	4.41	48.67
Unveiled	200	16.33	5.35	

df= 398; p<.001

A highly significant difference is found between Veiled and Unveiled women on the Sexual Attractiveness section of the Body Esteem Scale. The figures reveal that veiled women had a greater sense for weight concerns as compared to Unveiled women.

Table 5

*The levels of Physical Condition*

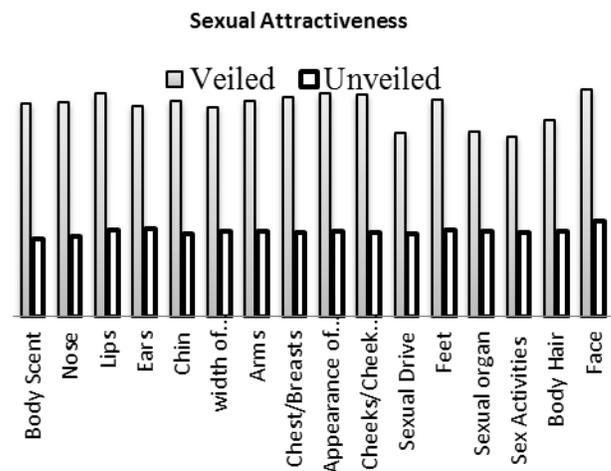
Group	N	M	SD	t-value
Veiled	200	45.36	4.70	48.25
Unveiled	200	17.80	6.57	

df= 398; p<.001

A highly significant difference between Veiled and Unveiled women on the Sexual Attractiveness section of the Body Esteem Scale is revealed. The figures elaborate that Veiled women had a greater sense for physical condition as compared to Unveiled women.

Figure 1

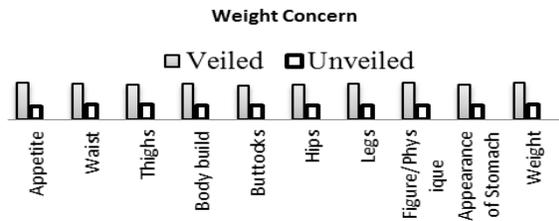
*The comparison of individual indicators for Sexual Attractiveness*



It can be easily traced by the figure above that each of the indicators of Sexual Attractiveness measured by Body

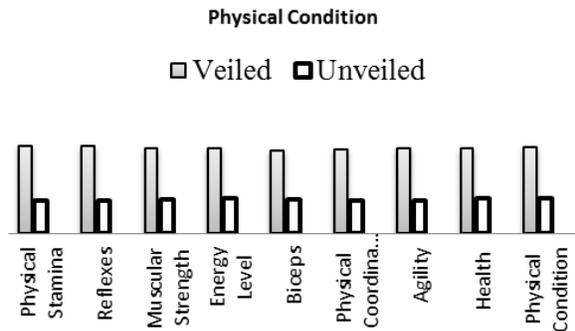
Esteem Scale reveal that veiled women have a greater sense of sexual attractiveness as compared with the unveiled.

Figure 2  
The comparison of individual indicators for Weight Concern



It can be easily traced by the figure above that each of the indicators of Weight Concern measured by Body Esteem Scale reveal that veiled women have a greater sense for weight concern as compared with the unveiled.

Figure 3  
The comparison of individual indicators for Physical Condition



It can be easily traced by the figure above that each of the indicators of Physical Condition measured by Body Esteem Scale reveal that veiled women have a greater sense for physical condition as compared with the unveiled.

**Discussion**

The findings of the current study revealed (table 2), as hypothesized, that the veiled women projected significantly higher levels of body esteem and the unveiled women revealed significantly lower levels of body esteem. The results have confirmed the hypothesis of the study and are also steady with relevant former studies. Veiling has been positively correlated with a woman’s body esteem. Rastmanesh, Gluck, and Shadman (2009) concluded that veiling result in strong emotions that contribute in a woman’s feelings about her body. Gore (1999) also established that veiling has a strong positive impact on body esteem. Another study (Hallak & Quina, 2004) associated veiling with the nobleness of women and revealed that it was positively correlated with body esteem.

The current study has further analyzed the three sub divisions of body esteem in detail and has found significant

differences between veiled and unveiled women. An overall impression of the study is that sexual attractiveness plays a greater role in the development of body esteem as analyzed with weight concern and physical condition (table 3-5). The veiled women revealed (table 3) a greater sense of sexual attractiveness as compared to unveiled women. The veiled women also projected (table 4) a greater sense for weight concern as compared to unveiled women. Furthermore, the veiled women showed (table 5) a greater sense for physical condition as compared to unveiled women. Some earlier studies in this regard have tried to establish associations between the indicators of body esteem separately. Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, and Posavac (2005) have established connections between one’s veiling and sexual attractiveness, physical condition and weight concern. Frost and McKelvie (2004) found that veiled women had more optimistic approach towards physical condition, weight concern and sexual attractiveness as compared with the unveiled. Another study by Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, and Schaufeli (2000) have revealed the similar results by stating that veiled women are more optimistic for their weight concern, sexual attractiveness and physical condition as compared with their counterparts. These and many other studies are quite similar with the findings of the current study.

A deeper analysis into the sub factors of body esteem (Figures 1-3) further confirms the hypothesis of the study on micro levels whereby each of the body part or body attribute is taken more seriously by the veiled women as compared with the unveiled. This has contributed in the overall higher body esteem in the veiled. The Body Esteem Scale was found excellently reliable in the current study (table 1).

The study, on the other hand, was unable to find several interesting areas related to the subject understudied. This was mainly because the study was designed just to measure and differentiate the levels of body esteem among veiled and unveiled women. Several psychosocial factors that might have contributed towards the higher levels of body esteem in veiled women as compared with the unveiled are ignored in the current study. These may include the socioeconomic status, family background, marital status, cultural pressure, etc. This, however, would encourage the researches to study the unaddressed areas in future.

With reference to the findings of the current study and the earlier studies mentioned herein, it becomes clearer that veiling is neither a religion-specific practice nor the veiled are senseless about their aesthetic beauty.

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