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Abstract

Although gender and sustainability have been topics of discussion in international discourse since 1980, little has been done to connect the two. While one of the United Nations Sustainable Goals UNSDGs (5) places a strong emphasis on gender equality, the sustainable tourism paradigm fails to examine it from a social perspective.

This paper examines the relationships between gender, religion and tourism and makes the case for the creation of travel destinations that uphold gender equity.

The research employs narrative interviews conducted with Muslim women while travelling in the UK to explore how their travel experiences are influenced by their gender and religion. This is a field work study based on in-depth interviews with 21 participants who shared their behaviour, perceptions and feelings related to their trip. The results demonstrate that gender and religion influence the views and experiences of female Muslim tourists in the UK and indicate qualities that female Muslim tourists may seek in a destination that are consistent with their Muslim identity. The results also point to some positive and transformative learning that endured after the trip.

Key words

Sustainability, Tourist behaviour, Muslim tourists, Gender, Stigma

1.0 Introduction

The size of the Muslim travel market is on the rise with spending predicted to reach US\$225 billion in 2028 (Crescentrating 2022). Muslim tourist arrivals reached 160 million before the pandemic in 2019 and it is projected that 230 million arrivals will be attained in 2080 (Crescentrating 2022). The Muslim travel market is important for a sustainable and inclusive travel industry. It is well regarded and desired by major hotel companies around the world which are increasingly developing their Halal friendly provisions to accommodate the needs of Muslim travellers (see JW Marriott Grosvenor Hotel in London, The Tschuggen Grand hotel in Switzerland, and the Eurostar hotel in Moscow: Oktadiana et al. 2016). Muslim-friendly hotels features include Halal food, prayer facilities, female swimming/spa times, female housekeeping and room staff, spa facilities, Middle Eastern menus, alcohol free options, non-alcoholic bars, Arabic TV channels, and a Quran in rooms (Premium Europe 2016). Halal tourism can be seen as a form of sustainable tourism in that it allows visitors to honour the values and practices conferred by faith and it permits a destination to maintain and sustain its culture. In this regard, halal tourism aligns well with the sustainability development goal number 11 for sustainable cities and communities, specifically in terms of preserving cultural heritage. Interestingly, this dimension of sustainability often sits in contrast with the sustainability development goal number 5 for gender equality and the emancipation of women.

Muslim non-pilgrimage travel has often been overlooked in the tourism literature. It is imperative however to understand the needs and motivations of Muslim tourists which differ from the general leisure market due to Muslims' tendency towards ingrained adherence to Islamic teachings while on holiday (Zamani-Farahani and Henderson 2010; Oktadiana and Pearch 2017; Oktadiana et al. 2017). Indeed, the religious attributes of a destination are important factors in the decision-making process of Muslim tourists (Collins and Tisdell 2002; Battour et al 2010, Osman and Brown 2022). It is perhaps for this reason that previous studies focused on Islamic behaviour related to the teachings of the Quran (Islamic Sacred book) (Ryan 2016). The female Muslim travel market is similarly neglected. Notwithstanding the cultural and religious pressures on women (Al Alhareth et al. 2015; Ratthinan and Selmat 2018), Muslim women are increasingly traveling alone for

the purpose of education, business or leisure (Nikolova 2019). Indeed, the Muslim female traveller is a fast-growing segment within the global travel market (Mastercard-CrescentRating 2019): over 63 million Muslim women spent approximately USD 80 billion on travel in 2018. Modern Muslim women are asserting their agency through negotiating traditional norms to create new identities that are closer to Western norms but with Islamic values in mind (Bhimji 2009; Nyhagen 2019; Osman and Brown 2022). Current research on sustainable tourism overlooks the intricate relationship between gender, religion, and tourism, failing to explore how Muslim women navigate their cultural and religious identities while traveling in non-Muslim majority countries like the UK. There is a lack of in-depth, qualitative studies that delve into the personal narratives of these travellers in their natural context gaining insights into their behaviours, beliefs and attitudes. This limits our understanding of the travellers' unique challenges, motivations, and experiences.

The current field work, qualitative study makes an original contribution to a growing body of literature on female travel in general by focusing on an important segment of the valuable Muslim travel market: the female Muslim traveller. It uses a qualitative, narrative approach to explore the meanings that female Muslim tourists attach to travel and to the empowering influence of tourism (Brown 2009a; Ratthinan & Selmat 2018). It also contributes to knowledge on how gender, religion and cultural background intersect with tourism to shape female tourists' experiences. No research has been carried out on the experiences of Muslim female tourists in the West. The current study of the experiences of Muslim female travellers in the UK also makes an original contribution to the sustainable tourism literature through its focus on gender. Despite gender equality being the object of one of the sustainable development goals (UNSDG 5), Ferguson and Moreno Alarcon (2015) assert that the sustainable tourism paradigm does not recognise gender equality or incorporate a gender analysis. This study, rooted in feminist scholarship, offers an in-depth exploration of how gender and religious identity shape travel experience; it emphasises the agency of Muslim women, allowing their voices and perspectives to be at the forefront.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 The female tourist experience

Much research on the female tourist experience indicates the benefits of travel for women, including: self-discovery and improved knowledge (Cai and Combrink 2000; Pennington-Gray and Kerstetter 2001; Lin and Lehto 2006; Poria 2006; Cockburn-Wooten et al. 2006); social interaction (Junek et al. 2006; McNamara and Prideaux 2010; Li et al. 2011; Durko and Petrick 2013); relaxation (Cai and Combrink 2000; McNamara and Prideaux 2010); a sense of independence (McArthur 1999, Poria 2006 ; Khan 2017; Wilson and Harris 2006; McNamara and Prideaux 2010; Yang et al. 2018a,b; Xu and Liu 2018); and pampering (Junek et al. 2006). Many authors highlight the escape from domestic responsibility (Berdychevsky et al. 2013; Butler 1995; Chiang and Jogaratnam 2006; Poria 2006; Stone and Nichol 1999; Wilson and Harris 2006; Small 2005; Cockburn-Wooten et al. 2006). There is also a focus on a liberation from the constraints on sexual behaviour that are imposed at home (Berdychevsky et al. 2015, 2010, 2013). Resisting the expectations for women's behaviour has also received attention (Weischselbaumer 2012; Berdychevsky et al. 2013, 2015; Yang et al. 2016; Seow and Brown 2018). It can be observed that the extant literature on Muslim women's travel experiences is limited and often non-critical, focusing predominantly on motivations and behaviours. While the examples above offer insights into the unique travel needs and preferences of Muslim women, they seldom interrogate the wider implications for sustainable tourism. The current study argues that existing research overlooks the critical intersection of gender, religion, and sustainability, particularly in the West. Therefore, the topic of transformative travel for Muslim women remains underexplored in the context of sustainable tourism development.

Research also reveals the constraints that women face when travelling due to their gender, which carries implications for leisure opportunities (Wilson and Little, 2005; Gibson et al. 2013). Wilson and Little (2008, p. 183) observe that the tourist experience is 'gendered, sexualised, socially and culturally constructed'. Jordan and Gibson (2005) for example show that the male gaze can impact negatively on the female tourist experience as it represents the sexualised objectification of women. Jordan and Aitchison (2008) equate sexualised male attention with sexual harassment. Indeed, male attention can make women fearful and suspicious (Coble et al. 2003; Cockburn et al. 2006; Berdychevsky et al. 2013; Brown and Osman 2017; Seow and Brown 2018; Yang et al. 2018). Of relevance to this study is that physical appearance can draw more male attention as was the case for female Asian tourists in the west (Seow and Brown 2018) and for western female tourists in Egypt (Brown and

Osman 2017). Women, particularly those wishing to travel solo, may avoid certain tourist destinations deemed to be unsafe. Wilson and Little (2008) refer to the ‘geography of women’s travel fear’ to describe the view of some places as unsafe for women. Indeed, the literature on female tourists highlights the role of safeguarding practices among women, which are used to keep themselves safe (see Chiang and Jogaratnam, 2006; Berdychevsky et al. 2016; Khan et al. 2017). Examples include women changing their dress (Brown and Osman 2017); avoiding hitchhiking (Packer 2008); avoiding going out at night (Osman et al. 2019). This calls for more proactive measures from the tourism industry to address safety for female travel rather than placing the burden of safety on the travellers themselves. While female travel has been well researched and documented, the implications of such research has not been sufficiently considered and utilised in sustainable tourism policies (Alarcon and Cole 2019). Destinations aiming for sustainability must consider the diverse needs of tourists, including women from different religious groups. Understanding the constraints that women face can help destinations develop more inclusive policies and practices aimed at all tourists, making tourism more sustainable and equitable. The gap in sustainable policies regarding gender consideration is evident. We argue that social sustainability including gender equality and empowerment needs to inform research on gendered experiences in tourism.

2.2 Muslim women and travel

There has been limited research on female Muslim tourism. Of those few studies that have been conducted, some have concentrated on motivation. Oktadiana et al. (2017) surveyed 356 Muslim tourists and compared the results with pre-existing data about the motives of Western tourists. Their findings emphasised the top three motives to be relationship strengthening, experiencing nature and trying something different. Meanwhile, Asbollah et al. (2013) found that Muslim women’s travel is motivated by seeking uniqueness, self-enjoyment, healing and development of own knowledge. In their qualitative research on female Asian Muslim tourists, Ratthinan & Selmat (2018) found that women are increasingly engaging in travel, trying to ‘unlearn patriarchy’ and learn more about the world and themselves while they still adhere to their cultural and religious values. Interestingly, Sakai and Fauzia (2016) suggest that women often conform to gender roles to protect the family image while tacitly pushing their boundaries to find autonomy.

In their study of Malay female tourists, Asbollah et al. (2013) focused on the tourist gaze, arguing that most research on this topic has been dominated by a focus on Western societies. They claim that the tourist gaze of a Muslim woman is different from that of a Western woman. Urry (1990) states that as the tourist gaze relies on the tourist's interpretation of their experiences, the Muslim woman's gaze is unique because it is largely influenced by her religion and cultural upbringing. This corresponds with Buddhahumbhitak's (2010) interpretation of the tourist gaze as a mindset that is socially constructed by the tourist: it is about what they see and what they are aware of. Asbollah et al. (2013) and Osman and Brown (2022) also found that while travel motivations for Muslim and Western women may be similar in terms of seeking to relax and escape domestic life, Muslim women's motivations are affected by their culture, including dress and food. They found that Muslim women are often restricted in terms of destination choice by religious practices, including for example, finding a place where they can pray five times a day, dressing modestly and eating familiar halal food.

A further constraint on female Muslim tourists is the racism and Islamophobia that they may face in a non-Muslim country. Research on the international student experience has documented a worryingly high incidence of racism towards those international students who are visibly different from the white host community. A study by Brown and Jones (2013) revealed that out of a survey of 153 international postgraduate students, 49 had experienced some form of abuse. In most cases, this took the form of verbal abuse, though racism manifested physically for nine students. A link was made by the authors between the micro student experience and macro societal forces. Indeed, in 2010, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance reported an increase in racist incidents and offences, attributed in part to the economic downturn, which had led to an increased hostility towards migrants. Unfortunately, Islamophobia still exists in modern Britain. A more recent survey conducted by the Birmingham University on Islamophobia showed that 23.2% of people belonging to upper and lower middle class social groups hold prejudiced views about Islam compared with 18.4% of people from working class social groups. This is a total of 41.6 % of 1667 people questioned. The survey concluded that Muslims are the UK's second most disliked group after Gypsies (Jones and Unsworth 2021).

Increased levels of Islamophobia have been documented in Europe and beyond since the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in America, evidence included the rise of populism and the banning of the burka or the hijab in some North European countries (Organization of Islamic Cooperation, 2020). Brown's (2009b) study of Muslim international students found that geo-political tension impacted on the everyday life of Muslim students, who saw a clear link between their safety and the September 11 terrorist attack, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the growth in Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and negative media reporting. According to Bhimji (2009: 265), in Britain, racism towards South Asians is religious based, 'with Muslim women receiving much media attention because of their visible symbol'. Bhimji's study focuses on British-born South Asian women. Visitors to the UK are caught up in societal tensions that are nothing to do with them. Female Muslim tourists who display their association with Islam through the veil can be subjected to abuse, with clear impacts on their satisfaction with their trip. As Goffman (1963) points out, tourism is just a microcosm of wider society and should not be seen as standing apart. Furthermore, as Moufakkir (2015) suggests, challenging racist stigma in society is important before it can be challenged in tourism. There is evidence to suggest that antipathy towards foreigners has increased further since Brexit has been in public discourse, and it is not likely to diminish soon (Dennison and Geddes, 2018). Brown and Jones (2013, p. 5) observe: 'If Britain is a racist society with a growing problem of racist and religious hate crime, it is perhaps logical to expect that international sojourners might be caught up in unresolved tensions, and that they may fall victim to racist or religious abuse.' Muslim visitors may also be impacted by stories featuring Islam and negative stereotyping in the British media (Richards and Brown 2017).

2.3 Tourism and stigma

Stigma and discrimination against any group of travellers can hinder the sustainability of tourism destinations. Studies have linked the stigma experienced by Muslim tourists to that of Muslim immigrants. According to Goffman (1963) an immigrant is viewed as tarnished, due to exhibiting different attributes from those normalised by the host society. Goffman's (1963) definition of stigma refers to attributes that disqualify a person from social acceptance, including physical deformities, character blemishes and group stigma. Such a

stigmatised status is similar to being a ‘handicap’ due to its undesirable attributes. Sobal (1999) states that it is common for stigmatised people to have a negative social identity, for stigma to be incorporated into their self-evaluation. Byrne (2001) defines stigma as a mark of disgrace or discredit that sets a person aside from others; it signifies prejudice based on negative stereotyping, the labelling of a person as inferior.

Frable et al. (1990) argue that society can make an individual culturally valued or stigmatised. Frable et al. state that sometimes the variation from the norm is so significant that everything about the person is understood in terms of a master status condition. Those with such a condition are likely to be mindful in social exchanges, paying close attention to how interaction develops and trying to negotiate and manipulate unpredictable social environments to help them to avoid the pitfalls associated with social contact. According to Goffman (1972), manipulation of the communication process is key in reducing anxiety, as it allows the stigmatised individual to control and shape the reactions and perceptions of others. Sobal (1999) describes acceptance as the central aim of a stigmatised person’s life. Moufakkir (2014) argues that stigmatisation undermines the Arab and Muslim tourist experience and challenges cultural identity. It provokes feelings of shame, disbelief, disappointment and anger. Similarly, Brown et al. (2015) documented the vulnerability and stress experienced by Muslim international students in the West, resulting from the verbal or physical abuse they encountered that they associated with the negative representation of Islam in the media. Findings from their study showed that Muslim countries are presented in the media as “(1) Muslims are terrorists; (2) Muslim countries are strict and conservative; (3) Muslim countries are dirty, backward and uneducated” (P53). Such categorisation affects the way Muslim tourists are seen by host communities.

The debate in public discourse on immigration verges on the xenophobic and racist, thus stigmatising groups including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Brown and Jones 2013). According to a Cross-government Working Group on Anti-Muslim Hatred (2020), constant negative media coverage on Islam is shaping people’s views: the group stated that there was “a serious and systemic problem of racist, anti-Muslim reporting within sections of the British media”. Omar (2006) went so far as to claim that being Muslim in a western country is characterised by inner turmoil and a drive to protect a vulnerable self-esteem.

Muslim female tourists, especially those who wear the hijab (the Islamic head dress) are most susceptible to negative stereotypes and prejudice. According to Moufakkir (2014), those who exhibit cultural differences and deviance from the host society are labelled abnormal and undesirable. Furthermore, visitors who belong to countries of immigrants living in the host societies become subject to the “stigmatizing host gaze” by association (ibid: 18). Moufakkir (2015) argues that the Arab and Muslim tourist is disqualified as a tourist due to racial appearance and dress. Moufakkir (2015:21) states that the Moroccans in the Netherlands are stigmatized as ‘KutMarokkanen; an infamous famous attribute that labels them as troublemakers, literally translated as ‘asshole Moroccans’. They are the undesired others, similar to the Algerians in France, the Turks in Germany, the Pakistanis in the UK, the Lebanese in Australia and the Latinos in the US (ibid). Visitors of the same national or cultural background will be viewed in the same way as permanent residents. It can be argued that destinations that fail to mitigate such stigma risk damaging their image and being perceived as unwelcoming or unsafe for diverse groups of tourists. This can also have a detrimental impact on the destinations’ sustainability as it may struggle to attract a broad spectrum of travellers, thus threatening their financial viability.

In her interview study with 31 Muslim women in North London Ryan (2006) found a high degree of stigmatisation. Similarly, in their study of the experiences of Black Caribbeans in the UK, Stephenson and Hughes (2005) explored how race relations are reconstructed within the tourism realm. They found that the intrusive white gaze and the stereotyping of black communities have led to black tourists’ dissatisfaction with their trip. Stigmatising racialised situations can arguably ‘reinforce or verify people’s existing (ethnic) identities rather than encourage new (tourist) identities to develop’ (Stephenson and Hughes 2005: 139). One of the cited benefits of tourism is that it can permit the development of a feeling of universal sisterhood or brotherhood through collective experiences and interactions (Stephenson and Hughes 2005: 138). However, a stigmatised tourist as a result of ‘racialised encounters’ (Stephenson and Hughes (2005: 138) might not realise this state of unity.

2.4 Gender and sustainability in tourism

Eger et al. (2019) state that ‘meaningful and respectful engagement’ with gender studies is marginal in tourism research. Meanwhile the few studies that focus on gender and tourism

sustainability tend to centre on tourism development and women's employment in tourism (e.g. Ferguson and Moreno Alarcon 2015; Kato 2019). Alarcon and Cole, (2021:1) argue that tourism's ability to address the SDGs is diminished if gender equality is not addressed in a meaningful way and that sustainable tourism will remain 'an elusive pot of gold' if does not accommodate cultural sensitivity. Cultural sensitivity in tourism is vital, particularly for Muslim women. It ensures that tourism practices respect their needs and religious beliefs, aligning with sustainable tourism principles of social equity, environmental protection, and economic viability (Asbollah, et al. 2013). For Muslim women travellers, access to halal food, prayer facilities, and suitable leisure activities are crucial for an inclusive experience. These practices not only cater to Muslim women's unique requirements but also contribute to preserving and appreciating their cultures. The broader principles underlining sustainable tourism guide this approach, emphasising social justice (Weaver 2006).

The concept of cultural sensitivity in tourism, however, extends beyond accommodating religious practices. It involves a deep understanding of the customs, traditions, and values of the visiting community (Aji et.al 2021). For example, the experiences of veiled Muslim women travellers in the West are greatly shaped by the complex interplay of Islamophobia, gender stereotypes and misconceptions of their religious identities (Awan and Zempi 2020). Understanding these challenges is crucial to ensure that travel services are inclusive and sensitive to the needs of Muslim women travellers especially those wearing the hijab (veil). This approach to inclusive travel contributes to destination development and shifts the narrative towards a more comprehensive application of sustainability.

Moreover, the provision of services that respects the privacy and modesty preferences of Muslim women, such as gender-specific amenities and the availability of appropriate clothing and spaces for prayer and relaxation, enhances the travel experience (Osman and Brown 2022). This approach not only respects the religious and cultural practices of Muslim women but also promotes a more inclusive and equitable tourism industry.

Sustainable tourism development, with a focus on cultural sensitivity, is recognised as a critical prerequisite for a progressive global society. It offers an opportunity to celebrate and preserve the unique cultural characteristics of visitors while promoting sustainable economic, social, and environmental practices (Jamal and Camargo 2014). This approach stresses the importance of local engagement and the development of tourism policies that

respect the cultural and religious differences of visitors. By leveraging cultural sensitivity as a strategic direction, destinations can create meaningful and enriching experiences for tourists while ensuring the long-term sustainability of their natural and cultural resources. Moreover, integrating cultural sensitivity into tourism practices, particularly for Muslim women, is not just about providing specific services but about fostering a deeper respect and understanding of diverse cultural practices conducive to a sustainable destination. This paper is original in its focus on the potential value of tourism in contributing to a desire among female Muslim tourists for gender equality during their travels. In this, our study foregrounds tourism as what Boluk et al. (2019) termed ‘a conduit for enhanced sustainability’. Empowering women and girls is a crucial aspect of achieving the UNSDG 5 for gender equality, and tourism has a role to play.

3.0 Methodology

The authors spent much time considering the most suitable way to research a topic that interlinks gender, religion and culture, and three factors became key, informing an innovative approach to the research. Firstly, a qualitative research using fieldwork was considered the approach most suited to address the complex and sensitive topic of female Muslim tourist experiences (see Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015). A fieldwork methodology refers to the systematic approach and techniques used by researchers to collect data in the field or real-world settings (Leavy 2020). It was deemed useful in interviewing Muslim female travellers, as it helped us explore their experiences, perspectives, and challenges while travelling. Using a fieldwork methodology enabled the researchers to delve into the lived experiences and meanings attached to those experiences. Furthermore, the researchers were able to gain insights into the unique encounters, perceptions, and identities of the participants. This fieldwork study makes a unique contribution in the field of sustainable tourism by exploring how culture, identity and religion interlink in the realm of travel and thus bring forth a perspective. This new approach not only addresses a gap in current research but also uncovers fresh insights into the intricate factors influencing decision making processes among travellers during their journeys. The study’s originality lies in its examination of how cultural and religious aspects impact destination planning offering an insight that could shape future research efforts and policies in culturally diverse communities. The interview guide for the semi-structured interviews included the following topics: growing up as a Muslim

woman, positive and negative experiences while travelling in the UK, feelings about the challenges faced while traveling in the UK, overall impression of women in the UK, and reflection on the experience and what has been learned. Secondly, a feminist lens was adopted; in this feminist study, our participants are female tourists who were encouraged by the female researchers to consider how their gender, religion and cultural background influenced their trips before and while travelling. Our interpretation of the data was informed by a feminist understanding that gender impacts on tourism activities and tourism decision-making. Women's leisure is shaped by gender (Scraton & Watson 1998; Pritchard and Morgan 2000). Thirdly, it was vital that an emic perspective was used. Thus the Egyptian (first) author of the paper offers a privileged insider perspective on the topic and has a feminist understanding of the role of women in Islamic culture.

In-depth interviews were carried out with 21 Muslim women while travelling in the UK. Participants were also chosen on the basis that this was not the first time they had visited the UK and that they had travelled to the UK in the past three years. A three-year time limit was chosen so that feelings about their previous experiences can be easily remembered and validated during the current trip. Most participants used their current or most recent trip to reflect on their experiences. Data saturation was reached after conducting 21 interviews. In order to select information rich participants, purposive and convenience sampling was undertaken (Jones et al. 2013). The participant profile shown in the table below shows that participants ranged from 20-50 years of age. They were from different Muslim countries, including Egypt, Syria, Russia, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran. The authors acknowledge that Islam is practiced differently in different Muslim countries. All participants had travelled to the UK for leisure purposes on an independent travel basis. Nine were accompanied by a male partner or parents, and the rest had travelled alone. All participants had prior knowledge of British culture through various media. Participants occupied different professions such as educational, tourism professional, office clerks, medical staff, and some were housewives.

Table 1. Profile of interviewees

<i>Participants' pseudonym</i>		<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Travelled with companion</i> <i>Y (Yes)</i> <i>N (No)</i>	<i>Times visited</i>	<i>Length of stay</i>
Laila	Lebanon	20-30	Y	1	10 days
Rania	Syria	40-50	Y	5	7-15 days each trip
Hania	Tunisia	40-50	N	4	7-15 days each trip
Gigi	Egypt	50-60	Y	1	5days
Vivian	Russia	30-40	N	4	5-15 days
Donia	Egypt	20-30	N	1	5 days
Maha	Egypt	30-40	Y	3	5-7 days each trip
Nihal	Turkey	20-30	N	2	8-10 days each trip
Nawal	Libya	20-30	N	3	7-12 days each trip
Khadija	Saudi Arabia	20-30	Y	1	9 days
Mai	Egypt	30-40	N	1	7 days
Fatma	United Arab Emirates	20-30	Y	1	5days
Dalia	Syria	30-40	N	3	7-12 days each trip
Nour	Lebanon	40-50	N	2	7-15 days each trip
Salwa	Syria	30-40	N	5	7-15 days each trip
Hadia	Indonesia	40-50	Y	3	6-10 days each trip

Rola	Syria	40-50	N	1	15 days
Khawla	Saudi Arabia	20-30	N	2	6-10 days each trip
Arwa	Saudi Arabia	20-30	N	4	6-15 days each trip
Rahma	Egypt	40-50	Y	2	6-10 days each trip
Asmaa	Egypt	20-30	Y	3	6-10 days each trip

Recruitment for participants was conducted through the researchers' work and social networks. All interviews were carried out in the UK, the place of residence for both researchers. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and were digitally recorded. It was noticeable that participants were keen to talk about their trips despite the sensitivity of some of the situations they encountered. A flexible approach was adopted, one of the hallmarks of the semi-structured interview (Jones et al. 2013), allowing participants to lead discussion. Rapport was important, and the fact that the interviewer (the first author) was a Muslim woman made it comfortable for participants to discuss issues related to gender and religion that affected their trip.

This research conforms to the ethical guidelines produced by the Ethics Committee of the researchers' university. Participants were provided with an information sheet about the research, detailing its aim and they were asked to sign a consent form. They were also assured of the confidentiality of the information they would provide, and that they could withdraw from the research at any point. Pseudonyms are used to protect identity.

Thematic analysis was used to treat the data, an approach commonly used in qualitative data analysis. The guidance offered by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed. The first step of thematic analysis is immersion in the data; this involved a repeated reading of the interview transcripts and listening to the recordings. This allowed the researchers to get a sense of the whole before the text is broken down during the second analytic step of coding. During the process of coding, the interview transcripts were separated into chunks of texts and labelled according to content. A mass of codes was produced, which informed the creation of

categories or themes, the third step of thematic analysis. This involved the grouping of similar codes into broader categories. These are represented in the section headings of the results section. Thus, as is appropriate in an inductive study, the research categories are emergent from the data and reflect participants' particular biases. This is particularly important in an exploratory study on a topic on which relatively little is known, and it is also important in a feminist piece of scholarship in which often-silenced voices need to be heard.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

Several themes emanated from the interviews as presented and discussed in the following thematic sections.

4.1 A sense of freedom compared to a life of restrictions

Participants revealed that their trip to the UK offered them a sense of freedom as compared to their restricted lives back home. The trip was seen as an opportunity to enhance their lives by embarking on new activities that they have often dreamt of and were unable to perform while at home. Examples of such activities include freedom of dress, going to the cinema alone and mixing with men. A key feature in Islam is that other than next of kin, women are segregated from men (Chowdhury 1994). Such segregation excludes women from accessing many leisure facilities and imposes a life of inequality. Some of the participants revealed dimensions of their restricted lives while growing up. These restrictions posed a life of limitations that inspired a need for freedom which was partially achieved through their travel.

‘My life was very sheltered, not in a good way, not in a caring way. I was very isolated with very little to do. As a girl, I didn’t get the opportunity to develop and grow by doing different things in life. I was only allowed to go to school, do my homework and that’s it. So it was very limiting and very closed’. Mai

‘My parents refused to allow me to do gymnastics or music. I really wanted to do that, but they said just focus on your studies, that’s more important’. Asmaa

It is apparent that participants found travelling a way to address some of the imposed limitations they were subjected to while growing up. Away from home, they can freely engage with activities that would help their self-growth. However, it is interesting to note that while on holiday, participants' culture and religion were still influencing their behaviour and choices. It can be argued here that the above finding represents a distinct discovery, contrasting with the concept of liminal spaces where tourists might feel liberated to behave without the constraints of their home societies. Instead, the participants embark on their travels with a sense of duty and morality. This is exemplified in Fatma's quote below:

'Literally my notes were all about what I was going to do while travelling in England, more specifically the things that I want to do them in my life, but I can't because of different aspects: religion, culture and traditions as well. These three points are still like obstacles in my trip there'.

As shown in the excerpt above, religion and culture remain at the heart of the travel experience for Muslim women. These factors act as obstacles for women who would like to embrace Western freedom and try new ways of life dissimilar to that of home. They are often held back by cultural and religious restrictions as these are part of their identity (Asbollah et al. 2013). Furthermore, they are held back by stereotypes and how they are expected to behave. There was an acknowledgement among the participants of the way their lives were at home and how they always need to examine their behaviour for fear of being blamed or punished. It is interesting to note that participants reluctantly accepted the imposed gender inequality.

'To be honest being independent or free is depending on where you are first and what kind of society you are surrounded, when I am home I would not do a lot of things in the way that I want, I would be blamed for my behaviour which is not going to be accepted by the society, people there judge you and can also impact your life easily, even worse they can easily go into your private life.' Salwa

'At home, you are always watched by your immediate family, extended family and friends of the family, it is not easy to do what you want.' Khawla

Another participant explained how hard it was for her to read books or listen to music and recalled how she was reprimanded by a family member for writing the lyrics to a love song:

‘They (families) monitor everything, you can buy it (books) without their knowledge but again you feel guilty and if you get caught then it’s a big problem. I remember one time I wrote the lyrics of a love song when I was 11 and I was told off badly by my auntie. She said this is wrong, never do this again’. Hania

Islamic cultures appeared to be a bubble surrounding participants regardless of the destination they had visited in the UK. They felt that they were always governed by the rules from home even at a distance. Participants were also raised to believe that women are vulnerable on their own therefore such rules are not to be forgotten while away from home. The restriction imposed on participants varied in degree according to, age, and origin and family structure. Jackson and Henderson (1995) also found that age, income and family structure are among factors that influence the degree by which constraints on women are imposed. Reinforcing restrictions is also driven by disparities in how gender is constructed in a given culture. In this research the observations regarding the experiences of participants from Islamic cultures travelling in the UK offer a unique lens through which to critically examine gender sustainability. The persistence of cultural norms and restrictions, even in a foreign setting, highlights a crucial dimension of gender sustainability: the intersection of cultural identity with gender norms and the mobility of women. The notion that these tourists remain encapsulated within a "bubble" of their native cultural and religious norms, particularly concerning the perceived vulnerability of women when alone, highlights a significant barrier to achieving gender equity and sustainability. This furthers our understanding of their needs and experiences while travelling.

‘In my culture you are raised to feel that you are so vulnerable on your own. And if you have this opportunity to go into the world, you have to think about where you come from and all this shapes your attitude towards the place’. Hania

‘I remember how scared I was the night before my trip, I couldn’t sleep, I didn’t feel confident that I could travel without my family’. Rahma

Tourists’ own nationality and their small cultural bubble are used to assess travel destinations (Urry 1990). This may tarnish their experiences and reduce destination authenticity (Stevenson and Young (2010). Asbollah et al. (2013) argue that in this case the tourist needs to step out of the bubble and freely step into a new culture, however, such a transition may not be made possible in the face of the religious, gender or social restrictions experienced by Muslim women.

4.2 Breaking the rules

An interesting theme that emanated from analysis and was shared by all participants was “breaking the rules”. Participants capitalised on their newfound freedom away from home by doing something out of character to break the rules. In every case, this action was taken to mark their first moment of freedom upon arrival in the UK.

‘The first thing I could do as soon as I arrived to break the rules is to buy a packet of cigarettes and smoke it on the street. For me the cigarettes symbolised freedom. As a woman, it is something I would never do walking in the streets of Egypt and smoking. I wasn’t a smoker, but that was a manifestation of freedom, my rebellious attitude, the first thing I could do to break the rules. And I was happy that I could do this in public, in front of everybody’. Gigi

The above quotation raises a number of issues central to Muslim women’s perception of freedom. First, it can be argued that people who are deprived of certain rights that may seem basic in Western culture, such as the right to smoke for women, perceive this kind of activity as the ultimate expression of freedom. Second, it is interesting to note that an urgent need to break societal restrictions goes to the forefront of the travel activity. This precedes the typical recreational tourist activities such as sightseeing or visiting landmarks. Third, the choice of activity, in this case smoking for a non-smoker, appropriately represents rebellious behaviour. Other examples of breaking the rules are presented below:

‘I have done a lot of things here that I would never imagine myself doing in my country because of the religion aspect and the culture as well, I smoked cigarettes out in front of people as nobody would look at you badly, I go to the nightclubs, I drink alcoholic drinks’. Laila

‘I can recall the craziest thing that I have done was clubbing all night until 10:00 am and then I spent the whole week with my friend in his house.’ Donia

It is interesting to note that participants embarked on behaviours considered forbidden in their culture to manifest their freedom and agency away from home. In this case women’s travel creates opportunities for them to resist surveillance from others (Jordan & Gibson 2005), and enables them to transgress social norms and gendered rules imposed by society (Yang, Khoo-Lattimore, & Arcodia et al. 2017). Their sense of freedom, however temporary, is the main priority for their travel. Some participants reflected on their ‘forbidden’ behaviours with a sense of sorrow as stated by Nihal below:

‘It’s a pity because instead of visiting a museum or going to a gallery where I can learn more about the British culture, I find myself wanting to do something else to feel free as I will not get this opportunity at home.’

Nevertheless, Islamic religious or cultural norms remain at the heart of the travel experience as there are always limits Muslim women do not exceed, ‘but I know my limits and I would not go that far because I know I will be punished by God or my family if they find out’ Nawal. This supports the view of Oktadian et al. (2017) that religious teachings remain central to the travel experiences of Muslim tourists.

It is apparent that the participants experienced a liminal transition during their trip in the UK (Turner 1974; Berdychevsky et al. 2015)). According to Lett (1983 cited in Berdychevsky et al. 2015), a liminal transition can occur when the tourist experience becomes a vehicle for the ‘licensed suspension of everyday norms’ (54). This was the case for our participants who experienced relief through the expression of suppressed feelings and behaviour. The study reveals the rich and complex stories of Muslim women travellers who use their travels as a chance to experience personal freedoms not obtainable back home. Their adventures represent a special moment in tourism- a liminal

space where rules are temporarily paused, highlighting the importance of creating safe and sustainable places for travellers to freely explore their identities and freedoms. This could be seen to negate the notion that female Muslim tourists try to keep their sense of duty and morality intact. But it is important to understand and embrace a diverse tapestry of tourism experience.

4.3 Bringing the baggage with them: fearing judgement/ being judgemental

Following on previous discussions about the influence of participants' culture and religion on their travel, it was apparent that their actions were controlled for fear of judgment. Some participants especially those who ascribed to the hijab, experienced negative encounters with the local population. Stereotyping was at the heart of the negative experiences.

'I often got asked by random people whether in the supermarket or in the malls, why you cover your hair? I faced that a lot and I would not mind if people ask me of course, but I did not like some of the reactions I got.' Hadia

I was asked by a man one day about my hijab; well I was so friendly with him and of course I answered him. After a long chat his answer was a bit rude as he kept saying that Hijab still does not make any sense to him. Well, I do respect his opinion but it is sad that people in the west here look at Muslim women or rather the woman who wears hijab as a weak person'. Vivian

'A Muslim woman wearing hijab, of course people will see me differently. The way people look at you, talk to you, or how I get treated is totally different compared to other women. I see that, and I do understand why they see us from this perspective, well it is because we are guided by rules which come from our religion, our culture, I think this is why they see us as not free women which is true'. Nour

The above quotations are examples of how Muslim women especially those visible through their head dress are often stigmatised and portrayed as oppressed. This recalls

Moufakkir's (2014) notion that those who display cultural differences and nonconformity are perceived by host societies to be abnormal and undesirable. Some of the participants' experiences also supported Moufakkier's view that visitors who come from countries whose nationals are immigrants living in the West become subject to the "stigmatizing host gaze" by association (p. 18). With their fear of and dissatisfaction with being judged, it is also interesting to note that some participants such as Nour acknowledged their lack of freedom and understood the way people perceived.

An unexpected finding in this research is the notion of being judgemental. Participants revealed their disapproving judgment about Western women they encountered during their trip:

'May be the way they behave in the nightclubs is a bit exaggerated, and sometimes I see women almost naked in the street, this is too much compared to my country where no woman dares to hold a cigarette and smoke in the street'. Donia

'the first strange thing was the first time I saw two ladies sitting next to each other and kissing, and that was so shocking to me as I do not want my kids to see that. Many things shocked me during this week in London like, I can even recall at the weekend, I saw group of guys and ladies were totally naked walking in the street which had a lot of people walking and taking photos and those people seemed very normal.' Laila

'I was on the beach and saw two men kissing, I felt offended as I also had my children with me'. Khadija

'I felt so embarrassed with my kids seeing people kissing in public. I wanted to cover my kids' eyes.' Rola

The above comments point to behaviour, acceptable in Western culture, that came as a shock to participants. Their adverse reaction is fuelled by a partial grasp of Western culture and the differences from Islamic societies where homosexuality for example is considered a crime. Asbollah et al. (2013) found that people's own way of life is central to their self -identity. Therefore, their gaze and perception of their own culture are very significant to a travel situation. This finds echo in Buddhahumbhitak's (2010) argument about the tourist gaze being socially constructed. The above situations were a source of

distress to some of the participants who came from very conservative Islamic cultures. Many of the participants stated that they prefer visiting Islamic destinations such as Dubai, Malaysia or Indonesia over Europe as they feel more comfortable with their cultural norms. This is of particular interest to tourism practitioners especially since Muslim travel is on the rise (Crescentrating 2022), perhaps more efforts need to be dedicated to promoting Muslim friendly destinations.

The findings also emphasise the influence of cultural norms and values on travel behaviours, particularly highlighting the discomfort some Muslim travellers might experience when visiting destinations where local customs differ significantly from their own, such as in attitudes towards homosexuality. This situation relates to gender sustainability in tourism by emphasising the importance of inclusivity and respect for diverse gender identities and sexual orientations in a global tourism context.

4.5 Returning home and making a difference

Not all participants' experiences were negative: some participants valued their time in the UK and embraced the gender related values. Being free while in the UK was a main theme in all interviews. Disagreement with some elements of Western culture did not detract from the benefits of their trip which in some cases were life changing.

'I am free here and I can do whatever I want. My time here is much easier. When I talk to people I feel more confident or if I go out I do not have that stress of thinking about people seeing me or not, I go to the nightclub by myself or with friends and I do not think about what people think about me because women are simply free in this country.' Salwa

The above comment denotes feelings of freedom and confidence. It was apparent that the travel experience had an empowering effect on some participants as they witnessed the freedom of women in Western societies and learned about how women should be treated. Some of them confessed that they would take some of these learned behaviours back home and change the way they treat their sisters and daughters:

'When I go home, I will let my daughter make choices in her life. I don't want to restrict her anymore, I want her to grow up feeling worthy and confident'. Rania

‘I will let my sister go out alone if she wants. I will even talk to my parents to allow her more freedom and my brother to stop controlling her’ Mai

It can be argued that the participants went through transformative learning, whereby they integrated other’s viewpoints and adopted a broader perspective on the world. This allowed them to develop new competencies and abilities (Pung et al. 2019). Tourism has the power to be an educational and enlightening experience, where individuals from more restrictive societies witness and experience different gender dynamics. As seen from the testimonies above, these experiences can lead to personal transformation and a re-evaluation of gender norms. This is especially significant when individuals decide to implement changes in their treatment and expectations of women within their own families upon returning home. This indicates a ripple effect where tourism indirectly contributes to gender sustainability by encouraging more equitable practices at a community level. Behavioural transformation is a result of transformative tourism experiences whereby new practices to benefit the community are acquired by tourists after their return home (Mkono 2016 Coghlan & Weiler 2018). Weiler (2018) states that positive behaviour change after a trip can only happen through a transformative process that sees a shift in personal knowledge, identity and existence (Coghlan & Weiler 2018). By looking at reversing some oppressive practices, participants found their trips to be a catalyst for attempting to unlearn patriarchy (Ratthinan & Selmat 2018) and achieve a degree of gender equality at home. This is in essence a way to empower women and girls in the family and reach an aspect of gender sustainability called for by the UNSDG particularly Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). By promoting gender sustainability through tourism, there is a tangible pathway to contribute to these global goals. Tourism then not only becomes an economic activity but also a transformative force for social and gender equity.

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study makes an original contribution to knowledge by exploring how gender, culture and religion influence Muslim female tourists’ perceptions of their travel experiences in the UK. The study extends the literature on the female tourist experience by focusing on the experiences of Muslim women holidaying in a Western destination. While there may be

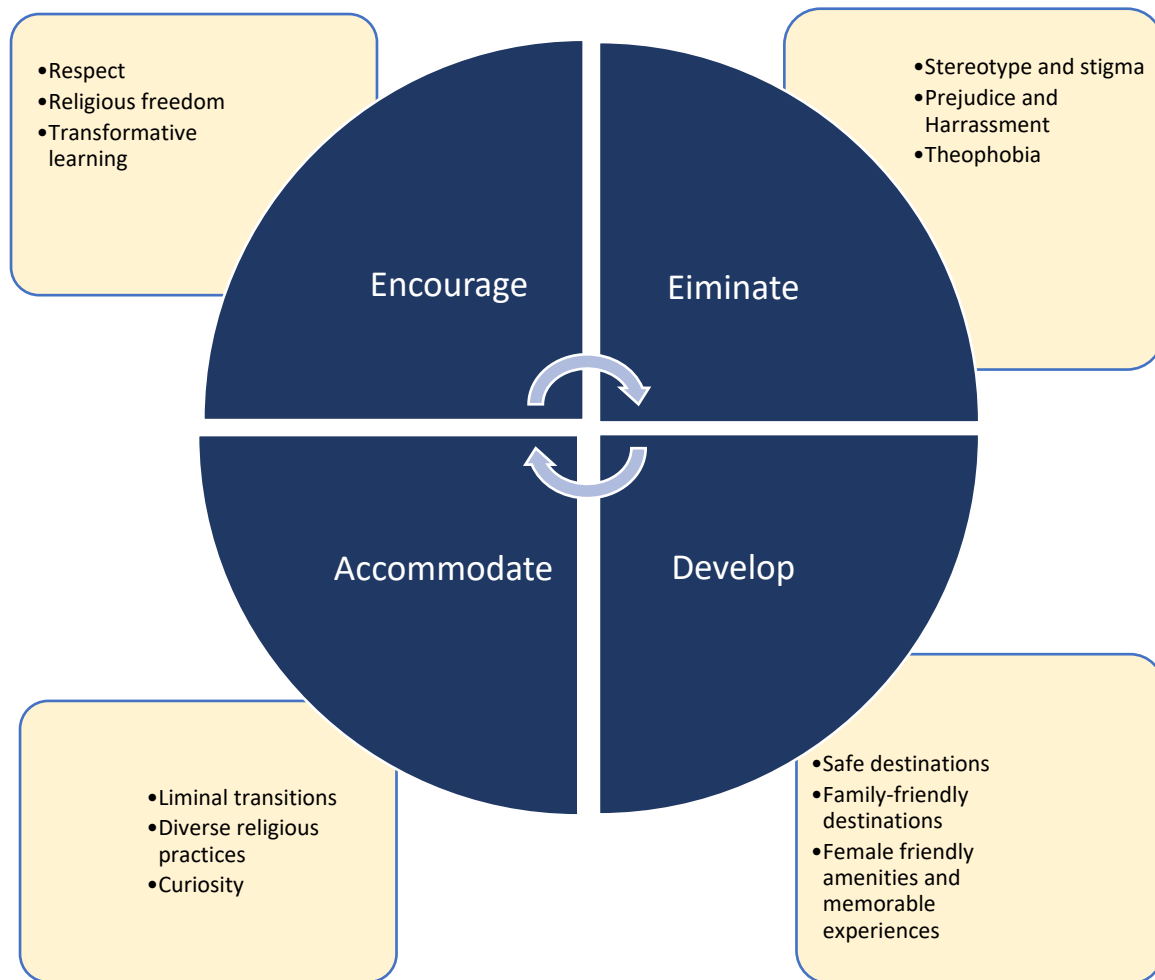
similarities across the female tourist experience irrespective of religion or belief system, we argue that the Islamic sociocultural context carries a great impact on Muslim female travellers. While research on gender and tourism has mainly focused on the restrictions women face, on solo travel and on travel motivations, this study is unique in exploring the important impact on tourist experiences and behaviour from cultural and religious identity.

The women interviewed in this study were subjected to a life of restrictions imposed by Islamic teachings and conservative cultural norms. Some were keen to experience freedom away from home, to push cultural boundaries, and the impacts were enduring and often powerful. This study therefore extends the literature on the transformative potential of tourism by focusing on the female Muslim tourist. However, their experiences were often limited by self-imposed cultural and religious boundaries. This study thus highlights the importance of self-surveillance in the experience of being a Muslim female tourist in the UK. Meanwhile, some women struggled with some Western values and were judgemental and disapproving. Eltahawy (2015) states that women are highly controlled in Islamic societies which carries implications for the way female tourists view other women in the West. Furthermore, some women found modern western values such as tolerance of homosexuality difficult to accept, and it is for this reason that they felt more comfortable visiting Islamic destinations. There is scant acknowledgement in the tourism of how tourists can be judgmental and stigmatising to different local groups due to their differing values and orientations, and herein our study makes an important contribution.

Extending understanding of the stigmatised tourist (see Moufakkir 2015), stereotyping and stigma were prevalent especially for women who are visibly Muslim (those who wear the head dress). They were discomfited and made vulnerable by the way they were perceived as being oppressed and less progressive. This negatively impacted on their enjoyment of their trip and lent a feeling of being exposed and vulnerable. In our previous research on Western female tourist experiences in Egypt, participants felt that their conformity to local gender roles and behaviour was necessary to smooth their journey through Egyptian society as they were heavily subjected to harassment and unwanted male attention. Conversely, this study indicates that not conforming to Western values (made visible through the wearing of the hijab), our participants were equally subjected to stereotyping and stigma.

To conclude, this feminist qualitative study, using a field work approach, sheds light on both the way that Muslim women are perceived and treated in Western destinations and the changes they undergo through their trips. By disseminating our work to academics and practitioners, we aim to enable a shift towards a more sustainable way of dealing with Muslim female tourists, contributing to their transformative learning and helping them benefit from the novel cultural practices and values they encounter during their journeys. This growing shift to consider ‘the gender complexity of the world’ aims to recognise the consequences of ‘gendered (un)sustainable’ tourism (Eger 2023: 1460). Figure 1 indicates our view on developing sustainable destinations from a gender and religious perspective. It puts forward four key parameters to build a respectful environment that allows religious freedom and enables transformative learning for Muslim female tourists. It calls for the elimination of deep-rooted stereotyping and stigma that many of the participants experienced. This can only happen when there is awareness of Muslim female tourists’ struggles and experiences both within and outside their own culture. The figure also underlines the importance of accommodating diverse religious practices and curiosity and understanding how female tourists can partake in new experiences to challenge their own cultural norms. The figure calls for developing sustainable destinations that cater for women, families and offer female-friendly memorable experiences.

Figure 1: Sustainable destinations: A Gender and religious perspective



Finally, this study develops awareness of a particular market segment and contributes not only to the growing literature on Muslim women’s experiences but also to tourism practitioners promoting their destination to the growing segment of Muslim female travellers.

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