Motives behind the veil: Women's affective experiences wearing a veil depend on their reasons for wearing one

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ABSTRACT

Strong assumptions about Muslim women wearing a veil abound, yet few studies examine women's felt experiences of wearing one. The current study applied self-determination theory to examine how individual differences in motives for wearing a veil relate to women's experiences in the Muslim-majority countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia (N = 791). Confirmatory results showed 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 across these two countries. However, results for controlled motives (e.g., perceiving no choice) were mixed. Findings suggested the experience of wearing a veil depend heavily on women's individual differences in motives.

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Images of Muslim women wearing veils – a range of hair- and body-coverings – have been politically charged in recent decades, especially in Western countries, leading to negative assumptions about the effect this has on the women wearing them (Ogan, Willnat, Pennington, & Bashir, 2014). Correspondingly, most people in Western Europe support at least some restrictions on Muslim women wearing a veil (Pew Research Center, 2018; Williamson, 2014). But for many Muslim women, wearing a veil is a form of self-expression (White & Hernandez, 2013), allowing them to portray themselves in the way they would like to be seen by family, peers, and others (Patel, 2012). For example, qualitative work with women in Indonesia (a Muslim-majority country) and India (a Muslim-minority country) identified diverse motives for wearing traditional Muslim dress including expressing a cultural identity and opposing stereotypes (Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, 2012). This view is in line with a broader understanding that dress plays an important role in how individuals express themselves and their identity (Crane, 2012).

Further complicating the matter, theorizing and research on wearing a veil demonstrates both detriments (e.g., interpersonal difficulties; Eaton, 2015) and benefits (e.g., more positive body

image; Swami, Miah, Noorani, & Taylor, 2014) for Muslim women. Yet, no studies of which we are aware have investigated individual differences in motives driving women's religious dress and how these affect women's wellness, which may help reconcile contradictory findings in this small literature.

The current study aimed to understand individual differences in women's motives for religious wear and how they correspond to wellness, guided by self-determination theory, a prominent theory of motivation (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT argues that behavior can be motivated by autonomous reasons when it reflects self-endorsed values and beliefs. Alternatively, behavior can be motivated by controlling forces such as social pressure, and feelings of guilt and shame (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research shows that when people have autonomous motives for their actions, they feel positive emotions as a result of engaging in them, unlike controlled motives stemming from responding to external or internally imposed pressures, which lead to more negative emotions (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999; Ryan & Connell, 1989; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010). Importantly, this pattern has been shown across cultures (Chirkov et al., 2010).

The current study examined the autonomous and controlled motives for wearing a veil that Muslim women may have, and how these motives may influence their experience of religious dress as positive or negative. Two countries, Saudi Arabia and Iran, were sampled in the current study because they hold veiling laws requiring modest dress. In Saudi Arabia women in public are

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required to wear modest dress and in most cases wear the abaya, a garment that covers most of the face and body, but the culture is moving toward more liberal interpretations of modest dress (Schmidt, 2016). In Iran, women are required by law to wear the hijab, or loose-fitting headscarf. In both cultures, we tested the overarching hypothesis that autonomous motives for wearing a veil will relate to more positive affective experiences for those women, while controlled motives would either not relate, or predict *worse* affective experiences.

1. Method

1.1. Preregistered plan

We preregistered our hypotheses, study design, and data analytic plan on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/dkz2u/. Across these two cultures, we hypothesized that women reporting more autonomous motives for wearing the abaya or hijab (specific to each country) will have more positive affective experiences (and fewer negative affective experiences) when wearing it (Hypothesis 1). In contrast, as women endorse more controlled motives, we expected that they would *not* benefit from wearing the abaya or hijab (Hypothesis 2). Specifically, we expected that controlled motives would have no relation, or even relate to more negative affective experiences and fewer positive affective experiences. In addition, we did not preregister, but tested the possibility that motives for dress would impact overall life satisfaction, a more general indicator of well-being, given the frequency of religious wear in women's daily life. Specifically, our exploratory hypothesis was that autonomous, but not controlled, motives would predict greater life satisfaction (Hypothesis 3).

1.2. Participants and procedure

This study comprised of 542 women from Saudi Arabia and 249 women living in Iran recruited via word of mouth and snowballing techniques. Based on the average effect size reported in Ryan and Connell (1989) between autonomous and controlled motives and positive coping ($r = 0.30$), we calculated the sample size needed to detect this effect size, aiming for 0.90 power at $\alpha = 0.05$. This revealed that we would need to recruit a minimum of 134 women per country, though we decided to accept all who agreed to take part during the study duration of September to November 2018. The average age of women was 32.9 years ($SD = 10.15$ years). Women considered themselves to be moderately religious ($M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.87$; scale ranging from 1 to 5), and moderately well-educated. Specifically, 9.7% reported the lowest education levels in their country (less than high school education), 24.2% reported a high school education, 52% reported some college education, 9.6% reported being college graduates, and 4.4% held postgraduate degrees (M.A., Ph.D.). Further, their households ranged in wealth, with 40.7% earning the lowest bracket in their country, 10.6% earning the second lowest bracket, 9.2% making average wages, 6.1% earning above average, and 28.4% making the highest earnings in their country.

Participants reported on their motives for wearing a veil ("abaya" in Saudi Arabia and "hijab" in Iran) and their feelings when wearing it. They further reported on general life satisfaction, data used in an exploratory analysis, as well as other measures of family support, mental ill-being, and gender discrimination(not of focus in this preregistration or paper, but also not published elsewhere). All items were translated to the Saudi dialect of Arabic and to Persian by local researchers fluent in these languages and in English, and then back-translated by independent researchers fluent in both languages. Consent and debriefing materials were also translated to these two languages and ethical study procedures were approved by a university ethics committee. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the raw data is not publically available but will be shared upon request.

2. Materials

Perceived Locus of Causality scale (Ryan & Connell, 1989). The adapted Perceived Locus of Causality scale was composed of six items. Participants received the prompt, "Women can have different, and sometimes multiple, reasons for why they dress certain ways. How true are these statements for you? *I wear the hijab [abaya] because…*". They then reported on three items ("I have no choice", "I would feel bad about myself if I did not", and "others would disapprove of me if I did not") reflecting three controlled motives for wearing the hijab/abaya. They also reported on three items ("It reflects my values", "I enjoy wearing it", and "It's an important part of my self-expression") reflecting autonomous motives. These items were paired with a scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all true for me*) to 7 (*Very true for me).*

As preregistered, we first ensured that adequate reliability was achieved for each of the two types of motivation. The three motives which comprise autonomous motivation showed high internal reliability, $\alpha = 0.81$. We therefore averaged the three autonomous forms of motivation for the primary analyses, with higher scores reflecting more autonomous motivation for wearing a veil. However, controlled reasons showed very poor reliability, $\alpha = 0.12$, even when split by country (αs = 0.27 and 0.39 in Iran and Saudi Arabia, respectively). As such, we selected to keep the three forms of controlled motivation separate in analyses.

Differential Emotion scale (Youngstrom & Green, 2003). The Differential Emotion Scale includes a mix of positive and negative terms reflecting corresponding emotions, and these were selected for appropriateness in relation to dress and supplemented with dress-specific experiences. Positive affective experiences included 'empowered', 'attractive', 'true to myself', 'proud', 'confident', 'self-assured', 'content', and 'peaceful'. Negative affective experiences comprised of 'angry', 'irritated', 'annoyed', 'sad', 'unhappy', and 'self-conscious'. These experiences were presented in a fully randomized order following the prompt "*Wearing the hijab/abaya makes me feel…*" and paired with a scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all true for me)* to 7 (*Very true for me).* Principal components analyses suggested good loadings for all positive affective experiences on a single factor. The negative affect 'self-conscious' loaded on a separate factor from other negative affective experiences (item total correlation with other negative emotions, $r = -0.20$); we thus removed this item from the negative affective experiences composite. We then conducted reliability analyses on each of the two subscales and identified both had high internal reliability (positive affect; $\alpha = 0.96$; negative affect; $\alpha = 0.96$ (with 'self-conscious', α was 0.81)). As such, each subscale was computed by averaging items reflecting positive and negative affective experiences related to dress, separately, but excluding the item 'self-conscious'.

Life satisfaction. Life satisfaction was measured with one item asking "In general, how satisfied are you with your life?", paired with a scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 6 (*extremely*). Responses averaged $M = 2.86$, with $SD = 0.90$. This brief method for assessing satisfaction with life has been shown to produce similar results to multi-item measures in past research (Cheung & Lucas, 2014).

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

Correlation analyses examined the links between separate motives, affective experiences when wearing religious dress, and

life satisfaction (Table 1). In line with expectations, all three autonomous motives for wearing a veil predicted more positive affect, less negative affect, and greater life satisfaction. Two of the controlled motives for wearing a veil (feeling no choice and avoiding disapproval) aligned with expectations, showing either no link or predicting lower positive affect and life satisfaction. However, wearing a veil to avoid feeling bad predicted more positive affect, less negative affect, and no link with life satisfaction. When examining across controlled motives, correlations were weak and inconsistent in direction (rs ranging -0.25 to 0.28), explaining both the low reliability observed across controlled motives and the inconsistent pattern of controlled motives predicting affect and life satisfaction.

We also observed that women reported higher positive affective experiences for wearing a veil as compared to their reports of negative affective experiences, and a paired sample t-test revealed this mean difference was significant ($t(748) = 15.62$, $p < .001$). Similarly, women reported higher autonomous motives for wearing a veil versus all three controlled motives, $ts(757)$ range 4.66 to 8.58, $ps < 0.001$).

3.2. Main model

Analytic approach. Hierarchical regression models predicted positive and negative affective experiences, separately, as was pre-registered. On an exploratory basis, a separate model predicted life satisfaction. Autonomous motivation and the three controlled motives were entered as predictors (see Table 2). To ensure that the demographic characteristics of the sample (age, religiosity, or education) did not confound relations between motives and affect, we tested for this in exploratory models. These supplemental results are presented on our OSF page (notably, adding these covariates did not change any of the patterns reported here).

Positive affective experiences. Our first confirmatory analysis defining motives as predictors accounted for 67% of the variance in positive affective experiences. Consistent with our hypothesis, results showed that women who reported more autonomous motivation for wearing a veil also had more positive affective experiences when wearing it, $B = 0.71$ ($SE = 0.03$), 95% CI [0.66, 0.77], $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.27$ (the unique variance accounted for by this predictor). Holding this constant, women also reported lower positive affective experiences when having no choice for wearing a veil, $B = -0.12$ ($SE = 0.02$), 95% CI [-0.16, -0.07], $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$. Opposite to the hypothesized effect, women who reported wearing a veil to avoid feeling bad had *more* positive affective experiences related to their dress, $B = 0.13$ ($SE = 0.03$), 95% CI [0.09, 0.18], $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.015$, as did those who expected disapproval from others, $B = 0.12$ ($SE = 0.02$), 95% CI [0.08, 0.16], $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$. Taken together, autonomous motives for wearing a veil robustly predicted greater positive affective experiences when wearing a veil, while controlled motives showed mixed effects.

Negative affective experiences. In a second confirmatory analysis, autonomous and controlled motives predicted negative affective experiences. A first step defining motives as predictors accounted for 14% of the variance in negative affective experiences, notably lower than the variance accounted for predicting positive affective experiences (though still significant, $p < .001$). Results were consistent with our hypothesis that women who reported more autonomous motives for wearing a veil also had less negative affective experiences when wearing it, $B = -0.22$ ($SE = 0.04$), 95% CI [-0.29, -0.15], $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.04$. Holding this constant, women also reported more negative affective experiences wearing a veil when feeling like they had no choice in the matter, $B = 0.13$ ($SE = 0.03$), 95% CI [0.08, 0.18], $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$, and reports of avoiding feeling bad did not relate to negative affect, $B = 0.004$ ($SE = 0.03$), 95% CI [-0.05, 0.06], $p = .88$. Opposite to the hypothe-

sized effect, women who wore a veil to avoid disapproval from others reported lower negative affective experiences, $B = -0.08$ ($SE = 0.03$), 95% CI [-0.13, -0.03], $p = .004$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$.

In sum, results demonstrated a similar pattern for negative affective experiences of wearing a veil whereby autonomous motivation predicted lower negative affect, while controlled motives were more mixed. Interestingly, though, results demonstrated the same pattern as they did for positive affective experiences: specifically, feeling like one has no choice to wear a veil predicted worse affective experiences, while wearing it to avoid social disapproval related to better affective experiences.

Life satisfaction. On an exploratory basis, we tested whether individual differences in motives for wearing a veil predicted life satisfaction, a more general indicator of well-being. Autonomous and controlled motives for wearing the veil together accounted for 10% of the variance in overall life satisfaction. Findings showed an effect of autonomous motivation for wearing a veil on life satisfaction, $B = 0.13$ ($SE = 0.02$), 95% CI [0.09, 0.17], $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.05$. On the other hand, having no choice in wearing a veil did not relate to life satisfaction, $B = 0.01$ ($SE = 0.02$), 95% CI [-0.02, 0.04], $p = .42$, nor did wearing a veil to avoid feeling bad, $B = -0.03$ ($SE = 0.02$), 95% CI [-0.06, 0.001], $p = .06$. However, dressing to avoid others' disapproval as a reason for wearing a veil predicted lower life satisfaction, $B = -0.07$ ($SE = 0.02$), 95% CI [-0.10, -0.04], $p < .001$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.03$. This pattern of autonomous motives predicting greater life satisfaction, and controlled motives either not relating or predicting worse life satisfaction, aligns with hypotheses.

4. Discussion

This confirmatory study explored individual differences in Muslim women's motives for wearing traditional veiling (abaya/hijab) in the two predominantly Muslim countries of Iran and Saudi Arabia. We observed the strongest support for our hypotheses concerning the positive effects of having autonomous reasons for wearing a veil, as these motives consistently predicted greater positive and lower negative affective experiences of wearing a veil, along with higher life satisfaction. A more complex picture emerged for controlled motives. In line with hypotheses, perceiving no choice in wearing a veil consistently related to worse affective experiences and did not relate to life satisfaction. However, opposite to hypotheses, wearing a veil to avoid feeling bad and avoid social disapproval related to *more positive* affective experiences (though notably, wearing a veil to avoid social disapproval predicted lower overall life satisfaction). This inconsistent pattern across controlled motives is surprising considering most work shows that all three types of controlled motives have deleterious effects on wellness (Nix et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Yet, recent work has found nuances (including certain desirable outcomes) of different dimensions of controlled motivation in certain contexts (Legate, Weinstein, & Przybylski, 2019). Differences in the structure of controlled motivation may exist across cultures or behaviors under study (e.g., for religious dress), or they may be artifacts of using an older measure (follow-ups should use the newer measure in (Sheldon, Osin, Gordeeva, Suchkov, & Sychev, 2017).

Results suggest the importance of further cross-cultural work, including the need to consider the impact of laws and cultural norms on motivation– especially controlled motives. It would be informative to study relations between motives and affective experiences longitudinally, while also tracking changes in laws and norms around religious dress, as our study is limited in its cross-sectional design. Further, as we only sampled women in two Muslim-majority countries, future research should seek to replicate this work in Muslim-minority nations to understand whether

Table 1
Correlations between motives and positive and negative experiences related to religious dress and life satisfaction.

	Mean	SD	No choice	Feel bad	Others disapprove	Self Expression	Values	Enjoy	Positive affect	Negative affect
No choice	3.38	2.45	–							
Feel bad	3.36	2.27	−0.25***	–						
Others disapprove	3.19	2.20	0.28***	0.12**	–					
Self Expression	3.88	2.29	−0.46***	0.47***	−0.08*	–				
Values	4.12	2.38	−0.43***	0.46***	−0.10**	0.65***	–			
Enjoy	4.08	2.24	−0.37***	0.32***	−0.27***	0.57***	0.53***	–		
Positive Affect	3.87	2.08	−0.47***	0.52***	−0.01	0.73***	0.70***	0.58***	–	
Negative Affect	2.12	1.67	0.29***	−0.18***	−0.01	−0.24***	−0.34***	−0.27***	−0.33***	–
Life Satisfaction	2.86	0.90	−0.13***	0.03	−0.22***	0.17***	0.19***	0.29***	0.16***	−0.16***

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Table 2
Regression models of motives predicting positive and negative experiences related to religious dress, and life satisfaction.

	Positive affect			Negative affect			Life satisfaction		
	B (S.E.)	95% CI	R^2	B (S.E.)	95% CI	R^2	B (S.E.)	95% CI	R^2
Autonomous motives	0.71** (0.03)	[0.66, 0.77]	0.27	−0.22** (0.04)	[−0.29, −0.15]	0.04	0.13** (0.02)	[0.09, 0.17]	0.05
No choice	−0.12** (0.02)	[−0.16, −0.07]	0.01	0.13** (0.03)	[0.08, 0.18]	0.03	0.01 (0.02)	[−0.02, 0.04]	0.00
Feel bad	0.13** (0.03)	[0.09, 0.18]	0.015	0.004 (0.03)	[−0.05, 0.06]	0.00	−0.03 (0.02)	[−0.06, 0.001]	0.004
Others disapprove	0.12** (0.02)	[0.08, 0.16]	0.01	−0.08* (0.03)	[−0.13, −0.03]	0.01	−0.07** (0.02)	[−0.10, −0.04]	0.03

Notes. *B*s represent the unstandardized regression coefficients, *S.E.*s are their standard errors, 95% CIs are their 95% confidence intervals, and R^2 is the proportion of unique variance explained by the predictor in the model. Autonomous motives were aggregated across self-expression, values, and enjoyment as they showed good internal consistency, but controlled motives were entered separately as they did not show adequate internal consistency. All four predictors were entered simultaneously into the model.
*$p < .01$, **$p < .001$.

relations generalize to women who may face very different pressures and norms around dress (Entwistle, 2015).

In sum, though there are many assumptions made about the experiences of women who wear a veil (Williamson, 2014), our findings suggested a more complex picture. The experience of wearing a veil relied heavily on *why* women wore it and revealed that wearing a veil for autonomous reasons predicted positive affective experiences and life satisfaction. In closing, this work speaks to the importance of understanding a woman's personal motives for wearing a veil before making assumptions about its effect on her, whether positive or negative.

Author Contributions

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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