Face Mask as Veil: Social Identity and Negotiation among Female Students in Indonesian Islamic University

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Abstract
After the pandemic ended, face masks were still widely used by students in Islamic universities, especially by veiled female students. This article aims to understand the social identity construction of the group of female students wearing face masks as veil and how they seek to negotiate veils to avoid discrimination. The research uses phenomenology method, with purposive sampling. Data collection was carried out by in-depth interviews with 30 informants who had been observed for three months. The result show how veiled female students formed their social identities through Tajfel's social identity theory. The veiled female students tend to positively assess the wear of the niqab as strengthening the in-group and increasing their self-esteem as devout Muslim women. To respected and get affirmatively valued, female students negotiating of wearing face masks as niqab, become open personalities, pursue academic achievements, and appear as a fashionable Muslimah.

Keywords: face mask, veil, social identity, female student

Introduction

We never imagined that before the covid pandemic occurred, things such as masks that were only used by healthcare personnels, mining workers, or polluting industrial workers, would be used by everyone. At the end of 2019, the coronavirus explosion occurred in Wuhan, China, and spread around the world into a pandemic in a short time. The situation has required the government, including the government of Indonesia, to implement health protocols during the pandemic. The simplest health protocols implemented so far was washing hands, maintaining distance, and using face masks. Since then, the use of face masks has finally become a new habit that persists even after years of the pandemic is over (Finance Ministry of Indonesia, 2021).

Wearing a face mask has always been functionally interpreted as protection from external threat like viruses and dust. However, according to Leone (2020), an established culture can change the meaning of a functional object into a semiotic and communicative device. It can even be separated from its practical function to just an aesthetic device. For example, objects such as glasses or hats that were sometimes used but did not have function. Glasses were used to help vision and hats cover the head from the heat, but many people use them only for the sake of appearance.

Four years after the COVID-19 pandemic ended, the government of Indonesia stopped enforcing work restrictions, including the mandatory use of medical masks. When compared to other countries, the abandonment of mask-wearing mostly in Western countries after the pandemic ended. Meanwhile, in Asian countries such as Japan, using masks in public spaces is considered normal. Leone (2020) explained that there were many factors that distinguish these habits. In Japan, people usually wear masks during cold months and flu periods, and not only to protect themselves from air that may be contaminated, but also to protect the air and

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others from someone who is sick or infected. Then he found in Japan, it is actually more polite not to constantly stare at the other person's face at all, and to avoid looking directly at the other person's face especially if the other person is someone to whom tradition would entitle with special respect; for example, an old lady. So that one of the reasons for the cultural acceptance of protective masks in Japan was actually the fact that faces would not be used in the same way in Japanese conversation as in western conversation. Protective masks would not bother people in Japan because it is not as important there as it is in Europe to see someone's eyes or even face when talking to that person, and it is not even frowned upon as a manifestation of impoliteness. This statement was also affirmed by Schönweitz et al. (2022) based on 413 qualitative interviews with residents in five European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Ireland, and Switzerland) that the meaning of masks has changed drastically during the first months of the pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic people who wore masks had to fear stigmatization, but at the height of the pandemic those who did not wear masks were more likely to get stigmatized. In addition to being considered a barrier to non-verbal communication, the mask also a way to affirm friendships, maintain social contact, signify certain moral or political attitudes on the part of the wearer and non-wearer, express their membership in a particular community, or articulate concerns. So in addition to the functional meaning of masks as medical protectors, we also need to understand the socio-cultural meaning and the social effects they cause.

Indonesia as a country with a majority Muslim population highly upholds Islamic values in daily life. Local culture and Islamic values have long coexisted in the community. We can see for example the dress culture that has always been characterized by Islam. Veil, one example, has undergone a model transformation with the times. Veil is interpreted spiritually by Muslim women, and shows themselves as obedient to God (Galadari, 2012). After the Covid-19 virus entered Indonesia, the wearing veil also adjusted to a medical device for disease prevention, namely face masks. Initially, the most widely used face masks were medical face masks, as time went by, various mask models appeared that were used by women wearing veil. Offices, schools, and other public spaces, everyone is wearing face masks. No exception on campus, female students wearing veil and face masks make it even more difficult for us to identify their faces.

According to Rumaney and Sriram (2021), there were different types of veil practices such as the diversity of the Muslim community in the world because there were different interpretations in the Qur'an regarding its use. In Indonesia, the most widely practiced form of veiling is the *hijab*, that is the habit of wearing a veil with a cloth that only hides women's hair. Then a small percentage of women who veiling with the *niqab (*in Indonesia also called *cadar*). *Niqab* is the cloth that covers the woman's face. Over the years, the veil has undergone many transformations in both aesthetics and the meanings attached to the practice.

The dominant Islamic community in Indonesia follows the opinion that wearing a hijab is only to cover the hair up to the chest. While another opinion in Islam that women should cover their entire body including their face with the niqab. According to Khair et al. (2021) the first opinion use moderatism approach who used the opinion of the scholar Muhammad Husain Thabathabai who explained the position of the hijab in Qs. Al-A'raf [7]: 26 that the hijab in sharia law and culture is a garment of worship and dress with the best ethics. Moderatism approach is an inclusive approach to culture in Indonesia, not extreme in religion, applying

Islamic values in accordance with the socio-cultural context in Indonesia. Moderatism teaching was reflected by dominant Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah which also dominate the ideas of society in Indonesia (Formichi, 2012).

Ahmad (2020) revealed that moderate Islam is more developed in Islamic universities, in contrast to fundamental Islam which is more developed on non-Islamic universities. This is spearheaded by campus da'wah institutions that develop on Islamic campuses such as the Indonesian Islamic Student Movement (PMII) which is affiliated with NU. Their cadres then hold structural positions at the university then implemented regulations limiting the wearing of the niqab by female students because it was considered a form of conflicting and superficial understanding. Women wear niqab also often received a negative connotation as radical Islam.

IAIN Parepare is one of the Islamic universities that is exactly the same implementation moderatism approach, namely implementing the rule of prohibiting the wear of the niqab. Although islamic universities were predominantly influenced by the belief that wearing a veil is not mandatory, there is a small group of female students who still believe in the minority opinion. They did join into small non-formal organization like *Gerakan One day One Juz* and socialize the wear of the *niqab* with islamic discussion both inside and outside the campus. Various factors motivated female students to persist in wearing the *niqab* despite social pressure; these often stemmed from psychological benefits such as feeling that it improved behavior and lessened temptation (Metriwati et al, 2020; Ritonga, 2022). One of the reasons for those who obligatory the niqab based on the textual understanding of the Qur'an Al-Ahzab [33] about the command to stretch women's veil all over their bodies.

This article seeks to analyze the perspective of veiled female students towards their group and their social identity as an important factor to explain their decision at the individual level to wear the niqab. IAIN Parepare is a suitable research location to find out how they construct their social identity as veiled students so that they survive despite pressure and discrimination because they were a minority group. We also sought to analyze how they negotiated their identities as veiled women by the wear of niqab although the pandemic has passed.

Research Methods

This article is qualitative research, using phenomenology approach and purposive sampling techniques to search for relevant informants. The informants chosen were female students who were registered at IAIN Parepare with the habit of using face masks in the classroom and in the campus area. We conducted initial observations for three months before starting interviews to identify the right informants, starting from April 2024. We found 30 informants who were indicated to use face masks as *niqab*, 8 informants representing the lecturer, and 15 supporting informants from other students. These informants were selected based on criteria that included female students wearing face masks in the campus area, then supporting information from other students or close friends and lecturers and corroborated by their own confessions at the time of the interview. Informants who wear *niqab* were characterized by their consistency in wearing face masks and did not willing to take them off in public areas. To corroborate their confessions, we interviewed them through the intermediary of a close friend or an interview did by a woman.

We use indepth interview techniques to obtain accurate information and the interview process was confidentially to maintain the personal identity of the informant as well as the

informant's self-disclosure to the researcher. A literature review was also carried out as supporting data in strengthen our findings, where we found secondary data in the form of motives for female students wearing veils from similar cases in other Indonesian Islamic universities as shown by the research results of Metriwati et al (2020) and Ritonga (2022).

To analyze the identity construction of veiled female students, we applied social identity theory. We transcribe all interviews in advance. Then, each transcript is read for understanding the patterns or categories related to social identity theory and research questions. We also look for similarities and relationships between these categories to find the patterns. Then the patterns found were marked to be grouped so that they form a theme. The theme is then used as a finding which is then validated for its compatibility with the concept of 3-stage of identity construction. The stages of identity construction were social categories, social identification, and social comparison. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), social identity is a person's sense of their self-concept from their membership in social groups, in this case the veiled student's sense (belonging, purpose, self-worth, and identity) of who they were based on their group. The group was an important source of pride and self-esteem (Simorangkir, 2018; Assiri, 2022).

The categorization stage is the first stage where we try to understand the social environment of veiled female students by categorizing female students who wear niqab or simply use face masks for health or appearance reasons, including themselves, with some characteristics such as reasons and habits. Next, we look at their social identification, what is the reason why they adopt the identity of the group of veiled female students (niqab group) and follow their rules, such as the obligation to follow routine studies. In the social comparison stage, we looked at how the niqab group would compare their group with other outside groups in a biased way such as a group of female students who only wore hijab, because their group would tend to get a positive assessment for self-esteem. Through these three stages, members of the niqab group will look for negative aspects of the outside group and look in their group positively while being neutral. Ultimately, it will give rise to positive distinctiveness, namely the desire to gain positive self-esteem that motivates members within the group to differ positively from the relevant outside group.

Results and Discussion
Identity Construction of Veiled Female Students
Talking about clothes, we sometimes deduce someone's ideology quickly through clothes, especially clothes worn by women. This is not wrong, because clothes were symbols. Symbols were interpreted by someone depending on their individual preferences and historical experiences. One of the religious symbols on women's clothing that is easiest for us to interpret, especially in the Islamic religion, is the veil. The veil is worn by Muslim women as a form of obedience to Islamic rules. Various types and forms have also developed, starting from the *hijab*, *khimar*, *niqab*, *burqa*, *chador*, *abaya*, and *shayla*. *Hijab* is the mostly practice among women which refers to conceals women's hair and sticking the cloth up to the chest. A *khimar* is a longer headscarf that falls below the wearers elbows. The *niqab* is the cloth that covers the woman's face (in Indonesia called *cadar*). the *Burqa* is similar to a concealing cloak. The *chador* refers to a full-length sleeveless cloak worn over the head and held shut in front by the hands, concealing everything except the hands and feet. The *abaya* is a long-fowing dress used to cover one's body. And the *shayla* is loosely tied hijab with longer ends (Rumaney & Sriram,

2021). In Indonesia, the veil model used by most women is hijab and some small use niqab. Hijab itself among female students there were two models, namely sharia hijab which refers to the use of hijab with long-dress or robes (*gamis*) while trendy hijab using hijab combined with tight clothes such as pants, t-shirts, or shirts (Millah, 2021). This becomes even more complex when we experience a new period, namely the Covid pandemic which requires us all to wear face masks. The face mask itself is a device that was originally used for health purposes. Using it combined with the veil style worn by female students will certainly give rise to various prejudices. During the pandemic, female students at IAIN Parepare were used to using face masks combined with veil, most of them with *hijab* models.

During the pandemic, people who wear masks didn't only interpreted as preventing transmission of the virus, they did also communicating the message that they care about health and showing social compliance behavior. There is a message that is trying to be conveyed if we wear masks that we care about our environment, preventing us from infecting other people or preventing other people's viruses from infecting us or our families at home. The government's recommendation to use masks makes us think that it is good and right for our common interests, so that we use masks to actually show ourselves that we were obedient and care about other people (Inglis & Almila, 2020; Leone, 2021). IAIN Parepare also implements the rule of using masks as a form of preventing virus transmission and was complied with by the entire IAIN Parepare also implements the rule of using masks as a form of preventing virus transmission and was complied with by the entire academic community.

After the pandemic has passed, many people in Indonesia still wear masks in public spaces. This also happens in universities where many students were habitual wearing face mask. In islamic universities was interesting, because many women wear hijab with face mask so looks hard to identify. There many reasons why they were comfortable wearing masks in public spaces. Most informants felt that by covering their faces they would receive more polite treatment, especially from male gazes. Generally, they did not used to and feel disturbed by stares from the opposite sex. Apart from that, covering their faces makes them feel more respected and looks religious. And other informants stated that by covering their faces they gain the right to privacy in public spaces. Kahn (2021) explains that everyone has the right to privacy in public spaces, this right includes the right not to be conspicuous in public, the right not to be photographed without consent, and even the right to be ignored. Wearing a mask in unusuals situation may make us stand out and look strange, but people's experiences through the pandemic have made masks commonplace in public. So instead of getting public attention, the pandemic made mask users look normal and people will ignore them. This disregard is a comfort for female students who exercise their right to privacy in public spaces. This right is also felt by those who equate face masks with *niqab* because they believe that God requires women to cover their faces in public. This is where the categorization stage begins, they will try to find similarities with others. According Tajfel in Assiri (2022), identifying as a social group member depends on the clarity of boundaries separating the social group from other groups. Knowing what it means to be a veiled women wear niqab and the activities defining this social group helped informants in this study identify themselves as veiled women (*niqab*). Ten infromants openly identified themselves as users *niqab* when they realized they were doing activities specific to the *niqabs'* community. Some of these activities mentioned by the participants were how consistent they did in wearing face masks in public areas, participating

in collaborative study (*halaqah tarbiyah*), and memorize the Qur'an, which were all activities associated with the *niqab* group. As revealed by one of the informants:

> *"As a veiled woman wear niqab, I have to deposit my memorization of Qur'an to my supervisor every week and participate in discussions about Islam."* statement of informant (i), 21 years old (5/8/2024)

When informants were asked whether masks could replace the *niqab*, most of them answered yes. According to them, the *niqab* is an obligation and maintaining it requires a little sacrifice, including being willing to be ridiculed or labeled as a radical. In this case, the social identification stage begins when female students categorize other people, including themselves, into social categories, in this case those who still wear face masks in public areas is a veiled women (*niqab*). The members adopt the group's identity and change their behavior and attitudes in accordance with what they believe to be the group's norms. In this case, the most striking rule of the women wear *niqab* is the prohibition on removing face masks in public places, even in class. For them, the motive for wearing the *niqab* is part of obedience to Islam and drawing closer to God which is in line with opinion Zulkarnain et al (2022) that the motive for the wear of the niqab among Islamic university students in Centrak Kalimantan (in their case study) is because they believe that wearing the *niqab* is part of implementing Islamic law. When the informants were asked about the reason for wearing the *niqab*, the strong reason was that the veil was considered the highest form of piety for women in covering their private parts.

At the comparison tage, generally informants who felt part of an in-group of veiled female students (*niqab* group) defined themselves as devout Muslim women who were kept away from sin. According Tajfel (1981), the members of a social group compare their group to another out-group, aiming to acquire a favorable comparison that boosts their self-esteem. In the case of covid, Mustafa & Mujahidah (2020) stated reasons that drive veiled student to wear niqab because it compares women who previously did not wear a niqab but had to cover their mouths to prevent the transmission of the virus. So they saw the medical impact of the wear of the niqab long before the pandemic spread. For them, only by following God's rules will life be safe, because the *niqab* is clearly ordered in the Qur'an, by following the Qur'an you automatically follow God's commands including protecting personal health. This means that women who do not cover their face can be said to be disobeying God's rules. One of the informants even had opinions:

> *"I am sad to see that some Muslim women do not cover their private parts including their faces. Even though it has many benefits and prevents us from heinous behavior. Why do you wear the hijab but the clothes you wear can still arouse the lust of the opposite sex? By wearing a veil, we can avoid these things. Doesn't that law clearly come from God? Why is it still being debated?"* statement from informant, 20 year old (2/8/2024)

This is a clear example of the "us" and "them" of positive distinctiveness. Veiled female students tend to positively assess the wear of the *niqab* as strengthening the in-group and increasing their self-esteem as devout Muslim women. On the other hand, they will negatively judge those out-groups based on aspects such as not protecting their body parts or being easily

seduced. Social identity theory reveal that if a social group fails to provide individuals with a positive social identity through psychological distinctiveness, then the individuals ought to choose one of several behavioral options. Such options depend on the individuals' social mobility and whether individuals can leave the social group or not. Because in this case the veiled female students group was successful in creating a positive distinctiveness, that is the reason why its members find it difficult to abandon the group or their practice. In general, social groups function as providers of positive social identity. This occurs by the process of comparison with other groups based on salient dimensions that carry a vivid value differential and were cognitive, evaluative, and effective in their representation (Commins & Lockwood, 1981; Halldorson, 2009; Assiri, 2022).

Negotiations of Identity to Reducing Stigma or Discrimination

Constantly wearing a face mask or covering one's face inevitably leads to prejudice. For a student wearing a face mask, dealing with someone in a higher position, such as a lecturer, will be very challenging. At IAIN Parepare, wearing a mask indoors can create a negative impression. For some lecturers, students who cover their faces were considered impolite. Lecturers tend to feel annoyed because it is difficult to identify who they did talking to or it is difficult to catch the user's expression. If there is an interpersonal conversation, not looking at the person you did talking to and not expressing anything will certainly be considered a form of impoliteness. The attitude of these lecturers is very ordinary because the custom in Indonesia is that the position of lecturers is highly respected and very hierarchical. Leone (2020) revealed how she with her European culture could not get used to communicating with the face mask users she met along her trip to Japan. Grimes (1975) asserts that we must be aware that the face is the basic interface of human interaction. Interpersonal communication is always based on seeing the other person's face and showing the other person's face, especially if the person we did communicating with person has a respectable position can trigger the impression of disrespect. However, at least some lecturers did not have a problem with this, especially lecturers from the younger generation.

In Indonesian Islamic university such as the findings of Ahmad (2020) dominated by moderate Islamic ideologies that do not agree to apply strict Islamic laws such as wearing *niqab*. So the majority of lecturers do not agree with the wearing of *niqab* for female students. When female students wear *hijab*, robes and face masks, it is very easy for them to be considered women who wear the *niqab* and radical. Up to this stage there has been a form of discrimination by the majority group against minority groups.

According to social identity theory, if the feeling of belonging is associated with the experience of discrimination shared by members of the group, then this feeling of belonging is expressed with negative emotions such as anger and vice versa. The peoples will identify themselves and others in several groups, whereby their groups were a source of positive evaluation such as pride (nationality, religious belief, race, tribe, kin). This classification may lead to favoritism or prejudice to members of the group (us versus them). So the motive for discrimination, prejudice, and the willingness to differentiate one's social group from others is the need for a positive self-image (Tajfel, 1981; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Ling, 2020). In the case that occurred at IAIN Parepare, if there is discrimination committed by a lecturer and

experienced by one of the veiled women wear *niqab*, they will get support from in-group members which further strengthens their group.

Despite receiving discriminatory treatment such as restrictions on studying and radical stigma. The *niqab* group members still stand by their principles. They support each other through non-formal study activities and joining or making religious organizations. In fact, there is an opinion of the ulama that they follow that does not recognize face masks as a substitute for the veil, but the wear of a real veil such as the *niqab* is very risky, forcing them to only wear a face mask. This means that the negative stigma of using a face mask is less than wearing a *niqab*. They also feel helped by the pandemic moment, thereby minimizing someone's negative perception of mask wearers. Some informant stated that they were confident in their choice because both veils and masks have the same medical benefits and everyone wears them. Ting-Toomey (2015) through Identity Negotiation Theory revealed that humans in all cultures want positive identity affirmation in various communication situations. However, what is the right way to show identity affirmation and consideration varies from one cultural context to the next.

Generally, negative stigma towards veil wearers do not apply among fellow students. To prevent the emergence of negative stigma such as radicals among students, most of them were open and humble towards everyone. They also try to get attention through achievements and a diligent attitude towards lecturers, especially lecturers who don't care about the rules for preventing radicalism on campus. To get rid of the stigma of being old-fashioned, some informant also always wear muslimah clothes that were current and fashionable. Some informant mentioned that they did try maintaining a positive identity of wearing the *niqab* is not only a form of commitment to being a good person, but also a sense of pride as a devout Muslim woman. This is in line with Ting-Toomey's allegations that persons tend to experience identity consistency in repeated cultural routines in a familiar cultural environment and they tend to experience identity change (or to the extreme, identity chaos and turmoil) and transformation in a new or unfamiliar cultural environment. This is reflected in how veiled women change their *niqab* with face mask or to be a fashionable woman so that accepted in their environment as a minority. Because satisfactory identity negotiation outcomes include the feeling of being understood, respected, and affirmatively valued (Ting-Toomey, 2015).

Conclusion

After the Covid-19 pandemic, we have become accustomed to the activities of peoples to wearing face mask. So that we can understand that face mask used for the sake of common health. Now that the pandemic has ended, we did still seeing the phenomenon of people wearing masks, including female students. The motive for using masks among female students at IAIN Parepare is a private aspect, but the majority of them use them permanently in public spaces for reasons of belief in the obligation of the *niqab*. Social identity theory shows how the construction of veiled women's identities has gone through three stages, namely categorization, identification, and comparison. Social categorization is characterized by the efforts of veiled female students to group themselves into groups according to the same belief in the obligation to cover their face in public. Then social identification began when these veiled female students began to identify themselves as part of the group and began to apply the applicable values and rules such as consistently not taking off their face masks in public areas. Social comparison then occurs when the female students with the veil begin to compare themselves with the female

students who do not cover their face. This then gives rise to positive distinctiveness that is shown through the statement of being a religious woman and abstaining from bad behavior.

The veiled female students wear *niqab* were challenged when studying at Indonesian Islamic university such as IAIN Parepare. Women with *niqab* not always well received. After going through the pandemic, face masks still exist among female students, especially veiled women. They must wear face masks instead of *niqab* to minimize the negative prejudice received. As a form of negotiation, veiled female students must also be open to others, strive to pursue academic achievements, and wear fashionable Muslim women's clothes. Everything is done to prevent the forms of discrimination that they can accept. In accordance with identity negotiation theory, its outcomes include the feeling of being understood, respected, and affirmatively valued.

This study explains how the face masks have become an important part of the social identity construction of veiled female students. How to cover their faces is a symbol of their pride as obedient Muslim women and commitment to being a good person. However, this research is only limited to the moderate ideology and culture that develops in Islamic universities in Indonesia. In order not to cause misunderstandings, it is necessary to compare further research on public universities in other Muslim countries.

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