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Australian Muslim women and fitness choices – myths debunked

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper was to better understand the underrepresentation of Muslim women living in Australia in physical activity and in group-fitness classes in particular. The authors contend that the Australian fitness industry has ignored the needs of this group through stereotypical islamophobic views focusing on religious dictates as the prime barrier for participation of this group. This study debunks this myth showing that motivations for exercise are complex and multi-faceted.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conducted interviews and a focus group with 27 Muslim women living in Australia. Through this method, the authors explored the role of religiosity and national culture in attitudes towards participation in exercise, gym attendance and group fitness classes.

Findings – The authors confirmed that while religion impacted the form and place of exercise options, it did not impact the overall motivation to engage in exercise. This study found that group-fitness classes offered by gyms did not particularly appeal to this group of women, partially due to their religion (this form of exercise being too aggressive and immodest) and partially due to their ethnic background. Exercise options that were more social were favoured. The authors found that notions of femininity and culturally embedded expectations for the role of women were more powerful predictors of exercise engagement and choice of exercise type.

Research limitations/implications – This research is exploratory in nature and as such its findings are restricted to the small sample. To extend this study's implications, a larger empirical study should be conducted and needs to also consider the intersection between national culture and religiosity on decision-making.

Practical implications – This study has practical implications for the fitness industry attempting to attractive new markets in a multi-cultural population. To attract Muslim women, gyms and fitness centres need to consider providing appropriate areas for women to exercise that allow them to maintain their modesty. To attract this segment, fitness products that are focused on a holistic approach to wellness and highlight opportunities for social interaction should be developed. Focusing on this group as a market segment needs to include a broader contextualisation of their lifestyles and individual situations and should not just focus on their religion.

Social implications – The requirements of the Muslim religion for women to adopt conservative dress and to avoid contact with men do hinder their ability and also their desire to exercise to maintain a healthy mind and body. Many of these women would like to exercise but find it difficult to find the right settings and form of exercise that suits their needs. Engaging in exercise with others is also an important way for these women to integrate into their communities and to assimilate with the national culture.

Originality/value – This research is original in that it is one of the first to explore attitudes of Muslim women towards exercise and group-fitness classes in Australia. In particular, it includes an examination of the impact of religiosity on motivations and attitudes towards fitness and is the first to consider the relationship between religion, ethnic background and notions of femininity in the context of fitness. The influence of religiosity is an area heavily impacted by cultural bias and stereotyping, and it is therefore important for a deeper understanding of this issue in the services domain.

Keywords Religiosity, Body image, Fitness, Muslim women, Motivation for exercise

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Growing health awareness, stressful modern living and increasing discretionary income have stimulated the growth

and global expansion of the fitness industry (Andreasson and Johansson, 2016) such that going to the gym now rates second after walking for participation for Australian men and women (ABS, 2015). The group fitness classes offered by gyms and fitness centres are increasingly popular accounting for more than 50 per cent of all visits to gyms (Andreasson and Johansson, 2016). While women dominate group-fitness

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classes (Fitness Australia, 2016), the cultural bias of this form of exercise is unlikely to appeal to all women who reside in a multi-cultural country such as Australia. One group under-represented in this form of exercise, and in physical activity generally, is of Muslim women living in Australia (ABS, 2015; Australian Sports Commission, 2017; Sporting Equals UK, 2015).

Despite the history of consumer research in the context of gyms and (Sassatelli, 2010; Andreasson and Johansson, 2014), investigation of the impact of cross-cultural factors and religiosity on fitness participation has escaped scholarly attention. Downplaying the complexity of this issue, and marginalising the problem to one of gender or dress has resulted in gyms and fitness centres overlooking Muslim women as a potential market segment. Muslim women are assumed to be not interested in, or precluded from, exercise and physical activity due to their religious practices (Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012; Zaman, 1997; Walseth, 2006; Maxwell and Taylor, 2010). We contend this over-simplification of the underrepresentation of Muslim women in Australia for exercise ignores existing research on exercise motivation and the impact of religiosity on decision-making. Australian Muslim women could represent an untapped market opportunity for gyms and fitness centres in Australia if more were known about the true impact of religiosity on their exercise motivations (Fitness Australia, 2016).

To explore our contention, we interviewed Muslim women living in Australia about the impact of religiosity on their attitudes towards exercise and gym attendance. Our findings de-bunk the myth of religious oppression of Islamic women deprived of their basic rights to their own bodies through exercise choices. In fact, this segment represents an untapped opportunity for the fitness industry. Our exploratory findings make two contributions to the services marketing literature. First, we add to the understanding of motivations for fitness participation of multi-cultural minority groups such as Muslim Women in Australia. Second, we reveal the Muslim market to be diverse and unbounded concluding that while religion can be a useful starting point for segmentation, care is needed not to overemphasise faith at the expense of other aspects of identity.

Literature review

Increasing competition in the fitness industry has challenged service providers to meet the changing demands of their customers (Teik, 2015). Servicescape differentiation, targeting the needs of niche segments, allows gyms to appeal to new markets (Tombs and McColl-Kennedy, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2012; Teik, 2015). The Muslim community and in particular Muslim women are one such group with specific needs that could benefit from this approach. Muslims in general are an under-researched market segment for the fitness industry, and exploration of opportunities for faith-based segmentation in the broader services sector is scant (Alserhan, 2010; Wilson and Liu, 2011).

Faith-based segmentation

Religious beliefs are one of the many factors known to influence consumer purchase decision-making and behaviour (Ahmad, 2017; Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012; Alam et al., 2011), and the degree of impact is dependant on the commitment of the

individual to the religious beliefs, activities and rituals (Wilson and Liu, 2011). Faith-based segmentation targets the needs, motivations, values and/or religious dictates of specific religious groups (Zarouali, 2016). While the potential of this approach has been recognised in the food (halal) and banking (Islamic banking) sector, faith-based marketing is still not commonly practiced (Sandıkcı and Rice, 2011).

With 1.8 billion people identifying as Muslims, and the emergence of an affluent middle class with a desire for avant-garde consumption accounting for US\$2.2tn in spending (Zarouali, 2016), Islam is one religion with potential for faith-based segmentation. However, Muslims are often overlooked as a viable market segment, stereotyped as having low socioeconomic status and being unmotivated by Western consumption values (Wilson and Liu, 2011; Goodman, 2015; Alserhan, 2010; Zarouali, 2016). This view is particularly common in the fitness sector where the negative stereotyping of Muslim people, and in particular women, is pervasive (Melewar and Alwi, 2017).

Motivations for exercise

The cliché of Muslim women is that they are restricted from and disinterested in leisure, fitness and fashion by virtue of their faith (Temporal, 2011; Alserhan, 2010; Wilson and Liu, 2011). Indeed, despite the efforts of health practitioners and governments attempting to stimulate participation in physical activity for Muslim women, the consistently low participation rates, even in Muslim majority countries, support this notion (Walseth, 2006; Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012; McCue, 2008; Soltani, 2016; El Ansari et al., 2014).

Participation in physical activity is a great catalyst for social enabling (Rohm et al., 2006) with group exercise classes in particular known to foster community building and integration for immigrant groups (Heley and Jones, 2013; Walseth and Fasting, 2004; Mullen and Whaley, 2010). It should therefore follow that the social element of gym attendance provided by group-fitness classes should make this form of exercise an attractive option for migrant and socially marginalised women such as Muslim women in Australia. Despite this, Australian Muslim women form a small or almost non-existent market for these group fitness classes (Ellin, 2009) and have the lowest participation rates in all forms of physical activity (ABS, 2015; Walseth and Fasting, 2004). This leads us to question whether these low participation rate means Muslim women are not interested *per se* in physical activity (their attitudes to physical activity) or whether the way sport is organised and the options available to them preclude them from engagement due to religious dictates.

Body image

One powerful motivator for exercise for both men and women is the desire to improve health outcomes and appearance (Crossley, 2006). Body image, in particular, influences exercise engagement and the form of exercise chosen for women for Hurst et al. (2017) and Crossley (2006). Body image refers to the attitudes reflective of a person's acceptance of and appreciation for the body (Homan and Tylka, 2014). Body dissatisfaction, obsession with physical appearance and low body weight for women have traditionally been associated with Western cultures (Frisén and Holmqvist, 2010). However,

these attitudes are increasingly becoming an issue in other parts of the globe, including Muslim majority countries where body image dissatisfaction and obsession with thinness are on the rise (Angail, 2015; Van den Berg *et al.*, 2010).

Building on this knowledge, the desire to improve appearance is a common appeal used by gyms targeting women as a reason to join. This approach does not appear to resonate with Muslim women as their gym attendance participation rates remain low. This leads us to question how migrant communities who have not been enculturated to the Western ideology of the perfect female form interpret or relate to body image as a motivator for exercise (Dunkel *et al.*, 2010; Đurović *et al.*, 2016).

Demographic, biological, psychological/psychosocial, social cultural and environmental perspectives have all been explored in the search for answers to the question of uneven participation for Muslim women in physical activity (Kahan, 2002; Walseth and Fasting, 2004; Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012) with little consensus emerging on an answer. Understanding Muslim women's attitudes to exercise and the impact of religion and religiosity on their lifestyle choices may contribute more to this discourse.

Religiosity is an under-valued variable that may partially explain some of the variance in exercise participation for Muslim women (Lindridge, 2005; Sood and Nasu, 1995). It is our contention that religion could be a factor when examining multi-cultural issues related to participation in physical activity and low gym attendance for Australian Muslim women (Alam *et al.*, 2011; Walseth and Fasting, 2003; Lindridge, 2005).

Religiosity

Religions are human-made institutions providing a distinct worldview based on a belief in some superhuman or natural entity (Kahan, 2002). Religiosity refers to the attitude and behaviours (Sood and Nasu, 1995) towards religious beliefs, prescribed behaviours and the observance of religious rituals (Tiliouine *et al.*, 2009). The degree of a person's religiosity can be categorised on a continuum from high to low depending on the commitment one has to their religious laws, rituals and beliefs (Sood and Nasu, 1995). The application of religious instruction and the degree of religious influence (religiosity) on behaviour depends on a person's cultural, environmental and socio-economic orientation (Kahan, 2002; Muhamad and Mizerski, 2010; Whitehouse, 1995).

Religious affiliation and strength of faith have been shown to be a significant factor in ideals about health in many religions (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2007; Kahan, 2002; Lindridge, 2005). Religious doctrine can either enable health behaviours or proscribe boundaries governing health behaviour (Khan, 2002). The doctrinal assertions of many faiths that God is merciful, loving and forgiving suggest appearance would not be important to whichever deity is being worshipped.

Research on relationships between religion and health behaviour provide a mixed picture with some studies highlighting religiosity as a reason for not exercising, while others have found no support for this view (Kahan, 2002; Walseth and Fasting, 2003; Lindridge, 2005; Zaman, 1997). This contradiction and the fact that religion prioritises the desirability or undesirability of various human endeavours, supports our contention that the

relationship between religion and physical activity warrants more attention (Cleveland *et al.*, 2013; Chui and Kwok, 2008).

In Islam, the degree of a person's religiosity stems from the extent to which they observe the "five pillars" of their faith. These are belief in one God and Muhammad as is His Prophet; performance of prayers five times a day; almsgiving; fasting during the month of Ramadan; and pilgrimage to Mecca (El-Menouar, 2014). For Muslims, being highly religious means unquestionable observance of all practices recommended through the holy book "Quran" and the Prophet's teachings (Tiliouine *et al.*, 2009).

One of the main tenets of Islam is the requirement to take care of the body through healthy eating and exercise (Ellin, 2009). However, this can be problematic for Muslim women particularly when adhering to religious principles about modesty. Even in Muslim majority countries, women struggle to find appropriate spaces to engage in regular physical activity (Maxwell and Taylor, 2010). While the provision of women-only group exercise classes is a popular solution (Devito, 2014), it only addresses the obvious barrier of low participation for Muslim women and does not consider the more complex underlying motivations at play.

While research has suggested the lack of engagement in physical activity for Muslim women can in part be explained by social, religious and cultural factors (Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012; Mahmud and Swami, 2010; Toffoletti and Palmer, 2017), consumption and economic data relative to this segment suggests a possible confound with these research findings. If we assume the behaviour of Muslim women – low-participation in physical activity – is mostly attributable to religious, social and cultural barriers, then we would also expect their consumption of other related health and beauty products and services should also be low.

This however is not the case. Instead, we see the affluent middle class of Muslim women increasing their spending on fashion and other lifestyle products and services (cosmetics, hair care and travel) – with more than 200 euro on average per month being spent on high class fashion alone (Zarouali, 2016; Melewar and Alwi, 2017). This suggests participation in physical activity is a more complex issue than can be explained by religiosity alone. It also highlights the need to understand the attitudes of Muslim women towards physical activity and how these attitudes align (or do not align) with their behaviour.

Our investigation also takes up the call from Islamic Marketing scholars to better understand the Muslim market (Ahmad, 2017; Melewar and Alwi, 2017) by exploring beyond the single lens of religious norms. Marketers need to consider that a narrow conceptualisation of religion and faith as a one-size-fits-all may not factor in the effect of other aspects of a consumer's identity such as their culture and socio-economic status (Melewar and Alwi, 2017). We need to pay more attention to how a Muslim consumer negotiates and interprets their faith within the desires of a modern consumption setting and to consider how their country of origin also impacts how a religion is practiced (Whitehouse, 1995). Thus, we could conceive that to generalise "Muslim women", as a homogenous segment may not be entirely valid.

If the fitness industry is to re-think their views about the opportunities in targeting Muslim women, then an understanding of the motivations for exercise for these women and how this is

negotiated within the constraints of their religious and cultural norms is essential. The industry needs to move beyond a focus on the requirement for modest dress (in particular, the hijab or burka) and gender segregation (Australian Sports Commission, 2017).

It is our contention that the existing servicescapes offered by gyms and fitness centres, both social and physical, disenfranchise Muslim women. Further, we propose by exploring the attitudes of Muslim women to fitness and exercise in general, we may gain a deeper understanding of their motivations for, and choices of, physical activity and better understand the impact of religiosity and culture on those choices.

To seek answers to these gaps in our knowledge about factors affecting exercise participation rates for Muslim women in Australia, we explored the following research questions:

- RQ1.* What role does religiosity play in the motivations for Australian Muslim women to engage in physical activity?
- RQ2.* What role does religiosity play in the motivations for Australian Muslim women to attend a gym for group-fitness classes?

Method

This study used a qualitative approach to data collection as prescribed by other studies of minority women and culturally and linguistically diverse populations examining fitness motivations (Gregg and Bedard, 2016; Biddle et al., 2001). The complexity and sensitivity of the issues under investigation support a qualitative approach allowing researchers to develop a deeper understanding of the research issues (Seidman, 2013). We used convergent interviewing in this study to provide a context for fitness behaviour (Hutson, 2016). Next, we used a focus group to gain further insight into issues of nationality versus religiosity as an influencer in motivations to engage in physical activity.

The context of the interviews involved three broad areas:

- 1 general attitudes towards fitness;
- 2 fitness habits and preferences; and
- 3 the impact of religiosity on the motivations for exercise, the choice of fitness activities and group-fitness classes in the gym specifically.

Baseline demographic data, information on exercise frequency, ethnic background and religiosity were also collected as background variables in this study.

For the focus group, these same three areas were explored along with an additional investigation into impact of culture or nationality in addition to religiosity on these choices.

Women in both the interviews and focus group self-determined their degree of religiosity as follows:

- strictly practising – follow and practice all five pillars of Islam;
- moderately practising – believe in the five pillars but do not strictly observe all rituals;
- casually practicing – believe in the five pillars but do not observe rituals except on major occasions; and
- rarely practicing – believe in the five pillars and do not observe any rituals.

Participants indicated their degree of frequency for exercise as follows:

- exercise regularly – exercise purposely at least three times per week;
- exercise occasionally – exercise purposely once per week or less; and
- exercise rarely/never – no purposeful exercise program or regime followed.

Participants for the interviews were chosen using purposive sampling commencing with personal contacts. Participants were from the Australian cities of Sydney, Armidale and Toowoomba. The primary criteria for selecting the participants for the study was they had to be Muslim women over the age of 18 residing in Australia. There was no requirement for participants to have any particular level of fitness or participation rates for physical activity. Face-to-face interviews were conducted, and they lasted for 30 min on average and were digitally recorded.

Twenty women participated in the interviews; Table I provides the descriptive statistics of these respondents. As the table shows, most of the respondents were well-educated married women, most had children and all were working in some capacity. The ages of the women ranged between 26 and 40 years. All women were currently living in Australia. A third of these women were practising their religion strictly and two-thirds were not.

Analysis of the interviews highlighted national culture emerging influencing the expectations for gender specific activities such as household duties and exercise choice and how these women negotiated their interpretation of their religious obligations. This finding needed further exploration. Thus, we elected to conduct a focus group discussion with eight Muslim women from different cultural backgrounds. The focus group also allowed the researchers to corroborate the findings from the interviews as a part of ‘member checking’ practice (Morgan, 1996).

Participants were invited to the session using the same methodology as for the interviews. These women were all over the age of 18 years, residing in Australia and from different cultural or ethnic backgrounds. There was no requirement for these women to have any specific interest in, or engagement levels with, physical activity or exercise.

The eight women who participated in the focus group ranged in age from 18 to 46 years. About half of these women self-identified as moderately practising Muslims and all were well educated. The ethnic mix of these women was divided with half originating in the Middle East and half in Asia. Table I provides the demographic statistics for the focus group. While the respondents in both of these samples are not representative of all Muslim women in Australia, every attempt was made to generate a sample sufficiently diverse in terms of demographics, religiosity, ethnic background and exercise frequency to provide the researchers with answers into the research questions being explored.

The verbal content of each interview and the focus group were transcribed independently by two researchers to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts. Thematic content analysis investigated the themes from both the interview data and the focus group. Constant comparative technique (Glaser and

Table I Descriptive statistics of sample (in-depth interviews and focus group)

Demographic	Descriptor	Interview ^a	Focus group ^a	Total
Age	18 – 21	2	3	5
	22 – 25	4	0	4
	26 – 30	6	0	6
	31 – 40	6	3	9
	41 – 50+	2	2	4
Highest level of education	Secondary School	3	3	6
	Vocational training qualification (TAFE)	6	0	6
	Undergraduate degree	7	0	7
	Post graduate degree	4	5	9
Personal income	<\$20,000	3	6	9
	\$20,001 – \$35,000	9	0	9
	\$35,001 – \$50,000	4	0	4
	\$50,001 – \$65,000	2	2	4
	\$60,001 – \$80,000+	2	0	2
Ethnic background	Asian – Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, MalaDescriptivysia, Indonesia, Afghanistan	10	4	14
	Middle-east – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Syria, Iran, Jordan	8	4	12
	African – Sudan, Ethiopia	2	0	2
Marital status	Married	15	5	20
	Single	3	3	6
	Divorced	2	0	2
Employment status	Full-time employed	4	4	8
	Part-time employed	9	0	9
	Casual employed	6	1	7
	Self-employed	1	0	1
	Unemployed	0	3	3
Number of children	None	5	3	8
	1 child	8	1	9
	2 children	5	4	9
	3 or more children	2	0	2
Religiosity	Practice religion strictly	6	5	11
	Practice religion moderately	9	0	9
	Practice religion casually	4	3	7
	Practice religion rarely	1	0	1
Frequency of engaging in exercise	Regularly	8	3	11
	Occasionally	7	5	12
	Never	5	0	5

Note: ^a20 participants in the interviews and 8 participants in the focus group

Strauss, 1967) used simultaneously with data collection ensured rigorous data analysis.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data is presented in line with the research questions posed. Where quotes are provided they will be coded as IP for interview participants and FP for focus group participants.

RQ1. What role does religiosity play in the motivations for Australian Muslim women to engage in physical activity?

Most of the respondents in both the interviews and the focus group expressed a positive attitude towards fitness and exercising regularly, and all confirmed that their religion supported this view. For these women, the importance of ensuring a healthy body and mind was paramount:

I like to exercise and stay fit. My husband and I go to the gym regularly (IP – Middle East).

I am dead against this idea of women not attending gyms and getting fit (IP - Asia).

Due to the restrictions from our religion, we are not allowed to try many things for entertainment. I think attending gym can solve this problem to a great extent (FP - Asia).

When it comes to exercise, I think, there is nothing for women to stop them to exercise because our religion actually tells us to be healthy. (FP – Middle East).

For those interview participants who expressed a less positive attitude towards purposive exercise, household chores and time were cited as barriers to their engagement:

I do not have time to exercise; keeping the house tidy and looking after kids keeps, me fit (IP - Africa).

My first duty is to my husband and family before I can take time for myself to exercise (IP – Middle East).

No one back home used to talk about female body fitness. We have learned about this development after coming to this country’ – (IP - Africa).

When we explored this further in the focus group, we noted the expectations for gender specific roles in different cultures appeared to be more responsible for attitudes towards an appropriate way to spend leisure time than religiosity *per se*. Muslim women from the Middle East expressed a greater sense of responsibility first to their families and to attending to household duties than to their own personal fitness than did those from Asian countries:

We all have responsibilities towards our family and we can do physical activities only after completing all household work (FP – Middle East).

As long as I know that I am not doing something wrong, nothing can stop me from going to the gym. You can wear decent clothes and not invite people to look at you if you care so much. I am a flexible in how I practice my faith and do not think that I subscribe to the idea of not doing physical exercises due to the religious influence (FP Asia).

My culture is not really so rigid about female participation in fitness related activities when that is done in an environment which is very conducive to the maintenance of values of a Muslim female (FP – Asia).

Some interview participants noted they felt restricted in their exercise choices due to religious obligations, particularly in their home country. The more relaxed culture of Australia meant they could be less strict and enjoy more freedoms when it came to exercise choice:

I would not go to a gym at home where there were men, but here [in Australia] I can leave off my Hijab and go to the gym with my husband without any problems (IP – Middle East).

When we explored this idea in the focus group, we found new insights. The conversation suggested Australia's more relaxed cultural attitudes towards women's roles, clothing choices and exercise participation motivated these women to exercise more regularly regardless of their religion and their nationality:

It is pretty easy here [in Australia] to go to the gym and engaging in fitness activities. It is not like home. Here we can do what we want (FP – Asia).

All participants were conscious of maintaining a physically attractive appearance (body image). Many commented that they engaged in exercise to create and maintain a positive body image confirming that positive body image is a global phenomenon accepted by females regardless of religiosity or national culture:

Women in all parts of the world are very conscious about the way they look and they do whatever they can to make them physically attractive – I am a female too and I feel in the same way' (IP – Asia).

I think most women go to fitness centres to make them look attractive by giving their bodies the shape they would dream of. There are exceptions perhaps, but vast majority fall into this category. They may not admit this, but that is the case (IP – Asia).

Working out actually makes you feel better within yourself. Your energy level tends to increase as well. If you eat wrong and do not stay fit, you gain weight and feel not happy with your appearance and energy level. Whereas, if you do work out you feel good about yourself and it looks good on you (FP – Middle East).

When participants of both interviews and the focus group were asked about the influence of their religious beliefs on their body image, they all thought a desire to create an ideal self was not confined by the rules of their religion. For some of these women, it was the judgement of other women rather than being attractive to males, motivating them to keep in shape. For these women, apart from their families, only other women saw them uncovered and they felt compelled to look good and dress well in these circumstances:

I am so concerned about my figure that I take a look of myself through the mirror every time when I come across one. Don't think that I am different as I know my friends do the same thing. I know someone who wears 'Hijab' but has the same obsession about her body and that she takes her hijab out in public toilets just to have a look of herself through the mirror to make sure she looks alright. (IP – Middle East)

Women face competition from each other in the way they look and they make all sorts of efforts to make them look beautiful – this has nothing to do with attracting a male. So, it is quite natural even for a Muslim female to take her hijab out at the place of convenience to put on make-up or to have a view of herself through mirror (IP – Africa).

This was not the case for those who chose modest Western dress without a veil. For them, looking good for their families and husband was important:

The Quran tells us it is important to look after our bodies and to stay active and healthy, this of course results in a good shape and attractive form. Even though I have a husband and children I feel it is important to stay attractive for them and to follow the Quran (IP – Asia).

When this was explored further in the focus group, participants talked feely about the concept of physical attractiveness and its popularity even among very conservative Muslims regardless of nationality. Their conversation suggested even conservative Muslim women spend significant amount time engaging in physical exercise at home using videos and other tools to improve their body image and the way they look. These women were exercising to remain attractive to their husbands even though they covered themselves when outside the home:

I want to look slim even though I wear the hijab. (FP-Asia)

Since I'm not wearing the hijab and I still want to use (wear) cute clothes. I still do it (exercise) for pictures. (FP-Asia)

It's not just for others, it's for you as well. You know you feel so good when you are healthy and look smart and your body is in good shape. (FP-Middle East)

Only five interview respondents were not very active in the discussion related with body image. These participants – all from more strict Muslim countries in the Middle East – indicated they did not think about their body image; however, they acknowledged the importance of being physically fit and healthy as part of their religious beliefs. For these women, focusing on how they looked was not as important as being a good mother and wife and health was not related to looks. Some of these women indicated that housework and chores themselves were a sufficient way to get exercise and that even participation in their daily prayers (Salat) was also seen as a good form of exercise:

The act of praying is quite physically demanding and originally it was designed to be a good way to stay fit and healthy. It is enough for me (IP – Middle East).

Why go to a gym? There are plenty of work to do at home, and carrying out all these activities is one kind of physical exercise (IP – Africa).

When this idea was explored in the focus group, most felt that while the prayer ritual was definitely a good way to get exercise, it was very lonely and that playing sport or going to the gym were more fun ways to stay fit. They emphasised the social aspects of sport and exercise were important to them and commented that regular exercise did not have to interfere with the requirements of being a good mother and wife. All of the women in the focus group linked health to physical appearance, and this view did not change with nationality within this group.

When asked about their opinions regarding the requirement of Islam to dress modestly and wearing of the hijab and how this

influenced their fitness choices, most of the interview participants did not see this as a factor. This view was also consistent for the focus group participants and there was no substantial difference in this view by nationality:

Muslim females are not encouraged to wear revealing clothes but that should not stop them from going to the gym either as there are decent clothing available. Moreover, there are also gyms that offer separate facilities for women. There are scopes to address all cultural issues (IP – Asia).

Islam strictly says you can't expose yourselves. You can't expose your body. It's not just for women but also for men. Men also can't just expose their body to women either. You have to dress very modestly, you have to cover yourself in a proper manner (so that) you are not exposing yourself. You also have to be careful of the exercises you choose. Waving your legs around in the air is not appropriate no matter what you are wearing (FP – Asia)

RQ2. What role does religiosity play in the motivations for Australian Muslim women to attend a gym for group-fitness classes?

Most respondents in the interviews were supportive of the idea of women going to a gym or to fitness centres to get healthy, to feel better about themselves and to meet other women. Socialisation and mental refreshment (getting out of the house) was a strong motivator for these women to engage in exercise at a gym. This view was also consistent with the focus group participants who also noted making friends from new cultures was an important motivation for going to the gym.

Participants in both the interviews and focus group viewed the gym as a social hub and felt gyms were great places not just to exercise but also for assimilating with others to gain social acceptance by people from different ethnic backgrounds and learning new cultural norms. For example:

It is a great way to escape the drudgery of the house and to meet my friends (IP – Asia).

I love the opportunity to meet new people and to practice my English (IP – Asia).

I love to work out and then have coffee with my friends; we catch up on what everyone is doing and help each other (IP – Middle East).

Some of my friends only like going to the gym with others from their same culture, I love meeting new people as well (IP – Middle East).

You get to meet new people, become their friends and can share your stories and thoughts with them. Staying at home and performing household activities is something that you have to do, and that's what makes life really boring at times. Attending gym can take that pressure away and bring some change in life. (FP – Middle east)

It is of course a great way to spend your time when you get really get exhausted with a monotonous job like housekeeping. Working out alone is boring. That is why I would like to spend my time doing activities that are important for my health while interacting with others to fulfil social needs. (FP – Middle East)

While going to the gym was seen an acceptable form of exercise for all the Muslim women who participated in our study, organised group-fitness classes were not particularly attractive to them nor seen as an enjoyable option. When we explored this in more detail, swimming, playing games such as soccer or basketball and dancing were cited as more attractive exercise options than group fitness classes.

The group fitness options were seen as too aggressive and not suitable for women. This view was very culturally specific with those from the Middle East being more vocal about this form of exercise being inappropriate than those from more moderate Asian cultures. For example:

I have watched those classes at my gym, but they look too aggressive for me – all that kicking and yelling – it doesn't look like much fun. I'd rather play a game for exercise or work out with my friends (IP – Africa).

The Quran tells women to exercise, particularly running, swimming and archery. I love to swim; aerobics does not interest me at all (FP – Middle East).

The interview participants who expressed less positive attitudes towards attending a gym said they would only consider for this form of activity, if certain basic religious values were not compromised. In particular, bodily movement in front of male was more of an issue than clothing restrictions. These respondents expressed preference for a separate facility or exercise area for women so they would not be exposed to men and where they could exercise in safety. Their concerns were about maintaining modesty through their clothing choices, and they did note this required some cultural adjustment in Australia compared to their country of birth (e.g. wearing regular pants and shirts):

Getting exposed to males while walking down the road or working in the office is something that we are now accustomed to. But, you do not really need to expose yourself to a male while working out if there are separate facilities like they have in some places (IP – Asia).

Going to places where it is only for women, you do not run such risk. Muslim women in such environment can take their 'hijab' out; feel free, be themselves, close back-up and go home when done (IP – Middle East).

I do not want any male to observe my bodily movements while carrying out physical activities. This goes against my values which are based on my religion. As Muslim women, there are many restrictions that are being imposed on our lives. Some of those restrictions are being compromised because we are living a different condition here. For example, I am not wearing "hijab" and am exposing myself to other people from different gender. But that does not mean that I will allow myself to go out there to do a demonstration of my bodily movements in front of a male. (IP – Middle East).

This view was also supported by a few of the focus group participants who were more vocal about the un-attractiveness of group-fitness classes as an option for them. The main issue for these women was the discomfort they would feel participating in this form of exercise even in a segregated setting:

I've seen some people do yoga with partners. I think yoga is great but if the partner is another gender like a man, my father will kill me. As long as our partner is, the same gender no (body) movement is not allowed (FP-Asia).

Some types of exercise are difficult if we strictly follow the Quran. It is made very clear that you bring your head covering in front of your bosoms so that you cover your bosoms. We have to be very modest. The religion teaches us moderation and modesty. Especially for swimming it gets difficult, we can't wear a bikini and go on a beach where there are other men. It is not allowed at all. We have restrictions there. Definitely in Islam it's not allowed to expose yourself so much. If there are only women it is allowed, but when there are men, you can't expose yourself. (FP – Middle East).

Discussion

Those who practice Islam look to the Quran for guidance on all aspects of behaviour, norms and lifestyle choices. The Quran emphasises the importance of a modest approach to all things including eating, exercise, dress and behaviour for men and women. This requirement for modesty in dress has resulted in the adoption of clothing choices for women considered to be extreme and excessively restrictive from a Western viewpoint (the Burhka for example). In non-Muslim majority countries, the Burkah and the Hijab instantly identify women as being of Muslim faith and with this comes Islamophobic stereotyping in relation to attitudes and behavioural expectations.

The decision to wear the Hijab or Burkah is viewed as a symbol of oppression and restricted freedoms for Muslim women when it comes to their bodies and lifestyle choices. It has also led the fitness industry to assume a Muslim women's religion inhibits and prevents their participation and interest in physical activity and exercise and fitness. Certainly, this view was supported by data from many countries including Australia, consistently showing Muslim women with low participation rates in physical exercise.

Thus, we developed our initial position for this study that religiosity would be a significant factor in understanding the low participation of Australian Muslim women in physical exercise at gyms and fitness centres. Further, we posited that the Islamophobic stereotyping of Muslim women by the fitness industry had resulted in these women being discounted as a potential market segment with the service offering of gyms and fitness centre not sufficiently sensitive to their religious and cultural needs.

Our findings showed Muslim women in this study: understood the importance of being healthy; were sufficiently motivated to engage in exercise on a regular basis; and were positively predisposed to attending fitness centres and gyms. While some of the women in our study were not practicing their religion strictly, all noted that principles of Islam stressed the importance of being healthy, and eating well and exercising to achieve this goal. In summary, being a Muslim did not preclude these women from being interested in and participating in physical exercise on a regular basis.

Previous research examining exercise motivation has agreed this is a complex issue influenced by both individual and social factors (Laverie, 1998; Mullen and Whaley, 2010; Teik, 2015). While it is known the goals and motivations for fitness and the attractiveness of different fitness products vary with gender and age (Patterson, 2007; Teik, 2015), there still remains a void in our understanding of the impact of religion and ethnicity on exercise motivations (Ram et al., 2004). Our study has addressed this gap and contributed to the literature exploring exercise motivations of a marginalised population – Muslim women living in Australia (Walseth, 2006).

The work of Walseth (2006) provided us with a sound framework for understanding how religiosity might affect the motivations for exercise of Muslim women. She called for more research exploring the relationship between Muslim women's ethnic identity and the notion of femininity to understand participation of Muslim women in sport (Walseth, 2006). Our study took up this call with results highlighting the strong influence of body image derived from modern notions of femininity (looking good and surviving the scrutiny of other women), as a motivator for exercise participation for these women (Walseth, 2006). What was new was our finding that religiosity played a role in how this motivation translated into behaviour. Regardless of how strictly the women in our study practiced their religion, all noted the desire to live good Islamic lives and to abide by the Quran's principles. How these women negotiated this when it came to exercise choices in Australia – a country with liberal cultural norms and different expectations of the role of women – was strongly influenced by their home country's cultural norms and values.

Our study found that ethnicity established appropriate roles for women, and this created a lens through which religious

dictates were interpreted and translated into exercise choices. This confirms our earlier contention that attitudes of Muslim women to exercise choice and motivation for physical activity was likely to be more complex than could be explained by solely by religion. Indeed our contribution provides further evidence to the debate that to restrict our thinking about this potential market segment to narrow assumptions about what it is to be a Muslim, is restrictive and counterproductive (Ahmad, 2017). We have confirmed in this exploratory study that there exists multiple interpretations of Islam and multiple ways for the same motivation to translate into behaviour.

In addition to contributing to the discourse on exercise motivation, our study also contributed to the services marketing literature by finding that while religiosity did not directly affect the decision of whether to exercise, it influenced both the form and place of exercise choices for Muslim women in Australia. Consistent with Walseth (2006), we noted some forms of exercise were not appealing to the Muslim women, despite them being given licence to participate. In particular, many of the group fitness classes offered by gyms were not attractive as they were too aggressive (boxing and Mui Thai); too suggestive in terms of bodily movement (some yoga classes); and/or not social enough (general aerobics). The women in our study preferred social exercise options like team sports (volleyball). For these women, attending a gym needed to be a social experience, with opportunities to foster relationships with others, have time out from their daily lives and to improve solidarity within their own cultural groups and maintain their overall well-being.

Our findings that religiosity impacts the choice of place and exercise execution options for Muslim women also extend the existing servicescape literature. Gym appearance, ambiance and opportunities for social engagement in fitness centres and gyms are known to be more important for women than men (Kim et al., 2016; Sassatelli, 2010). What was not known was how these attitudes might differ by ethnicity and religiosity (Teik, 2015).

We found that religiosity did pose hurdles for some women in our study about where they exercised and the suitability of gyms and fitness centres as places for exercise. However, the social benefits of exercising in a gym with other women were a strong enough motivator for them to consider alternative strategies to overcome these hurdles and still maintain their religious principles. While the concept of women only gyms addressed some of these issues and were seen as an attractive option for some of the women in our study, most did not see this as necessary. If a gym was to offer culturally appropriate spaces for women to work out where they could maintain modesty and be somewhat separate from men, then this would ameliorate many of their issues. The existence of hijabs designed for exercise and physical activities and other outfits now available also made the issue of dress less of a problem.

Thus, we debunk the myth that Muslim women are restricted by their religion from exercising and that requirement for modest dress is the main reason they do not engage in physical activity. Our exploratory study of Muslim women has highlighted the translation of the principles of Islam into daily life and consumption choices vary from person to person. Further, we noted cultural norms and perceptions of femininity influenced how religiosity directed exercise choices and

behaviours. Our study found that for these women, that while attitudes about femininity did include perceptions of body image, it also included views about the gender-specific roles of women and these ideals determined how strictly or how liberally religious norms and values were interpreted and their subsequent impact on exercise behaviour.

Our study has highlighted that in multi-cultural settings, service providers should look beyond ethnicity and religion as discrete and independent factors to determine a market segment. These descriptors alone neither provide sufficient understanding of the identity of consumers to successfully apply segmentation principles nor do justice to the complexity of human behaviour and the inter-relationships of many of these variables. Our study has provided evidence for a closer quantitative examination of the way individuals interpret and negotiate religious norms and values. Future studies could explore the relationships between religiosity, identity, notions of femininity and the role of body image to better understand Muslim women as consumers of health and fitness products and services.

The implications of these findings for gyms and fitness centres aiming to attract Muslim women are that their offer needs to focus less on body image and more on overall health and physical well-being. They also need to consider culturally appropriate spaces for these women and others with strong views on modesty to exercise. While body image is a consideration for Muslim women for exercise participation, it is not the prime driver when it comes to the specific form of exercise chosen. The social aspects of exercise and options, which take a more holistic approach to wellness rather than purely body image, are more important determinants of exercise choice for these women.

This paper has contributed to the services marketing literature by explaining consumer behaviour in the context of the fitness industry. The generalisability of these findings to the wider population is limited due to the exploratory nature of the study. The study has presented the challenges and opportunities faced by gyms and fitness centres in catering to the needs and requirements of the segment comprising Muslim women.

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Further reading

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