Original Research

Is She a Good Muslima? The Impact of Hijab (Head Covering) on Muslims' Evaluations of a Rape Incident

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Abstract

This research examines how Muslim women and men evaluate a rape incident based on whether the victim wore hijab. While Western research has extensively examined victim's dress, the impact of religious dress codes like hijab remains unknown. Hijab mainly symbolizes sexual modesty for Muslim women, and its perceived importance is likely influenced by two sociocultural norms dominant in Islamic cultures, namely honor norms and religious fundamentalism. Results from an experimental study with 623 Muslim adults (287 women, 336 men) residing in the United Kingdom found support for our preregistered hypothesis that both women and men blame the victim who did not wear hijab more than the victim who wore hijab. Also as hypothesized, men, compared to women, attributed more blame, were less certain that the incident was rape, and held the perpetrator more criminally liable. Greater endorsement of honor norms was related to higher victim blame, lower certainty of rape judgment, lower criminal liability, and

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less punishment for the perpetrator. The discussion highlights the importance of a scientific understanding of rape culture in Muslim communities.

Introduction

"If you (women) go out without hijab and are sexually assaulted, it is your own fault." This controversial public statement was made during the Iranian presidential debate by Maryam Ashrafi Goudarzi, the campaign speaker of the most conservative candidate Saeed Jalili (IRANWIRE, 2024). Although troubling, this statement echoes deeply ingrained beliefs in some religious and cultural contexts where a woman's failure to adhere to religious dress code, such as wearing hijab, can shift the responsibility of sexual violence from the perpetrator to the victim.

Sexual aggression is a pervasive social and public health issue on a global scale (World Health Organization, 2024), often accompanied by victim blaming and the exoneration of the perpetrator (see review by van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Extensive research from Western contexts has shown that rape victims are often held responsible for their plight, and the appearance and dress of the victim are among the most prevalent factors associated with victim blaming (see review by Gravelin et al., 2019). The more revealing and "suggestive" the victim's clothing, the greater the level of responsibility and blame assigned to her for sexual assault (Johnson et al., 2016). However, there is a significant gap in understanding how people from other cultural groups—such as Muslims—perceive and evaluate rape. Given the symbolic importance of dress as a marker of sexual modesty in Islam, it is of interest to investigate how Muslims evaluate rape when the rape victim either observed or violated the Islamic dress code "hijab" in the form of head covering.

There is no uniform Islamic culture, as Muslims practice Islam in diverse races, ethnicities, and national borders worldwide (Said & Funk, 2003). Nevertheless, religiosity and honor norms are two significant value systems for Muslims that have psychological implications for guiding and explaining their interpersonal relations (Abu-Raiya, 2013; Vandello, 2016). Given that these two cultural factors have a significant impact on gender norms and sexuality, it is likely that they affect victim blaming and rape judgments. Past research has indeed revealed that a stronger endorsement of religious and honor-oriented beliefs is associated with increased tendencies toward victim

blaming (Malayeri et al., 2024; Öztemür & Toplu-Demirtaş, 2024). The current study builds on this line of research by investigating whether the adherence to the female dress code of hijab prescribed by Islam influences Muslim observers' evaluation of an incident of nonconsensual sex.

Hijab refers to the principle of modest dress specific to Muslim women and is commonly used as an umbrella term for various veiling practices among Muslims. Veiling includes a range of coverings that vary in extent, from covering only the head to covering the entire body, though it does not necessarily mean covering the face. Veiling practices have deep historical roots predating Islam, with evidence from ancient Assyrian (13th century BCE) and Persian societies where veils indicated social class and marital status while enforcing norms of female sexual modesty (Ahmed, 2000). Feminist scholarship has critically examined how such modesty codes perpetuate rape culture by shifting blame to women's "immodesty" rather than male violence (Hirschmann, 1998; Mernissi, 1987). This tradition continued through Greco-Roman and Byzantine periods, later incorporated into Judaic (tichel), Christian (nun's habits), and Islamic practices as embodiments of chastity and sexual propriety—a linkage feminist theorists argue instrumentalizes women's bodies as vessels of honor.

Modern manifestations vary significantly by context: While some Muslim-majority states enforce veiling to regulate female sexuality (e.g., Iran), many women adopt it voluntarily as piety, identity, or resistance to Western hegemony (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mahmood, 2006). Postcolonial feminists highlight this paradox where veiling can simultaneously represent patriarchal control and feminist resistance (El Guindi, 2005). In diaspora communities, hijab often serves the dual purpose of maintaining cultural heritage while negotiating multicultural identities (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2010), with many women embracing it as both a profound expression of personal faith and a conscious commitment to Islamic identity and ideals of sexual modesty that some feminists critique as reinforcing rape myths (Gill, 2008). These diverse implementations demonstrate how a single garment accrues complex, often contradictory meanings about female sexuality across time and space, with feminist debates continuing to interrogate its relationship to victim blaming in sexual violence (Abu-Lughod, 2002).

The present research examined how Muslim women and men evaluated a nonconsensual sexual encounter depending on whether the female victim wore or did not wear hijab, and how endorsement of religious fundamentalism and honor norms moderated these evaluations. For the purposes of our study, we adopt the definition of "hijab" offered by the Encyclopedia Britannica as "a garment worn by some Muslim women to cover their hair" (https://www.britannica.com/topic/hijab). Given that hijab is commonly recognized as a

symbol of sexual modesty for female Muslims, intended to protect them from sexual harassment and aggression, whether a woman adheres to this religious dress code can influence Muslim observers' judgments of her, the rape incident, and the perpetrator. We refer to the female victim who wears hijab as "hijabi" and the one without hijab as "non-hijabi."

Social Perceptions of Victim Dress

Extensive evidence has shown that a victim's style of dress can have a significant effect on victim blaming (see review by Gravelin et al., 2019), as it is strongly associated with rape myths (Payne et al., 1999). The myth that women who are raped are usually dressed suggestively stems from people's misjudgment of sexual interest based on the (female) victim's clothing style (Maurer & Robinson, 2008). Vast research has documented that the widespread sexual objectification of women in society has influenced men's construal of women's sexual intent (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Slater, 2002). Given that clothing is often closely associated with sexuality, a woman's lack of sexual interest can be misunderstood when she wears a body-revealing or perceived suggestive attire. While some studies show that both women and men believe revealing dress indicates sexual interest, more provide evidence that men compared to women have a greater tendency to perceive such attire as an invitation for sex (see review by Lennon et al., 2017).

To date, only one study has examined the impact of wearing hijab on perceptions of rape victims. In this experimental study, participants watched a video of a rape victim's testimony in a mock trial, where the victim was depicted wearing hijab or not. The results showed that the victim wearing hijab was rated as more credible compared to the victim without hijab (Fahmy et al., 2019). However, potential moderating effects of gender or attitudes relevant to the religious or cultural context of hijab were not examined in this study.

Past research has found that perceptions of rape victims' respectability influence evaluations of the victim, the perpetrator, and the nature of the assault (Whatley, 1996). For example, a victim's sexual history, marital status, and profession strongly impact judgments about her responsibility for the assault and the seriousness of the incident (Feldman-Summers & Lindner, 1976). In fact, their study with U.S. participants showed that a "prostitute victim" was blamed more for the incident than a "virgin victim." This pattern of victim blaming based on perceived respectability can extend to situations where social or cultural expectations are at play. For example, when a Muslim woman chooses not to wear hijab in a community where veiling is associated

with modesty, members of her community may question her moral values and behaviors more readily, often viewing her choice as a departure from accepted standards. This perceived departure can lead to a shift in accountability, with greater blame placed on the woman and less blame assigned to the perpetrator.

Gender Differences in Blaming Victims and Perpetrators

On average, research finds that men blame rape victims more than women (Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2021), though there are some exceptions. This difference might be due to the varying degrees of identification with the perpetrator and the victim: Men are more likely to identify with the male perpetrator, whereas women are more inclined to empathize with the female victim (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). However, some research has shown no significant gender differences in the attribution of blame to female victims in acquaintance rape scenarios (Bagherian et al., 2021; Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023). Defensive attribution theory suggests that women may blame the victim to protect themselves from feeling vulnerable, thereby distancing themselves from the risk of experiencing a similar situation (Pinciotti & Orcutt, 2020). Therefore, the question of gender differences in the tendency to blame rape victims, as a main effect or a moderator of the hijab condition, warrants further investigation.

Moreover, we predicted that men would be more affected by the hijab manipulation than women as studies have shown that men are more likely than women to assign blame to victims of rape, especially when the victim's behavior or appearance deviates from traditional or conservative norms (Abrams et al., 2003; Grubb & Harrower, 2008).

Religious Fundamentalism and Honor Norms

We explored two potential moderators of perceptions of rape victims. Religious fundamentalism may influence evaluations of rape by reinforcing a set of beliefs that dictate gender and sexual norms within society (Razavi et al., 2023). Religious fundamentalism is defined as the rigid belief that there is only one true set of religious teaching and unchangeable rules that are considered infallible (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005). Studies found positive associations between religious beliefs and rape victim blaming (Heath & Sperry, 2021). Religious fundamentalist endorsement is significantly associated with higher victim blame, lower perceived likelihood that a scenario of

nonconsensual sex was rape, and less severe punishment attributed to the perpetrator (Malayeri et al., 2024).

There is no pancultural consensus on whether veiling is mandatory for Muslim women, yet this tradition has been more strictly and widely observed by Islamic fundamentalists. A common belief is that since veiling acts as a shield against sexual harassment, it has significantly increased Muslim women's participation in economic, political, and social sectors in Muslim-majority countries, as it is believed to desexualize them in contrast to unveiled women in Western societies (Garcia-Yeste et al., 2021). Critically, because fundamentalists more closely associate hijab observance with female morality (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005), they should show stronger differentiation in rape evaluations of hijabi versus non-hijabi victims compared to non-fundamentalists.

Besides religious fundamentalism, notions of honor and shame are closely tied to veiling and include the strict control over female sexuality by male kin, family, and the community (Werbner, 2007). Honor cultures assign high value to the achievement and preservation of honor, which is defined as the value of a person in their own eyes and in the eyes of the society in which they live. As noted by Leung and Cohen (2011): "Honor must be claimed, and honor must be paid by others. A person who claims honor but is not paid honor does not in fact have honor" (p. 509). The achievement and preservation of honor is central to most Muslim societies although the concept of honor is not exclusive to Islam (Caffaro et al., 2016). Compared to other cultures (e.g., dignity and face cultures), honor cultures place more importance on gendered honor codes. Women are expected to maintain their sexual purity before marriage, demonstrate loyalty, and show submission to their spouse and family members. Men should be strong, tough, fearless, dominant, autonomous, and courageous enough to control and protect women and other family members (Fischer et al., 2004).

Endorsement of honor norms varies not only between cultures but also between individuals within a cultural group (Uskul et al., 2023). Prior research has shown that individuals who strongly adhere to honor beliefs are more likely to blame female rape victims, accept rape myths, and hold sexist attitudes, even though they also express more negative views towards rape (Gul & Schuster, 2020). Recent findings from an Iranian sample also showed that stronger honor beliefs predicted higher victim blame, lower certainty that a sexual encounter was rape, and greater exoneration of the perpetrator (Malayeri et al., 2024). As honor cultures link women's modesty directly to collective reputation (Leung & Cohen, 2011), individuals endorsing honor norms should demonstrate stronger differential responses to hijabi versus non-hijabi victims compared to those less invested in honor codes.

The Present Research

This study investigated how Muslim women and men evaluated a scenario describing a nonconsensual sexual encounter between a man and a woman in which the female victim wore hijab or did not wear hijab. Participants read a vignette describing a nonconsensual sexual encounter involving a male perpetrator and a female victim. They then rated the extent to which they blamed the victim (characterized by high victim and low perpetrator blame), their certainty that the encounter was a rape, and their recommended punishment of the perpetrator.

Hypothesis 1: Compared with the hijabi victim, participants will blame the non-hijabi victim more, be less likely to evaluate the sexual encounter as rape, and attribute a less severe punishment to the perpetrator.

Hypothesis 2: Men, compared with women, will place more blame on the victim, be less likely to evaluate the sexual encounter as rape, and attribute a less severe punishment to the perpetrator.

Hypothesis 3: The differences in attributions and rape evaluation to the hijabi versus non-hijabi victims will be larger among men than among women.

Honor norms and religious fundamentalism were included as moderator variables. Based on the theoretical understanding of these constructs as well as past research, we expected that people who hold rigid religious beliefs and those who strongly endorse honor norms would be more responsive to whether or not the victim wore hijab.

Hypothesis 4: The more participants endorse honor norms, the more they will blame the victim, the less likely they will be to evaluate the sexual encounter as rape, and the less severe punishment they will attribute punishment to the perpetrator.

Hypothesis 5: The differences in attributions and judgment in the hijabi versus non-hijabi conditions will be larger the more strongly participants endorse honor norms.

Hypothesis 6: The more participants endorse religious fundamentalism, the more they will blame the victim, the less likely they will be to evaluate the sexual encounter as rape, and the less severe punishment they will attribute to the perpetrator.

Hypothesis 7: The differences in attributions and judgment in the hijabi versus non-hijabi conditions will be larger the more strongly participants endorse religious fundamentalism.

Method

Participants and Design

An a priori power analysis showed that a sample size of 612 participants was required to obtain 80% power in detecting a small effect ($f = 0.15$) for MANOVA and regression models (see Supplemental Appendix A for details). Adult participants were recruited via the online data collection platform Prolific. The survey was available to any user who fulfilled the eligibility criteria of indicating their religion as Islam, being 18 years of age or older, identifying as a woman or man, and being a resident of the United Kingdom. We introduced this research to participants as a study on how people perceive social interactions. We informed them that the survey would involve a scenario describing an unwanted sexual encounter between a woman and a man.

In total, 730 adults completed the survey. Of these, 104 were excluded because they incorrectly answered the manipulation check question on victim dress, and three more were excluded who identified as nonbinary. The final sample consisted of 623 participants (287 women, 336 men), thus meeting the sample size required by the power analysis. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 72 years ($M = 29.73$, $SD = 9.23$). Supplemental Appendix B provides additional demographic information about the sample.

The experiment had a 2 (Participant Gender: woman vs. man) $\times$ 2 (Victim Dress: hijabi vs. non-hijabi) between-subjects design with victim blame, certainty that the sexual encounter was rape, and punishment attribution to the perpetrator as dependent variables. Endorsement of honor norms and religious fundamentalism were continuous moderators. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions that manipulated victim's dress. Participants then read the nonconsensual sexual scenario (adapted from Temkin & Krahé, 2008) presented together with the photo of the victim, named Zinab, either with her head covered (hijabi condition) or without (non-hijabi condition). The name of Zinab was selected because it is one of the most popular Muslim names for girls (Islamic Relief U.K., 2023). In the scenario, a man had nonconsensual sex with Zinab, his student, at his place. To reduce any influence of the perpetrator's characteristics on the dependent variables, the perpetrator's name was abbreviated to Mr. S.

Measures

All study materials were presented in English. At the beginning of the survey, participants had to pass a brief English language comprehension task to continue to the materials. Supplemental Appendix C presents the verbatim study materials. The measures were used in a previous study in Iran and found to have good psychometric properties (Malayeri et al., 2024).

Victim Blame. To measure attributions of blame, participants were presented with eight items (adapted from Bieneck & Krahé, 2011). The first four items referred to the blame attributed to the perpetrator (e.g., "To what extent do you think Mr. S. is responsible for the situation?," "How much do you think Mr. S. is to blame for what happened?"). The remaining four items referred to the blame attributed to the victim (e.g., "To what extent do you think that Zinab had control over the situation?," "How likely it is that Zinab could have avoided the situation?"). The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all/ very unlikely*) to 7 (*very much so/very likely*). A confirmatory factor analysis established that after reverse-scoring the items of perpetrator blame, the eight items formed a unidimensional scale, Chi^2 ($df=16$)$=11.84$, $p=.754$, Comparative Fit Index (CFI)$=1.00$; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)$=0.00$, 95% CI [0.00, 0.03], Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)$=0.022$. On that basis, we averaged the eight items to create a composite victim blame scale, with higher scores indicating greater victim blame. The internal consistency of the scale was $\alpha=.68$.

Certainty of Rape, Criminal Liability, and Punishment Attribution. Participants indicated how certain they were that the situation described in the scenario qualified as rape, using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*certainly not rape*) to 7 (*certainly rape*), following previous work (Hills et al., 2021; Monson et al., 2000). In addition, participants rated the extent to which they believed the perpetrator should be held criminally liable for his action (Gul & Schuster, 2020) on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*absolutely*). Subsequently, they selected the appropriate punishment they believed the perpetrator deserved from a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (*no punishment*), 2 (*fine, but no prison*), 3 (*1–7 years in prison*), 4 (*8–15 years in prison*), 5 (*16–20 years in prison*), 6 (*more than 20 years in prison*). Due to the low correlation between the two items ($r=.21$), they could not be combined into a single scale. Consequently, the items were analyzed as individual variables.

Endorsement of Honor Norms. Participants answered the 10 items of the Honor Endorsement Index (Vandello et al., 2009), which included statements

such as "A man must defend his honor at any cost" and "A woman must be pure and honest." The response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The items were averaged to generate an honor endorsement score, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of honor norms. The scale had a high internal consistency, $\alpha = .90$.

Endorsement of Religious Fundamentalism. Participants completed the Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004), responding to 12 items that evaluated their fundamentalist beliefs. One item was slightly changed to refer to "Islam" rather than "God." Examples items were "To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to the one, fundamentally true religion" and "The fundamentals of Islam [instead of 'God' in the original version] should never be tampered with or compromised with others' beliefs. " The response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The individual responses were then averaged to generate a composite score, with higher scores indicating greater religious fundamentalism. The scale had a high internal consistency with $\alpha = .90$.

Procedure

Participants first read the sexual assault scenario and responded to the items measuring victim blame, judgment of the incident as rape, and attributions of criminal liability and punishment to the perpetrator. They then indicated their endorsement of honor norms and religious fundamentalism. This was followed by a manipulation check that asked about the victim's dress. Placing the measures of honor norms and religious fundamentalism after the assessment of the key dependent variables was done to prevent participants from consciously reflecting on such beliefs and ideologies, as it could raise suspicions about the actual study purpose and potentially bias their responses to the dependent variables. The mean scores of both measures did not differ significantly between the two hijabi conditions. Lastly, participants provided demographic information including age, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, education level, and nationality.

Researcher Positionality. The research team comprised scholars with differing relationships to hijab: The first author brings lived experience from a Muslim cultural background (Iran), while the co-authors approach the topic as non-Muslim social scientists. We engaged in regular reflexivity discussions to navigate this dynamic, acknowledging how our positionalities might shape interpretations of hijab's symbolism while leveraging diverse perspectives to strengthen analytical rigor (Bourke, 2014).

Data-Analytic Strategy

The hypotheses were tested in two multivariate regression analyses in Mplus, version 8.8, to include all outcome variables in the same model, using the MLR estimator (Muthen & Muthen, 2012). For Hypotheses 1 to 3, the model included participant gender, victim dress, and gender × victim dress to test the main and interaction effects of the two variables on victim blame, certainty of rape judgment, criminal liability, and rape punishment. The conditional effects were coded as −1 (male) and +1 (female) for gender and victim dress (−1 non-hijabi; +1 hijabi). To test Hypotheses 4 to 7, the model included victim dress, honor norms, and religious fundamentalism as well as the interaction of the two moderators with the manipulation of victim's dress. Standardized coefficients are reported. Because the models were fully saturated, no model fit indices are available. The conditional effects of the moderators at lower and higher levels were set at values of ±1 *SD* from the mean.

Exploratory Analyses

For transparency, we note that exploratory analyses were conducted to examine the role of perceived agency of the victim on the victim blame and the overlap between religious fundamentalism and honor norms. However, these analyses were not included in the scope of the current paper and are not discussed further in the "Results" or "Discussion" sections.

Transparency and Openness

All hypotheses and analyses were preregistered on OSF (https://osf.io/238cg/?view_only=0ac01acbfc1b48a4942e81bb80131686). The data and analysis code are also available on OSF (https://osf.io/238cg/?view_only=0ac01acbfc1b48a4942e81bb80131686). The verbatim research materials appear in Supplemental Appendix A. The Ethics Committee of the University of Bern approved the study as risk-free for the participants.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all variables for the total sample. None of the demographic variables (sexual orientation, marital status, and education) were significantly correlated with the study variables, with one exception: age showed a very small but significant correlation with victim blame, $r = .085$, $p = .034$. However, due to its small

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Bivariate Correlations.

Variables (range)	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Victim blame (1–7)	1.81	0.70	—				
2. Certainty of rape judgment (1–7)	6.89	0.48	−.22***	—			
3. Criminal liability (1–7)	6.92	0.38	−.26***	.83***	—		
4. Punishment attribution to the perpetrator (1–6)	4.73	1.16	−.11**	.16***	.21***	—	
5. Honor norms endorsement (1–7)	4.04	1.46	.40***	−.07	−.09*	−.02	—
6. Religious fundamentalism endorsement (1–7)	4.79	1.31	.21***	.07	.07	.12**	.49***

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

effect size, we did not include age as a covariate alongside other variables in the hypothesis-testing analyses.

Hypotheses-Testing Analyses

A multivariate regression analysis was conducted to examine the main and interaction effects of gender and victim dress on the effect of victim dress on the dependent variables: victim blame, certainty of rape judgment, criminal liability, and attribution of punishment. The means are presented in Table 2.

Supporting Hypothesis 1, participants assigned more blame to the victim who did not wear hijab compared to the victim who wore hijab, $\beta = -.08$, $p = .035$, 95% CI [−0.162, −0.006], $d = -0.16$. Contrary to our predictions, there was no significant effect of victim dress on the certainty that the sexual encounter was rape, the perpetrator's criminal, liability and the participants' attribution of rape punishment to the perpetrator. Therefore, the findings provide only partial support for Hypothesis 1.

Supporting Hypothesis 2, men compared to women blamed the victim more, $\beta = -.09$, $p = .024$, 95% CI [−0.175, −0.012], $d = -0.18$, were less certain that the sexual encounter was rape, $\beta = .09$, $p = .005$, [0.026, 0.150], $d = 0.18$, and held the perpetrator less criminally liable, $\beta = .12$, $p < .001$, [0.062, 0.180], $d = 0.35$. The gender difference for punishment severity was nonsignificant. Against the prediction in Hypothesis 3, the Gender × Victim dress interactions were nonsignificant for all outcome variables. Thus, the effects of gender and victim dress appear additive rather than interactive.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Victim Blame, Certainty of Rape Judgment, Criminal Liability, and Punishment Attribution to the Perpetrator by Perceiver Gender (Female vs. Male) and Victim Dress (Hijabi vs. Non-Hijabi).

Gender	Condition	N	Victim blame M (SD)	Certainty of rape judgment M (SD)	Criminal liability M (SD)	Punishment attribution to the perpetrator M (SD)
Women	Hijabi	161	1.67[a] (0.62)	6.94 (0.35)	6.98[a] (0.16)	4.72 (1.17)
	Non-Hijabi	126	1.83 (0.79)	6.94 (0.28)	6.96 (0.27)	4.78 (1.13)
	Total	287	1.74[a] (0.71)	6.94[a] (0.32)	6.97[a] (0.21)	4.75 (1.15)
Men	Hijabi	179	1.84[b] (0.86)	6.83 (0.66)	6.86[b] (0.53)	4.79 (1.18)
	Non-Hijabi	157	1.92 (0.69)	6.88 (0.46)	6.89 (0.40)	4.63 (1.13)
	Total	336	1.88[b] (0.69)	6.85[b] (0.57)	6.88[b] (0.47)	4.71 (1.16)

[a,b]Means differ significantly between women and men.

The second analysis examined the moderating role of honor norms and religious fundamentalism by adding the two variables and their interaction with the hijab condition to the model. Consistent with Hypothesis 4, the more participants endorsed honor norms, the more they blamed the victim, $\beta = .40$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.320, 0.473], $d = 1.01$, the less certain they were that the sexual encounter was rape, $\beta = -.12$, $p < .001$, [−0.184, −0.063], $d = −0.24$, the less criminally liable they held the perpetrator, $\beta = -.15$, $p < .001$, [−0.213, −0.089], $d = −0.30$, and the lower the punishment they attributed to the perpetrator, $\beta = -.11$, $p = .016$, [−0.202, −0.021], $d = −0.22$. No support was found for the interaction of victim dress and honor norms predicted in Hypothesis 5 on any of the dependent variables.

Contrary to Hypothesis 6, the more participants endorsed religious fundamentalist beliefs, the more certain they were that the sexual encounter was rape, $\beta = .12$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.065, 0.178], $d = 0.35$, held the perpetrator more criminally liable, $\beta = .14$, $p < .001$, [0.081, 0,197], $d = 0.39$, and attributed more severe punishment, $\beta = .17$, $p < .001$, [0.081, 0.267], $d = 0.45$. The association between religious fundamentalism and victim blame was nonsignificant. Contrary to Hypothesis 7, the Religious fundamentalism × Victim dress interaction was nonsignificant for all dependent variables.

Discussion

This study addresses the gap in the scientific understanding of how observing a religious dress by the rape victim influences rape perceptions by Muslim

women and men. Participants evaluated a heterosexual rape scenario in which the victim either wore or did not wear hijab as part of a religious dress code. Moreover, honor norm endorsement and religious fundamentalism were included as two cultural norms that might moderate the difference between hijabi and non-hijabi victims.

As predicted, whether the victim observed hijab influenced participants' reactions to the rape encounter. Both women and men blamed the non-hijabi victim more than the hijabi victim. However, wearing hijab did not affect the extent to which participants were certain that the encounter was rape and punishment of the perpetrator. Given the high ratings of certainty of rape (over 6.8 on a scale from 1 to 7), the scenario did not present enough ambiguity to create variability on this dimension. Participants blamed the victim *despite* agreeing that she has been raped (particularly men, and particularly when the victim is not wearing hijab).

In terms of gender differences, men compared to women blamed the victim more, were less certain that the sexual encounter was rape, and held the perpetrator less criminally liable. These findings are consistent with the extensive evidence from Western societies indicating that evaluations of rape vary between men and women (see review by Grubb & Harrower, 2008), as well as research available from Muslim populations (Kazmi & Rauf, 2024). However, our findings contrast with two recent studies on Muslim (Iranian) samples that found no gender differences in victim blame. One of these studies utilized scenarios involving an Iranian female victim who was not wearing mandatory hijab at the perpetrator's place or office and was sexually assaulted (Karimi-Malekabadi & Falahatpishe Baboli, 2023). The second study suggested that these results might be due to Iranian women and men both supporting similar gendered honor codes (called "Haya"), such as the belief that women should follow Islamic dress codes and avoid interactions with male strangers (Bagherian et al., 2021).

One of the most prevalent rape myths is that a woman was asking for sex or deserved to be raped because of what she was wearing, and studies consistently found that men are more accepting of rape myths than women (see review by Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994), implying an interaction between participant gender and the victim's attire. Our results did not find a gender difference in judgments of rape based on whether the victim was wearing hijab or not. This finding is consistent with data from a meta-analysis that women and men did not differ in perceptions depending on the extent of the victim dress's provocativeness (Hockett et al., 2016).

Greater endorsement of honor norms predicted higher victim blame, less certainty that the incident was rape, lower ratings of perpetrator criminal liability, and less severe punishment to the perpetrator. This finding confirms

prior research (Brown et al., 2018; Saucier et al., 2015) and is consistent with one of the most recent studies conducted in Iran revealing that stronger honor beliefs are significantly associated with greater victim blame and exoneration of the perpetrator (Malayeri et al., 2024).

Unexpectedly, participants with stronger religious fundamentalist beliefs were more likely to perceive the incident as rape, find the perpetrator criminally liable, and assigned a more severe punishment, a finding that contradicts the available research (Heath & Sperry, 2021; Malayeri et al., 2024). However, they did not assign less blame to the victim.

The findings suggest that fundamentalists in our sample may have interpreted the vignette through a moral-legal framework, treating nonconsensual sex as a violation of divine law irrespective of victim characteristics. This moral-legal perspective may also help explain broader associations between religious fundamentalism and punitive attitudes. For instance, research outside rape perception has found that stronger religious beliefs correlate with harsher judgments, including higher rates of guilty verdicts and more severe sentencing in mock-jury studies (Yelderman & Miller, 2017). However, whether this punitive tendency extends to fundamentalists' evaluations of rape cases—where divine law may supersede contextual factors—remains unclear and needs further investigation. Replicating these findings in samples where fundamentalism's theological dimensions (e.g., scriptural literalism vs. cultural tradition) can be disentangled would clarify these mechanisms.

Strength, Limitations, and Future Research

The current work offers novel scientific insights into how Muslim women and men evaluate rape scenarios based on whether the victim had been wearing hijab, including the role of sociocultural norms about honor and religion. In addition, our study complements research from non-Muslim communities/samples on rape evaluations depending on victim's dress. Therefore, by providing evidence from a Muslim sample, this research adds to the cultural diversity of research on rape evaluation.

Some limitations suggest potential avenues for future research. The sample composition may have been affected by self-selection bias, as for ethical reasons, participants were informed upfront that they would need to read and evaluate a brief description of a nonconsensual sexual encounter between a man and a woman. This could have led to a higher likelihood of participation by individuals who view sexual aggression as a pressing social issue, while those uncomfortable with topics related to sexuality may have chosen not to participate. However, it is crucial to highlight that any potential self-selection bias does not explain the effect of the hijab manipulation, as participants were

randomly assigned to the two conditions. The study did not stratify analyses by ethnic background, denominational affiliation (Sunni/Shia), or migration generation due to data collection constraints. Future research should deliberately oversample these subgroups to examine potential variations in hijab-related evaluations.

Moreover, all participants were Muslims but lived in the United Kingdom as a non-Muslim country. Thus, their broader cultural environment did not represent honor norms or religious fundamentalism. Whether this situation attenuated or increased their subscription to these culture-bound beliefs cannot be decided based on our data. In any case, like with the self-selection bias discussed above, this sample feature likely did not impact the effect of our hijab experimental manipulation.

Although the vignette approach is widely regarded as the most valid and reliable method for studying victim blaming (van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014), employing alternative methodologies, such as videotaping or qualitative approaches, is recommended (Cohn et al., 2009). Regarding sociocultural beliefs, this study highlighted the effects of honor norms and religious fundamentalist beliefs on rape evaluations. Future research could benefit from exploring how other constructs related to the appraisal of rape scenarios, such as rape myth acceptance, just world beliefs, and traditional gender roles, impact evaluations related to wearing hijab (Gul & Schuster, 2020). Moreover, future studies should use a scenario that is more ambiguous as to the question whether it depicted a rape and the man deserved punishment to avoid the ceiling effect on these variables and create sufficient variability for the Hiab manipulation to show an effect.

This study did not measure perceptions of the victim's sexual intent. The non-hijabi victim may have been perceived as more sexually interested, which could contribute to victim blaming; future research should include this measure. Furthermore, studies should examine non-Muslim populations' perception of hijabi rape victims, as hijab may hold different symbolic meaning for them, representing cultural "otherness" rather than modesty. Consequently, veiled Muslim women might be perceived as outgroup members and blamed more due to Islamophobia (Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012), compared to unveiled, more Westernized women.

Future studies should employ more ambiguous scenarios to avoid ceiling effects, diversify stimulus materials (e.g., "Zinab") to account for ethnicity/ class. Cross-religious comparisons could also clarify if these dynamics are Muslim-specific or part of broader modesty-enforcement patterns (Iwamura, 2004). Finally, although participants completed a language screening, it is unclear whether linguistic or cultural nuances may have affected comprehension or interpretation of the scenario. However, if this was the case, it would

introduce random noise into the data and could not explain the significant differences and associations found in the study.

Overall, the results are largely consistent with the hypothesized main effects, but except for the large effect size for the association between honor norm endorsement and victim blaming, the effects were small to moderate in magnitude. Moreover, none of the proposed interactions were significant, which indicates that the variables included in our study made an additive contribution to the prediction of the aspects of rape evaluation included in our study. Future studies should employ larger samples to be able to detect small effects with greater power.

Practice Implications

The findings have practical and policy implications at different levels. For victim support services, the results underscore the need for culturally competent approaches that recognize how Muslim women's experiences of sexual violence are mediated through intersections of religious identity, cultural norms, and social context. Service providers must develop specialized training to address the unique challenges faced by both hijabi and non-hijabi victims, ensuring support systems are equipped to handle issues ranging from family honor concerns to institutional Islamophobia.

At the community level, the study suggests religious and cultural leaders have a critical role to play in reshaping narratives around sexual violence. Rather than simplistic condemnations of modesty culture, effective interventions should engage with Islamic theological traditions to promote more balanced understandings of gender ethics. This includes highlighting Quranic principles of consent and human dignity, while challenging patriarchal interpretations that disproportionately burden women. Community education initiatives could productively focus on developing shared understandings of moral responsibility that do not singularly focus on women's dress.

At the legal level, the study highlights the need for judicial training to address unconscious biases about Muslim women's attire while avoiding stereotypes. Such programs should teach legal professionals how perceptions of hijab may affect credibility assessments, using cross-cultural data to show these biases are universal—not unique to Muslim cases. Training must refocus on consent-based legal standards rather than clothing, implementing safeguards like standardized protocols and expert testimony. The goal is equitable treatment that neither ignores bias nor exceptionalizes Muslim victims.

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Ethical Considerations

The manuscript adheres to ethical guidelines specified in the APA Code of Conduct and the present study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Bern, Switzerland.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The materials and data that support the findings of this research are openly available in OSF (https://osf.io/238cg/?view_only=0ac01acbfc1b48a4942e81bb80131686).

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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