Between Culture and Choice: Mediating Role of Personal Preference in Hijab-Wearing Practices in Pakistani Higher Education Institutions

Muhammad Shahzad (Corresponding Author)
Lecturer, Department of Sociology
University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
m.shahzad@uog.edu.pk
Laraib Fatima
M.Phil Student, Department of Sociology
University of Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan
17091518-005@uog.edu.pk
Sidra Batool
Technical Librarian, Ayub Agricultural Research Institute
sidra.batool@aari.punjab.gov.pk
Kirn Ashraf
Ph.D Scholar, Institute of Information Management
University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan
kirnfahd86@gmail.com

Abstract
This study assessed the mediating role of personal preference in the association between cultural influence and hijab-wearing practice among female students in Higher Education Institutions. The study addresses the pressing need to understand the complex dynamics surrounding the practice of wearing the hijab in various educational and cultural situations. 350 respondents were selected from two public sector Higher Education Institutions (HEI) by employing convenient sampling technique. Data were collected using a well-structured research survey. It had questions pertaining to the study variables. The collected data were analysed using Smart PLS 4 and PROCESS Macro. The key finding of the study shows that personal preference mediates the relationship between cultural influence and hijab wearing practice. The study concludes that for the comprehensive understanding of the hijab wearing practices, it is necessary to take into account both cultural influence and personal preference. The study has wider ramifications for policy making, cultural awareness and inclusive environment at HEIs.
***Keywords**: Personal Preference, Mediating Role, Hijab-Wearing Practice, Higher Education Institutes (HEI), Cultural Influence.*

Introduction

Hijab-wearing practice is growing globally in both developing and developed worlds. More and more women are wearing hijab at public places. Enactment of laws to ban this practice at public places has sparked debate in some western and eastern countries among religious researchers. In Islamic dress code, hijab refers to loose-fitting cloth used to cover head, neck and body Ahmed (2008). Hijab has different meaning for different people. A section of women consider it expression of identity and empowerment. Other section thing that it is symbol of oppression and subjugation. Similarly, some scholars also assign different meanings to it. Some scholar equate it with complex interaction of social, cultural, and individual forces (Almutawaa et al., 2024). According to them it is not just religious expression (Mostafa, 2023). It is symbol of modesty and identity. Other scholars conceptualize hijab as personal identity, autonomy, and religious expression Zakir and Zabrodskaja (2023). Because hijab-wearing is closly corrated with personal autonmy, cultural identity and religious expression, .this necessitate to research it

University environment is complex mosaic of academic, personal, cultural, and religious expression of students (Amini & Daulay, 2022; Deborah Nauli Simorangkir & Pamungkas, 2022). Because hijab wearing practice at HEIs can be potentially impact by different cultural influences and personal desires, it is essential to research hijab-wearing practice in the context of HEIs. Universities are also mirror image of many ideologies, cultures, and identities (Hoseinzadeh, Niazi, & Shafaeimoghadam, 2018).They are perfect for learning about the nuances of hijab practices. Understanding how females navigate their religious identities in the classroom is essential. The next generation of professionals, leaders, and community members are shaped in large part by HEIs (Mizel, 2020).

The practice of wearing the hijab is closely linked to cultural norms and expectations (Taufik & Taufik, 2019). According to Hass, 2020; Mehjabin, 2020; Tabassum, Afzal, & Hadi, 2020, personal preferences are neither intrinsic nor inborn. They are socially and culturally constructed, according to sociology. This creation process occurs within a specific social and cultural setting (Mehjabin, 2020). Through societal influences that influence people, this setting may have an impact on personal preferences,

likes, and dislikes. The practice of wearing the hijab may be directly influenced by culture. Through the mediation of socially constructed personal preferences, it may also have an indirect impact on the practice of wearing the hijab (Abbas, 2023). Consequently, individual preference may operate as mediator in the interaction between cultural impact and the practice of wearing the hijab.

Although previous studies have recognised the impact of culture and individual preferences on hijab-wearing practices (Almila, 2017; Arif, 2018; Hass, 2020; Hoseinzadeh et al., 2018), little is known about the possible channels that individual preferences may offer within the context of the culture-hijab relationship. Prior research frequently treats personal choice as an independent factor, ignoring the possibility that it could serve as a mediating variable to explain how culture influences the practice of wearing the hijab (Clough, 2023; Mostafa, 2023; Sharma, 2023). The majority of research focusses on direct effects, examining if cultural influence have a direct impact on the practice of wearing the hijab. Therefore, more investigation is required to examine how individual preferences translate cultural influences into the practice of wearing the hijab. Furthermore, the subtleties of cultural impacts may be overlooked by current studies. Since cultures are not homogeneous, the influence of particular culture on wearing the hijab may vary depending on personal preference. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to comprehend the manner in which cultural influence appears in hijab-wearing practice. We aim to identify the complex dynamics that influence the hijab-wearing practice at Higher Education Institutions (HEI) by investigating the mediating function of personal preference.

Numerous additions to the earlier body of literature are made by the study. First, this research advances the field of religious sociology. Second, this study addresses the many call from academics to identify the mediating processes via which cultural influence influences hijab wearing habits, as there is a relative lack of integrative literature on the subject. Third, the study provides insight into the experiences of female university students in a particular social and cultural context. Fourth, the study acknowledges the significance of individual preference while emphasizing the impact of societal norms. This supports the idea that, even in situations when culture has an impact, women make their own decisions about the hijab. Finally, the study broadens the

conceptual framework, which frequently concentrates exclusively on cultural norms, by emphasizing the mediating roles of family influence and personal preference.

The paper is structured as follows: the introduction comes first, then the literature review. The materials and procedures are outlined in section 3, which is followed by data analysis and results. Subsequently, the final section delves into the discussion of the findings, encompassing study conclusions, limitations, and suggestions for future research directions.

Literature Review

A body of previous research shows that the relationship between culture and hijab-wearing practice has been studies extensively by academic researchers (Fayyaz, Ambreen, & Kamal, 2023; F. Khan, 2022; Khir-Allah & Khir-Allah, 2021; Moradi, 2023). An intricate web of social traditions, cultural norms, economic compulsions, religious beliefs and expectations affects hijab-wearing (Hoseinzadeh et al., 2018; Leuenberger, 2017). Cultures are macro structural systems that impact concepts of modesty, femininity, and religiosity (Rahman & Firdaus, 2018; Slininger, 2014). Several past studies indicate that how these values are interpreted in a culture has bearing on hijab-wearing practice. Hijab may be seen as an indication of conformity with cultural standards of decency and piety (Haroon et al., 2022; F. Khan, 2022; M. M. Khan, Azhar, Abiden, Ullah, & Rana, 2023). Hijab-wearing practice is also influenced by the cultural norms of particular groups. Hijab-wearing practice becomes an instinctual behaviour in societies where it is cultural norm (Prempeh, 2022; Tina, 2022). Individual internalize this norm through socialization and cultural requirement.

Furthermore, past studies has shown that hijab-wearing practice among students of HEIs is potentially takes dictation from cultural forces and societal expectations (Ahmad, Sajid, Ali, & Shah, 2014; Hoseinzadeh et al., 2018; SAFIRA, 2020).The work of Fayyaz et al. (2023) highlights how societal expectations—whether beneficial or restrictive—create an environment that shapes individual decisions. Whether society accepts or rejects girls' hijab-wearing behaviour may depend on expectations from friends, family, and wider groups (Ahmadi, Adlipour, & Mirmohammad Tabar, 2014; Rahmayantie & Budi Lestari, 2016). Cultural values are woven throughout the traditions that guide and uphold the hijab. The

study of cultural norms by Muhammad, Ali, and Aly (2019) shows how familial and societal traditions contribute to the hijab's continued status as a tradition that is passed down through the generations. Traditions and cultural beliefs may be obstacles for some people and facilitators for others, according to earlier research. Due to conflicting cultural expectations and changing societal standards, wearing a hijab may offer challenges for certain young girls while providing others with a feeling of self-assurance and identity (Clark & Saleh, 2019; Eid, 2018; Jalil, 2023; Mohammadi, Maghsoodi, Hasanpoor, & Maskouni, 2022).

Significant scholarly attention has also been paid to the effects of cultural influences on students' hijab-wearing practices at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Ahmad et al., 2014; Mizel, 2020; Deborah N Simorangkir & Pamungkas, 2018). The most conspicuous impact of culture on hijab-wearing practice can be seen in HEIs where students comes from various socioeconomic, religious, and sectarian backgrounds. Past resreach demonstrate that hijab-wearing practice among university students is impacted by cultural standards, beliefs, customs, and rituals (Amini & Daulay, 2022). It is also affected by religious identity and personal freedom. Tough the importance of culture in influencing hijab-wearing practice cannot be denied but new research indictate that there could be some intervening variables that may transmit the impact of culture on hijab-wearing. Personal preference is potential mediating variable that serves as important mechanism that transfer the impact of culture on hijab-wearing (Almutawaa et al., 2024; Babakhani, 2024).

Additionally, personal preference potentially serves as an important conduit between cultural influence and hijab-wearing among the female students of HEIs (Mizel, 2020; Deborah N Simorangkir & Pamungkas, 2018). So, a comprehensive understanding of the hijab-wearing practice among the female students of HEI requires a delineation of interaction among culture influence, hijab-wearing, and personal preference. Thus, this study aims to study the mediating role of personal preference in the relationship of culture influence and hijab-wearing practice among female university students. Moreover, the purpose of this study is to assess the mediating mechanism and relationships between cultural influence and personal preference in the context of HEIs.

Drawing on aforementioned literature, this study proposes the following conceptual framework to assess the relationships among the study constructs.
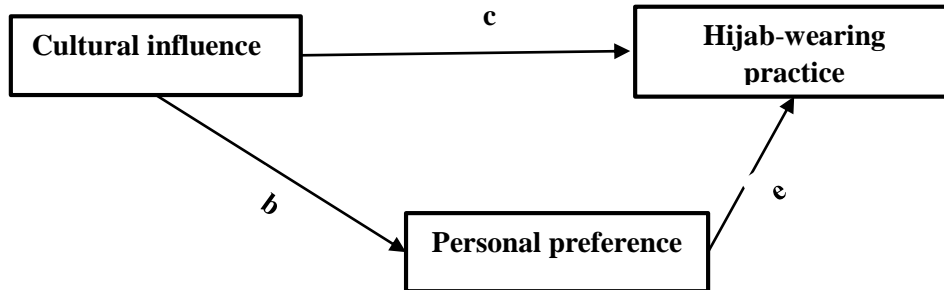

Figure 1: A conceptual framework of the impact of cultural influence on hijab-wearing practice through the mediation of personal preference.

Based on this conceptual framework, the study proposed the following hypotheses.

H¹: Cultural influence has a significantly positive impact on personal preference (Path b).

H²: Personal preference has a significantly positive impact on hijab-wearing (path e).

H³: Cultural influence has a significantly positive impact on hijab-wearing (Path c).

H4: Personal preference mediates relationship between cultural influence and hijab-wearing (path b x e).

Material and Methods

A non-probability convenience sampling method was used to recruit respondents for the study, which included female university students who wear the hijab. Data collection occurred between November 2020 and December 2021 through both face-to-face engagement and online survey dissemination via platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. The respondents were drawn from two major public universities in Punjab province, with 460 questionnaires distributed to ensure representation from the public

higher education sector. Of these, 380 were returned (yielding an 82% response rate), but 30 were excluded due to incomplete responses, leaving 350 fully usable questionnaires. Among the study respondents, 30.6% were fourth-semester BS students, while only 3.4% were M.Phil students, reflecting the generally smaller class sizes in postgraduate programs in Pakistan. Educational background data revealed that only 10.9% of participants' mothers had completed graduation, and 33% held a matriculation certificate. In terms of family structure, 56.3% of participants came from nuclear families, with only 4.3% from extended nuclear families. Additionally, 48.3% reported having between three and four siblings.

There were two sections to the questionnaire. The first section addressed questions about demographics, such as semester, academic programme, family type, father and mother's educational background, and number of siblings. Items to gauge personal preference, cultural influence, and hijab wearing were included in the second section. Likert scales with five points, 1 denoting strongly disagree and 5 denoting strongly agree, were used to measure the items. Cultural Influence was assessed using six items that captured the sociocultural and religious environment influencing hijab-wearing. Respondents indicated agreement with statements such as "Wearing hijab is common practice in my surroundings," "I wear a hijab influenced by religious values," and "In my neighbourhoods, the majority of women practice to cover themselves." Additional items included "I wear hijab due to my ancestral line," "I cover up myself for the sake of community respect," and "I wear hijab for religious and cultural symbols." These items reflect both the normative and symbolic dimensions of cultural influence.

Personal Preference was evaluated using twelve items reflecting autonomous decision-making, self-efficacy, and personal goal-setting. These included statements such as "I have a direct decision-making ability," "I understand exactly what I am supposed to do," "I have specific/clear goals to aim for my future," and "I will be able to achieve most of the goals that I have set for myself." Other items were "When facing difficult tasks, I am certain that I will accomplish them," "In general, I think that I can obtain outcomes that are important to me," and "I will be able to successfully overcome many challenges." Participants also responded to "I am confident that I can perform effectively on

many different tasks," "I have my own decisions regarding my life," and "Even when things are tough, I can perform quite well." The remaining items were "I am confident in what I am doing in my life," and "Compared to other people, I can do most tasks very well," highlighting confidence and perceived competence.

Hijab-Wearing Practice was measured using nine items reflecting the frequency and contexts of hijab use. Respondents reported on practices such as "I wear hijab regularly," "I prefer to wear hijab in university activities (education, extracurricular activities)," and "I wear hijab in family functions (weddings, birthday parties, family gatherings)." Other situational items included "I wear a hijab while travelling by public transport," "I wear hijab in the presence of a stranger," and "I feel comfortable wearing a hijab." Participants also responded to "I wear hijab according to my personal choice," "I wear a hijab while I go shopping," and "I wear hijab whenever I go outside my home," capturing habitual and voluntary aspects of hijab-wearing.

The reliability of the variables was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability (CR). After evaluating the sample, items with factor loadings below 0.600 were eliminated. All of the CR and Alpha values were higher than the recommended cutoff of 0.700. The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and CRs were all at or close to 0.700 and 0.500, respectively, which supports convergent validity. We initially ascertained the validity and reliability of the constructs. The structural model was then examined in order to test the proposed mediation and correlations. Data analysis was done using SmartPLS 4 and PROCESS macro.

Data Analysis and Results

This section present the results of the data analysis. Table 1 presents the discriminant validity results using both the Fornell–Larcker Criterion and the Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT). The diagonal values (in bold) represent the square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct: Cultural Influence (.774), Personal Preference (.846), and Hijab-Wearing Practice (.815). Each AVE value exceeds the corresponding inter-construct correlations listed below the diagonal, supporting discriminant validity per Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criterion.

HTMT values above the diagonal (ranging from .772 to .791) remain below the conservative threshold of 0.85 (Henseler et al., 2015), further supporting discriminant validity. These results indicate that each construct is empirically distinct from the others and that multicollinearity is not a concern.

Table 1

Fornell–Larcker Criterion and Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT)

The Study Constructs	1	2	3
1.Cultural influence	**.774**	.772	.791
2. Personal preference	.648	**.846**	.650
3. Hijab-wearing practice	.665	.781	**.815**

Note: The square roots of the AVE are bold and diagonal. The correlations between the construct's values are shown beneath the diagonal elements. The Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio of Correlations (HTMT) values are located above the diagonal elements.

Structural Model

Table 2 presents the results of direct paths testing. The results show that cultural influence ➔ personal preference (H3: β = 1.474, t =20.920, p < 0.001), personal preference ➔ hijab-wearing (H4: β = .380, t =10.377, p < 0.001), and cultural influence ➔ hijab-wearing (H5: β = .372, t =5.077, p < 0.001) were positive and significant. Hence hypotheses H1, H2, and H3 are accepted.

Table 2

Hypothesis Testing of Direct Paths

	Relationships	β	t-value	P
H1	Cultural influence → personal preference	1.474	20.920	.001
H2	Personal preference → hijab-wearing practice	.380	10.377	.001
H3	Cultural influence → hijab-wearing practice	.372	5.077	.001

Note: Unstandardized coefficients reported

Mediation analysis

The study also ascertained the mediating role of personal preference on the relationship between cultural influence and hijab wearing. The study also found a significant indirect effect of impact of cultural influence on hijab wearing through personal

preference (b= .560, t= 10.3771), supporting H4. Furthermore, direct effect of cultural influence on hijab-wearing in the present of mediators was also found significant (b= .372, p <.001). Therefore, personal preference partially mediated the relationship between cultural influence and hijab-wearing. Table 3 provides the results of mediation analysis.

Table 3
Hypothesis Testing of Indirect Paths

Total Effects	Direct Effects	Relationships	Indirect Effects	CI		P value	Conclusion
(CI→HWP)	(CI→HWP)			LB	UB		
1.190 (21.453)	.372 (5.07)	H4: CI→PP→HWP	.560 (10.3)	.4258	.6987	< .001	Partial Mediation

Note: CI = cultural influence, PP= personal preference, HWP = hijab-wearing practice; Unstandardized coefficients reported. Values in parentheses are t-values. Bootstrap sample = 5,000 with replacement.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study examined the factors influencing hijab-wearing practice, and the findings provide strong support for the hypothesized relationships.

Personal preference emerged as a partial mediator (H4). While cultures emphasizing hijab can influence women's decisions, the study suggests that personal preference plays a significant role. Women raised in such cultures may choose to wear the hijab for reasons beyond simply conforming to expectations. This aligns with research emphasizing the importance of individual choice in religious practices (Prempeh, 2022; Rumaney & Sriram, 2023).The partial mediation effect indicates that cultural influence still exerts a direct effect on hijab wearing. This suggests that cultural norms can influence women's decisions even if they don't fully explain them. Perhaps cultural norms create an environment where hijab becomes a more normalized and preferred option.

 Moreover, cultural influence has a significant positive effect on personal preference (H1), suggesting that cultural norms can shape women's individual beliefs about hijab. This personal preference, in turn, positively influences hijab wearing (H2). Similarly, cultural

influence also directly translates into a positive impact on hijab-wearing practice (H3). These findings highlight the interplay between cultural norms and individual agency. While cultures play a role in shaping preferences, women ultimately make their own choices.

To conclude, the study assessed the impact of cultural influence and personal preferences on hijab-wearing practice. The study findings provide strong support for the hypothesized relationships. We found a significant positive influence of cultural influence on personal preference. Personal preferences partially mediated the relationship between cultural influence and hijab-wearing practice. These findings underscore the complex interplay between cultural influence and personal preference in shaping decisions regarding hijab-wearing practice. Cultural influence plays a significant role in impacting personal preferences. It acts as an important pathway that transmits cultural values and shapes attitudes towards hijab-wearing practice. Personal preference plays a significant role in the ultimate decision to wear a hijab.

Implications

This study has several important implications for various stakeholders. Taking insights from this study, community and religious leaders can promote cultural sensitiveness in their societies. One key insight emerged from this study is that hijab-wearing practice is complex and complicated sociological construct that is impacted by the interaction of personal and cultural factors. Therefore, this understanding can help in creating polite and culturally sensitive spaces that give prime value to human liberty and cultural diversity. Higher education teachers can mitigate the potential effects of stigmatization of female university students who likes wearing hijab. Similarly, higher education teachers can also explain to students how cultural, familial, and personal factors interact to impact hijab-wearing practice. They can also highlight the importance of social context and macro structural frameworks to construct personal choices including hijab-wearing. Students can reduce potential prejudices attached with hijab-wearing by openly discussing factors impacting hijab-wearing. Policymakers can design policies that respect inclusivity and cultural sensitivity. These policies should recognize the significance of family institution in forming cultural values and norms. HEIs should create space where hijab wearing students

could free express their culture, beliefs, norms, values, and religious identity.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the study offers useful information, it has some limitations that should be considered while interpreting the findings. The study relied on self-reported data, which leaves it open to bias. Furthermore, the study may not have been as generalizable to other demographics due to its exclusive focus on female students at HEIs. Doing more research with a wider range of samples and longitudinal research design could yield a more thorough understanding of hijab-wearing practices. Additionally, the partial mediation effect needs to be taken into account. This suggests that personal preferences is not the only pathway influencing hijab wearing. Peer groups, media representations, and religious leaders are a few more potential mediating variables that could be involved. Future research could examine the relative significance of these potential mediators. Future research may also look at the basic mechanisms via which family influence operates. Researching the importance of parental modelling, clear instructions, and family discussions over the hijab, for instance, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of this mediating influence. Examining any possible cultural variations in the interactions between personal preference and cultural impact may also be informative.

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