"It's the one place I don't have to fight": Exploring Muslim women's sense of personhood and identity in boxing gyms through the lens of an Islamic model of the self

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Abstract

Previous research has noted significant mental health issues amongst the Muslim female community while they remain underrepresented in NHS mental health services. The intersection of their religious, sociocultural and gender identities are richly nuanced and often not well understood in secular Western society. As a minoritised community that is often misrepresented and misunderstood in the media as well as subject to the effects of racism and Islamophobia, we need to better understand how to address the impact of these issues on their wellbeing. Over the last decade or so, there has been a steady growth in Muslim women engaging in women's only boxing groups. Research on sports has shown boxing to be beneficial to mental and physical wellbeing in a variety of ways such as improving emotional regulation, reducing stress and supporting cardiovascular health. The present study aimed to explore how Muslim women who have participated in boxing make meaning of the activity in relation to other aspects of their identity. Twelve Muslim women who have engaged in boxing took part in sensory ethnographic interviews. Narrative analysis identified five narrative themes: stories of (re) (claiming) *aql*, *qalb*, body and *rūḥ*, stories of a home away from home, stories of energising efforts to get closer to the *Deen*, stories of resistance, and stories of being the change. The findings indicate the importance of considering spiritual identity, approaches to nurturing positive embodiment and inclusivity, and honouring embodied resistance in addressing the mental health and holistic wellbeing of Muslim women. It is important to explore the interplay between boxing and the Muslim female identity so that we may be able to explore ways to meet the needs of this community in creative ways, beyond traditional NHS settings.

Keywords: Muslim, women, Islam, Boxing, sport, Intersectionality, mental health, holistic wellbeing

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"Only to the extent that we expose ourselves over and over to annihilation can that which is indestructible in us be found."- Pema Chodron

Contents

Introduction Chapter

Chapter Overview

      This chapter introduces Muslim women in Britain through population demographics and provides one explanation of what it means to be a Muslim. The key tenets of Islam are then elucidated through the framework of Rasjid Skinner's (2019) Islamic Psychological Model of the Self. Skinner's model offers an understanding of spiritual identity and the cultural and religious factors shaping Muslim women's sense of personhood. To map the wider systemic and societal issues impacting identity negotiation for Muslim women, a critical evaluation of the permutations of intersectionality theory will follow. Feminist theories of embodiment are then raised in relation to their embodied intersectionality and experiences of oppression impacting identity formation and wellbeing. The interplay between their Muslim feminine embodiment and wellbeing will then be outlined, leading to the consideration of how sports offer a potential arena of identity negotiation and an avenue for supporting their wellbeing. The systematic review of the literature is then introduced; evaluating the existing research on Muslim women's experiences of engagement in sports. The meta-ethnography concludes by identifying a new line of argument from the existing literature which will then be discussed in the context of the theoretical models. A brief overview of the justification for the present study's focus on boxing engagement specifically is presented, concluding the chapter with a clarification of the aims and objectives of the current research study.

Population demographics of Muslim women in the UK

According to the Office of National Statistics (Census, 2021), Muslims are the second largest religious group in Britain, constituting 6.5% of the population in England and Wales, an increase from 4.9% in 2011. The percentage of people identifying as Christian in England and Wales has been decreasing in recent years, while the populations of other religions, including Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jewish, have been growing. In particular, the number of people identifying as Muslim increased from 2.7 million in 2011 to 3.9 million in 2021 (Census, 2021). According to Janmohamed (2016) nearly two thirds of the Muslim women in the UK are under thirty, reflecting a young and growing population.

The Muslim population was reported to be the most ethnically diverse religious group in England and Wales with members of the group identifying as Asian/ Asian British (68%), Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British (10%), White (8%), Arab, Mixed/ Multiple ethnic groups (4%) and 'other' ethnic group (11%). The largest ethnic group within these profiles was that of Asian/ British Asian made up of predominantly Pakistani (38%) and Bangladeshi members (15%) with 53% being migrants born outside the UK. According to the 2021 Census data, Muslims are disproportionately represented in the most deprived areas of England, with 39% of Muslims residing in the most deprived areas of England and Wales (Census, 2021). While these statistics begin to paint a picture of the variance in the UK Muslim population, they do not capture the full spectrum of diversity in ethnic, racial and socioeconomic status of Muslims in the UK.

In the recent Citizenship Survey, 83 percent of Muslim women classed themselves as practising compared to 76 percent of Muslim men (Communities and Local Government, 2011). An important caveat to this statistic is the diversity inherent in what it means to be 'practising'. The identifier 'Muslim' does not necessarily correspond to a person's religiosity; identity

amongst Muslim women is shaped by an amalgamation of multiple, intersecting factors including ethnicity, nationality, cultural traditions, and gender (Meer, 2008). Norenzyan (2013) explored how social stimuli influences sense of affiliation to one's Islamic community and expressions of faith while Ali (2008) identified differences between 'religious' Muslims who have an internalised relationship with Islam and 'secular' Muslims who view Islam as part of cultural traditions. Therefore, the present study acknowledges that being Muslim is a fluid concept where expression of faith is unique to each Muslim woman. However, the present study does not conform to such distinctions in line with a core concept in Islam being that one cannot assume another's intention, particularly in relation to faith (Al-Ghazali, 2000). Hence, for the present study, self-identification with the term Muslim is taken as a sufficient qualifier without distinguishing between Ali's (2008) categorisation of secular and religious Muslims.

Prior to the past decade, the field of psychology has largely neglected to explore religion as a central belief system shaping people's worldviews in relation to their psychological wellbeing (Ysseldek et al. 2010). Fiske et al. (1998) described religion as a system of shared beliefs, values, and norms that is transmitted across generations and places which therefore confers a cultural identity. Cohen and Leung (2009) explain how religion is an individual belief system which offers psychological benefits such as a framework of meaning-making and coping with adversity, as well as a form of culture. Taking into consideration that past research on Muslim women tend to focus on other aspects of their identity such as culture and ethnicity while neglecting to explore spiritual identity, the present study argues that elucidating markers of the defining features of Islamic faith would contribute to understanding the inner worlds and identity formation of Muslim women. Abu-Raiya (2013) suggests that religion is a central organising theme of everyday life for many Muslims as it shapes one's attitudes, moral judgments, public

and private behaviour, and relationships between women and men. While the adherence to Islamic guidance varies widely amongst Muslim women, Janmohamed (2016) suggests that faith is integral to their lives in terms of influencing their decisions and meaning-making in daily life. Badri (2000) asserts that belief systems underpinning a culture tend to be central to religious paradigms and therefore need to be given greater significance to understand the mental health needs of the Muslim community. By exploring Muslim women's mental health from the perspective of framing Islam as a cultural construct without distinguishing the cultural-based features of the Muslim community from religious principles, past research has missed the opportunity to deconstruct the specific aspects of Islamic faith which serves as protective factors for mental wellbeing. Hence, the following section will outline the key tenets of Islamic faith (refer to appendix A for a glossary of Islamic terms) in order to provide a foundational understanding of what it may mean to be a Muslim to explore the compounding effect of these aspects of Muslim women's identities.

Islam and spiritual identity

Islam is a monotheistic Abrahamic religion founded on the belief in the absolute oneness and uniqueness of God (Allah Subhanahu wa ta'ala (s.w.t) - an Arabic phrase meaning "Glorified and Exalted is He". It is used by Muslims as a sign of respect when referring to Allah) and the finality of Prophethood with Muhammad (peace be upon him (pbuh)) as the last in a long line of prophets.

The Arabic term Muslim translates to "one who submits to God" or "one who attains peace through submission to God" (Hamdan, 2007; Meer, 2008). The category 'Muslim' is far from homogenous; it is not confined to any single ethnic or cultural group, reflecting the global

and diverse nature of Muslim communities, as evidenced by demographic data. There exists considerable variation based on differing interpretations of religious texts, the authority of specific religious leaders or Imams (Hamid, 2011), and individuals' levels of internalized belief and practice (Ali, 2008).

While the present study acknowledges that culturally, there are different sects of Islam with varied nuances in theological differences, the following paragraphs will outline the similar overarching core concepts of Islam (Gilliat-Ray, 2010). This is in line with the goal of the present study to explore how Muslim women who have participated in boxing make meaning of the activity in relation to other aspects of their identity, such as their spiritual identity, rather than to comment and provide a comprehensive report of the theological and ideological nuances across different sects of Muslims.

The theological foundation of Islam includes belief in Allah (s.w.t), His Angels, the revealed scriptures, prophets sent as messengers of Allah (s.w.t), divine decree (*Qadr*) and the Day of Judgment. These form the basis of a Muslim's worldview, in which this world (*dunya*) is only an illusion and a test in which their actions and good deeds are in preparation for the Day of Judgment and the afterlife (*Akhirah*). There are five core pillars of Islam which structure the lives of Muslims; the declaration of one's faith with conviction (*Shahada*), the five daily prayers (*salah*), compulsory almsgiving *(zakāt)*, fasting from dawn to dusk in the holy month of Ramadan (*sawm*) and completing the pilgrimage to Mecca (*Hajj*) at least once during one's lifetime if one has the means to (At-Tirmidhi, 1879). Muslims are obligated to embody the values of Islam through their actions, words and reflect the guidance provided by Allah (s.w.t) in the way they live their lives. This is referred to as the *Deen* (the path), which in essence is a holistic approach to life that seeks to align all aspects of a person's existence with the will of

Allah (s.w.t). Skinner (2019) asserts that Islam is an embodied religion in that the daily physical movements of *salah* and emphasis placed on caring for one's physical health as integral to acts of *ibadah* (worship). For Muslims, *ibadah* extends to every aspect of the way they live their lives, an example having been given in the hadith as smiling at a fellow Muslim counting as a good deed and act of *ibadah* (At-Tirmidhi, 1879). This underscores the understanding within Islamic psychology that the body has a subtle relationship with one's spiritual state.

How Islam influences Muslim women's identity and wellbeing

The Islamic model of the self (Skinner, 2019) integrates traditional Islamic concepts with contemporary psychological understanding by outlining the relationship between mind, body, soul and spiritual state. Skinner's (2019) model situates key Islamic concepts within the psychological landscape of the components comprising a Muslim's spiritual psyche. Figure 1 outlines the key constructs of the model, which emphasises a holistic approach to mental health by incorporating spiritual dimensions of wellbeing alongside psychological and physical aspects.

Figure 1

The Islamic Model of Self
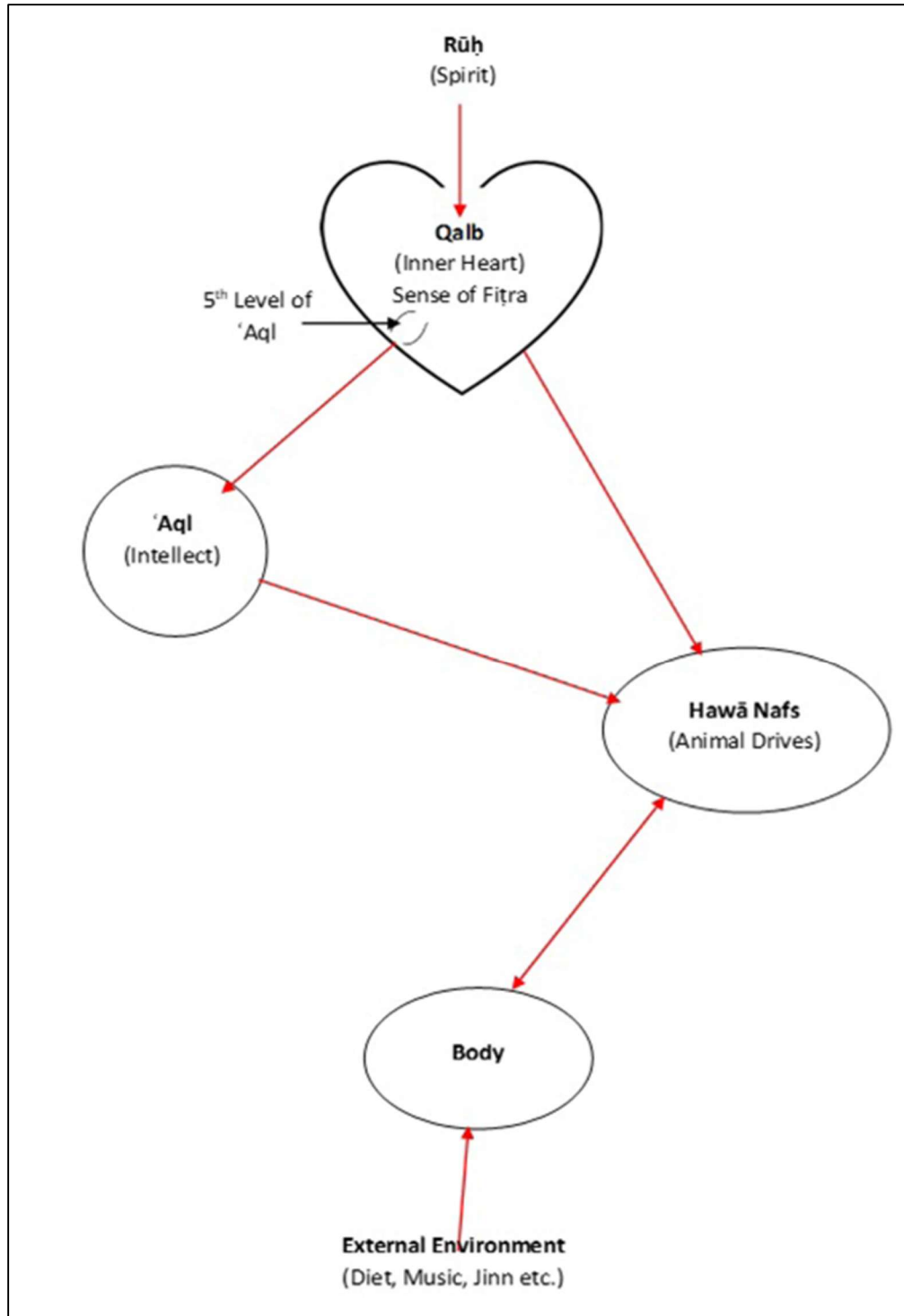
The following paragraphs elucidate each component of Skinner's (2019) model. *Rūḥ* represents the divine essence bestowed upon humans, serving as the core of one's being and connection to God, synonymous with one's soul. The *qalb* (Al-Ghazali, 2009) functions as the

spiritual centre of consciousness and emotional intelligence, influencing spiritual awareness and moral discernment. The *qalb* contains an inherent sense of '*fiṭra*'; one's inner moral compass, signalling what is natural and right. It is open to divine inspiration from the Rūḥ through true dreams and inspired intuition. The *qalb* symbolises a critical path to understanding the wellbeing of Muslim women within an Islamic context. It is a distinguishing feature of Islamic psychology differing from mainstream psychology, which locates emotional intelligence in neural structures of the mind (Zhao et al., 2021).

The *aql* is the cognitive centre of the self, encompassing rational decision-making and reasoning faculties of the self. It has five functions (Al-Ghazali, 2009), four of which are articulated in Western cognitive psychology as faculties such as logical reasoning. The fifth function is an extension from the *qalb* which receives and elocutes knowledge of the heart, which is a distinguishing feature of this model from Western psychology.

A healthy state of functioning in Islam is when this fifth function of the *aql*, known as gnosis, is directing the operations of the other components of the self in order to avoid dissociation of reasoning from *fiṭra*. The centrality of the *Shahāda* as a core pillar of Islam underscores how one's *niyyah* (intention) lies at the heart of what it means to be a Muslim (Ismail & Deshmukh, 2012; Sharaf al-Din et al., 2016). *Niyyah* manifests from the *aql* and *qalb* through one's actions and decisions; Muslims are taught to strive for purity of *niyyah* with the goal of only seeking Allah's approval by ensuring that one's motivations and actions are in alignment with the *ruḥ* and *fiṭra* (MhdSarif & Ismail, 2011).

Hawa nafs, colloquially referred to as *nafs*, denotes the animal self or one's instinctive drives. Also known as the ego in Western psychology, these desires and impulses are subject to the influence of temptation which requires reining in by the *aql*. However, if the outer four

functions of the *aql* is overpowering the fifth, the *aql* then shackles the *qalb*, constricting the

flow of gnosis coming from the heart, leading to what Skinner (2019) describes as a 'transitory

psychotic state' or spiritual crisis. There are three stages of nafs delineated within the model as

seen in figure 2.

Figure 2

The three stages of hawa nafs within the Islamic Model of Self
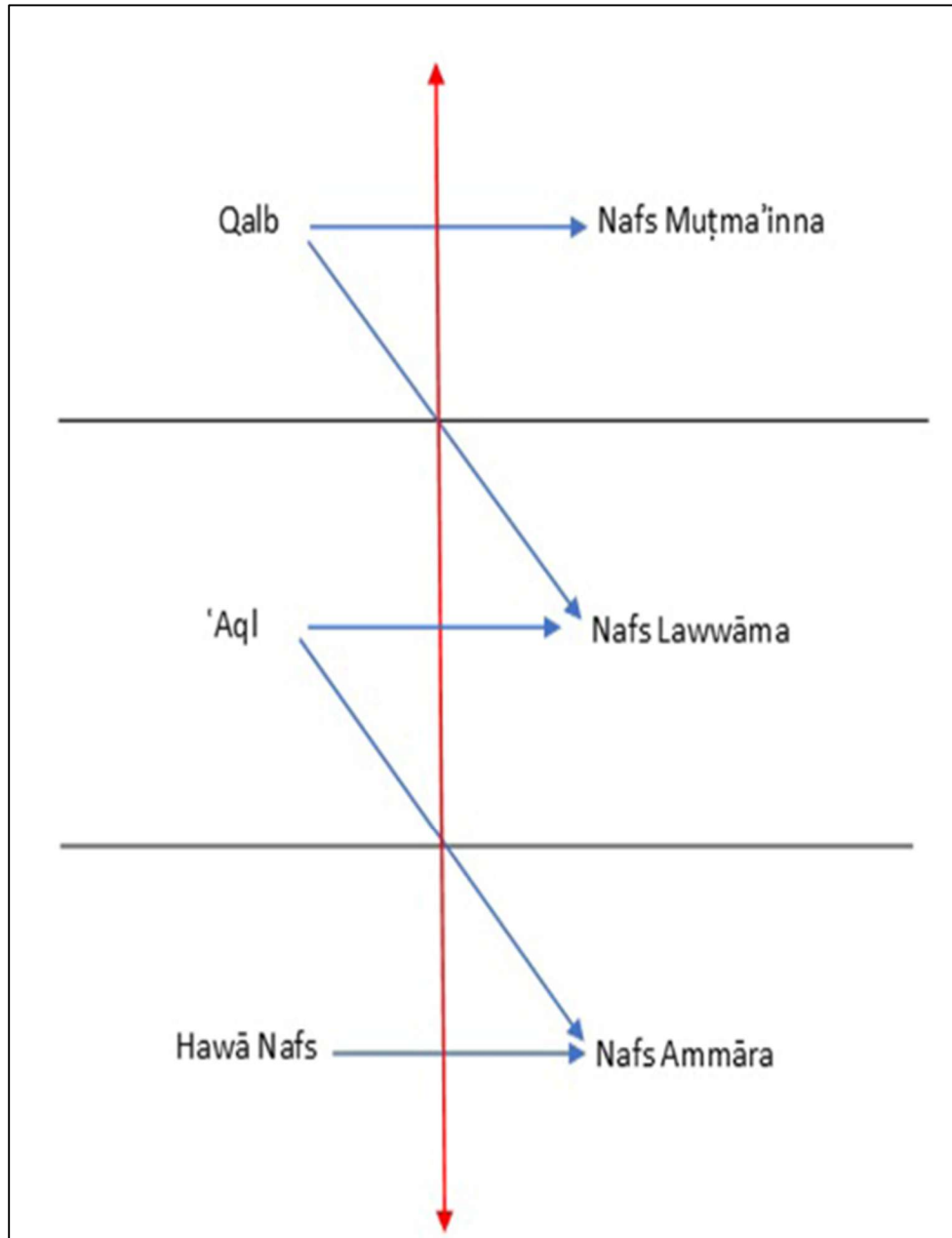
Nafs Ammāra (The compelling Self) signifies the state of the Self where the body and nafs have disconnected from the influence of the *aql* and *qalb* consequentially succumbing to the pull of the *dunya* and the devil. *Nafs lawwāma* (the Remorseful Self) signifies the state of psychological distress where an individual is aware of their disconnection from *fiṭra* and

separation from the guidance of the *rūḥ*. Psychological distress is understood as stemming from a disconnection from Allah, resulting in turmoil due to the battle between the *aql* tugging between the *nafs* and qalb. Therefore, *Nafs lawwāma* represents the bridging state critical for psychological work. The individual can either resolve their pain by coming back into connection with the *qalb*, thereby reaching for *Nafs Mutma'inna* or can dissociate from the pain and succumb to the misguidance of the devil, descending back into *Nafs Ammāra*.

      Nafs Mutma'inna (the Well Pleasing, Contented Self) represents the state Muslims strive to be in, where the self is in perfect alignment with the *qalb*. Restoring connection between *aql* and *qalb* in order to rein in the *nafs* is viewed as crucial to a Muslim's wellbeing within this model. The Quran places great emphasis on a Muslim's character, exemplified through one's morality (*Akhlaq*) and manners (*Adab*). Islam encourages both men and women to embody (modesty) in their conduct, speech and appearances. *Ḥayāʾ* carries the meanings of conscientiousness, shame, modesty, bashfulness, and all related feelings that deter a person from behaving indecently and is seen as critical to the maintenance of one's holistic wellbeing in Islam. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was said to have perfect character and his *sunnah*, in the form of the Hadith was provided as a guide for Muslims to live by (Al-Ghazali, 2000). One of the character traits cherished most by Allah is *sabr* (patience) which is mentioned in its different forms numerous times in the Quran as endurance, fortitude, steadfastness, restraint and perseverance. Muslims strengthen their connection to Allah by practicing *sabr* through *Tawakkul* (to place trust in or fully rely on Allah) in *qalb* and *aql*, demonstrated through one's conduct when facing adversity (Al-Munajjid, 2017). The state of *Nafs mutma'inna* is seen as Allah's reward in bestowing the believer with tranquillity and peace for embodying *sabr* and practicing *Tawakkul* in times of difficulty. While a majority of current dominant psychological thinking

works at the level of the *aql*, Skinner's model (2019) suggests development of psychological therapy which incorporates supporting Muslims in connecting to the *qalb* to bring it back in alignment with the *rūḥ* may be beneficial.

The final component of Skinner's model is the body. The body represents a vessel and vehicle to face the trials of *dunya*. It is viewed as the base layer of the Islamic self; a container for one's soul. The body serves as a conduit, both to carry out the actions of the internal faculties of the *qalb*, *aql* and *Hawa* as well as taking in worldly influences such as food, drink and living environments, which then translates to internal energy which affects the *Hawa*. Islamic guidance views the body as *amanah* (trust) from Allah, placed in the care of Muslims to be treated as valued gifts to be kept in good physical condition. Muslims are encouraged to embody *tawazun* (balance and moderation) in caring for their body and in daily affairs, wherein the *sunnah* encourages sports such as archery and swimming as well as self-defence (Qaradawy, 1992). Skinner's framework proposes that the ideal state of self is achieved when the *qalb*, illuminated by the *rūḥ*, directs the *aql*, which in turn governs the *nafs* and the actions of the body.

The role of the body highlights the centrality of embodiment in Islamic practice. Another aspect of embodiment of Islam is *daʿwah*, which refers to the religious obligation and moral responsibility of Muslims in inviting others to understand, embrace, or return to the teachings of Islam (Esposito, 2002; Kamali, 2008). While formal *daʿwah* efforts may be led by trained scholars or organisations, the concept also applies to everyday acts of embodying Islamic values and being an ambassador or role model in terms of demonstrating Islamic values through one's *adab* and *akhlaq* (Zebiri, 2007). *Daʿwah* thus functions not only as a tool of spiritual outreach, but also as a means of constructing and negotiating Muslim identity, particularly in diasporic settings.

While Skinner's model provides a valuable starting point for consideration of the spiritual identity of Muslims, there have been a number of criticisms levelled against it, primarily due to the lack of empirical validation and testing which limits its applicability in clinical settings. Skinner's model drew heavily from Al-Ghazali's (2009) Ilm al-Kitab (book of knowledge) which emphasises the paramount importance of knowledge, asserting that it is the cornerstone of both worldly and spiritual well-being. Given Al-Ghazali's focus was on knowledge, the *aql* component of Skinner's model may be articulated in more depth while the other aspects of self, such as the *qalb* and *rūḥ* may be lacking in elaboration, thereby replicating Western psychology's overemphasis on the mind. Furthermore, given the focus of this research is on Muslim women's experiences of embodiment through boxing, the separation of body and *aql* may unintentionally reinforce the false dualism which is rejected by notions of embodiment in feminist theory. Hence, while Skinner's model offers a useful way to consider the components of Muslim women's spiritual identity, it is important to hold in mind that alternative conceptualisations of the relationship between Muslim women's religious identity and their embodiment of boxing may also exist beyond the scope of the tenets of Skinner's model. Islamic scholars have also critiqued Skinner's model for drawing from Al-Ghazali's secondary interpretations rather than incorporating primary Islamic sources such as the Qur'an and Hadith.

The present study utilises Skinner's (2019) Islamic Model of Self as a framework of understanding how Muslim women make meaning of boxing in relation to other aspects of their identity. Past research on the experiences of Muslim women tends to be reductionistic by fixating on the visual embodiment of their identity expression such as the *hijab* (headscarf) or *niqab* (face veil) while neglecting to explore the internalised experience of their Islamic identity in a holistic manner (Ganesh & Abou-Atta, 2016). Furthermore, this fixation on physical embodiment of

Muslim women's faith stagnates the discourse surrounding Muslim women's experiences and sustains misguided discourses on Muslim women's liberation in the West (Abu-Lughod, 2002). The flattening of Muslim women's experiences in research (Ganesh & Abou-Atta, 2016) reflects the wider societal imposition of a Eurocentric lens upon their experiences. The inclusion of an Islamic model was guided by the researcher's goal of decolonising the discourse around the imposition of Eurocentric and colonial lenses on Muslim women's experiences (Abu-Lughod, 2002). By offering an alternative lens rooted in their faith, the present study sought to avoid perpetuating the dominance of Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) psychological models in research which are ill-fitted to understanding the experiences of non-Western cultures.

However, it must be acknowledged that in terms of understanding Muslim women's experiences of boxing in relation to their identity, Islamic psychology alone is insufficient in capturing the forces influencing their lives. Theologically, Islam affirms the spiritual, moral, and intellectual equality of men and women before Allah (s.w.t). Verses in the Qur'an emphasise that virtue, piety, and righteousness regardless of gender are the basis for rewards (Al Hujurat, Chapter 49, verse 13). Women in early Islamic history, including figures such as Khadija bint Khuwaylid and Aisha bint Abu Bakr, played prominent roles as businesswomen, scholars, and political actors, indicating a foundational recognition of women's agency and public participation. Both men and women are encouraged to practice *ḥayāʾ* in all aspects of their behaviour by lowering their gaze around members of the opposite sex. The Quran instructs women to cover their entire body bar their face and hands when they are outside the home. While not all Muslim women comply with these standards of modesty while still identifying as Muslim,

in general, Muslim women are conscious of upholding modesty in its various manifestations (Janmohamed, 2016).

Interpretations of women's roles in Islam have been shaped by patriarchal structures. The variation in practical application of Islamic principles across historical, cultural, and legal contexts has resulted in local customs shaping women's dress codes, education, and mobility (Gillat-ray et al., 2010). In many communities, the expectations of upholding modesty and family honour (*izzat*) is placed only upon women which does not align with religious guidance (Thorpe et al., 2020). Therefore, while considering Islamic faith illuminates certain aspects of their intrapsychic conflict and motivations, the position of women in Islam cannot be reduced to static or universal definitions. It must be understood as a dynamic process situated within broader historical and social realities where external factors have a significant role to play in terms of what it means to be a Muslim woman in the UK.

Sociocultural and political narratives shaping Muslim women's identity and wellbeing

Intersectionality theory

Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) offers a valuable framework for deconstructing the sociocultural influences shaping the identity of Muslim women in UK society. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality culminated from the scholarship of the Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Audre Lorde which confronted interlocking systems of oppression. Davis (1981) challenged white liberal feminism for ignoring systemic oppression while Hooks (1984) emphasized the need for an intersectional feminist politics that includes race, gender, and class. Lorde's (1984) work illuminated how

silence perpetuates oppression, arguing that Black women's lived experiences are sites of radical potential.

Intersectionality theory states that different, inseparable, organisational systems and hierarchies such as; ethnicity, gender, class, disability, and other social identities, interact and create oppressive systems of inequality (Crenshaw, 1989). Since conceptualisation, intersectionality theory has provided a foundation for developing insight into how inequality is sustained through overlapping systems of power. Crenshaw argued that traditional approaches to social justice did not acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of the oppression experienced by individuals who inhabit the intersection of multiple marginalised identities, such as Muslim women. By only focusing on a single axis of either race or gender, the totality of these women's experiences would be reduced to systems insufficiently equipped to address the compounded injustices of overlapping systems of oppression in their lived experience. As argued by Ruby Hamad (2020), white feminist discourses tend to exclude racialised women by dismissing expressions of agency and liberation that do not uphold Western ideals of sexuality and femininity. Intersectionality theory delineated three dimensions of intersectionality; structural, referring to how institutions systematically disadvantage certain groups; political, highlighting exclusion within social justice movements; and representational, which critiques cultural portrayals that marginalize or stereotype.

Intersectionality theory and paradoxical space

One critique of intersectionality lies in its implicit reliance on a normative base identity against which all other identities are layered (McCall, 2005). This structural assumption may unintentionally reinforce hierarchies of difference and suggests that identities are discrete and

additive, rather than fluid, relational, and co-constructed (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1982). As a result, intersectionality can inadvertently present identity as a set of quantifiable burdens, thereby minimizing the dynamic and empowering potential embedded within these intersections. This analytical framing risks flattening complex lived experiences and overlooks the resilience, adaptability, and insight that can emerge from occupying multiple social positions simultaneously.

In order to address this critique of intersectionality, the present study incorporated the fluid and relational aspects of identity negotiation by drawing upon Valentine's (2007) interpretation of Crenshaw's intersectionality theory. Valentine (2007) incorporated the impact of relational and spatial dimensions by positing that intersectional experiences are not fixed but are negotiated and reshaped through social and physical spaces. In expanding the concept of intersectionality to include a consideration of spatial constructions of identity, Valentine (2007) evoked Rose's (1993) concept of paradoxical space which is a feminist geographical reimagining of space that embraces complexity, identity, and relationality rather than fixed binaries.

Paradoxical space describes a space where identity is formed through relations, movements and tension that allows contradiction, multiplicity and ambiguity in challenging the hegemonic norms of the setting where women can occupy both the centre and the margin, and can be both insiders and outsiders. The concept of paradoxical space offers an operationalisation of Valentine's (2007) consideration of the spatial and relational dimensions of identity negotiation in intersectional identities within sporting spaces. This reorientation allows for a more holistic understanding of subjectivity, one that accounts for both structural constraints and the possibilities of agency, without fragmenting identities into isolated units or assuming a linear relationship between multiplicity and oppression.

Rose (1993) illuminated the concept through two key terms; spatial imaginary and critical mobility. Spatial imaginary refers to how we culturally conceptualize space and its meanings. Rose's critique of binary spatial imaginaries (i.e. public/private, masculine/feminine) and how they reinforce gendered and racialised hierarchies is particularly relevant to considering the experiences of Muslim women. Cultural and religious norms deepen the public/private divide while sporting spaces like the boxing gym which is traditionally viewed as a hyper-masculine space (Wacquant, 2004) lead to women of colour being cast as out of place (Rose, 1993). Critical mobility refers to the movement through and between spaces in ways that interrogates and resists dominant spatial norms and power structures. By critically examining mobility and delineating how the political undercurrents surrounding belonging in public spaces, Rose's (1993) theory offers the opportunity to examine if and how the presence of Muslim women moving through boxing gyms challenges the status quo and reconfigures the spatial imaginary through various aspects of their intersectionality.

Muslim women's mental health in the UK

There is a paucity of research specifically on how Muslim women's mental health is impacted by the various aspects of their intersectionality as research tends to neglect religion while focusing on ethnicity, race or culture as separate constructs. Previous research has largely framed Islam as a cultural practice within specific ethnicity groups such as Pakistani or Bangladeshi Muslim communities rather than attending to the tenets of religious faith (Badri, 2000). This is perhaps reflective of the heterogeneity in the Muslim population as levels of religiosity and adherence to Islamic guidance varies widely. Bagasra (2023) found that for Muslims, religious identity can play a strong role in how mental health struggles are framed. For

example, distress may be understood as a test, spiritual weakness or moral failing. These conceptualisations influences their likelihood of seeking help and a possible preference for faith-integrated treatment. Bagasra and Mackinem (2019) also emphasised the importance of clinicians having an awareness of gender-specific cultural dynamics and how these intersect with mental health. However, as Bagasra's (2023) scholarship is not focused specifically on Muslim women's mental health in the UK and reflects American Muslims' experiences, this may limit the applicability of these findings to the current study.

While there is merit in examining how the separate aspects of their identity individually influence mental health, considering an intersectional lens offers the opportunity to identify the challenges faced by overlapping aspects of their identity in relation to meeting the mental health needs of this population. However, given that majority of Muslims in the UK are from the South Asian community, it is valuable to consider these findings to understand some of the factors influencing Muslim women's wellbeing.

Impact of intra-community oppression on Muslim women's mental health

Research has highlighted the impact of patriarchal oppression due to ethnic and cultural practices on Muslim women's mental health (Bhimji, 2012). The pressure of collectivism in South Asian communities translates to expectations to conform to cultural notions of femininity and familial gendered norms of servitude which limits their ability to exert agency in the ways they dress, career choices as well as being allowed to participate in leisure activities (Bhimji, 2012). Das (1976) elucidated how identity formation and generational, familial cultural narratives are intertwined for children of South Asian immigrants. The process and tensions in

acculturation while developing a cultural identity for second-generation South Asian migrants was also found to impact psychological wellbeing (Bhugra, 2003; Triandis, 1989).

Various scholars have drawn attention to the significance of upholding *izzat* in relation to preserving kinship ties in South Asian communities which impacts Muslim women's mental health (Chew-Graham et al., 2002; Gilbert et al,, 2004). In a recent study, Gunasinghe, Hatch and Lawrence (2018) found that maintaining *izzat* was both protective against, as well as a source of, psychological distress amongst British Pakistani Muslim women. Similarly, earlier research found *izzat* exerting a conforming force which served as protection against judgment and shaming from the community (Das, 1976; Krause, 1989; Sangar & Howe, 2021). In contrast, Gilbert et al. (2004) demonstrated how *izzat* is linked to entrapment of Muslim women who feel duty-bound to put family approval before their own desires by fulfilling roles of being a "good mother and a good wife". Similarly, Takhar (2005) suggested that South Asian women tend to sacrifice their own desires for the sake of the family obligations and *izzat* while Chapman (2014) highlighted how women within the South Asian community are pressured into silence regarding issues of domestic abuse. The risk of family dishonour and resulting shame on the individual has been found to keep women in abusive situations due to the stigma around divorce and the blurring of distinction between self and others in collectivistic cultures (Takhar, 2005). In a study utilising focus groups to explore factors impacting suicidal behaviour amongst South Asian women in Britain, Hicks and Bughra (2003) found family pressure, expectations to maintain gender-specific roles, marital violence, 'entrapment' in unhappy situations, and depression to be significant factors. However, the use of focus group methodology may have biased the findings by inadvertently silencing individual narratives through the conforming pressure of being in a group.

South Asian Pakistani women have been found to have higher rates of depression compared to white counterparts, even in comparison to other South Asian groups such as Bangladeshi women (Anand and Cochrane, 2003; Sproston & Nazroo, 2002). In contrast, earlier research attributed social and familial resources and collectivist cultural structures to lower prevalence of psychological distress in South Asian groups in comparison to other ethnic groups (Anand & Cochrane, 2005, Hsu, Davies & Hansen, 2004). This contrast may reflect the tension in evolving intergenerational gender roles, illuminating the interplay of socio-cultural and relational factors influencing Muslim women's wellbeing. However, they cannot be generalised to account for the entire population of Muslim women in the UK as not all South Asians are Muslim. Furthermore, a lack of understanding of the nuances of the contextual factors contributing to these findings may lead to conflation of these findings with harmful stereotypes of the Muslim community (Anand & Cochrane, 2005).

In a review of self-harming behaviours amongst South Asian women, Aktar & Tribe (2024) suggested that community surveillance led to isolation and silencing of Muslim women's distress while experiences of racism from mental health professionals led to reluctance to seek support. While understanding how intra-community factors impact Muslim women's wellbeing is important, various other intersections of their identity contribute to their mental health as well. In order to understand how the wider political discourses and historical contexts have influenced Muslim women's wellbeing, the next section of this paper will examine the impact of systemic and societal oppression arising from the social construction of various intersections in Muslim women's identities.

Impact of wider societal oppression on wellbeing

Islamophobia, Orientalism and the coloniality of power

Muslim women face significant multilayered discrimination from Islamophobic public

discourse shaped by Orientalist and colonialist historical influences, systemic racism and

institutional exclusion (Afshar, 2008; Dwyer, 1999). Since the 9/11 bombing of the Twin Towers

in 2001 and the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005, the scrutiny of Muslim women has intensified

in British public spaces and in the proliferation of research investigating experiences of

Islamophobia (Altikriti & Al-Mahadin, 2015; Meetoo & Mirza, 2007; Taras, 2012).

Islamophobia was first introduced into the consciousness of the British public through the 1997

publication of the Runnymede trust report which defined it as 'the shorthand way of referring to

dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims' (Runnymede

Trust, 1997, p. 1). The issue with this definition was that it failed to capture the active dimension

of Islamophobia-motivated hate crimes, which manifest as harassment and violence against

Muslims, particularly visible markers of 'Muslimness'. Recent updates to the concept framed

Islamophobia within the lens of intersectionality as "fear or hatred of Islam that translates into

ideological and material forms of cultural racism against obvious markers of 'Muslimness'"

(Chakraborti & Zempi, 2012, p. 271). Awan and Zempi (2020) elaborated upon this working

definition by outlining how Islamophobia is motivated by institutional, ideological, political and

religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism.

In order to understand the relationship between Islamophobic constructions of stereotypes

imposed upon Muslim women in the UK and the resulting impact on their identity negotiation, it

is critical to consider the historical influences of Orientalism. Edward Said (1978) defined

Orientalism as "an enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to

manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively" (p. 3). Orientalism constructed the Middle East, and by extension Muslims, as the antithesis of the progressive liberal West. Orientalism served as a gendered discourse of power, painting Muslim women as oppressed and in need of rescue from controlling, violent and misogynistic Muslim men (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Said, 1978). The historical discourses of Orientalism and colonialism sustain contemporary structures of exclusion experienced by Muslim women in Western society at various intersections of their identity.

Quijano (2007) describes the enduring scars of empire that continue to do harm in the absence of a true colonial administration through the concept of 'coloniality of power'. He describes the matrix of coloniality through the evidence of the entrenchment of racialisation of certain cultural identities, racial social classification and racism as an organising principle of how modern hierarchies are structured. At its core, the coloniality of power reflects the power and privilege of Whiteness (Quijano, 2007). The coloniality of power maintains the historical strategy of Western imperialism which marked Muslim women's embodiment of Islam as a site of ideological battles over national identity and citizenship in Western societies (Fanon, 1967; Zine, 2012a). In the context of Britain, a non-Muslim majority country, the targeting of Muslim women and the demands placed upon them to adhere to Westernised rules of "civilised" clothing bears the imprint of the coloniality of power.

The coloniality of power can be observed in inflammatory language utilised by British politicians and media narratives perpetuating anti-migrant sentiments in tandem with geopolitical events which has exacerbated hostility towards the Muslim community (Mirza, 2013). In the wake of the Charlie Hebdo incident in 2015, anti-Muslim attacks in London increased by seventy percent with the majority of these attacks targeting Muslim women (Sherwood and Nardelli,

2015). Hate crimes in the UK rose by 42% following the 2016 Brexit referendum (Mortimer, 2016). In 2024, the tragic stabbing of three young girls in Southport triggered riots across the UK when misinformation spread regarding the perpetrator being Muslim. This led to the highest number of anti-Muslim hate cases recorded by Tell MAMA since the founding of the project in 2011 (Tell MAMA, 2024). The likelihood of being the target of hate crimes was particularly heightened for Muslim women wearing the *hijab* or *niqab* due to the visible embodiment of their religious identity (Perry, 2014; Tell Mama, 2018). Fluctuation in British public perception and projection of societal issues onto Muslim women diminishes their sense of safety in public spaces (Mortimer, 2016).

Alimahomed-Wilson (2020) critiqued the gender-neutral conceptualisation of Islamophobia for neglecting intersectionality. By underestimating the "centrality of gender as an ongoing, co-constitutive axis of power that structures Islamophobia" (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020, p. 649), she highlighted how Islamophobia is inextricably linked to the stereotypes which construct Muslim women as passive in direct relation to the constructions of Muslim men as violent and oppressive. Dolan (1988) spoke of the heterosexual male gaze and the colonising gaze as the spatialisation of gendered Islamophobia. The sense of hyper-visibility in public spaces due to the gaze compounds the stigmatisation experienced by Muslim women as they move through the world (Tarlo, 2010). Hargreaves (2016) evidenced how the colonial gaze and sense of othering in public spaces is detrimental to Muslim women's mental and emotional wellbeing. Zempi and Chakraborti (2015) found that some Muslim women choose to isolate themselves at home as a way to cope with the lack of safety. Research suggests that individuals who have experienced Islamophobic hate crimes in public spaces in the UK suffer physical, emotional, psychological, and economic damage and are often ignored within the criminal justice

system which impacts their sense of safety within UK society (Awan & Zempi, 2020). These experiences contribute to cumulative distress and have significant implications for Muslim women's mental health and exerts influence on their process of identity negotiation (Edge, 2010; Gatrad & Sheikh, 2002).

By situating Muslim women's experiences of othering in Western society as a product of the white supremacist and colonial desire to command them under the white masculine gaze, Razack (2018) framed the gaze as the spatialisation of the imposition of Eurocentric interpretations of liberation upon the bodies of Muslim women. Abu-Lughod (2002; 2013) warns against the structural violence and disrespect that entails the imposition of Western feminist ideals upon the bodies of Muslim women, identifying it as a form of arrogance founded upon misguided notions of superiority. Hamad (2020) elaborates upon the trap of subscribing to the singularity of white feminism as the only valid conception of liberation. Assuming Muslim women aspire to the same ideals of Western feminism dismisses their agency and identity in conceptualising alternative visions of liberation which align with their cultural and religious values.

Poynting (2009) shed light on how young Muslim women are responding strategically to lived circumstances of everyday racism through constructing blended identities in the wake of 9/11 and subsequent negative media constructions of Muslims. Their assertion of their spiritual identity appeared to provide a partial resolution to the tension in identifying as British while simultaneously being positioned as a threat to British values (Haw, 2009). Kale and Hart (2017) found that veiled Muslim women in the UK experienced fear of Islamophobia intensifying following Brexit and faith represented a coping mechanism and source of resilience for them. Similarly, McKenna & Francis (2018) found Muslim women to be increasingly defining

themselves through their religion rather than their British nationality or country of origin. The literature suggests that Muslim women may be engaged in reconciling the various aspects of their intersectional identities through re-construction and re-evaluation of intergenerational cultural practices, Islamic guidance and British culture in order to define what it means to be a British Muslim woman for themselves (Haw, 2010).

Embodied Intersectionality, feminist embodiment theory and stigma.

These findings raise a further critique of intersectionality theory wherein the predominant focus on oppression may obscure the strengths and agentive capacities that may also emerge from the intersection of aspects of identity. To address these limitations, scholars have called for a reimagining of intersectionality which attends to how power, agency, and subjectivity are negotiated at the intersections of identity (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Nash, 2008). Mirza's (2013) articulation of embodied intersectionality incorporates considerations of resistance by examining how the dialectical forces of external oppression and Muslim women's resistance is affectively mediated by the body in their articulation of their identities (Mirza, 2009b). Embodiment refers to the way in which a phenomenon is experienced by the body, in addition to emotional and cognitive senses (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2018). It recognises the body as a site of knowledge which contributes to holistic meaning-making. Embodied intersectionality situates their embodiment of Islam as expressions of resistance, challenging stereotypical tropes of Muslim women being oppressed and in need of rescuing (Abu-Lughod, 2013). In light of how gendered Islamophobia disproportionately affects Muslim women due to the visibility of their *hijabs* (Ganesh and Abou-Atta, 2016), embodied intersectionality offers a way to explore how Muslim women embody power and disempowerment through the various intersections. This

reorientation allows for a more holistic understanding of subjectivity, one that accounts for both structural constraints and the possibilities of agency, without fragmenting identities into isolated units or assuming a linear relationship between multiplicity and oppression.

Feminist embodiment theory offers a theoretical foundation of examining the interaction between gendered Islamophobia and Muslim women's expressions of resistance in embodied intersectionality. Feminist embodiment theory acknowledges how embodied intersectionality inscribes itself upon women's lived experiences of inhabiting their bodies. Women's bodies are recognised as political; they represent a site of social control and resistance within the context of social norms defining which bodies are considered acceptable or beautiful (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2018). One of the theories informing feminist embodiment theory is Goffman's (1983) stigma theory which defined stigma as avoidance or disparagement of individuals because they are marked by an attribute that is deeply discrediting. Goffman (1983) outlined three principal forms of stigmatising attributes, one of which is membership in an ethnic or religious minority group. Stigma theory outlines how bodies that deviate from socially constructed ideals of beauty and expressions of sexuality, such as racialised bodies and Muslim women's, are rejected in public spaces. In post-colonial Britain, stigma theory can be observed in the anti-Islamic hostility playing out through the Muslim female body in the form of state sanctioned rhetoric pushing for the banning of *hijabs* in public spaces and in sports participation. This perpetuates the oppressive coloniality of power by dismissing Muslim women's agency in embodying their religious identity (Bhimji, 2012). Goffman (1983) explained how external stigma faced by bodies that deviate from socially constructed ideals may lead to internalised stigma in individuals who have been othered, resulting in shame, self-surveillance and disembodiment.

In negotiating sexism from within their community while challenging other forms of prejudice and discrimination from wider society, Muslim women face a double bind wherein they are both hyper-visible and invisible all at once (Khalid, 2011). Embodiment of spiritual identity has been linked to increased fear and perceived vulnerability in public (Perry, 2014). Hopkins and Patel (2006) found that embodiment of Islamic identity was also associated to increased experiences of discrimination in the workplace. This results in a further paradox for their mental health; while spirituality may serve as a protective factor against depression, increased embodiment of religiosity heightens their risk of experiencing prejudice and discrimination (Hodge et al., 2016). The prevailing stereotypes casting Muslim women as either oppressed or hyper-visible symbols of cultural difference serve to both worsen their mental health and dissuade Muslim women from seeking support from non-Muslim healthcare professionals, contributing to internalised stigma and social isolation (Meer, 2008; Samari, 2016). Menakem (2017) described how unhealed racial trauma causes lasting effects on bodies of racialised individuals which ripples through generations. Bryant-Davis & Ocampo (2006) highlight how racial trauma leads to dissociation and grief, and alters one's sense of identity. Bryant-Davis & Ocampo (2006) distinguish racial trauma from PTSD by asserting that living as a marginalised individual where racism is a daily occurrence means that the stress is ongoing. Therefore, the traumatic events will never be truly "post".

Gaps in British mental health provision for Muslim women

Muslim women are underrepresented in mental health services which is at odds with the high rates of mental distress within this population (Patel et al., 2000). This inconsistency has been attributed to concerns about confidentiality, community judgement and stigma surrounding

disclosure (Malik, 2000). Reluctance to seek formal care may also be due to perceptions of Western psychological models being insufficient in accounting for spiritual idioms and cultural manifestations of distress, reflected by inadequacies in service provision and lack of adaptations to include the religious frameworks through which many Muslim women interpret emotional wellbeing (Rashid & Jagger, 1992; Weatherhead & Daiches, 2010). While this study acknowledges that heterogeneity in the Muslim population means that religion is not a central part in every Muslim's identity, Islam is likely to have informed the values that shaped their development and family roles, their understanding of spirituality as well as their engagement with social and political discourses surrounding Muslims (Ahmed & Amer, 2012).

Dein et al. (2008) recommends the provision of culturally and faith-sensitive mental health services that recognise the role of Islam not only as a coping mechanism but as a source of resilience and healing. Recent studies by Rassool (2015) and Hussain and Bagguley (2013) have highlighted strengths-based perspectives of how Muslim women nourish their wellbeing through religious and community-based approaches. In a qualitative review of South Asian's experiences of psychological distress, Mooney, Trivedi and Sharma (2016) advocated for greater understanding of how distress is interpreted in these communities in order to improve the provision of culturally sensitive health care. Furthermore, the absence of research incorporating Muslim women's embodied intersectionality into explorations of approaches to support their wellbeing has resulted in a paucity of strengths-based, person-centred approaches to supporting Muslim women's wellbeing. These findings underscore the need for more community-led, culturally aligned approaches incorporating spiritual identity into Western mental health models to explore distinct possibilities of healing that is collective, embodied and aligned with the *qalb* (Skinner, 2019). Anand and Cochrane (2005) found that individuals from South Asian cultural

backgrounds, particularly women, are more likely to report distress related somatic symptoms which suggests that addressing embodiment may be critical to their wellbeing. Therefore, the next section explores one possible avenue for Muslim women to tend to their wellbeing through connecting with their sense of embodiment through sports.

Muslim women, sports and wellbeing

This study explores the value of sports in light of the aforementioned research indicating a need for more community-based embodied approaches to supporting Muslim women's wellbeing. Oppressions enacted against various intersections of Muslim women's personhood are detrimental to their wellbeing and may contribute to their somatisation of distress (Anand & Cochrane, 2005). In the context of Islam as an embodied religion, it would be useful to explore the interplay between Muslim women's embodiment of spiritual identity and embodiment in sports in relation to their wellbeing. While mental health research has largely focused on illness and access to services, a parallel budding field of research has explored the intersectional dynamics of sports engagement which offers insight into how religion, gender, ethnicity, and class interact to result in unequal opportunities to participate, but also provides an arena for renegotiation of embodied intersectionality (Rana, 2022; Thorpe et al., 2022). This study explores sports settings as potential paradoxical spaces (Rose, 1993) for identity negotiation in relation to Muslim women's embodied intersectionality.

There has been a proliferation of research on the benefits of sports for wellbeing in recent years, however, there have been few studies specifically focused on the benefits for Muslim women. A recent scoping review by Bozdarov et al. (2022) on boxing as a mental health intervention found that it provided significant reduction in symptoms of anxiety, depression,

PTSD and negative symptoms of schizophrenia. Non-contact boxing improved mood, confidence, self-esteem and provided an outlet for anger. While the studies included did not explicitly identify any participants as Muslim women, three studies discussed using a trauma-informed non-contact boxing program for marginalised women who have experienced trauma (Gammage et al., 2021; Lyon et al., 2020; van Ingen, 2011). Participants spoke about how inclusion in a historically masculine-dominated sport made them feel safe and empowered. Comparisons were made between traditional talk therapy and how using a movement-based program allows them to embody strength and power while releasing their anger safely. However, to the author's knowledge, there have been no systematic reviews on the benefits of sports specific to Muslim women's wellbeing.

The relationship between Islam, physical activity, and Muslim women's participation in sport has received increasing scholarly attention in recent years, particularly within the framework of identity negotiation and intersectionality (Agergaard, 2016; Ahmad, Richards, Amara and Henry, 2010; Benn, 1996; Jawad *et al.*, 2010; Kay, 2006; Ratna, 2010; Stride, 2016 Thorpe & Marfell, 2020). However, the bulk of scholarship does not include firsthand experiences of Muslim women or tends to emphasise the experiences of adolescent Muslim girls leaving adult Muslim women's voices and complex embodied experiences underexplored. Kipnis and Caudwell (2015) explored the societal and cultural barriers experienced by female muslim boxers in Kabul. Through discussing how these women navigate cultural and religious norms to pursue their athletic ambitions, they shed light on the challenges faced by Muslim women engaging in boxing. The broader implications of how their engagement in boxing challenges stereotypes and gender norms in Afghan culture, demonstrates how combat sports offer a

platform for women to assert agency and subvert societal expectations (Kipnis and Caudwell, 2015).

Muslim women in the UK navigate complex processes of identity negotiation in relation to their participation in sport, as they reconcile religious commitments, cultural expectations, and broader societal perceptions (Samie & Sehlikoglu, 2015; sportscotland, 2008). Islamic guidance promotes physical wellness through recommended activities such as swimming, archery, and horse riding; practices historically undertaken by both male and female companions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) (Kamali, 2008). While Islam encourages physical activity and emphasises the importance of caring for one's health as part of religious duty, research has consistently reported low rates of sports participation among Muslim women, particularly in diaspora contexts (Samie & Sehlikoglu, 2015; Walseth, 2006). Past scholarship has disproportionately focused on barriers to participation, often framing Muslim women through deficit narratives shaped by assumptions of religious conservatism, cultural restriction, or patriarchal control which limits representation of their voices in the scholarship (Ahmad, 2011; Gül & Gül, 2021; Jawad et al., 2010; Ratna & Samie, 2018). The narratives around Muslim sportswomen in the media often frame them either as exceptional symbols of progress or as passive victims, both of which flatten the nuances of dilemmas they negotiate and the diversity of their lived experiences (Ahmad, 2011). This paper argues that by focusing on the wider context in terms of barriers and facilitators, the agency of Muslim women has been minimised in the research, thereby colluding with colonial and Orientalist lenses imposed upon their experiences. This study endeavours to utilise a Muslim-centric approach in using an Islamic model of the self, combined with intersectionality theory to adopt a holistic view of evaluating their experiences in sports settings. This shift aligns with broader efforts to decolonise mental

health by recognising the legitimacy of non-Western epistemologies and practices (Siraj, 2011; Walseth, 2006).

In many cases, sport becomes a site where multiple identities; religious, ethnic, national, and gendered, are simultaneously contested, adapted and reaffirmed. Sport often mirrors broader societal tensions which impacts access to gender-sensitive facilities, supportive family structures, and culturally competent instructors thereby reinforcing existing disparities (Ratna & Samie, 2018). Muslim women navigate these terrains while simultaneously challenging hegemonic assumptions about Britishness, modernity, and gender equality (Samie & Sehlikoglu, 2015). Ratna's (2011) exploration of British-Muslim female footballers navigating the intersection of faith, gender and sport documented the dilemma between balancing upholding *ḥayāʾ* while observing the dress codes of football participation. By examining how these athletes challenge stereotypes and assert their identities within the realm of football, Ratna (2011) shed light on the ways in which sports can serve as a site for identity negotiation. Footballers were found to be redefining femininity and athleticism for themselves in order to reconcile their spiritual and sporting identities thereby countering the notion that these identities are mutually exclusive. However, Ratna's study did not specify the age of participants and included participants under the age of sixteen, which may have limited the relevance of some of the findings.

Similarly, Rana's (2018; 2022) ethnographic exploration of Muslim and ethnic minority women's experiences in Dutch kickboxing gyms documented female-only kickboxing classes as sites of collective resistance and identity negotiation. The narratives shared by participants suggested that when sports participation is aligned with Islamic values, it offers the possibility of a transformative space for embodied empowerment, religious belonging and political resistance which challenged simplified narratives of Muslim women as either oppressed or secularly

emancipated, showing how agency is exercised within and between intersecting social norms. The value of these gender-segregated kickboxing spaces in fostering empowerment and inclusion formed the basis of Rana's (2018) critique of Dutch integration policies based on Western liberal values which frame gender segregation as inherently oppressive. These kickboxing spaces challenged the narrative of integration by arguing instead for culturally-sensitive, spiritually-inclusive sports settings. Rana's narrative-driven exploration of how Muslim women navigate piety and athleticism not as opposites, but as mutually reinforcing, demonstrates the power offered by embodied practice as avenues for not just physical but holistic wellbeing.

However, given that participants were recruited from only two gyms in The Hague, the study is limited by its narrow scope and rootedness in the Dutch context. Furthermore, critics have pointed out the risk of over-romanticising kickboxing gyms and broader sporting spaces for Muslim women by downplaying other aspects of difference between members and glossing over the tensions in interactions within the gym. In spite of these limitations, Rana's work is a valuable contribution to gender, religion, and sport studies that reframes Muslim women's participation in sport as an act of both religious and political agency. Therefore, the next section of this paper aims to build on these findings through a systematic review of Muslim women's experiences in sports. This meta-ethnography aims to search and review literature on Muslim women's experiences of engaging in sports to meet the following objectives; firstly, to describe themes arising which capture their experiences of engaging in sports within the framework of intersectionality, feminist embodiment theory and the Islamic Model of Self. Secondly, to analyse the quality of literature identified and finally, to identify potential gaps in literature and derive future research questions.

Systematic review of the literature

A meta-ethnographic approach (Noblit & Hare, 1988) was best suited to addressing the research questions as it is particularly suited to developing conceptual models and theories (Sattar et al., 2021). What separates a meta-ethnography from other qualitative synthesis approaches is the interpretation of conceptual data drawn from the available body of qualitative research using a unique translation synthesis method to transcend the findings of individual study accounts and create higher order themes (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sattar et al., 2021).

To address the aim of the present study of advancing understanding of Muslim women's experiences of engaging in sports, the meta-ethnographic approach of interpreting beyond the findings that are currently reported felt most appropriate. Given that the goal of this systematic literature review is to develop a qualitative interpretation of exclusively qualitative interpretations (Luong, Bearman & MacLeod, 2023) meta-ethnography was better suited than thematic synthesis for this review.

Search strategy

For the current review, an initial search was conducted on 15th May 2024 and the final search to check for any updates was carried out on 10th March 2025. The search strategy dissected the research question into five main components; "sports", "women", "Muslim", "participation" and "experiences" which formed individual search streams. Each component was systematically searched for, after which components were combined. The first search component related to the "sports" aspect of the question; terms such as "sports participation" or "sports" or "activity" or "athletes" or "physical activity" or "exercise" or "fitness" or "training" were searched. Secondly, various versions of the "women" component was searched through, terms

like "female" or "woman" or "females". Thirdly, relating to the "Muslim" component, iterations of the word such as "Islam" or "Islamic" or "Muslims" were searched. The fourth component, of "participation", was included to narrow the research focus to papers explicitly exploring experiences of participation rather than general attitudes towards physical activity. Terms such as "participation", "engagement" and "involvement" formed this search strand. For the final component, various synonyms for "experiences" such as "perceptions" or "attitudes" or "views" or "feelings" or "qualitative" or "perspective" were included.

The complete search strategy is delineated in Table 1. In anticipation of scarcity of research, OpenDissertations was searched to include grey literature theses. SPORTDiscus journal was included to capture research on sports participation.

Table 1

Search terms, limiters and results

Databases searched	CINAHL Ultimate, MEDLINE Ultimate, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, OpenDissertations, SPORTDiscus with Full Text	
Dates Searched	All years (1993-2022)	
Search no.	Search Term	Results
1	muslim or islam or islamic or muslims	131,441
2	Participation or engagement or involvement	1,757,178
3	experiences or perceptions or attitudes or views or feelings or qualitative or perspective	7,398,263
4	sports participation or sports or activity or athletes or physical activity or exercise or fitness or training	9,256,599
5	women or female or woman or females	15,143,655
	#1 AND #2 AND #3 AND #4 AND #5	340
	Duplicates removed	
	Limit English Language, Adults, Humans	274

Inclusion/Exclusion criteria

For the initial screen of abstracts and titles, the SPIDER framework was applied to identify the sample, phenomena of interest, design, evaluation and research shown in Table 2 which captures the inclusion criteria (Cooke et al., 2012). Studies focused solely on barriers to participation were excluded. 49 studies were found to be eligible and the full articles were sourced.

Table 2

SPIDER Criteria for Study Eligibility and Inclusion (Cooke et al., 2012)

Criteria	Definition
Sample	Muslim women above the age of sixteen who are presently engaged in, retrospectively engaged or considered engaging in sports
Phenomena of Interest	Muslim women's firsthand experiences of sports participation
Design	Interviews and open-ended questionnaires as well as any other creative qualitative methodology used to capture views of participants such as ethnographic observation or photovoice
Evaluation	Views, experiences, narratives
Research	Qualitative

Figure 3

Flowchart of exclusion criteria

Identification

Records identified through database searching n = 274

Records removed *before* screening Duplicate records removed n = 57

Additional records identified through hand searching n = 2

Screening

Records screened n = 217

Records excluded based on abstracts as not articles specific to Muslim women's experiences of sports n = 168

Full text articles assessed for eligibility n = 49

Full text articles excluded as not within parameters or not qualitative in design

Participants were not Muslim women or included majority non-Muslims and men n = 4

Participants were below the age of 16 n = 9

Study was not a peer-reviewed paper n = 2

Study did not include experiences of sports n = 3

Not a qualitative study n = 20

Included

Studies included in qualitative synthesis n = 13

Figure 3 outlines the exclusion criteria. Only studies including Muslim female participants were included in the review. Following a detailed scan of article titles and abstracts, 11 articles were identified for inclusion (Table 3). Two additional papers were included through a hand search (Thorpe, Ahmad, Marfell & Richards, 2020; Tjonndal & Hovden, 2022). Table 3 summarises the key details of the studies. Noblit and Hare (1988) recommend seven phases for conducting meta-ethnography which was followed in this study; getting started, deciding what is relevant, reading the studies, seeing how these are related, translating the studies, synthesising translations, and expressing the synthesis. These steps were conducted to produce a 'Line-of-argument synthesis' which involved taking the contexts of the studies into consideration and bringing together the literature to form a whole, greater than the sum of its parts. Themes relating to research questions were extracted from studies, translated into one another and synthesised to produce concepts outlined in Table 4 (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Table 3

Key details of studies

Study	Purpose	Sample	Data Collection	Design
Taylor & Toohey (2001)	Exploring attitudes towards, experiences of, and perspectives on recreation of Muslim women living in Australia and recreation service providers experiences of and understanding of meeting the recreation needs of Muslim women	20 Muslim women living in Australia and 12 recreation service providers	In-depth interviews with Muslim women, representatives of Muslim women's groups and recreation service providers	Grounded theory
Walseth & Fasting (2003)	Exploring the views of Egyptian Muslim women on the relationship between Islam and physical activity/sport to seek an understanding of the religious influence on Muslim women's sport participation	27 Egyptian students at one university	Qualitative interviews and field-observations over a four-month field study in Egypt	Case study (CS)
Walseth (2006)	To explore whether sport participation creates feelings of belonging and the reasons for feelings of belonging to develop	21 Norwegian immigrants aged between 16 and 25 years.	Life history interviews	CS
Koca et al. (2009)	Examining the nexus between cultural and social factors influencing Turkish women's constraints and strategies to negotiating participation in Leisure-time Physical Activity	43 women aged 27 to 55 years from local leisure centres in Ankara, Turkey.	4 focus groups and 20 individual interviews	Inductive individual and cross-case descriptive analysis
Murray et al. (2015)	To gain a better understanding of beliefs, attitudes, and experiences with physical activity to increase access to culturally appropriate physical activity opportunities	8 adult Somali women in San Diego, US	Participants provided with cameras, and engaged in group discussions about the scenes they photographed	PhotoVoice combined with Thematic analysis
Miles & Benn (2016)	Exploring how previous physical activity experiences influence women's current views and participation in physical activity in university to identify the key influences shaping their attitudes and behaviours towards participation	34 open-ended questionnaires and 6 individual interviews from Muslim women attending one UK university	Open-ended 22-item questionnaire and follow-up voluntary individual interviews	CS
Lenneis & Pfister (2017)	To investigate the lack of physical activity participation of Muslim minority ethnic women in Denmark and to identify key influences which shaped their attitudes and practices	26 female migrant cleaners from non-Western countries	Semi-structured interviews and participant observation	Thematic analysis
Abdulwasi et al. (2018)	Exploring factors influencing Muslim women's decisions to participate in a mosque-based physical activity intervention	12 South Asian Muslim women in Ontario Canada	Individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews	Descriptive analysis guided by an ecological framework

Study	Purpose	Sample	Data Collection	Design
Carr & Power (2020)	To understand how the players of Diverse City Football Club felt about their participation in football and how they negotiate participation both as individuals and as a group	12 Irish Muslim women	Focus group discussions	Grounded theory CS
Thorpe et al. (2020)	To build upon and extend understandings of the embodied sporting spatialities of Muslim women in Aotearoa New Zealand by drawing upon Muslim geographies to unpack the web of discourses intersecting in their lives and sporting experiences in order to reveal gendered Islamophobia as a spatialized process that occurs at different scales in sport	38 Muslim women (aged 16-63 years old) living in Aotearoa, New Zealand	8 focus groups and 15 interviews	Thematic analysis
Tjonndal & Hovden (2022)	To explore how female Muslim boxers express their commitment for boxing and what their identity as boxers means for them in their everyday life and how their involvement in boxing influences their lives	2 Norwegian female immigrants	Life story interviews	Narrative analysis
Soltani (2021)	To explore how religious identity intersects with wider relations of power such as gender norms and discourses around diversity to inform Muslim women's participation in aquatic leisure activities in NZ	19 university level-educated Muslim women in Hamilton, NZ	Semi-structured interviews, Online participant observations, self-directed photography	Ethnographic
Mahmood & Woodhouse (2024)	To contribute to the decolonisation of sports research, policy and practice with the term ethnicity used to reflect how culture, tradition and religion have impacted experiences of sports	1 British Pakistani Muslim	Complete member research status, narrative visibility and dialogue with informants beyond the self	Autoethnography

Critical appraisal

  The literature was subject to critical analysis using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklist for qualitative research (CASP; Critical Appraisal Skills Programme, 2018). The checklist was adapted to include a final item evaluating how valuable the research is to the research question of the meta-ethnography. This was included in order to account for the paucity and variance in studies on Muslim women's experiences of sports, with some studies including participants who were not engaged in sports or only focused on specific aspects of their identity (i.e. religious beliefs) in relation to sports participation. Table 4 below summarises the evaluation of studies across various categories while full details of the critical appraisal can be found in Appendix A. The critical appraisal supports evaluation of the conclusions drawn from this systematic review. All studies identified as eligible were included for synthesis regardless of quality due to limited available research in the area of interest.

Table 4

Adapted CASP Qualitative Appraisal Checklist

CASP Qualitative Checklist – Study Assessment													
	Mahmood & Woodhouse (2024)	Soltani (2021)	Tjonndal & Hovden (2022)	Thorpe et al. (2020)	Carr & Power (2020)	Abdulwasai et al. (2018)	Lenneis & Pfister (2017)	Miles & Benn (2016)	Murray et al. (2015)	Koca et al. (2009)	Walseth (2006)	Walseth & Fasting (2003)	Taylor & Toohey (2001)
Total score /20:	16	20	19	20	17	17	16	19	18	16	16	14	16
1. Clear statement of the aims of the research	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2
2. Qualitative methodology is appropriate	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2
3. Research design was appropriate to match aims	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2
4. Recruitment strategy suited aims	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	Partial 1
5. Data collection addressed research question	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	Yes 2
6. Relationship between researcher and participant/data has been considered	NA 0	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	No 0	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	No 0	No 0	Partial 1	No 0
7. Ethical issues have been taken into consideration	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	Yes 2	Can't tell 0	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	Partial 1	Can't tell 0	Partial 1

8. Data analysis was sufficiently rigorous	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	Yes 2	Yes 2
9. Clear statement of findings	Partial 1	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2
10. The research was valuable	Partial 1	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Yes 2	Partial 1	Partial 1	Partial 1	Partial 1	Partial 1	Yes 2	Partial 1	Yes 2

Systematic review results

Table 5 depicts the cross comparison of studies by concepts to address the first aim of this paper; to describe the various themes that capture Muslim women's experiences of participating in sports as well as analyse the quality of literature identified.

Table 5

Cross comparison of studies by concept

Concepts	Mahmood & Woodhouse (2024)	Soltani (2021)	Tjonndal & Hovden (2022)	Thorpe et al. (2020)	Carr & Power (2020)	Abdulwasi et al. (2018)	Lenneis & Pfister (2017)	Miles & Benn (2016)	Murray et al. (2015)	Koca et al. (2009)	Walseth (2006)	Walseth & Fasting (2003)	Taylor & Toohey (2001)
Emotional outlet & expression	•	•	•	•	•	•				•	•	•	•
Participation in alignment with Islam	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•
Judgmental gaze of cultural community	•	•	•	•	•		•	•		•			•
Gendered roles & responsibilities	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Marginalisation in secular society	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Building chosen communities	•	•	•	•	•	•			•	•	•		•
Seeking inclusive environments	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Negotiating barriers to participation	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Expressing agency	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•

The key concepts summarising the findings of the systematic review and how they fit into the categories of the meta-ethnography are outlined in Figure 4. Each category will be explored in greater detail in the paragraphs below.

Figure 4

Overview of key concepts and synthesised broader categories

Key concepts found in the studies	Synthesised categories
Emotional outlet and expression	Nurturing their well-being
Participation in alignment with Islam	
Seeking inclusive environments	Seeking out supportive communities
Building chosen communities	
Judgmental gaze of the cultural community	Barriers & Challenges in engaging in sports
Gendered roles and responsibilities	
Marginalisation in secular society	
Negotiating barriers to participation	Resisting and breaking barriers to participation
Expressing agency	

Nurturing their well-being

Emotional outlet and expression

Ten studies described how participants experienced sports to be an emotional outlet and avenue to express feelings. Participants described feeling happy, relaxed and more confident in themselves while releasing stress and anger through sports. Walseth (2006) found participants experiencing sports as a heterotopia; a free space separate from the outside world which was a refuge for them (Foucault, 1991).

Participants playing football in an Irish team, adapted to include the needs of Muslim women, reported increased wellbeing and confidence (Carr & Power, 2020), while swimming

was described as a therapeutic space of joy and pleasure (Thorpe et al., 2020). Thorpe et al.'s (2020) participants spoke of sports as an outlet for aggression and an energizing experience.

Participants in Lenneis and Pfister (2017), Miles & Benn (2016) and Murray et al. (2015) did not mention experiencing sports as an emotional outlet which may be because these studies were focused on the barriers to participations and mentioned that only a few participants were engaging in sports. Notably, the two competitive female boxers in Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) study spoke about boxing as a space of no pain where they could overcome anxiety and depression. Boxing was experienced as a space of freedom, which is particularly remarkable as their participation was so vehemently objected to by their families that their alienation brought up feelings of despair and shame. The emotional duality experienced by participants in this study amplified the sacred space of the gym as a space to process the wounds inflicted by the world beyond.

Participation in alignment with Islam

Different aspects of Islam were discussed by participants in relation to variation in milieu across studies. In ten studies, participants emphasised that physical activity was encouraged, as maintaining good health is a requirement in Islam. The level of alignment with Islam and spiritual wellbeing derived by participants varied with the type of sports and settings they participated in. Participants drew upon the Hadith and *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) who used to go running with his wife, Aisha (ra) as evidence that their participation was aligned with Islam. Participants in Walseth & Fasting's (2003) study raised how Islamic guidance highlights the importance of play and how participants enjoyed sports in following the *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Another way in which participants aligned their engagement in sports was through examining their *niyyah*. For example, participants in Walseth and Fasting's (2003) study spoke about how sports is an obligation

while identifying secular society's lack of provision as the issue rather than Islam. Furthermore, they raised the importance of being shielded from the male gaze while participating as their *niyyah* was not to cause excitation for men, rather, it was to fulfil their Islamic duty to be physically fit.

Carr & Power (2020) found that participation in football complemented Islamic values. Participants framed sports as an act of worship which strengthened their sense of agency and spiritual and emotional wellbeing. Participants' agency in enacting personal interpretations of maintaining embodied respectability, while navigating the rules of sports settings, was found to influence their psychological and emotional wellbeing. Thorpe et al. (2020) raised Mernissi's (1991) conceptualization of the three *hijabs*; visual, spatial and ethical. The visual hijab is the visual embodiment of modesty in dress and behaviour, the spatial hijab represents the border that restricts female Muslims' mobility in public spaces while the ethical hijab represents the protector that shelters Muslim women from forbidden things, or harams such as meeting men alone (Hamzeh and Oliver, 2012, 332). Participation in sports was found to be beneficial to psychological, spiritual and physical wellbeing when in alignment with the three *hijabs*.

Participants in Abdulwasi et al.'s (2018) mosque exercise program felt comfort due to their exercise fitting within the boundaries of Islam which framed exercise as an act of worship while participants in Miles and Benn's (2016) study spoke of how exercise allowed them to fulfil their obligation of caring for their bodies as it is *Amanah* from Allah. Several participants mentioned sports that were encouraged in the Quran; swimming, archery and horse riding. This concept was accentuated in sports settings where participants were enabled and supported in manifesting their Islamic identity in a way where their agency to do so was respected. There were several ways in which sports settings supported or facilitated participants' upholding *ḥayā'* while engaging in sports; through gender-segregated settings,

through inclusion of modest attire such as the hijab or fully covered swimwear. For example, the author of Mahmood and Woodhouse's (2024) autoethnography spoke about wearing loose fitting clothes to the gym to preserve modesty.

However, participants in Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) study did not experience boxing as nurturing to their spiritual wellbeing due to the combined objection from their community due to boxing being a male dominated sport and the lack of inclusivity in boxing attire which meant that they could not uphold *ḥayāʾ* while competing in boxing. It must be noted that this study only had a small sample of two participants who were both refugees. For these participants, they experienced boxing to be nurturing to their emotional wellbeing in spite of the inner conflict and distress it produced through feeling like Islam and the cultural enforcing of barriers were obstacles to their participation. Walseth's (2006) study found that participants' identities as Muslims had limited influence on their sport involvement and did not comment further on whether their sports involvement interacted with their spiritual wellbeing or how sports was conceptualized for participants in relation to their Islamic identity.

Seeking out supportive communities

Seeking inclusive environments

Participants across all studies sought inclusive environments to participate in sports, which underscored the structural intersectionality in the lack of inclusive settings. Variance in contexts led to different threats arising from intersections in participants' identities. A safe space for sports participation was construed in a number of ways; free from racial discrimination and Islamophobia, shielded from the male gaze and the judgmental gaze of their cultural community. Koca et al.'s study (2009) highlighted how some participants found safety in female-only settings due to being shielded from the male gaze rather than due to

religious requirements. Others felt comfortable exercising in mixed-gym settings or on sports teams coached by male coaches as long as they felt included and that their agency in practicing Islam was respected.

The role of the coach in creating an inclusive environment was highlighted in a number of studies where participants expressed gratitude at feeling respected and treated equally as a member of the team. Having a coach willing to adapt activities based on participants' physical abilities and cultural needs made participants feel welcome and included. Abdulwasi et al. (2018) found that participants feeling supported by the instructor was a significant facilitator for sustained engagement. Some participants shared feelings of satisfaction, happiness and liberation in being able to participate in inclusive environments such as a swimming program specifically designed for Muslim women. Inclusive environments were ones where the three *hijabs* (visual, spatial and ethical) could be upheld without discrimination when participating in sports, creating a space culturally, socially, physically and spiritually 'safe' space. Conversely, Mahmood and Woodhouse's (2024) autoethnography highlighted the author's yearning to be able to participate in "male" sports such as football, while only being offered gendered sports opportunities in school, limited to netball and softball.

In studies where few participants were currently engaging in sports (Lenneis & Pfister, 2017; Miles & Benn, 2016; Murray et al. 2015) the emphasis was on yearning for more inclusive spaces to participate in sports that were adapted to the various aspects of their identity such as gender-segregated affordable options and childcare provisions to address the limitations of their social class and religious practices. Miles and Benn's (2016) participants sought gender-segregated opportunities in local community clubs and gyms in response to their university's failure to provide culturally appropriate environments for them to participate in physical activity. Taylor & Toohey's (2001) study highlighted how extra effort

was required from participants seeking out inclusive environments in terms of travelling further to find a sports program or venue which offers gender-segregated classes or activities where Muslim women can participate with their modesty upheld or access programs adapted to Ramadan. Participants also highlighted experiences of feeling ostracized when their requests for accommodation and adaptation are met with hostility.

Building chosen communities

The concept of building chosen communities manifested in ten studies, which may be reflective of the variance in the type of sports participants were engaged in. This concept was more salient in studies where participants were engaged in team sports. For some participants, these communities were built through finding an inclusive environment such as a supportive football team or local swimming pool where ladies-only sessions were offered. Participants described their basketball team as a "second family" and an aerobics class as a "second home" (Walseth, 2006). Having fun together fostered a sense of community for participants. Social support was one of the most important factors shared by participants in the experiences of sport involvement. Participants also spoke about feelings of belonging, which were particularly significant for first generation migrants. The shared sense of mastery from playing in one of the best teams in the region where most players were from minoritized ethnic backgrounds contributed to building a sense of chosen community for participants in Walseth's (2006) study. In a mosque-based exercise program, through their collective membership in shared faith and living in the same neighbourhood, Abdulwasi et al. (2018) found that the sense of community extended from connecting physically and spiritually in the mosque space to connecting socially in the neighbourhood.

Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) participants demonstrated how the sense of belonging from the boxing gym made them strong enough to endure the conflict with their families

being against their participation in competitive boxing. Koca et al. (2009) found that some women engaged in sports by turning it into a family activity, thereby creating a community where it would be possible for them to engage in sports. Similarly, Murray et al.'s (2015) participants expressed a desire for more family-inclusive physical activity programs and shared the responsibilities of childcare by relying on other women in the Somali community to facilitate time for physical activity. Other migrant families chose to build relationships with non-Muslim neighbours outside their cultural community, to foster relationships with people who would be supportive of their sports participation.

The concept of building chosen communities was absent in three studies. The intersectionality in the identity of the participants impacted their level of engagement in sports; Lenneis and Pfister's (2017) participants were working class cleaners who struggled to find time and energy to exercise due to work. The lack of provision for Muslim women at the university in Miles and Benn's (2016) study may not have facilitated a sense of community while the focus of Walseth & Fasting's (2003) was on their interpretation of Islam rather than their experiences of sports as a whole.

Barriers & Challenges in engaging in sports

Judgmental gaze of the cultural community

Nine studies highlighted sports being discouraged or perceived negatively in their cultural communities. Sports participation was viewed as trivial, frivolous and inappropriate for women. "Sports for sports sake" was seen to be an alien concept as physical activity appeared to only be permitted for the purpose of maintaining health. This was a shared experience of women living in their native Muslim-majority countries and abroad in Western societies. Participants shared that their families were worried about sports participation compromising *izzat* which led to their participation being regulated through constant

surveillance and gossip. Participants who chose to sustain participation experienced alienation from their cultural community. Competing in boxing while wearing the standard boxing uniform led to one participant's family fearing that she would ruin their family reputation and be labelled a whore by the community (Tjonndal & Hovden, 2022).

Conversely, many participants in New Zealand shared that their families were supportive of sporting participation if the three *hijabs* were respected. Similarly, Miles and Benn's (2016) found participants' families encouraging sports participation which emphasises the diversity in practice of Islam and influence of cultural practices, even within Muslim women in the same country and similar cultural background. Participants still sought parental support to participate in sports and valued their parents' trust that they would not compromise *izzat*. Sports like gymnastics were not allowed due to the uniform compromising their modesty (Thorpe et al., 2020). However, while their families were supportive, they encountered resistance from the wider cultural community. There was a sense of community 'policing' of their behaviour and enforcement of the three *hijabs* upon these participants. Women shared experiences of being judged by other Muslim women and having sports like rock climbing being seen as haram. Mahmood and Woodhouse (2024) raised the power held by Imams in the community in terms of endorsing the permissibility of sports. Surveillance, judgment and control of Muslim women was found to intensify with age once participants hit puberty.

Participants in Murray et al. (2015) were not able to access sports while Abdulwasi et al. (2018) did not find the judgmental gaze of the community to be a barrier for their participants which may be due to the physical activity program taking place within a mosque, where the three *hijabs* were upheld. By combining physical activity within the fortress of spiritual power in the community, their engagement was shielded from judgment. Notably,

Walseth's (2006) study on young Norwegian migrants did not find participants experiencing the judgmental gaze of the community.

Gendered roles and responsibilities

Participants across all studies shared that the roles they held as mothers, daughters and wives as well as the cultural expectations attached to these roles made it harder for them to participate in sports. Several studies raised the concept of the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1982), which are the relationships that women have in which they care for and about the needs of others. Both women in their native countries as well as migrant communities were found to value upholding the ethic of care, which depleted time and energy needed to participate in sports. The ethic of care was found to be a more robust feature of the lives of women in lower class families where there was less financial freedom to outsource caregiving and household responsibilities. Participants were confronted with iterations of "good girls don't do sports" first by their parents, then later by their husbands. A number of studies found husbands and their marital family to be gatekeepers of access to sports. Women could only participate in sports if they received the approval of their families first. Approval was more likely to be granted if the sports settings were gender-segregated or did not compromise *izzat*. Across studies, families raised different reasons to oppose women's participation in sports; either framing sports as a waste of time, too aggressive for women or conflicting with Islamic values due to male coaches, mixed training environments or uniform prerequisites not complying with religious dress requirements. Women in Turkey shared family expectations of servitude towards their in-laws in terms of staying home to do housework for their in-laws as well as internalised acceptance of their primary roles being that of mothers and wives (Koca et al., 2009). Turkish and Egyptian women shared that they were only able to participate in physical activity after bringing up children, leaving their job or after retirement.

Women boxers in Norway felt conflicted between fulfilling the role of a good Muslim daughter and achieving sporting success in boxing as sociocultural norms framed these aspects of their identity as incompatible. Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) study raised the gendering of power in sport embedded in the privileged position men hold in defining and categorising what's best for women such as dress codes and rules. Some studies also found cultural interpretations of Islam imposed by husbands to frame sports participation as going against religious requirements. Husbands were found to enforce the gendered discourses of the spatial and ethical *hijabs*, thereby creating barriers to sports participation (Thorpe et al., 2020).

Soltani (2021) highlighted how while being physically active is encouraged for both men and women in Islam and Islamic guidance advises both men and women to uphold modesty by engaging in sports in gender segregated spaces, the men in Afghan migrant communities were found to impose this religious obligation only on women. The positioning of women culturally as 'guardians of cultural and religious integrity' (Dwyer, 2008, p.447) appeared to intensify in some instances of migration to unfamiliar Western dominant contexts. Afghan husbands in Soltani's (2021) study were found to forbid their wives from going to the beach and impose the headscarf on pre-pubescent daughters.

The intertwining of cultural patriarchy with religious guidance which presents as a barrier to women participating in sports was seen in Walseth and Fasting's (2003) study as well where women in Egypt who did not wear the veil or only wore the hijab reported that their husbands used Islam to legitimise their control over them. Their study presented the complexities surrounding the debate of the interpretation of the verses of the Quran which some Muslim men and cultural communities use to legitimise men's control over women. However, women in the Egyptian study who wore the *niqab* and *krimar* which by extension was interpreted by the researcher to have internalised more Islamic values shared that they

respect the word of Allah above all else and therefore did not agree that men should prevent women from doing sport given that Islam encourages it. For women wearing *krimars* or *niqabs* who wanted to avoid creating fitna (chaos or temptation) through men watching them participate in sports where they might be doing movements that may be sexually exciting, having any men watching them do sports was a barrier to participation.

However, Carr and Power's (2020) study challenged the misogynistic presentations of Muslim men in previous research as they found Muslim fathers to be encouraging of their daughter's participation in football. This Irish study disputed the racialised Orientalist constructions of Muslim men by evidencing the support the young women received from their fathers when it came to sport, arguing that like Muslim women, Muslim men are not a homogenous group. It is important to note that the football team the women played in was adapted to incorporate the three *hijabs*, therefore allowing the women to align their participation with Islam.

Marginalisation in secular society

Eleven studies found participants experiencing marginalisation due to various aspects of their embodied intersectionality which presented as barriers to accessing sports. Most of the studies participants were either first- or second-generation migrants in predominantly white, Christian countries where there were few provisions for sports adapted to their needs. Migration to secular countries exacerbates the already existing inequalities of gender and cultural relations for migrant women which is then enacted in the double bind of trying to access sports settings which are not willing to be inclusive to their religious and cultural needs while their cultural community opposes their sports participation because of the lack of settings inclusive to Muslim women. Participants in Carr and Power's (2020) study shared previous experiences of being excluded from a Christian-majority Irish football team due to

being a racialised Muslim migrant. The intersecting oppression of racism and Islamophobia was underscored in this study by participants sharing how the lingering stigma and othering inherent to being a *hijabi* footballer was cast by the long shadow of the recently lifted ban on the headscarf in football.

Other women shared similar experiences of unequal power relations in public spaces such as swimming pools due to their embodied intersectionality. Their embodiment of faith in modest swimming attire represented a visible marker of their cultural, ethnic and religious difference in secular societies which resulted in these women feeling hyper-visible and unsafe due to experiences of harassment, hostility and disrespect in public spaces. Muslim boxers in Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) study encountered judgement from their coaches in their attempts to comply with Islamic guidance. Similarly, women wearing the *niqab* and *krimar* in Walseth and Fasting's (2003) study, cited Egyptian society's secular organisation of non-gender-segregated settings and competitions as a major barrier for their participation in competitive sport. Soltani (2021) highlighted how the intersection of the visual impact of their veils, and political situations fuelling gendered Islamophobia and anti-migrant rhetoric, compounded experiences of marginalisation.

Participants in Walseth's (2006) study shared feelings of exclusion due to their lower social class and migrant identity in sports teams where their other teammates were from an affluent neighbourhood and of White Scandinavian ethnicity. Murray et al.'s (2015) study highlighted the effects of the intersection between social class, migration and living in impoverished neighbourhoods as participants highlighted the lack of infrastructure and lack of safety in their neighbourhood due to high levels of crime as barriers to accessing sports. Mahmood and Woodhouse (2024) mentioned not seeing other Muslim women of a similar ethnic background performing at the highest level of sport which highlighted the lack of media representation.

Participants of Abdulwasi et al.'s (2018) and Koca et al.'s (2009) study did not experience marginalisation in secular society to be a barrier in accessing sports. For Abdulwasi et al.'s (2018) participants, the setting of the physical activity program in a mosque within their community which provided the opportunity to participate in sports may have removed the external felt constraints of marginalisation. Comparatively, for participants of Koca et al.'s (2009) study, living in a predominantly Muslim country such as Turkey may have mitigated the barriers presented in terms of secular society.

Resisting and breaking barriers to participation

Negotiating barriers to participation

Participants across all studies were engaged in negotiating barriers to participation in sports through a plethora of strategies adapted to the barriers they faced and the resources they were able to access. For migrant participants living in non-Muslim countries, negotiation strategies involved modifying their attire by either not wearing the hijab while exercising but still wearing loose-fitting clothes or finding female only spaces to participate in sports where modesty could be upheld through being shielded from the male gaze. Finding female-only spaces to participate in sports served as a shield against the judgmental gaze of their cultural community and their husbands' jealousy.

Participants from lower social classes negotiated barriers to participation by finding affordable options to access sports, such as the ladies' local community gyms in Koca et al.'s (2009) study. Koca et al. (2009) found that working women negotiated time for sports by finding options in the work environment while women who were housewives prioritised lower-impact sports such as Pilates to balance their energy levels with the demands of housework. Even within a single study in Egypt, Walseth and Fasting (2003) found differing strategies for negotiation based on participants' differing personal relationship to Islam.

Participants wearing the *krimar* and *niqab* adhered to Islamic guidance to challenge

patriarchal misinterpretations of Islam while women who were not wearing the veil or

wearing a hijab would seek permission from their husbands and families. However, to

mitigate the barrier of a lack of gender segregated settings in secular society and the difficulty

of exercising with a *krimar* on, some women resorted to doing physical activity at home.

An Australian study (Taylor & Toohey, 2001) found that advocacy for more women

only community spaces to participate in sports as well as religious considerations for offering

classes not coinciding with prayer times were one of the strategies used by women in

negotiating the marginalisation of living in a secular society, as well as the barrier of the

judgment of the community.

Expressing agency

Expressions of agency manifested through the mind, body and spirit for women

across all the studies. Several studies raised the concept of their relationship to Islam being a

personal interpretation rather than accepting the rules imposed by the judgment of others.

This linked to the heterogeneity in participants' interpretation of their sports participation in

relation to their Islamic identity. Thorpe et al. (2020) found participants using their voices to

challenge the barriers to sports participation. This concept of challenging genderizing

discourses that press upon Muslim women's bodies was framed as "deveiling processes"

(Hamzeh, 2011) in relation to questioning the gendered enforcing of the visual, spatial and

ethical *hijabs*. Some participants experienced development of new aspects of their identity

through sports participation which strengthened their spiritual identity. Women footballers

expressed agency in their sporting identity through raising cultural and religious awareness

within their own communities and challenging both gendered stereotypes of women in

football and racialised stereotypes of Muslim women in society. Another way in which

women expressed agency was by creating their own safe sporting spaces by becoming the change through establishing a female boxing class.

The variance in intersectional identities of the participants also impacted the significance of their Islamic identity, for example, some Muslim migrants in Soltani's (2021) study did not feel that being a Muslim was their primary identification and preferred to take off the veil when swimming in the sea but did not see this as being at odds with their relationship to Islam and therefore still experienced the benefits to their wellbeing. Similarly, while some participants in Koca et al.'s (2009) preferred to do sports in gender segregated setting to uphold modesty, others mentioned feeling constrained by religious views of their neighbours imposed upon their sports participation and chose to disregard community judgment.

Similarly, the women boxers in Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) study expressed self-determination in choosing to continue competing in boxing despite the alienation of their families and shame felt around their family's views that boxing would result in their condemnation in the eyes of Allah. Their expressions of agency were multifaceted; in choosing to navigate their relationship with Islam personally through forgoing the visual hijab to allow them to compete in boxing while facing Islamophobic rhetoric from their coaches and in choosing their own happiness and enjoyment of sports participation despite the judgment of the community.

Systematic review discussion

Line of Argument Synthesis: Muslim women's experiences of sports within the framework of the Islamic Model of Self

Four synthesised categories in dynamic interplay encapsulated Muslim women's experiences of sports. The line of argument captures the tension between nurturing the *aql*, *qalb* and *rūḥ* and the challenges of the external environment which play out through their bodies. Muslim women's experiences of sports was one of seeking out inclusive environments where their body, *qalb* and *aql* could feel safe and respected, in order to be able to build chosen communities to continue nurturing their well-being. Participation being in alignment with Islam allows them to nurture their spiritual wellbeing by connecting to their *rūḥ* and *qalb* while upholding the three *hijabs* in body and *aql*. Depending on geographical context, various elements of their embodied intersectionality encountered barriers and challenges to participating from the external environment. Experiences of marginalisation of their embodied intersectionality were enacted against their bodies through cultural policing and impacted their *qalb* through internalised stigma (Goffman, 1983). Participants drew upon confidence in *qalb*, negotiating barriers through their *aql* and resisted against barriers to participation by expressing agency in body and mind. Figure 5 presents the conceptual development of the synthesised categories. It outlines how the categories interact within the framework of the Islamic Model of Self and intersectionality theory (Noblit and Hare, 1988).

Figure 5

Line-of-Argument: Muslim women's experiences of sports within the framework of the Islamic Model of Self
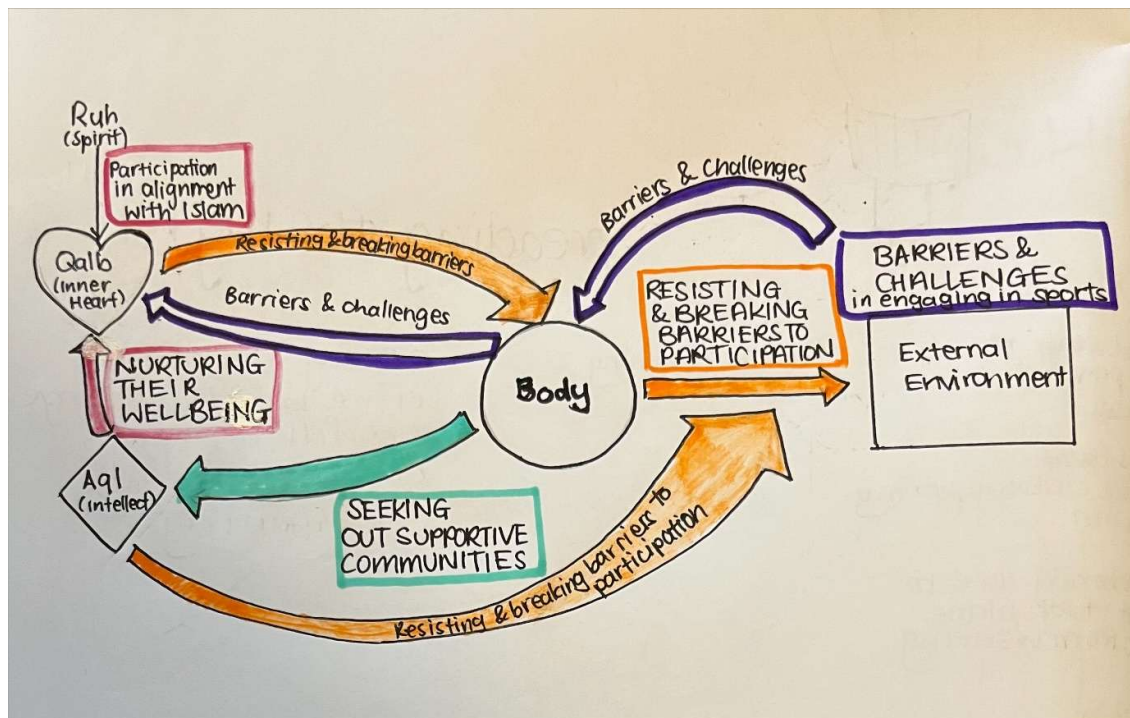
This systematic review of the literature highlights the interplay between Muslim women's embodied intersectionality and their experiences of sports participation through the framework of the Islamic Model of Self (Skinner, 2019). Emergent categories were consistent with previous studies which identified sociocultural and structural barriers to sports participation as well as sports being a site of empowerment, belonging and beneficial to wellbeing (Rana, 2024; Ratna, 2013). The model presented in this synthesis builds on these concepts to offer a deeper understanding to the benefits and dilemmas of sports participation in relation to Islamic faith and multiple facets of Muslim women's identity intersections. It offers insight into the value of sports that goes beyond the physical, mental and emotional benefits to wellbeing documented in past literature by illuminating the influence on the spiritual self and relationship to power negotiation.

A key finding across the studies was how crucial safety is as a pre-requisite for their participation in sports. Depending on the geographical context, safety from the consequences of community judgment or safety from Islamophobic and anti-migrant racism was a key factor in participants' consideration of engaging in sports. This sense of safety and inclusivity indicated a sense of safety in *qalb* transmitted through the body. The emphasis on safety encapsulates how Muslim women's embodied intersectionality presents as barriers and challenges to their engagement in sports. The impact of stigma (Goffman, 1978) was particularly evident in the concept of marginalisation in secular society wherein participants described their embodiment of their spiritual identity being met with hostility and rejection in public swimming spaces and gyms. Experiences of hyper-visibility in upholding the visible hijab and having their racialised bodies othered in public spaces led to internalised stigma for some participants. Some participants modified their embodiment of their Islamic identity to reduce stigma experienced through assimilating into the sporting context such as taking off their *hijabs* while surfing or wearing uniforms while boxing.

Incorporation of spiritual identity into sports participation may offer an additional layer of nurturing wellbeing that goes beyond the physical and mental benefits. While this may not be true for all Muslim women as it would vary with levels of religiosity and self-identification with their spiritual identity, it may be a valuable consideration. Therefore, sports settings which are respectful and inclusive to all aspects of their embodied intersectionality offer the possibility of supporting them in cultivating the spatial imaginary to reimagine the boundaries of public and private spaces of safety and inclusion. Some participants enacted the spatial imaginary by building these communities themselves to carve out safe spaces to do sports. However, even in instances where their *rūḥ* could not find safety, sports participation still appeared to nurture their emotional wellbeing and brought a measure

of relief from the external sexism and marginalisation they experienced as refugees (Tjonndal & Hovden, 2022).

The sense of embattlement in dilemmas inherent to their engagement in sport is evident in the categories of barriers and challenges as well as resisting against and breaking barriers. The external environment in Skinner's (2019) model presented as the category of barriers and challenges to engaging in sports wherein challenges to the spatial and ethical hijab interacted with cultural and geographical context. The internalisation of these barriers and challenges for some participants manifested as tension between the *aql*, *hawa nafs* and *qalb*. For some, the descent into *nafs lawwāma* is evident through the internalised conflict, shame and distress experienced in the wake of familial alienation and community judgment. For others, the galvanisation of their resolve to reach for *nafs mut'mainna* can be observed through the sense of peace experienced and engagement in resisting the imposition of secular norms on their participation. By committing to finding spaces to participate in sports which align with the three *hijabs*, participants experiences suggested strengthened connection to their *qalb* and *rūḥ*. However, it is important to note that age appeared to mediate the impact of these barriers as some women shared experiences of reduced barriers once their children had reached adulthood or their husbands were deceased (Koca et al., 2009).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this synthesis offers the Islamic Model of Self (Skinner,2019), embodied intersectionality and feminist embodiment theory as valuable frameworks for conceptualising Muslim women's experiences of sports in relation to their intersectional identity and spiritual wellbeing. Ambiguity in levels of sports participation across studies limited conclusions drawn however sports engagement presents a valuable avenue of supporting Muslim women's wellbeing, particularly when aligned with their spiritual identity.

This review furthers the argument against religious beliefs being framed as a barrier to Muslim women's engagement in sports by drawing attention to the misogynistic cultural interpretations of Islam and wider structural, political and representational intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) limiting their access to sports participation. The findings suggest that sports participation may challenge and counteract the harmful impact of hostile sociopolitical circumstances through offering a space of inclusion and belonging. The sense of safety felt in their *qalb* through the body and *aql* may have energised their fight in resisting against and breaking barriers to sports participation. By utilising their *aql* to participate in advocating and "deveiling processes" (Hamzeh, 2011), as well as expressing agency in embodiment through either reducing visible aspects of their spiritual identity or using their skills to create more female-only sporting spaces. By drawing strength from finding solidarity in inclusive spaces which nurtured their wellbeing, Muslim women appeared to apply the critical mobility drawn from these paradoxical spaces to modify their interaction with the barriers and challenges to accessing sports.

Qualitative studies exploring Muslim women's experiences of engaging in a specific sport would be valuable for mapping out their interplay between their embodied intersectionality with a particular sporting context. Given that only two of the studies included in the review was conducted in the UK, one of which was an autoethnography with a single participant (Mahmood & Woodhouse, 2024) it would be useful to explore the sporting experiences of British Muslim women to explore how the context of Britain interacts with their embodied intersectionality, experiences of stigma and access to sporting spaces. Given that resisting and breaking barriers to participation was the only concept found in all the studies, it may be valuable to compare if the salience of this concept varies across different sports or if different sports convey differing levels of critical mobility to energise expressions of agency.

Aims and Objectives

The salience of the barriers to sports participation and the ensuing process of resisting and negotiating these challenges, points to a sense of embattlement embedded in Muslim women's experiences of sports engagement. The present study endeavours to explore their embodiment of a sporting space that externalises the embattlement experienced at the various intersections of their identity. Boxing has been understood to be the most physically demanding and violent sport, associated widely with tropes of masculinity (Spencer, 2013; Wacquant, 1995, 2004). Menneson's (2000) ethnography of female boxers in France explored how women involved in a traditionally masculine sport construct their identities within a male-dominated space. While her work revealed boxing to be a space of gendered identity negotiations, critics highlight how her binary distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' women replicated the masculine/feminine divide, oversimplifying the multiplicity of gender expression through boxing.

Taking into account the wider context of societal violence enacted against their bodies and minds in British society through marginalisation, anti-Muslim racism and anti-migrant hate crimes, it would be valuable to examine the value of a fighting sport in relation to the ways in which they negotiate and resist these sociocultural narratives. Particularly in relation to what Bordieu termed "symbolic violence", which captures the daily normalised systemic and societal practices which make inequality and oppression not only acceptable but regularly consented to by the oppressed (in various racist, casteist, sexist, and gendered forms).

Bordieu describes it as a form of violence which is perpetuated through the denial of its existence, imposed through the majority who holds power (1991).

Spaaij and Schulenkorf (2014) suggested that martial arts provide safe experimental space with opportunities for externalising internal conflict hence this study explores boxing as an avenue for mitigating the effects of symbolic violence on Muslim women's wellbeing. Spencer's (2013) pioneering work through a sensory ethnography of mixed martial arts (MMA) showcased the cultural and sensory logic embedded in physical combat which offers a structured way to experience and mediate embodied suffering. By exploring a sport which is associated with stereotypes of violence and externalisation of conflict, this study endeavours to investigate how boxing may reframe their relationship with their body through developing agency. Building on Rana's (2024) exploration of Muslim women's kickboxing in the Netherlands and Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) narrative study of female refugees in Norway, this study explores Muslim women's boxing in the British context. Furthermore, given that the review included studies on the value of swimming which is one of the sports mentioned in the *sunnah*, it may also be useful to explore British women's experiences of other sports encouraged in the *sunnah*, such as archery or martial arts, particularly in relation to how it interacts with the constructs of the Islamic Model of Self (Skinner, 2019). Therefore, the proposed research aims to explore how Muslim women who have participated in boxing make meaning of the activity in relations to other aspects of their identity.

The objectives of this study are:

- To explore how boxing has impacted their lives beyond the sessions

- To examine the interplay between their engagement in boxing and conceptualisation of personhood within Islam in relation to their mental wellbeing

The proposed objectives endeavour to offer deeper insight into understanding the Muslim female community in the hopes of illuminating alternative ways of meeting the mental health needs of this population. The wider goal of the study is to explore boxing as a community-based mental health provision as an alternative to traditional NHS provision, By exploring their spiritual identity and embodied experiences, the aim of the proposed study is to expand current perspectives on considerations for supporting the wellbeing of Muslim women in the UK.

This research project draws upon my experiences as a boxing coach. I ran a women's community boxing class which inspired this study and it draws upon my own experiences as a Muslim woman and former boxer. From a personal perspective, I witnessed my own transformation through boxing which informed my understanding of the impact of boxing on holistic wellbeing. In the professional context, I have worked with the Muslim female community both clinically as well as through my role as a coach. Witnessing the growth and struggles experienced by these women has motivated me to want to share the stories of the community through this research.

The title of the thesis, "it's the one place I don't have to fight" was chosen to centre this study on the voices of the participants. This particular quote was chosen to highlight the paradoxes surrounding the assumptions made regarding Muslim women's participation in boxing which contrast their experiences of the gym often as a place of refuge.

Method

Overview

      This chapter outlines how the use of sensory ethnographic approaches sits within the wider framework of the critical realist and embodied ontological stances and theoretical frameworks underpinning the current study. By situating the research aims and consequential methodology within the social constructionist and interpretivist epistemological positioning of this study, the chapter goes on to discuss the research procedure, from participant recruitment to analysis and dissemination. The self-reflexive statement of the researcher forms part of the methodology to take into consideration the influence of potential biases on the analysis. The chapter concludes with consideration of methodological rigour and ethical concerns.

Research Paradigm

Ontology

Ontology is the position taken by a researcher in understanding 'reality'; concerning both the nature of reality and what exists (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Acknowledging the researcher's ontological and epistemological stance is crucial to the study as it is the foundation from which the methodology of the research stems (Guba & Lincoln,1985). Figure 6 depicts how the ontological positioning shapes the methods of the study.

Figure 6

Diagram from Grix (2002) The flow of research from ontology to data collection

Source: Figure adapted from Hay, 2002, p. 64.
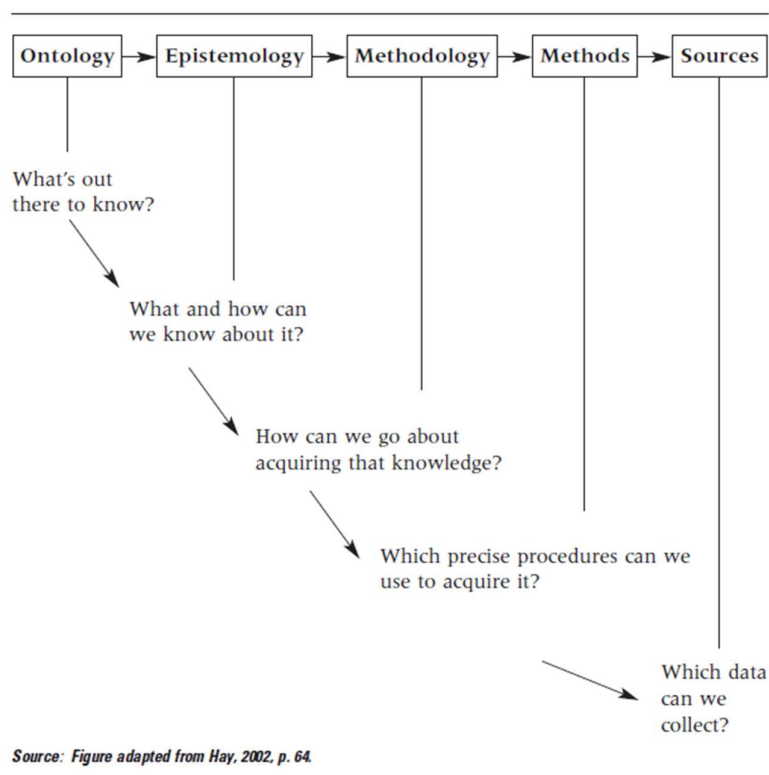
Ontological stances exist on a spectrum spanning from realism to relativism. Realism posits that reality exists independent of our conceptual thought and therefore there is an absolute truth which can be found, while relativism asserts that there is no absolute truth as reality only exists in co-existence with an individual's perceptions.

This study is grounded in a critical realist paradigm, which holds the view that an independent reality exists but that our understanding of it is partial; mediated by social, cultural, and individual interpretations (Bhaskar, 1978). In keeping with this position, the researcher's ontological position holds that multiple realities may exist based on people's experiences and perceptions. A critical realist ontological stance acknowledges that the social world is made up of real but unobservable mechanisms such as patriarchy and racism which influence the observable actual events we observe such as limited access to sports participation.

Houston (2001) outlined the three levels of objective reality within the ontology of critical realism; empirical, actual and causal. The empirical level consists of experienced events; the actual level includes all events whether experienced or not and the causal level considers the underlying mechanisms generating events. The three levels interact unpredictably in varying degrees within which forms of oppression at the causal level such as White supremacy, patriarchy and Christian-centrism, construct the empirical and actual levels of experience such as discrimination, racism, sexism and Islamophobia.

Rozas (2022) outlines the three "C's "; coloniality of power, critical realism and critical consciousness which provide a shared language to communicate the ontology of oppression. In critical realist terms, oppression is viewed as a system occurring at both the causal and empirical level. According to Rozas (2022), the lens of critical realism allows the researcher to deconstruct and examine the 'coloniality of power'. Critical realism facilitates the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1973); the awareness of the forces of power, critical discourse and human agency. Within the ontological premise of critical realism, Muslim women are understood to be active participants engaged in a reciprocal relationship with these systems (Houston, 2001). By connecting empirical experience with causal processes of oppression, critical realism builds a conceptual bridge linking structure

and agency. Therefore, a critical realist ontological position allows the researcher to identify and understand the interplay between structure and agency; the societal forces shaping boxing spaces and the embodied, sensory, and unique ways through which these women navigate, resist, or adapt to those forces. By adopting a critical realist ontology, this study hopes to break down barriers which obstruct social change (Rozas, 2022).

The present study also draws upon an embodied ontological stance, which asserts that individuals experience and form perceptions of the world through bodily and sensory engagement, in addition to cognition (Csordas, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). An embodied ontological stance places the body at the centre of understanding reality as a site of lived experience wherein identity is not only socially constructed in the boxing gym but also lived and expressed through movement, breath, fatigue, touch, rhythm, and spatial navigation (Csordas, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Within this framework, the experiences of Muslim women in boxing are understood as being shaped by real social structures that influence, but do not determine, their individual choices and identities.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the philosophy of how knowledge is gained, in congruence with the ontological stance of the nature of reality (Sprague, 2010). Critical realism and embodied ontological stances align with an interpretivist and social constructionist epistemology, which together inform how knowledge is approached, generated, and understood (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The current study utilises the dual lens of interpretivism and social constructionism.

An interpretivist stance posits that reality is not fixed or objective but instead is understood subjectively by individuals and interpreted within specific social contexts (Schwandt, 2000). Running parallel to interpretivist approaches, a social constructionist

perspective highlights that these meanings ascribed to reality are produced in interactions with broader social, cultural, and historical processes (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2015). Interpretivism guides the exploration of how participants make sense of their identities and embodied practices, while social constructionism allows for an analysis of how those meanings are produced through language, discourse, and social interaction within the boxing gym (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schwandt, 2000). Combining interpretivist and social constructionist epistemological stances reflect the aims of the current study to interpret the subjective views of Muslim women on their engagement in boxing as well as the wider context of how and why those experiences are shaped by the intersecting systems of religion, gender, and sport (Fletcher, 2017).

The interpretivist epistemological stance complements the embodied ontological approach by incorporating embodied knowledge; reality is interpreted and mediated through the body and one's senses (Pink, 2009). Boxing is thus approached as a sensory, physical, and affective practice in which Muslim women engage in identity negotiation through embodied practices, spatial interactions, and cultural meanings. This perspective challenges traditional Cartesian dualisms of the mind-body divide and foregrounds the body as both a source and medium of knowledge (Csordas, 1994), which complements the exploration of embodied intersectionality and spiritual identity in this study. It also aligns with feminist epistemologies that emphasize the legitimacy of subjective, lived, and emotionally engaged forms of knowing (Code, 2014; Haraway, 1988). As Islam is an embodied religion (Skinner, 2019), an interpretivist epistemological positioning offers an exploration into the subjective embodiment of Islamic identity which accounts for the heterogeneity in religiosity within the Muslim female population.

Methodology Concerning Research Aims

A qualitative research methodology was selected with the goal of generating rich, descriptive data on the subjective lived experiences of Muslim women to develop a nuanced understanding of how they interpret participation in boxing. Past researchers have found rich, descriptive data valuable for the exploration of the study of identity, due to the varying ways identity can be defined and operationalised, as well as the varying influences of cultural, geographical and personal contexts (Block, 2021; Taylor & Littleton, 2006). Furthermore, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative approaches allow greater insight into complex context-dependent social phenomena such as the interaction between religion, sports participation and identity.

Given the wider sociopolitical contexts of lingering Orientalist approaches to discussing Muslim women in the absence of including their voices (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Hamad, 2020), the choice of qualitative methodology was chosen to emphasise the narratives of participants based on first-hand experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Western feminist and liberal discourses often speak for Muslim women rather than with them, perpetuating epistemic violence (Mohanty, 2003; Seedat, 2013; Thobani, 2021). Therefore, the methodology of the current study was selected to prioritise approaches which facilitated speaking with Muslim women, rather than for them. Neufeld et al. (2001) highlighted that adopting a qualitative approach allows for greater sensitivity and adaptation of methods to navigate language barriers and building trust with marginalised populations. The open-ended data generated by qualitative research facilitates the exploration of under-researched topics through inductive, bottom-up processes (Atieno, 2009). Qualitative methods also offer the flexibility of facilitating an exploration of the way in which participants interpret reality and construct meaning through social contexts, thereby drawing together the interpretivist and social constructionist epistemologies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Willis, 2001).

Early-stage researchers are encouraged to follow recommendations to ground their research in one of five main qualitative approaches; Ethnography, Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Case Study and Narrative Research (Croswell & Poth, 2018). These approaches provide a "structured framework for rigorous and systematic" data analysis (Crosswell & Poth, 2018, p.65). As an early-stage researcher, the selection of an ethnographic approach was based on consideration of a number of factors. Firstly, the embodied aspect of doing research on sports in relation to identity required an approach that would move beyond consideration of solely verbal discourses into a more holistic, immersive frame of data collection. Loic Wacquant's seminal ethnographic exploration of boxing (1995, 2004) and Trimbur's later (2011) exploration of the intersection between race and masculinity in black men's experiences in boxing gyms partially influenced the researcher's choice of ethnographic exploration. However, Wacquant's work had limited engagement with gender as masculinity was presented as central to the boxing habitus without much critique. To the author's knowledge there have been no ethnographic studies capturing the experiences of female boxers. Drawing from Wacquant's ethnographic exploration, the present study sought to offer new intersectional perspectives on the ethnography of boxing.

Secondly, the selection of a research approach that views the researcher as integral to the generation of knowledge rather than separate was critical, given the researcher's identity as a Muslim female migrant and ex-boxer. An ethnographic qualitative approach allowed for the consideration of the researcher's identity in relation to immersion in the field. Finally, ethnographic approaches were chosen in the hopes of minimising the power imbalance between researcher and participants through the researcher being immersed in participants' milieu (Zempi, 2016).

However, the problematic discourses surrounding early Ethnographic research which framed non-Western cultures as "primitive", thereby being inherently othering must be

acknowledged (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Hays & Singh, 2012; Ulker, 2022).

Historically, ethnographic research evolved from its early origins rooted in colonialism which

grew out of Western interest in understanding other global communities (Hays & Singh,

2012). Since then, ethnographic approaches have branched out beyond cultural anthropology

to account for feminist theoretical orientations, cultural studies and various other schools of

thought which recommend ethnography for understanding cultural practices within specific

contexts, such as offering insight into the sociocultural dynamics at play in boxing gyms

(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ulker, 2022). Sparkes (2009) emphasised the importance of sensory

and affective dimensions in understanding lived experience, particularly in relation to sports.

The plurality of approaches utilised in continually evolving ethnographic approaches

makes it challenging to define the boundaries of ethnography, which is both an advantage and

disadvantage. The advantage to the present study is the platform it presents in engaging in

research in an underexplored area whereby researcher-participant collaboration can be

facilitated in order to prioritise cultural and person-centred data collection methods.

This research adopts Pink's (2015) definition of ethnography as an iterative-inductive

"process of creating and representing knowledge or ways of knowing that are based on

ethnographers' own experiences and the ways these intersect with the persons, places, and

things encountered during that process" (p. 35). Drawing on Karen O'Reilly's (2005)

description of ethnography, Pink (2015) goes on to explain ethnography as a research

approach that involves sustained and direct contact with participants by observing, listening,

asking and producing a rich narrative that "respects the irreducibility of human experiences"

(O'Reilly 2005 as cited in Pink, 2015, p. 5).

Sensory Ethnography.

Sensory ethnography (SE) is a recent development in ethnographic research which critiques the legacy of colonial and positivist traditions in classical ethnography by advocating for the incorporation of sensory and embodied ways of knowing (Pink 2008, 2009, 2015; Stoller 2004). SE challenges Eurocentric influenced dominant modes of knowing and by decentralising Western, disembodied, and often exploitative approaches to studying other cultures (Sparkes, 2009).

SE builds upon traditional ethnographic techniques such as researcher immersion in the field and participant observation by incorporating embodied knowledge into data collection (Howes, 2005). SE utilises innovative methods that go beyond listening and watching, to employ the use of multiple media such as drawing and collage-making, as well as drawing participants' attention to their sensorial experience of the research topic (Pink, 2015).

In relation to Muslim women's experiences of boxing, SE views Muslim women's identities as not only being shaped by discourse but also by the meaning-making in relation to sensory and emotional encounters in the gym (Vanini et al., 2012). SE observation views the interaction between the environment and the physical body, such as the sensations of touching hand wraps, hearing the sound of the bell ringing, feeling the impact of fists on the punching bag, smelling the sweat in the gym, the feeling of being observed or supported and feeling the textures of clothing adapted for modesty, as sources of information (Pink, 2015). The perceptions of these sensations are also explored, such as kinaesthesia, proprioception, internal rhythms of discipline, tension, and interpretations of physical pain in the boxing environment (Armstrong, 1962). Spencer's (2013) SE contributed to sports studies by illuminating the centrality of sensory experience in understanding lived violence in MMA and how sensory intensity shapes identity in combat culture. Transposing Spencer's (2013)

application of SE to the study of combat sports, to Muslim women's engagement in boxing, aligns with the embodied ontological position of this research.

SE facilitates an exploration of the lived bodily reality of the interplay between the embodiment of Islam and the embodiment of boxing. By including the voice of the body to reduce the reliance solely on verbal data, SE offers a way to mitigate the stigma in speaking about mental health issues which tends to manifest in somatic symptoms within the Muslim female population (Anand & Cochrane, 2005). SE also incorporates the researcher's sensorial experience of being immersed in the research environment as a source of knowledge, thereby accounting for the researcher's positionality in relation to the research topic.

Narrative Approaches.

Pink (2009) suggests that there are multiple ways to analyse sensory ethnographic data, depending on the type, amount, and quality of data as well as the purpose and scope of the research question. Both thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and narrative analysis (Riessmann, 2003) have been suggested to be suitable approaches for analysing sensory ethnographic data and there is increasing recognition of the utility of narrative analysis as an element of doing ethnography (Cortazzi, 2001).

According to Hinchmann and Hinchmann (1997) narratives represent storied ways of communicating and knowing. Burgeoning academic interest in narratives emerged from several contemporary movements, one of which was the emancipation efforts of racialised and marginalised groups (Riessman, 2005). Considerable variation exists across the disciplines in terms of the definition of a narrative. Anthropological research defines a narrative as an entire life story, composed of interviews, observations and documents. In the tradition of psychological research, personal narratives are long sections of verbal accounts relating to the research topic, developed over the course of single or multiple interviews

(Riessmann, 2003). The commonality between the various definitions of what counts as a narrative is the construction of texts for further analysis, be it field notes, transcripts or observations. The present study drew upon both anthropological and psychological research traditions where the narrative to be analysed was composed of each participant's interview transcript, drawings and fieldwork observation notes, as well as embodied movements of participants during the interview.

Given that narratives are seen as one of the fundamental ways in which individuals make meaning and organize their understanding of the world, narrative analysis offers a framework for examining the rich, detailed stories within sensory ethnographic data to provide a theoretically comprehensive understanding of Muslim women's embodied experiences in boxing. Narrative analysis allows the researcher to explore how reality is produced through how participants tell their stories as well as the content of the stories they tell. In line with the social constructionist lens of this study, narrative analysis allows for the interpretation of how Muslim women experience boxing, to be situated within the wider historical and cultural context of the stories told, including the influence of societal discourses on the narrators (Baddeley & Singer, 2010; Riessman, 2008).

In line with Frank's (2010) approach of framing the researcher as an empathetic listener and Bochner's (2012) advocacy for researchers to prioritise rich storytelling which brings participants to the forefront of the findings, this study conceptualises the stance of the researcher as a storyteller. In consideration of the marginalisation and silencing experienced by the population this research is centred on, the decision to adopt the stance of storyteller was guided by the intention to amplify the voices of the participants by bringing their narratives to life in their language rather than adhering strictly to academic language.

White and Epston (1990) describe a narrative approach to therapy as one which identifies the harmful stories individuals construct of themselves in relation to others, and

seeks to support the individuals in the reconstruction and reframing of these narratives. Holding the population of the present study in mind, narrative approaches to analysis were chosen to explore the potentially painful narratives of exclusion and discrimination experienced by participants in relation to their embodied intersectionality as well as to account for how boxing may have contributed to the reshaping of these narratives.

According to Riessman (2003), narratives refract rather than mirror the past. Examining the refraction allows researchers to explore the confluence between the personal and political in the meanings made from social events and experiences. Narrative analysis therefore offered the opportunity to investigate how participants linked their past before boxing to their present selves in relation to boxing, linking to the wider goal of understanding the connection between Muslim women's personal biography of experiences in the gym and how it fits in with their social identities and wider lives.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The interpretivist epistemological lens views the role of researcher as active and reflexive, shaping the knowledge generated by the research. Berger (2015) asserts that maintaining reflexive awareness is critical to the credibility and ethical integrity of the research process (Berger, 2015). I engaged in journalling and drawing throughout the research process, which is encouraged as an important aspect of researcher reflexivity in SE. Additionally, researcher immersion in the field is a further important aspect of SE so I also engaged in embodied reflection by moving through the boxing warmup, shadowboxing and bag work after each interview and during data analysis as a way to connect with my own embodied reflections throughout the process (Pink, 2009). As a researcher, the critical realist ontology aligns with my belief in the existence of Allah and Islamic teachings as an objective truth. Allah teaches us as Muslims that our capacity as humans to understand the full extent

of knowledge is limited and partial and we are easily influenced by cultural and emotional interpretations. My own relationship to Islam has been shaped by my frustrations around cultural misinterpretations and patriarchal misogynistic abuse of Islamic teachings. Growing up in Singapore, my relationship to my identity as an Indian Muslim woman was shaped by experiences of racism as an ethnic minority, the historical context of colonialism and dominant Asian narratives surrounding feminism.

Extracts from my research journal (see appendices K and L) and an illustration from the journal are included below in order to elucidate my process of how reflexivity shaped my methods.

Bukamal (2022) deconstructed insider-outsider positionality in conducting research and the consequential influence of the researcher's positionality in relation to the production of knowledge. An insider position is one where the researcher shares particular attributes with the participants of the study. In contrast, an outsider positionality of the researcher is when they do not belong to the group to which the participants belong (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The following paragraphs outline my reflections in relation to the various aspects of my intersectionality which confer both insider and outsider positionality in relation to the research topic.

I am a 34-year-old Muslim woman who moved to the UK eight years ago from Singapore. I do not wear the *hijab* but I dress modestly and do my best to comply with Islamic guidance by adhering to the five pillars of Islam. I am the daughter of a Muslim revert and I grew up in a family where my father emphasised the importance of our intentions being sincere, rather than complying blindly with actions due to cultural pressure. From my experience, the *hawa nafs* personally has felt like a tension I hold between the secular world I move through and the Islamic faith I practise at home.

Due to a hereditary condition, I became hearing impaired at the age of 21. My intersectional identity is something that I've found to both be a source of power I draw on and a loneliness I carry in terms of feeling out of place due to never quite fitting in. Growing up racialised as a minority in Singapore and then as a migrant in the UK, I have experienced racism in both subtle and overt ways which has diminished my sense of safety in public spaces. The September 11 terrorist attack on the twin towers happened on my tenth birthday. While it took years into adolescence for me to fully connect the dots between what had happened on that day and how the world had irrevocably changed in terms of what it meant to be a Muslim and the connotations that came with it, my awareness of the stereotypes imposed upon me as I grew into adulthood fuelled a sense of resistance in wanting to defy the trope of an oppressed Muslim woman. As a Muslim woman who doesn't wear the *hijab*, I am shielded from the full brunt of Islamophobia but also carry a sense of guilt in finding safety from not announcing my Muslim identity.

Growing up, my father actively encouraged both me and my brother to learn self-defence and be physically active. I started learning boxing and Muay Thai in a Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) gym in Singapore in 2012 and started competing in amateur boxing fights in 2014 where I then progressed to representing Singapore in international competitions as part of the National Team. I was coached in a mixed environment where there was only one or two other women on the fight team. For me, boxing was freedom; I came alive in the boxing ring. It allowed me to see what I was capable of and became the marker against which I measured the rest of life's challenges. In every other arena from then on, I thought "you've stepped into the ring, you've taken punches, you can do this." Figure 7 depicts a quote which captures the experience of being a competitive boxer for me.

Figure 7

A photo of the mural overhanging the boxing ring where the researcher's last competitive boxing fight took place
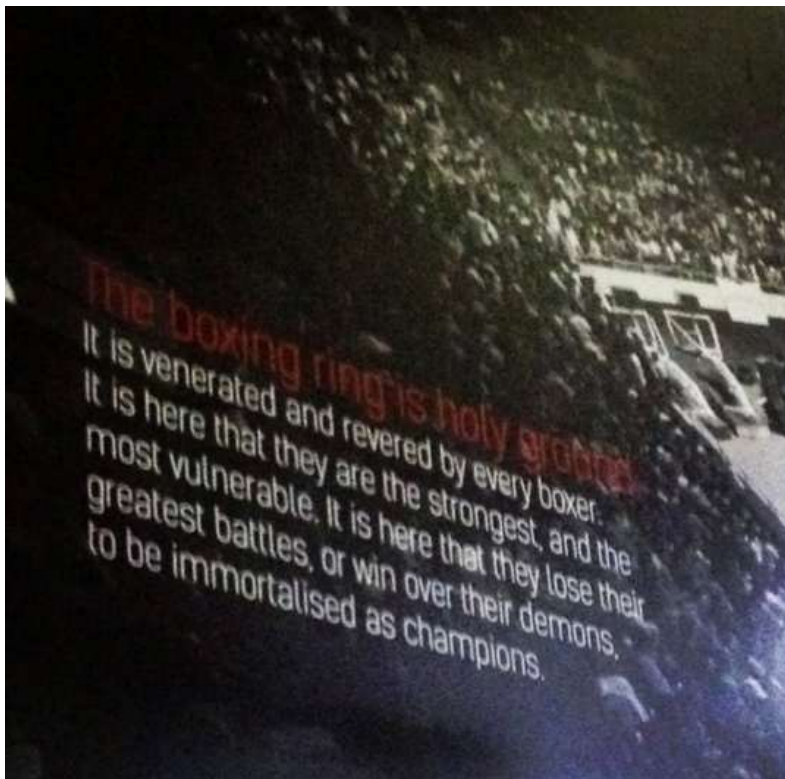
As a 21-year-old woman stepping into an MMA gym and then in time, the boxing ring, I was asked questions like, "who is going to marry you when your nose is broken?" which always struck me as odd and almost comical that my pursuit of sporting excellence bore any relation to my identity as a woman of marriageable age. Most of my extended family responded with a mixture of shock, horror and awe to my decision to compete, looking to my father to stop me. When I had questions and doubts about whether I was doing something wrong by becoming a boxer, my father would remind me of the stories of the female warriors who fought alongside Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), of how being a fighter and being strong is what Allah encourages us to be.

I started coaching mixed boxing classes in Singapore and then when I moved to the UK, I worked as a youth worker and boxing coach in a community gym in from 2017 to

2019. As part of this role, I coached a female only community boxing class which was made accessible to the Muslim female community. My experiences in coaching this class and the privilege of witnessing the way the women in the class bloomed through learning boxing inspired this research. Figure 8 depicts my illustration of how my identity as a boxer lives in my *qalb*. In the words of my coach, "you can't teach heart".

Figure 8

Illustration done by the researcher reflecting how intertwined boxing is with the rest of her identity

As articulated by Hussein (2023) on reflecting on the insider-outsider position in research, my position as an insider to the professional doctorate comes with expectations of academic research in the UK to provide a systematic critical review of previously legitimised discourses seminal to the study of Muslim women in Britain. However, as an insider with respect to my study participants, I grappled with the ethical dilemma of framing their narratives based on past studies which have portrayed Muslim women in reductive ways by framing them within Orientalist discourses. The choice of words and expressions of language throughout this study were chosen intentionally in order to convey the voice of participants as much as possible instead of prioritising academic language. In that vein, I have chosen to prioritise explanation of Islamic terms used by participants in the way it was expressed, with the English interpretations in brackets, in order to convey the authentic, ethnographic element of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencing this research, a risk assessment was completed, and ethical approval was gained from the University of Essex ethics committee (see Appendix J). The BPS code of ethics and conduct (BPS, 2021) was adhered to throughout the research process.

Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Data Storage

Once consent had been obtained from participants, in order to mitigate confidentiality issues while conducting interviews in a boxing gym, I contacted their gyms to secure the use of a separate room with punching bags to protect their privacy. I coordinated with the gym staff to conduct the interviews at times when classes were not being conducted so that the gym would be as empty as possible.

Participant wellbeing

Once participants were deemed eligible, they were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix D) and the consent form (see Appendix E) via email. Printed copies of the consent form and information sheet were made available at the start of in-person interviews as well and shared via video call at the start of online interviews. It was made clear that participants could still withdraw at this point. Following reading this and asking any questions they may have had, participants were required to provide written, informed consent before taking part. Freedom to withdraw from the study was emphasised throughout the research process.

Given the physical nature of the interviews, I considered the risk of injury. Fulton (2011) reflected upon the balance of ensuring participants do not come to physical or psychological harm while acknowledging that preventing physical harm when studying

boxing is challenging. Regarding accounting for ethical responsibility, he noted that there is a distinction between the research's focus of observing people in the natural setting of boxing and people taking part in boxing for a study.

However, only participants who are already attending or have attended boxing classes at their own will were recruited, therefore their involvement in boxing was anticipated to pose minimal risk in relation to the interview. Participants were invited to participate in the sensory aspects of the interview but given the choice to do as much or as little as they felt comfortable doing while responding to questions, so that they could regulate their level of activity individually. Furthermore, the flow of movements encouraged during the interview were designed to be less intense than a boxing session so it would not be too rigorous.

As noted by James and Prilleltensky (2002), it is important to consider the moral risk for individuals sharing experiences of psychological distress within cultures or familial structures where disclosure evokes shame and feelings of conflict. During the interviews, participants were only asked to share stories they would be comfortable speaking about and reminded that they could withdraw at any point. In alignment with anti-oppressive research practices (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014) participants were offered interviews online as well in person to prioritise their comfort. Participants online were also offered the option to participate in the online interview with their cameras turned off at their request out of respect for cultural and religious emphasis on modesty and privacy. The decision was guided by the aims of the research to prioritise participant collaboration and person-centred approaches by reducing the power imbalance in data collection.

Participants were also offered the chance to debrief after the interview. As part of the sensory ethnographic interview, a warm down using somatic movements and breathing exercises was offered as a choice for participants to engage in. However, this was not deemed necessary by any participants.

Ethical recommendations encourage researchers to utilise member checking to allow participants to maintain agency in the representation of their stories (Chase, 2008). Echoing the concerns of Hussein (2023), a key ethical concern was being mindful of not reinstating racist ideologies or essentialist cultural differences through this research. By meticulously detailing nuances in participants' stories and conducting member-checking, the researcher endeavoured to preserve fidelity to participants' voices through the findings. Therefore, once data analysis was completed, participants were contacted with an invitation to participate in the member checking process. By inviting participants to co-author their own data, member-checking enhanced the validity and ethical procedure of this study (Bamberg, 2012).

Researcher Wellbeing

In consideration of the aspects of the researcher's positionality which held an insider status in relation to participants' experiences, it was anticipated that participants' stories may evoke emotional resonance in the researcher. Interviews were conducted solely by the main researcher. Therefore, the researcher engaged in reflective journalling after each interview and practised self-care by engaging in movement through boxing or running. Following particular interviews where the researcher noticed that sitting with stories of racial trauma had impacted her well-being, the researcher would contact her two supervisors at the University of Essex who provided a safe space to talk through any difficulties experienced by the researcher. The researcher also scheduled regular supervision meetings throughout the interview and data analysis process in particular.

Data Collection

Participants

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.

The study recruited participants who:

- Were adult women aged 18-65

- Self-identified as Muslim

- Had sufficient understanding of English due to the requirement of verbal communication for data collection

- Are currently engaged in or have previously engaged in boxing classes or boxing training in the UK for a minimum of four sessions to allow for sufficient immersion in the boxing environment. As the goal of the study was to explore experiences of boxing rather than proficiency in boxing, self-identification as having engaged in boxing for 4 sessions was selected in order to include a wide range of participants who had varied lengths of engagement in boxing.

The following exclusion criteria were applied:

- Individuals who do not identify as a Muslim woman

- Participants below the age of 18

- Participants who are unable to communicate in English

- Muslim women who have not participated in boxing

Materials

Recruitment flyer.

A recruitment flyer (see Appendix C) was used for recruitment in boxing gyms. The flyer contained the lead researchers' contact details to allow potential participants to find out

more about the research and ask questions before agreeing to participate in the study. A digital copy was circulated through Muslim networks and WhatsApp groups for Muslim women that the lead researcher had contacts in as well as social media.

Informed Consent Pack.

Both the participant information sheet (Appendix D) and the consent form (Appendix E) were provided to participants to ensure the research observed ethical guidelines of transparency in research procedure.

Sensory ethnographic semi-structured interview guide.

Pink (2009) suggested conducting SE interviews while doing the same activity as the interviewee therefore, a semi-structured interview guide with questions relating to the broader themes of the study (see Appendix G) based on walking methodologies (Pink, 2015; Rooney, 2019) was developed to guide participants through the flow of movements that would take place during a regular boxing class. The interview questions were developed in consultation with a group of five Muslim female boxers who expressed interest in supporting the development of the study. Through reflecting on their own journeys through boxing and the specific phrasing which would encourage them to share their stories, the flow of questions and broad themes covered in the interview were developed collaboratively through five individual consultation sessions and collated by the researcher to inform the final SE interview guide.

Prompt questions were used flexibly and not required to follow a particular order of questioning to avoid constricting participants' narratives. The same initial prompt question was used in each interview; "How long have you been attending boxing classes and what was your journey into boxing?". The phrasing of follow-up questions were adapted to match participants' phrasing and individual narrative details. This variation in flow of questioning

and phrasing does not invalidate the results due to the social constructionist epistemology of this study. Participants were invited to warm up via skipping, wrap their hands, do a round of bag-work while I asked questions corresponding to the movement; for example, "What images come to mind when you're wrapping your hands?".

Visual drawing pad.

A large blank sheet of paper on which participants were invited to draw was made available at both the participant observation session and the individual interview. Participants were invited to share their experiences and respond in non-verbal ways to interview questions. Online participants were invited to draw on a piece of paper and share photos of their drawing, as a virtual version of the drawing pad.

Reflective field diary.

SE methods of data collection involve reflexive field notes, walking methodologies (in which participants are interviewed while moving around in the field), participant observation and interviews which incorporate creative approaches such as drawing and movement to capture rich narratives about participants' sense of the boxing gym (Pink, 2015; Rooney, 2019). Borer (2013) advocated for the use of walking interviews in order to explore soundscapes, touchscapes and smellscapes as a valuable data collection tool. Therefore, the reflective notes and observations from the field visits informed the development of a walking guide map for face-to-face interviews and refining the flow of questions relating to sensory experiences in relation to boxing.

Procedure

Recruitment.

Recruitment was done in two phases, the first in December 2023 and the second in May 2024. Purposive snowball sampling was used as participants were selected based on their experiences. Participants were recruited via boxing gyms across the UK with a particular focus on multicultural regions with greater Muslim populations which offer women only boxing classes. The researcher conducted field visits to various boxing gyms to immerse in the field by alternating participating in women's only classes and spending time in the gym. The reflective field diary was used to record sensory observations and what was felt and reflected upon before, during and after sessions.

Previous research with marginalised communities has suggested that the use of community figures or 'gate keepers' is an effective recruitment strategy (Eide & Allen, 2005; McLean & Campbell, 2003). Guided by this recruitment strategy, the researcher shared the recruitment flyer and participant information sheet with female Muslim boxing coaches who had advertised their classes on social media to increase the likelihood of identifying interested participants who might meet the inclusion criteria. By utilising the trusted position of Muslim female coaches who were also invited to participate, the hope was to snowball sample as their experience of the interview would hopefully be shared with other potential participants who were hesitant. It was initially planned for the study to be advertised at local mosques as well however there was no response when contacted, hence this avenue of recruitment was not pursued.

One predicted difficulty during recruitment was the level of stigma in terms of sharing any sort of emotional experiences and the close-knit Muslim female community carrying suspicion and reluctance of sharing private experiences with perceived outsiders (Anand & Cochrane, 2005). A further challenge anticipated was working around participants'

responsibilities as most participants were juggling full time work and childcare or care of other family members. Furthermore, the lead researcher was aware that her position as a mental health professional may contribute to the stigma and mistrust (Zempi, 2019).

Within the domain of qualitative research, there lacks consensus on the required sample size or how to determine sample size before data collection (Mocanasu, 2020). Given that the goal of the present study is to achieve a depth of richness in participants' stories, a large sample size was not deemed to be necessary. While large sample sizes are necessary for positivist research, the ontological and epistemological positioning of this study sought to gather enough stories of the realities inhabited by participants in order to achieve transferability (Mocanasu, 2020).

A total of 14 participants expressed interest, but not all followed up after receiving further information about the study. A total of 12 women were recruited and included in the final analysis. Seven participants requested online interviews while five participants opted to have in person interviews. Interviews were offered online as well as in-person in order to widen the recruitment pool and reach participants from across the UK, increasing the likelihood of reflecting the variance in intersectionality of the Muslim female population. Once written, informed consent had been provided by participants, confirmed participants were contacted to arrange a time for the researcher to observe them during a boxing class. Three qualitative methods outlined below were utilised for data collection, allowing triangulation which is a strategy used to enhance the credibility and validity of findings by employing multiple data sources (Carter et al., 2014).

Brief Informal interview and participant observation.

Firstly, participants were observed during a boxing session where a brief informal interview was conducted before and after the session to support ecological validity of the

findings in a naturalistic setting. The questions asked were based on the guide included in Appendix F. Data was collected through post session observation notes which included:

- words that summarise the emotional aspect and interactions observed during sessions

- movement phrases that reflected the session

- drawings of movements and body postures

- researcher reflections on the sensory experience of sessions

Individual in-depth sensory ethnographic interview.

Secondly, participants were offered either online or in-person individual in-depth interviews, with flexible dates and times suited to their schedules. While in-person interviews were ideally suited to the research methods, the researcher adapted the methods to be able to offer online interviews to prioritise the needs of the population. This was in line with the recommendations of Thorpe et al. (2020) on culturally and religiously appropriate approaches to ensure the safety and comfort of participants.

For in-person interviews, the lead researcher then contacted the gym they trained at to arrange a time for the interview where there would be access to a private space in the gym when classes were not happening to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were audio recorded throughout, capturing the sounds of the gym alongside participants' responses which allowed me to reflect on the aural aspect of the environment during data analysis. For online interviews, participants were invited to still move with me over video and the questions were adapted slightly to invite them to visualise some aspects of the boxing gym.

Demographic information was collected as part of the interviews where participants were allowed to provide as much or as little details regarding their personal characteristics that they felt comfortable with.

Visual drawing pad.

Visual summaries of the sessions in forms of collage, drawings and paintings both by participants and the researcher were captured through the visual drawing pad. This was used by the researcher to address possible recall bias and to document session content. Mannay (2015) suggests that creative research approaches can lead to deeper understandings that go beyond verbal interviews in data collection. Past researchers have used collage, photography and map making to broaden understanding of participants experiences of places (Mannay, 2015; Pink, 2015). Hence, the present study invited participants to respond with bodily movements and illustrations, to supplement verbal data.

Data analysis

Riesmann (2005) highlights the different approaches to narrative analysis which are selected to complement the data to be analysed. Thematic narrative analysis (TNA) focuses on the content of what is said, analysing language as a route to uncovering meaning-making. This approach presents types of narratives present across participants' transcripts which can be useful in identifying common themes (Bengtsson & Anderson, 2020). However, TNA risks neglecting the wider cultural and societal discourses creating nuances within each narrative theme.

In Structural narrative analysis (SNA), the emphasis is on the form of the telling; the repetitions, narrative devices used and imagery or metaphors drawn upon which deepens the analysis from surface content to the subtext and implied meanings (Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Some of the key components of SNA highlighted by Labov (1982) are orientation (to time, place, characters and situation); complicating action (the event sequence, or plot, usually with a crisis and turning point); evaluation (where the narrator steps back from the action to

comment on meaning and communicate emotion – the "soul" of the narrative); resolution (the outcome of the plot); and a coda (ending the story and bringing action back to the present). The researcher combined thematic and structural narrative analysis in alignment with the interpretivist and social constructionist epistemological stance of this study.

This dual approach to analysis was chosen to allow examination of Muslim women's spiritual identity in terms of the Islamic Model of Self within the wider societal contexts interacting with in-depth deconstruction of their narratives of their relationship to religiosity and boxing participation. The benefit SNA offers is the opportunity to suspend assumptions of transparency in participants' communication (Riessman, 2003). This was particularly useful in consideration of the potential role of stigma and shame in shaping participants' verbal narratives (Takhar, 2005). Analysing structural content may offer insight into the subtext of what could not be spoken or the stories that were communicated indirectly under the surface of the main narrative. By analysing the structural content of the transcripts alongside the thematic features, the researcher was also able to incorporate some of the embodied subtext of participants' narratives. Riessman and Quinney (2005) conducted a critical review of what constitutes quality narrative research. Factors such as comparing similarities and differences in participants' narratives as well as commenting on language, structure and context of storytelling were emphasised. The present study utilises these elements suggested in comparing the stories told by Muslim women of their experiences in the boxing gym and the narrative features used by participants to outline how boxing influenced their sense of personhood.

Transcription and coding

Following data collection, audio-recorded interview data were transcribed verbatim, in line with Riessman's (2008) guidelines which required documentation of spoken content

and non-verbal elements such as emotional tone (i.e. laughter, irritable huffs), pauses and utterances (e.g. 'uhhh…') and using Fraser's (2004) suggestion of hearing the story and experiencing emotions while transcribing narratives. Participants' gestures as well as expressions were also noted to integrate the sensory ethnographic embodied data from interviews (Pink, 2015). These details were essential to contextualising the process of narrative construction and capturing the richness of the narrative. Each transcript was first annotated by hand, highlighting narrative features such as repeated phrases and key turning points in the story.

Transcription was conducted solely by the researcher. All identifying details were redacted and pseudonyms were assigned to participants to preserve anonymity. The transcripts were stored securely in line with ethical guidance (BPS, 2021). Recordings were deleted as soon as they had been transcribed, and transcriptions were deleted once the data had been analysed. This is with the exemption of one example transcript shown in Appendix H. Transcripts were read repeatedly to allow for immersion in the data following the transcription process. Immersion facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' narratives and situated them in the context of the storytelling. Initial impressions of key themes were identified through re-reading transcripts and noticing symbols and repeated structural patterns. By noting participants' intonation, repeated phrases of expression and idiosyncrasies in communication, the researcher developed a sense of nuances in the themes in relation to participants' individual stories which informed the subsequent stage of analysis.

Visual story maps

Pink (2015) suggested that researchers should consider new ways of presenting research outputs in order to capture the sensory focus. To convey the sensory experiences in a vivid, engaging way, Pink (2015) suggests using a multimodal approach of presenting quotes

alongside visual data. Hence, the process of analysis of participants' drawings and imagery verbalised during the interviews is presented as a narrative drawing. The use of story maps in data analysis aligned with Riessmann's (2008) recommendation for analytical approaches to honour the structural and emotional integrity of each personal story. Participants' drawings were combined with the researcher's visualisations of the imagery verbalised in their interview transcripts, key phrases that participants repeated, as well as anecdotes shared to develop a story map for each participant. The visual data was analysed by drawing upon narrative analysis approaches, which focused on key turning points in the narrative, imagery, metaphor and use of repeated symbolism (Riessmann, 2008).

Each participant's interview was coded following transcription before the transcribing of the next interview. This was done to analyse narratives as individual and unique to each participant before analysing them collectively. The story map for each participant was drawn immediately following the initial coding of their interview. The development of the story maps was done after coding each interview was completed as it allowed for consolidation of the symbolism and narrative features and narrative types present in each interview.

The story maps presented in the result section represent the amalgamation of participants' visual data, the researcher's visual interpretation of the transcript and the researcher's interpretation of the participant's narrative, presented in the participant's own words. The story maps were orientated towards the research questions of their journey into boxing, how boxing had impacted their lives beyond the gym as well as their experiences in the gym. This process supported the next step of narrative analysis.

The story maps offered a form of analysis in bringing together participants responses to individual interview questions. Participants were not explicitly asked to draw a story map during the interview in order to allow the interview to remain inclusive and prioritise participant comfort as some participants preferred not to rely on drawing their responses. The

story maps offered a form of transparency in communicating the researcher's analysis and integration of participant's stories into a visual narrative that could then present participant's with an accessible way to retain agency over the analysis of their experiences.

The story maps were also used to conduct member checking. Following completion of story map drawings, participants were contacted and asked if they would like to view their anonymised story map in order to allow for feedback during the process of data analysis. This was done before the consolidation of the data analysis in order to co-produce the final set of meanings derived from the results with the participants. Participant feedback from this member checking process is included in Appendix M.

Narrative analysis

The next stage of data analysis was conducted using Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis software which aligned with TNA methodology (Reissman, 2008; Ting et al., 2024). Quirkos was utilised for final coding and theme development as it facilitated the visualisation and interactive process of exploring and analysing participants stories. Following the initial coding and analysis of each transcript as a whole, where structural features were identified and story mapping was completed, transcripts were imported into Quirkos for the thematic coding phase. Inductive coding was utilised to allow codes to be drawn organically from the data. Each section of the transcript was colour coded, then grouped into themes for each individual's narratives. The researcher took note of linguistic markers such as metaphors, imagery, repetition and symbolism to examine how the embodiment of the journey boxing was expressed within stories. Particular attention was given to chronological shifts in the narrative, demarcating participants' descriptions of their experiences before and after boxing as well as how they construct meaning from their embodied experiences in the gym and beyond. The researcher examined how the confluence of personal, social and cultural

contexts shaped each individual narrative's structure and content. The use of colour-coding and visual scaling of themes based on narrative segments added allowed the researcher to develop a visual representation of patterns in the narratives.

Upon concluding individual analysis of participants' stories, the next stage of analysis involved identifying recurring content across participant narratives. Similarities in phrasing, emotions, meanings made from situations, common experiences, and turning points in the narrative were identified. Convergence and divergence across individual stories were analysed to make sense of overarching patterns and commonalities in their experiences of boxing. In line with Reissman's (2008) approach, thematic codes were developed based on the content of the narrative segments and were then grouped into broader categories. Consideration of the interaction between structural features and thematic content was done at this stage of analysis.

These themes were then compared across interviews to capture similarities, differences and nuance in participants' narratives. This was a cyclical process which was repeated to balance honouring participants' individual narratives, with illuminating broader themes that remain true to the individual stories that contribute to the bigger picture.

Finally, the narrative types were consolidated based on overarching similarities across all participants' stories, with structural features capturing the subtleties in variances. I drew upon the guidance from Frank (2010) and Riessman (2008) in every stage of the analysis. Throughout analysis, reflections were recorded to support the process of transparent decision making and noting particularly emotive content.

The final phase of analysis wove together thematic codes with storytelling features to develop five narrative themes. The final themes storied the collective narratives of all participants while the structural features incorporated into each theme reflected the nuances in the themes. The order of presentation of the themes reflects the evolution over time of the

interplay between participants' engagement in boxing and their lives beyond the gym. Re-examination and comparison of themes across participants narratives led to theme refinement to ensure the final narrative themes represented the data accurately (Bamberg, 2012).

Results

Chapter Summary

This chapter begins with an introduction of the participants through a demographic table, describing each of the participants, to provide a context for their stories. The visual story maps for individual participants are then presented to bring the unique elements of each participant's story to life. Following the presentation of each participant's visual story map, narrative themes will be presented to answer the research question; "How do Muslim women who have participated in boxing make meaning of the activity in relation to other aspects of their identity?" and address the research objectives of examining how engaging in boxing has impacted their lives beyond the sessions, particularly the interplay between their engagement in boxing and conceptualization of personhood within Islam in relation to their mental wellbeing. The narrative themes are illustrated through verbatim quotes drawn from the transcripts through the process of narrative analysis.

Participant demographics

Table 6 outlines the key demographic information for each participant and features of their engagement in boxing.

Table 6

Introducing the Narrators

No	Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Nationality	Occupation	Marital status	Setting of boxing training	Length of time participating in boxing in years	Location of interview	Nature of participation	Embodiment of Islamic identity
1	Banu	40	Pakistani	Pakistani	Homemaker/ part time dinner lady	Married	Female-only	3	Online	Recreational	Hijabi
2	Hafsa	23	Pakistani	British	Nurse	Engaged	Female-only	8	Face-to-face	Recreational	Hijabi
3	Asiyah	46	Pakistani	British	Project manager	Divorced	Mixed	7	Face-to-face	Recreational	Hijabi
4	Maya	47	Bengali	Bengali	Teaching assistant	Married	Female-only	7	Face-to-face	Recreational	Niqabi
5	Iqra	22	Somali	British	Teacher	Undisclosed	Mixed	5	Online	Competitive	Hijabi
6	Aaliyah	22	Bangladeshi	British	Martial arts coach/mentor	Unmarried	Mixed	8	Online	Competitive/ Coaching	Hijabi

7	Aysia	29	Bangladeshi	British	Cloud generation specialist	Unmarried	Mixed	5	Online	Competitive	Stopped wearing the hijab recently
8	Medina	28	Pakistani	British	Trainee clinical psychologist	Unmarried	Female-only	1	Online	Recreational	Niqabi
9	Faiza	36	Pakistani	British	Business owner	Undisclosed	Mixed	16	Online	Competitive/ Coaching	Hijabi
10	Nadiyah	44	Pakistani	British	Business analyst	Divorced	Female-only	15	Face-to-face	Recreational	Hijabi
11	Maryam	21	White African	British	School support staff/ coach	Undisclosed	Female-only	8	Online	Recreational/ Coaching	Niqabi
12	Layla	28	Somali	Swedish	HR professional	Unmarried	Mixed	11	Face-to-face	Competitive/ Coaching	Hijabi

Figure 9

Banu's visual story map

Banu's Story

Grew up in Hong Kong, then moved back to Pakistan because of dad's job which meant I couldn't continue my education

my space in the **world** has GOTTEN BIGGER

space to 'be myself' is still expanding

Since joining the class, I've been doing anything I can to move forward, forward, forward

I never tried to push myself backwards

stepping towards growth

I don't keep myself locked at home anymore. I managed to build up the courage to go out and try to do whatever I want to.

When I make a commitment, I stick to it, no matter what

I'm still in that space. I keep the safe space of strength and confidence I found through the boxing class alive in my imagination

IT'S LIKE I LIVE THERE NOW even though I haven't been boxing regularly in 2 years

met husband in Hong Kong then moved to the UK together

People in our culture might gossip and say "oh, that's an inappropriate place"

letting go of my anxiety

gives me energy

When I attend online classes, it doesn't matter if they would be judging me for my scarf or who I am. I don't do it for them.

currently hoping taking qualification do my level 4 counselling course so I can help other Muslim women

Felt lonely as a migrant and found it hard to make friends

started believing in myself

connection

I felt mentally relaxed when I could wear a t-shirt and jogging bottoms to do the class

I carry the relaxation from boxing into the world with me

wanted to find out more about myself

If I could, I would love to go back to boxing

experienced racism - people shouting from cars, racist remarks and racial slurs because of my hijab, from non-Muslim women

When I think of the class, I see the whole group of us together

still feeling calm

Did a presentation on looking for my GCSE English class at college - The tutor was shocked, he didn't expect that I would do boxing. They expect me to fit a stereotype but no one should be judging anyone ever.

I am looking for a new fitness class, if I feel welcomed and like I belong, I would do any activity

triggered me to look for self-defense classes

even though other people judge me and stereotype me, I judged myself as well, I didn't think I could do boxing until I had my own personal experience of it

They keep motivating me to carry on, pushing me to not stop, to keep going till the timer goes

gaining trust in others

Boxing has made my faith stronger

why would I not wear my hijab or abaya just because I might get bullied? I don't do it for these people, I do it for Allah.

Freedom, not feeling anxiety when you're on you

I've gone back to education, I am doing a counselling qualification while working part-time as a dinner lady.

Found it difficult when I couldn't choose my partner for partner drills, felt nervous about pairing with new people

It is the freedom that my Deen gives me within boundaries I want my sons to do boxing too

was a full time carer for my sister last year but she has passed away since - keeping busy helps me cope with the grief

support of family is important

rather than helping Muslim women grow stronger, people in our community cage them

was looking for a safe female only space that fit within the boundaries of my religion

I have found my voice now more than ever before

As I age, it makes it harder to fit things in life.

you feel much more comfort in my abaya

moved house 2 years ago and stopped boxing

Boxing helped to boost my confidence when I was walking on the streets, I wasn't as stressed or worried if someone shouts racial slurs from a car. Because the movements you learn you aggressively, you know the movements are naturally in your body. The way I walk in the streets now brings confidence to my body, physical and mental health.

working part-time as a nursery school teacher

I like to experience things for myself

Started boxing at 31

learning about myself

my voice does not tremble when I stand up for myself now

women in our culture feel a lot of pressure in keeping the honour of our in-laws... people gossip, you have to be careful who you talk to and where you go

It felt like it wasn't really living

my husband is very supportive of my boxing

Initially learned as self-defense and for boosting my confidence

When your coach is supportive and friendly, and welcoming, that helps you feel comfortable & confident

I want to keep building myself

gaining physical strength

made sacrifices to attend, like leaving kids with my sister and not cooking dinner in the morning

All the things that have happened to me, even the negative are learning points, like BUILDING BLOCKS to where I am today the main thing is to not give up.

Feeling **Strong**

If you don't put yourself first, then you are gone.
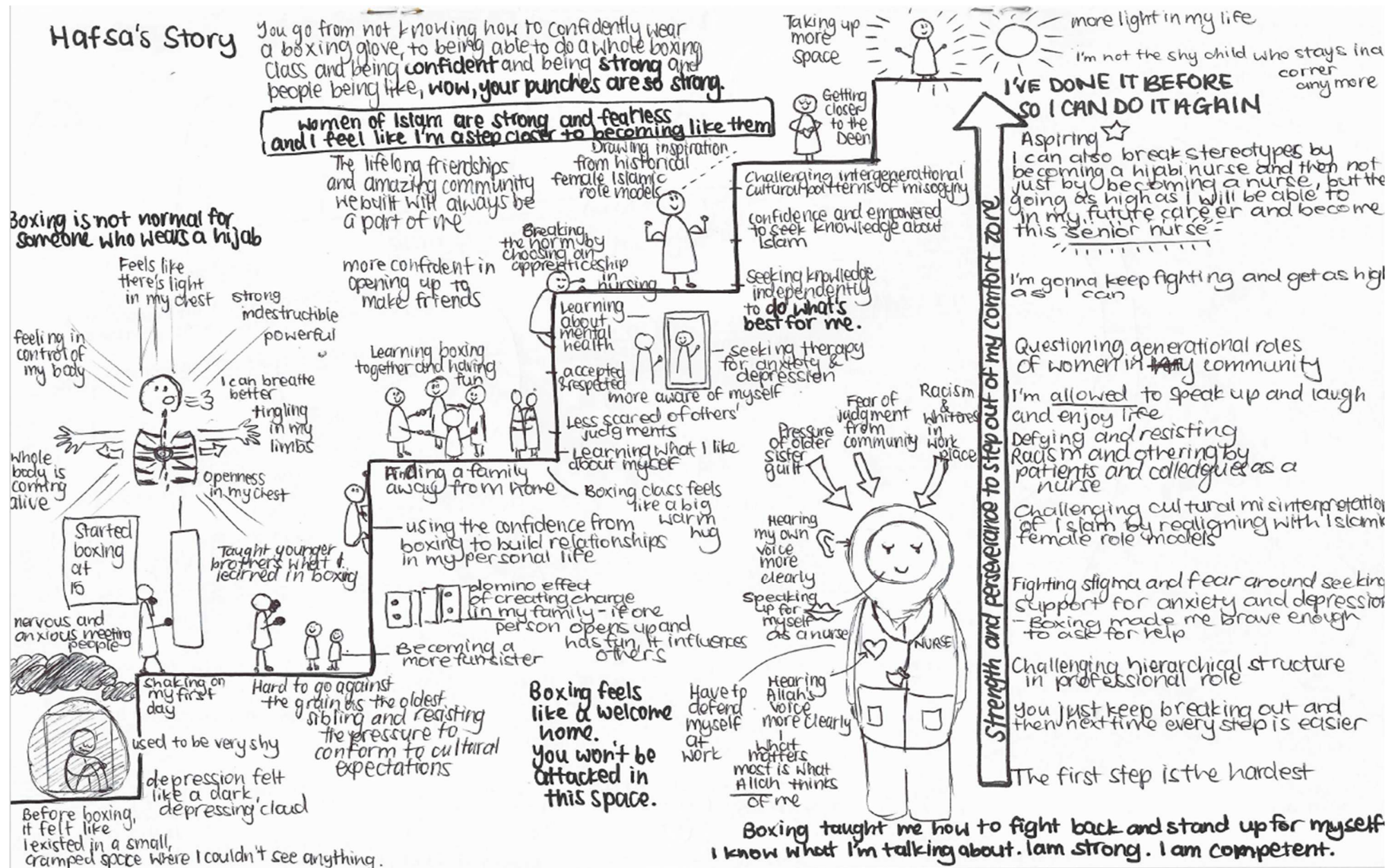
learning how to move with every single part of the body

Banu

While Banu did not want to draw during her interview, she shared the physical action of holding her hands up to represent the small amount of space to be herself in her life before boxing. By moving her hands outwards laterally, she gestured that the space to be herself has kept expanding since she started boxing

Figure 10
Hafsa's visual story map

Hafsa's Story

You go from not knowing how to confidently wear a boxing glove, to being able to do a whole boxing class and being **confident** and being **strong** and people being like, **wow, your punches are so strong.**

Women of Islam are strong and fearless and I feel like I'm a step closer to becoming like them

Boxing is not normal for someone who wears a hijab

Feels like there's light in my chest

strong indestructible powerful

feeling in control of my body

I can breathe better

tingling in my limbs

Whole body is coming alive

Openness in my chest

Started boxing at 15

nervous and anxious meeting people

shaking on my first day

used to be very shy

depression felt like a dark, depressing cloud

Before boxing, it felt like I existed in a small, cramped space where I couldn't see anything.

The lifelong friendships and amazing community we built will always be a part of me

more confident in opening up to make friends

Learning boxing together and having fun

Taught younger brothers what I learned in boxing

Finding a family away from home

using the confidence from boxing to build relationships in my personal life

Becoming a more fun sister

Hard to go against the grain as the oldest sibling and resisting the pressure to conform to cultural expectations

domino effect of creating change in my family - if one person opens up and has fun, it influences others

Drawing inspiration from historical female Islamic role models

Breaking the norm by choosing an apprenticeship in nursing

Learning about mental health

accepted & respected

more aware of myself

Less scared of others' judgments

Learning what I like about myself

Boxing class feels like a big warm hug

Boxing feels like a welcome home. You won't be attacked in this space.

Taking up more space

Getting closer to the Deen

Challenging intergenerational cultural patterns of misogyny

confidence and empowered to seek knowledge about Islam

Seeking knowledge independently to do what's best for me.

seeking therapy for anxiety & depression

Fear of judgment of older sister guilt

Pressure from community

Racism & Whiteness in work place

Hearing my own voice more clearly

Speaking up for myself as a nurse

Have to defend myself at work

Hearing Allah's voice more clearly

What matters most is what Allah thinks of me

NURSE

more light in my life

I'm not the shy child who stays in a corner any more

I'VE DONE IT BEFORE SO I CAN DO IT AGAIN

Aspiring ☆

I can also break stereotypes by becoming a hijabi nurse and then not just by becoming a nurse, but going as high as I will be able to in my future career and become this senior nurse

I'm gonna keep fighting and get as high as I can

Questioning generational roles of women in my community

I'm allowed to speak up and laugh and enjoy life

Defying and resisting Racism and othering by patients and colleagues as a nurse

Challenging cultural misinterpretation of Islam by realigning with Islamic female role models

Fighting stigma and fear around seeking support for anxiety and depression - Boxing made me brave enough to ask for help

Challenging hierarchical structure in professional role

You just keep breaking out and then next time every step is easier

The first step is the hardest

Strength and perseverance to step out of my comfort zone

Boxing taught me how to fight back and stand up for myself. I know what I'm talking about. I am strong. I am competent.

Hafsa

Hafsa's drawings depicted how through boxing, there was more space and light to be herself in her life. Each step out of her comfort zone was easier due to her perseverance and determination growing in confidence.

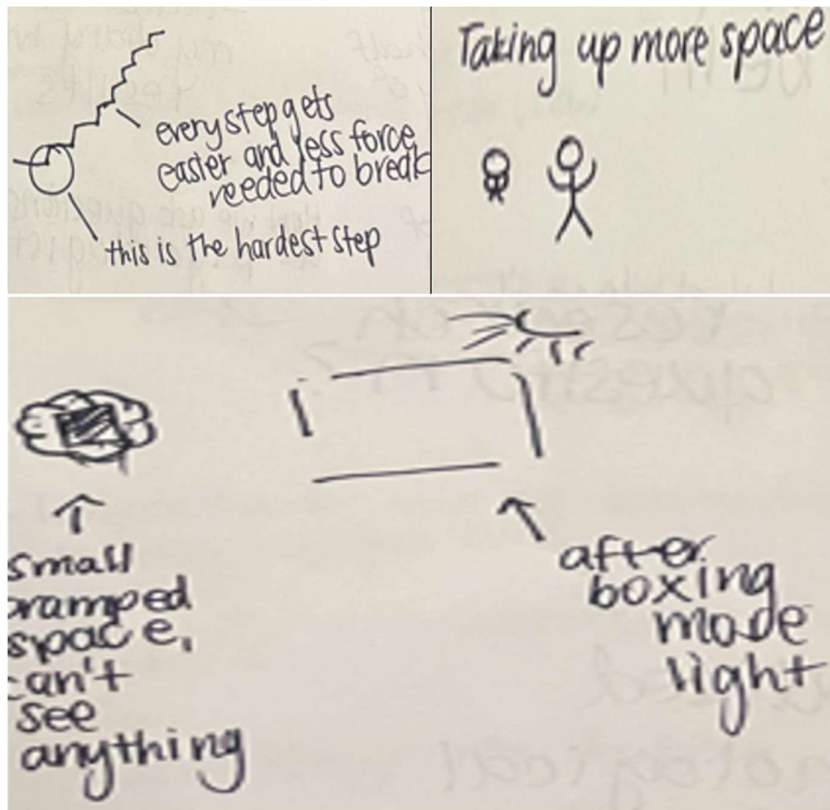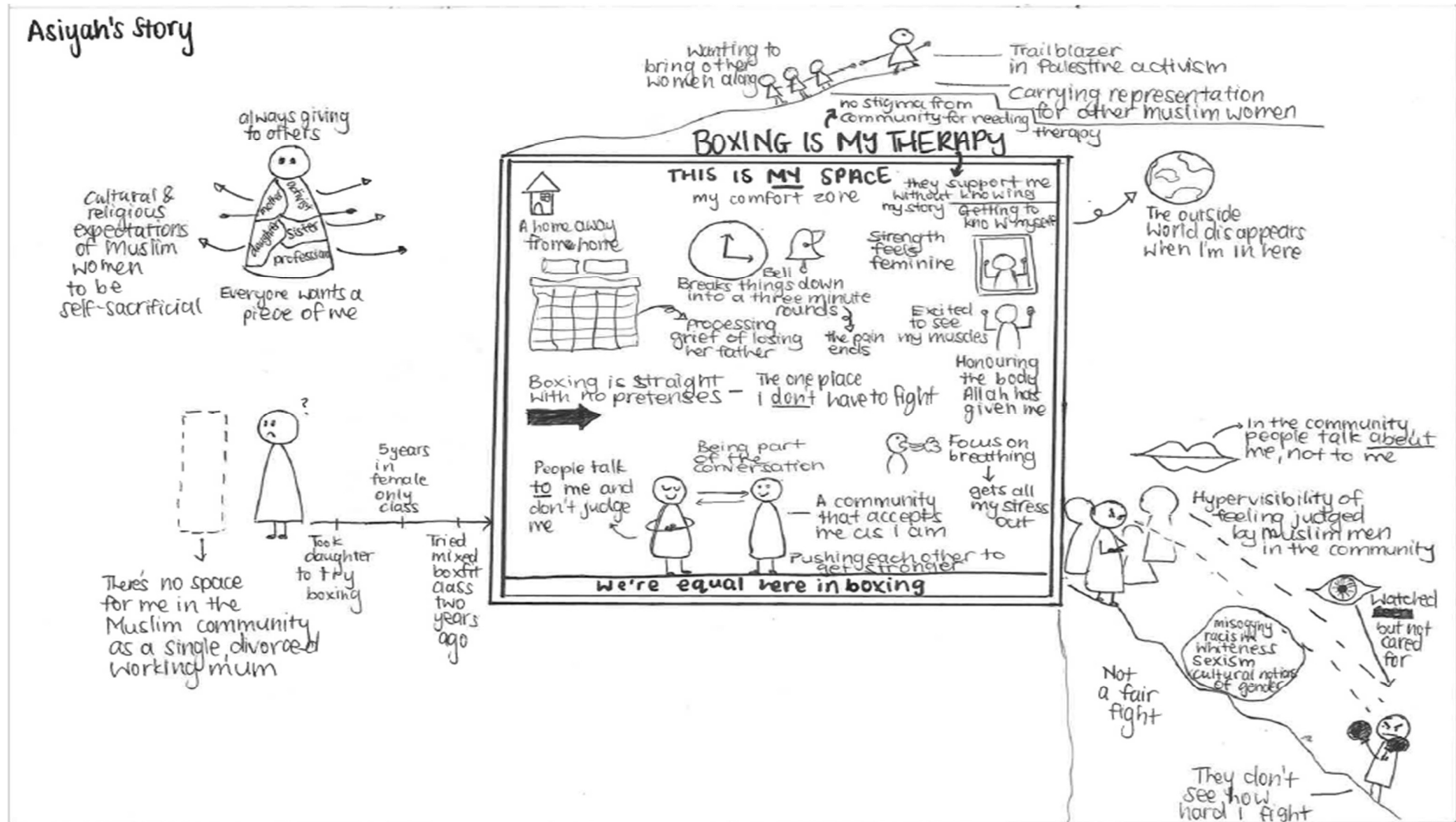**Figure 11**
Hafsa's interview drawings
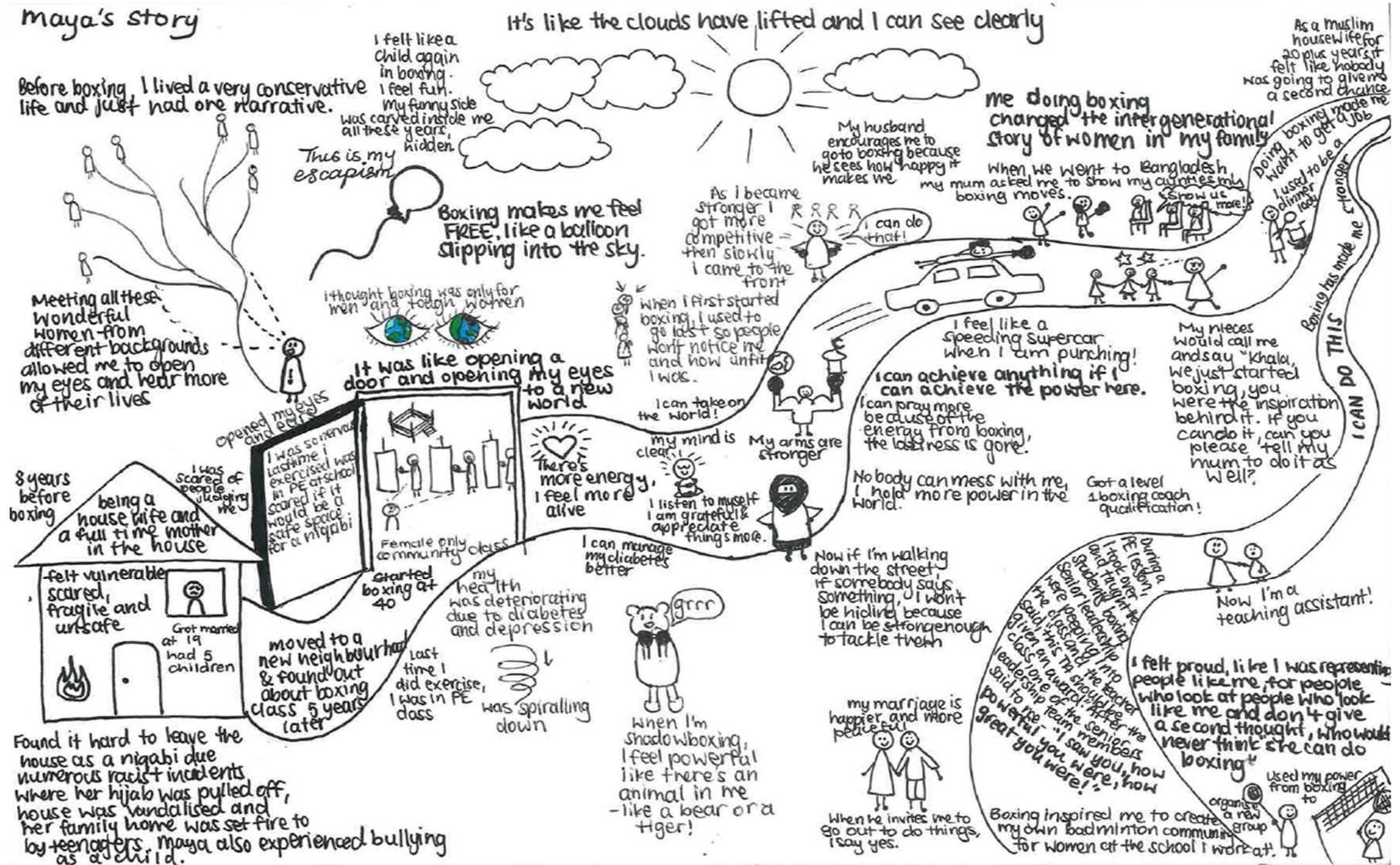
Figure 12

Asiyah's visual story map

Asiyah's Story

Asiyah

  Asiyah chose not to draw but shared visualisations of the gaze of the community and the boxing gym being a space she wants to keep fiercely separate from the rest of her life

Figure 13
Maya's visual story map

Maya's story

It's like the clouds have lifted and I can see clearly

Before boxing, I lived a very conservative life and just had one narrative.

I felt like a child again in boxing. I feel fun. My funny side was carved inside me all these years, hidden.

This is my escapism

Boxing makes me feel FREE, like a balloon slipping into the sky.

Meeting all these wonderful women from different backgrounds allowed me to open my eyes and hear more of their lives

I thought boxing was only for men and tough women

It was like opening a door and opening my eyes to a new world

opened my eyes and ears

I was so nervous last time I exercised was in PE at school scared if it would be a safe space for a niqabi

I was scared of people judging me

Female only community class

Started boxing at 40

8 years before boxing

being a house wife and a full time mother in the house

felt vulnerable, scared, fragile and unsafe

Got married at 19 had 5 children

moved to a new neighbourhood & found out about boxing class 5 years later

last time I did exercise, I was in PE class

my health was deteriorating due to diabetes and depression

was spiralling down

Found it hard to leave the house as a niqabi due numerous racist incidents where her hijab was pulled off, house was vandalised and her family home was set fire to by teenagers, Maya also experienced bullying as a child.

grrr

When I'm shadow boxing, I feel powerful like there's an animal in me - like a bear or a tiger!

When he invites me to go out to do things, I say yes.

my marriage is happier and more peaceful

When I first started boxing, I used to go last so people won't notice me and how unfit I was.

I can take on the world!

There's more energy, I feel more alive

my mind is clear

I listen to myself I am grateful & appreciate things more.

I can manage my diabetes better

My husband encourages me to go to boxing because he sees how happy it makes me

As I became stronger I got more competitive then slowly I came to the front

I can do that!

my arms are stronger

I feel like a speeding supercar when I am punching!

I can achieve anything if I can achieve the power here.

I can pray more because of the energy from boxing, the laziness is gone.

Nobody can mess with me, I hold more power in the world.

Now if I'm walking down the street, if somebody says something, I won't be hiding because I can be strong enough to tackle them

me doing boxing changed the intergenerational story of women in my family

When we went to Bangladesh, my mum asked me to show my aunties my boxing moves.

Show us some more!

As a muslim housewife for 20 plus years it felt like nobody was going to give me a second chance

Doing boxing made me want to get a job. I used to be a dinner lady

Boxing has made me stronger

I CAN DO THIS

My nieces would call me and say "khala, we just started boxing, you were the inspiration behind it. If you can do it, can you please tell my mum to do it as well?"

Got a level 1 boxing coach qualification!

During a PE lesson, I took over and taught boxing. Senior leadership were peeping in and saw the class. The TA said this to the teacher and leadership team given an award. One TA and the teacher of the leadership team members said to me "I saw you, how powerful you were, how great you were!"

Now I'm a teaching assistant!

I felt proud, like I was representing people like me, for people who look at people who look like me and don't give a second thought, who would never think she can do boxing"

Used my power from boxing to organise a new group

Boxing inspired me to create my own badminton community for women at the school I work at.

Maya

Maya's drawings depicted her visualisation of the impact of boxing as clouds clearing up the sky of her mind. She feels like a speeding supercar while punching and visualised the sense of freedom as a balloon slipping into the sky.

Figure 14
Maya's interview drawings

Figure 15

Iqra's visual story map

Iqra

Iqra chose not to draw but shared the visualisation of being in a bubble while she boxes.

Figure 16

Aaliyah's visual story map
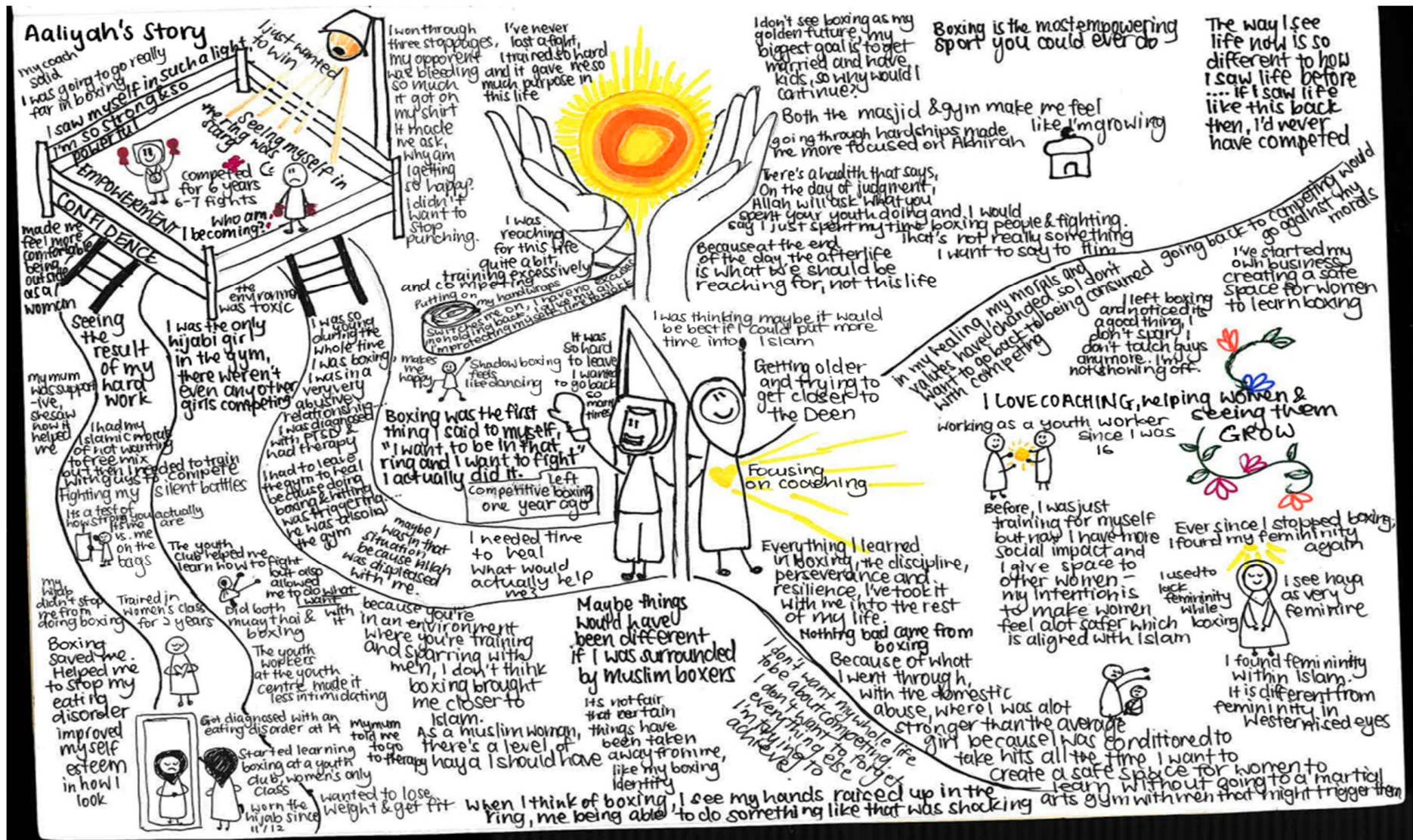
Aaliyah

Aaliyah did not want to draw during her interview. She spoke about her coaching as a ball of light being shared instead of just kept for herself when she was competing.

Figure 17

Aysia's visual story map
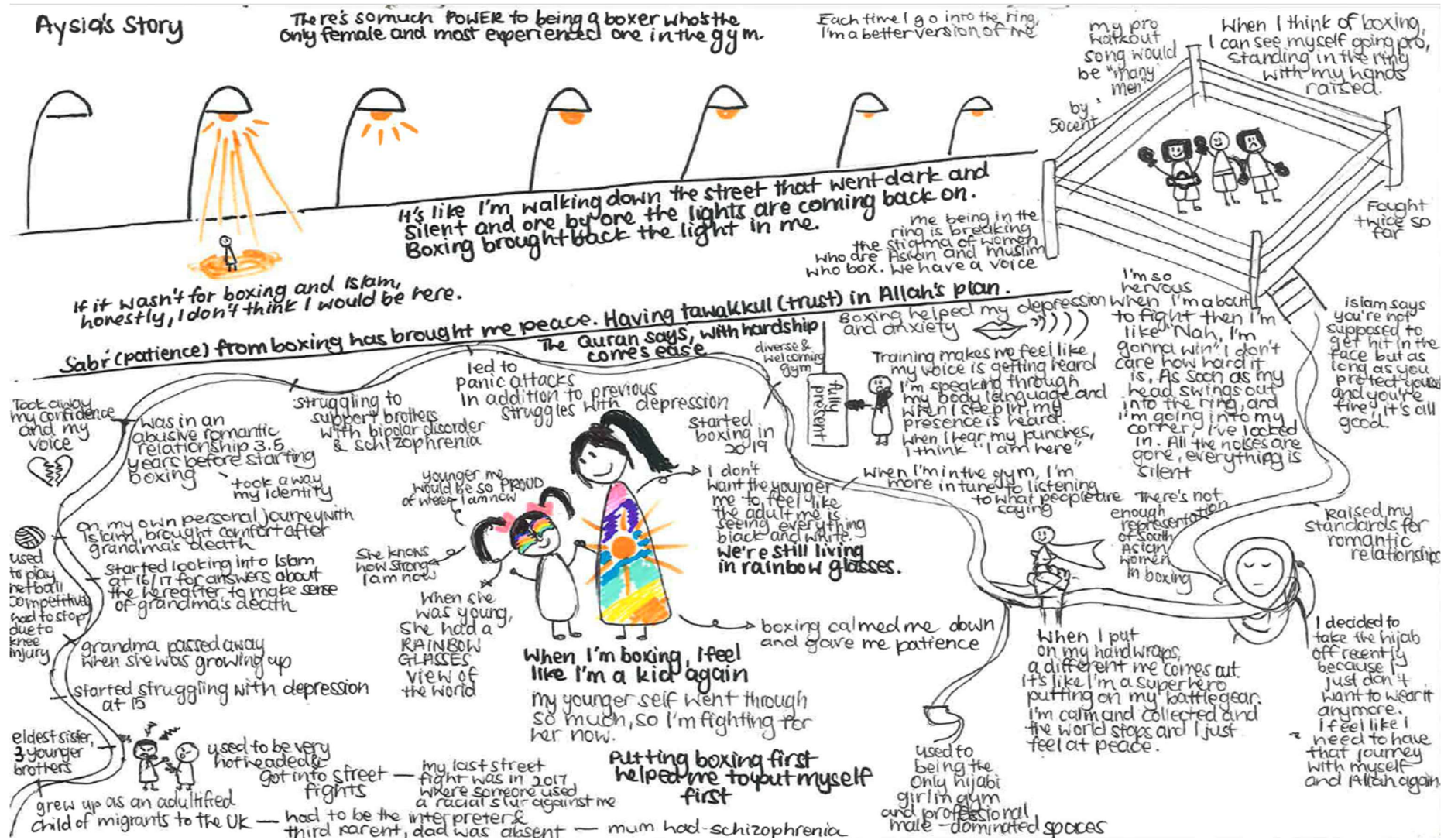
Aysia

Aysia did not want to draw during her interview but she visualised boxing as the space where her rainbow glasses of childhood came back on and how it brought back her voice. She also shared the imagery of walking down a street where a difficult circumstance in her life had turned off all the streetlights and boxing had brought the streetlights back on, one by one.

Figure 18

Medina's story map
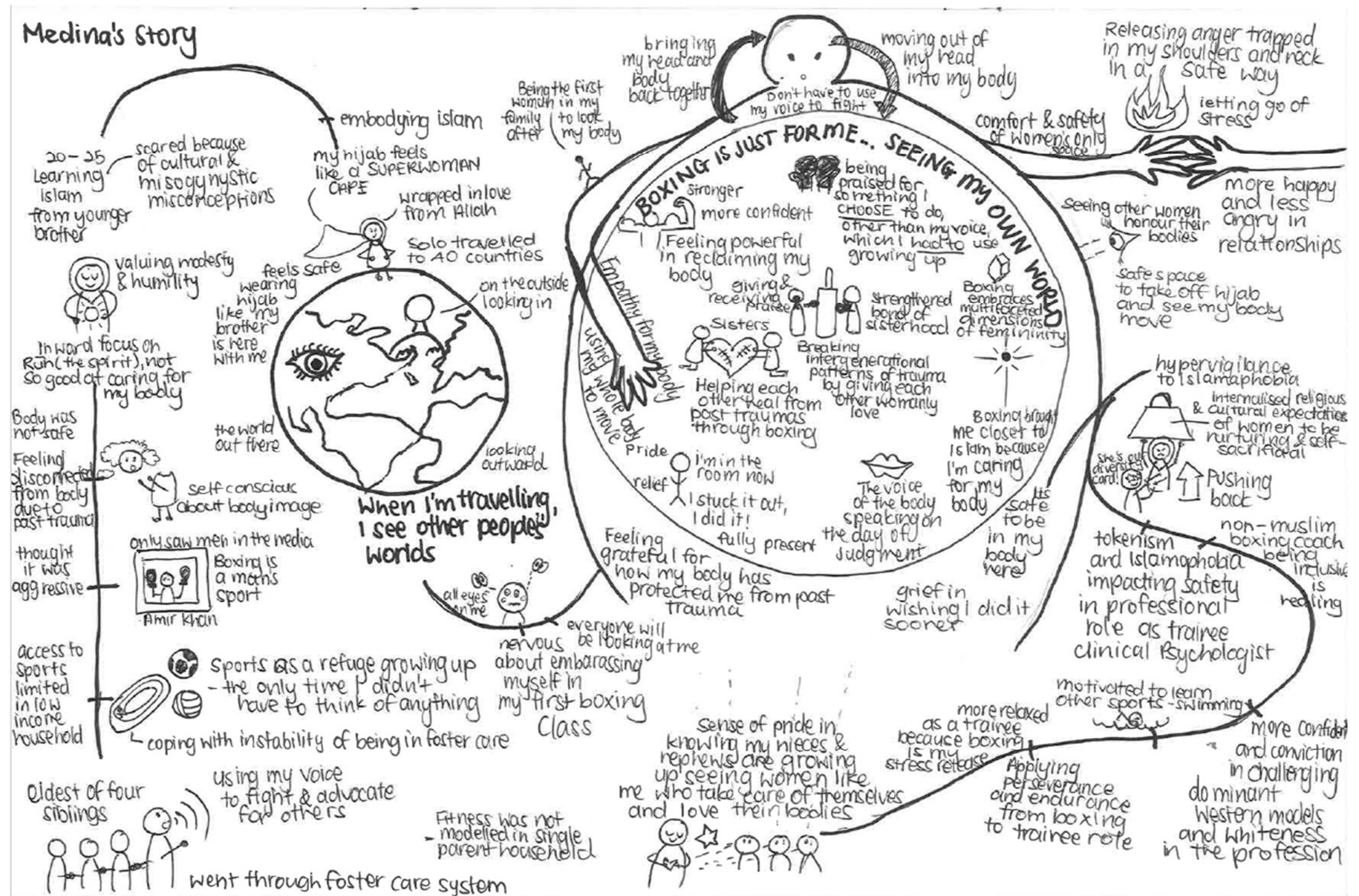
Medina

Medina is a niqabi who started boxing a year ago fortnightly and has been attending boxing more regularly in the last few months. Medina's drawings depict how she felt like she was on the outside looking in before she did boxing and now, she feels like she is in the room.

Figure 19
Medina's interview drawings
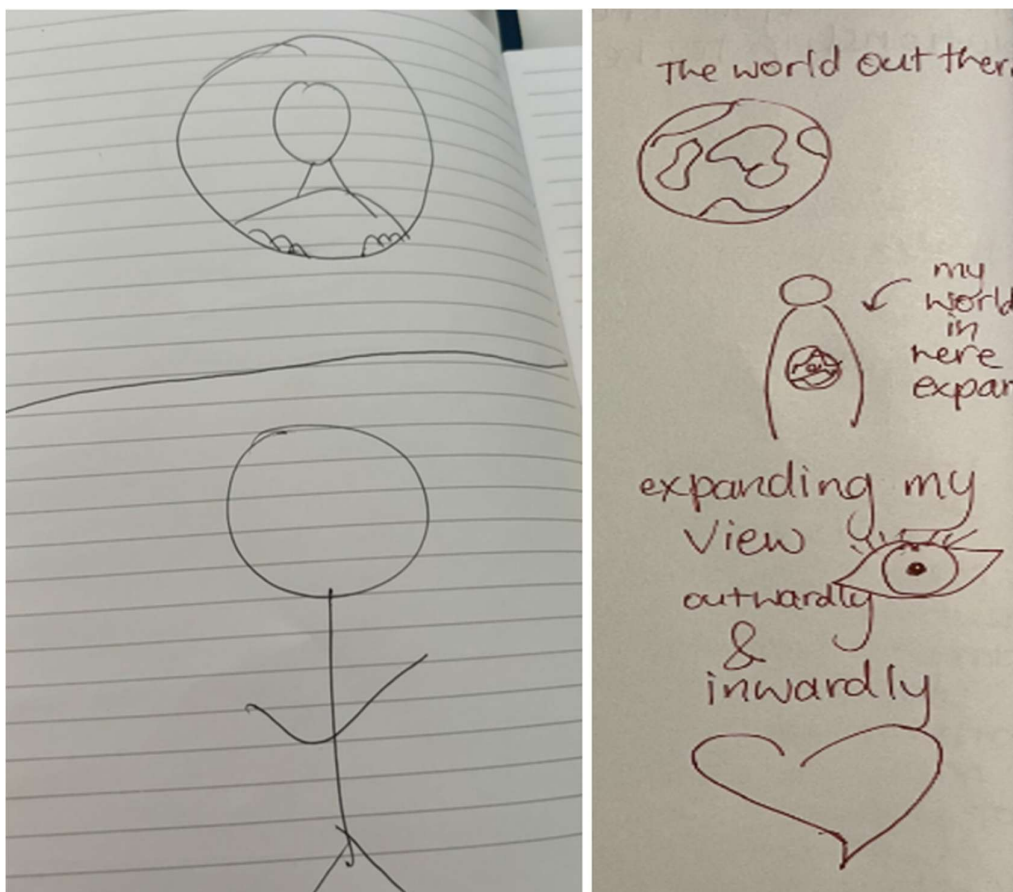
Figure 20

Faiza's visual story map

Faiza's Story

Tried out a boxing class for fun   2009   messed around on punching bags during University while helping friends set up a gym

Boxing opens doors

lost her father right before exams

balancing role as present mum and coach   courage to take risks

I'm where I should be

importance of self defence for children

taking her daughter to the gym

became a mum

started coaching and women's boxing business full time in pandemic   worked in the police force

started competing within a year

camraderie & family

5 competitive fights

The buzz of fighting

community of empowering women

non-muslim clients remind her it's prayertime   started coaching   taking people on an amazing journey

breaking barriers for future generations

a safe space for women

MY WORLD IS SQUARE

resilience

confidence in knowing myself

processing grief   emotional release

embodied sense of togetherness

defying stereotypes

a mental sport

applying patience & discipline to her role as fundraising manager

learning Sabr (patience) & discipline

hitting things allows emotions to come out

a space to bring different worlds together

you go into the ring alone

I am free

BOXING IS A BLUEPRINT FOR MY LIFE

engaging in solidarity acts of resistance

Continuing to do Dawah through boxing & being a strong Muslim female role model

teaching boxing in mosques

coping with Palestinian genocide and feelings of helplessness

islam structures my life

Faiza

Faiza's drawings depicted how Faiza's world is square as she applies what she's learned in boxing as a blueprint for life. She also drew a brain to depict how boxing is a mental sport and the happy face signifies how it impacts her emotions.

Figure 21
Faiza's interview drawings

Figure 22
Nadiyah's visual story map
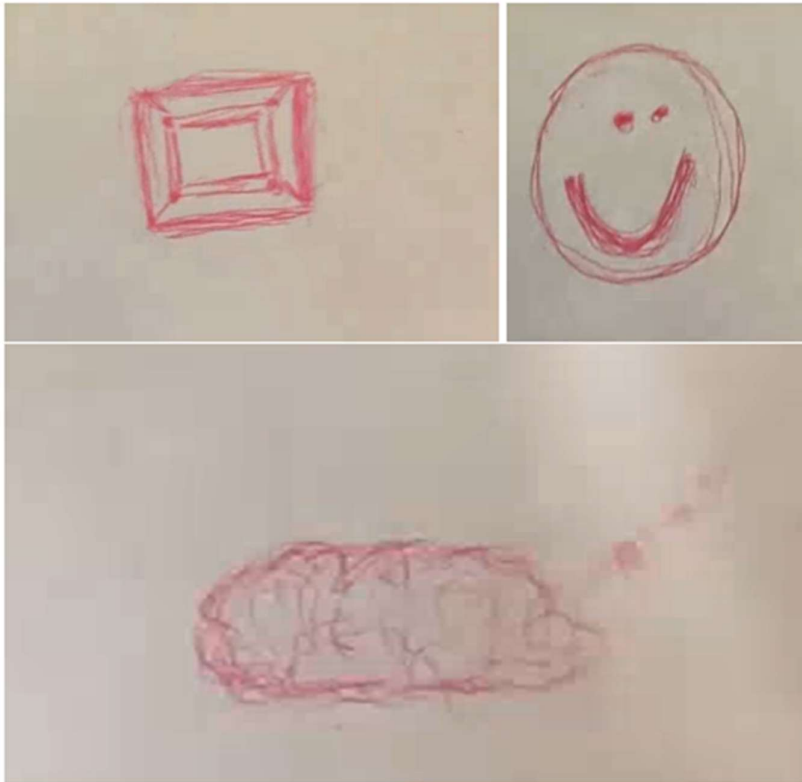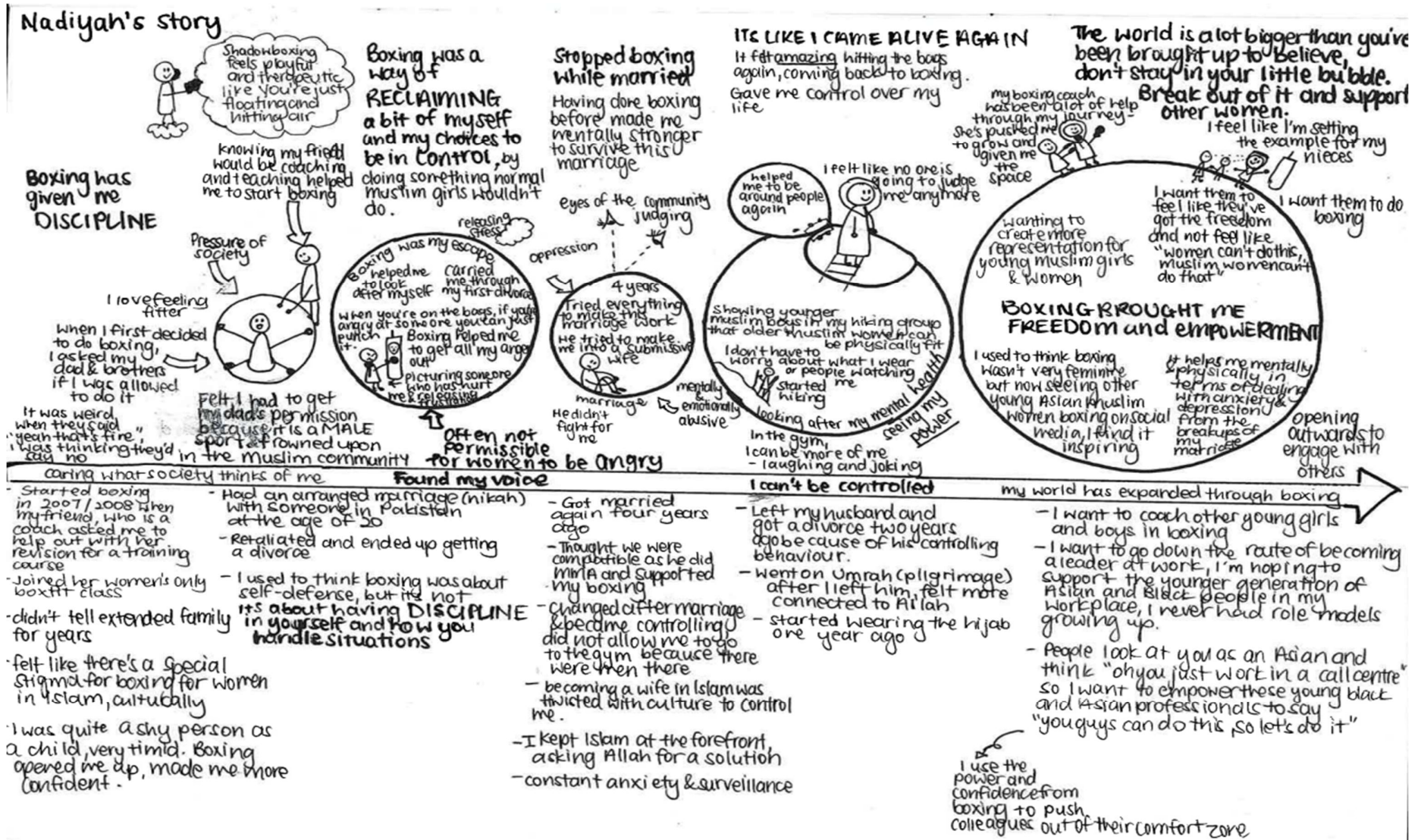
Nadiyah

Nadiyah's drawings depicted how her space to be herself has grown over time through boxing while resisting against oppression and cultural pressures in her life.

Figure 23
Nadiyah's interview drawings
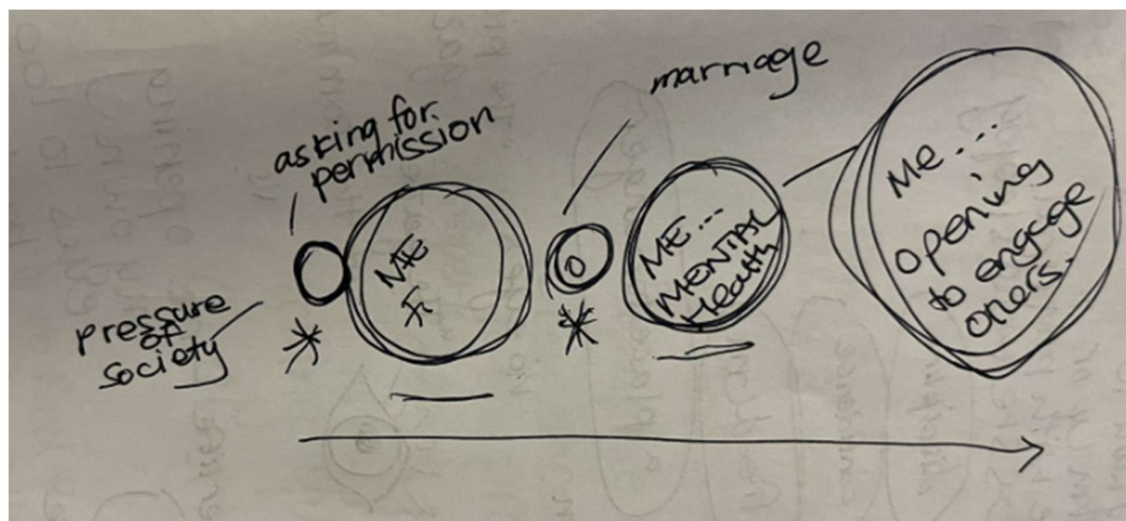
Figure 24

Maryam's visual story map
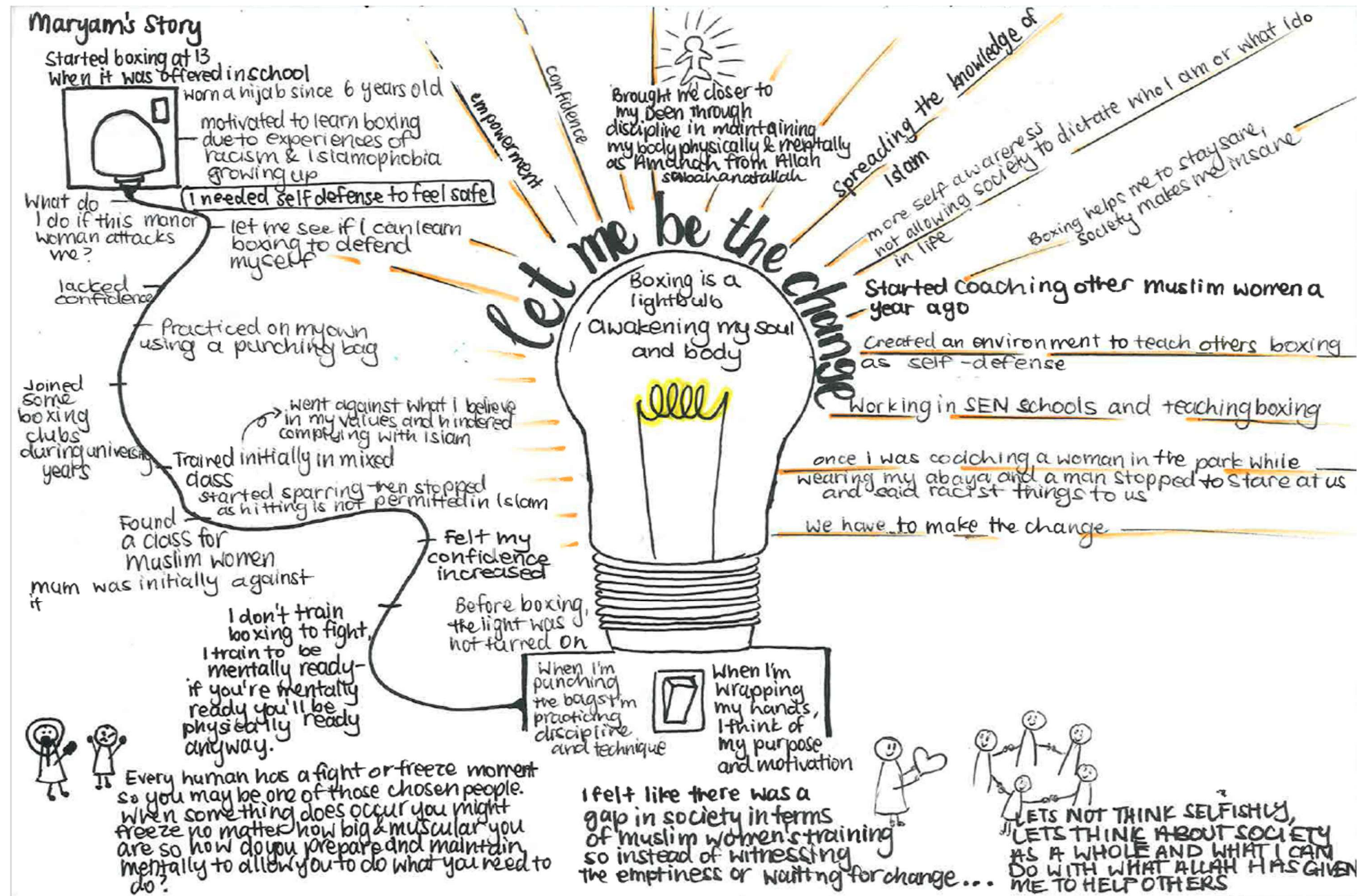
Maryam

Maryam did not want to draw during her interview but she shared the imagery of a lightbulb representing what boxing means to her as it awakens her mind and body.

Figure 25

Layla's visual story map
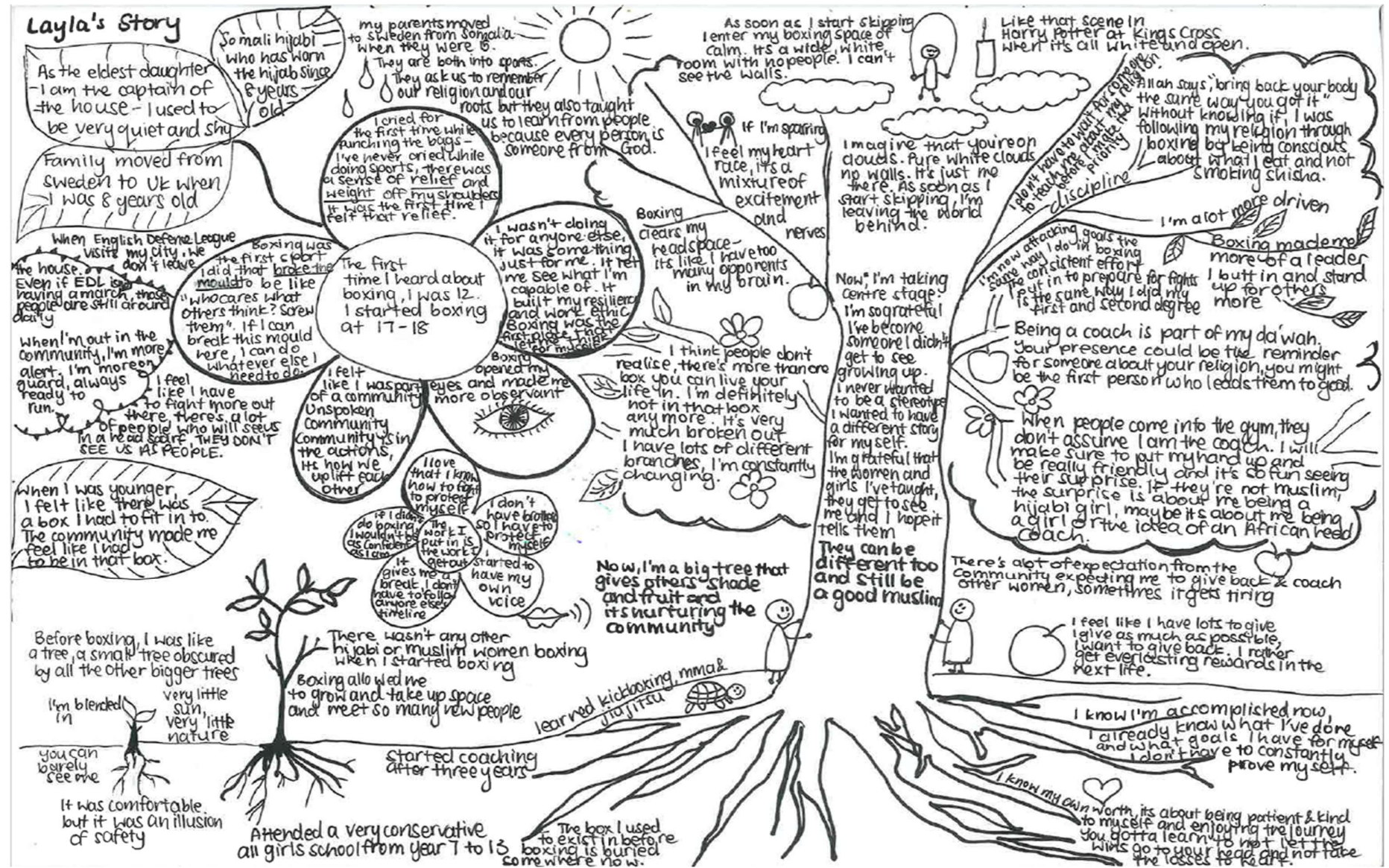
Layla

Layla's drawings depict how she was a small tree hidden by bigger trees before boxing but through boxing, she grew to be a big tree which provides shelter and fruit for others, signifying how she gives back to her community through coaching and sharing her skills with others.

Figure 26
Layla's interview drawings
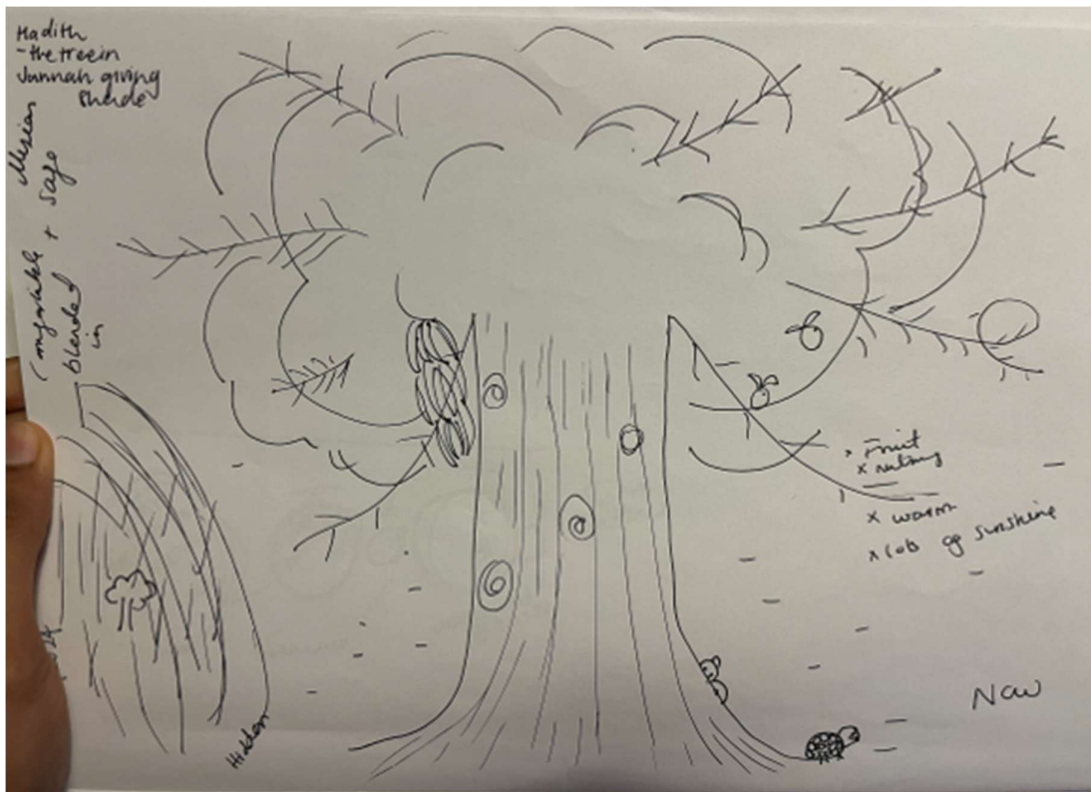
Narrative Themes

The following section delineates the narrative analysis (NA) conducted on the transcripts of twelve participants' interviews to answer the question 'How do Muslim women who have participated in boxing make meaning of the activity in relation to other aspects of their identity?'. Five narrative themes which captured similarities across participants stories of how boxing has impacted their lives and sense of identity beyond the sessions were identified:

- Stories of (re) (claiming) *aql*, *qalb*, body and *rūḥ*

- Stories of a home away from home

- Stories of energising efforts to get closer to the *Deen*

- Stories of resistance

- Stories of being the change

Each sub-narrative represents a progression in their story, reflecting how participants storied boxing, first in relation to their inner worlds, then experiencing the impact of boxing reaching outwards into their interaction with wider society. This flow mirrored the way participants' narrated their experiences during the interview. The exploration of each narrative theme will be interwoven with elements of narrative features to depict how the telling of their story illuminated the unique nuances of individual experiences within each theme.

Stories of (re) (claiming) aql, qalb, body and rūḥ

Participants spoke about the sense of internal headspace that being in the boxing gym gave them. For some, it was the transition between the doors of the gym to warming up and focusing on the sensory aspect of wrapping their hands where they realised the outside world fell away and they could be completely present. For Layla, the physical act of skipping signalled her entering the mental experience of calmness unique to boxing.

it's me in a wide room, no people… Like that scene in Harry Potter near the end at Kings cross when it's all white and open. A wide room where I can't see the walls. When it comes to boxing, I'm immediately in that space… It starts as soon as I start skipping. I don't think there's any doors for the wide room. Imagine that you're on clouds. It's just me there. And it's not scary. It's very safe. Pure white clouds, no walls. – Layla

The researcher's interpretation of Layla's description of headspace during boxing bears resemblance to some aspects of the description of *Jannah* (paradise) in the Quran as a place that is "as wide as the heavens and the earth" (The Quran, 2004, 3:133). The celestial imagery of white clouds may have represented the connection boxing offers to her *rūḥ*. The repetition of "wide" captures the sense of relief of calmness that boxing brings to her *qalb* in contrast to the confinement in worldly struggles. This sentiment was echoed by Asiyah, who expressed how boxing nourishes her *qalb* as the only place in her life for her to tend to her own needs.

I haven't got anybody asking for a piece of me… I'm giving, giving, giving and people ask even a little bit of me but when a lot of people ask for a little bit of you, suddenly you know you don't get a break… So when I'm here, I'm punching a bag, which I absolutely love, it's my therapy, but I'm just doing it for me, its **MY** *thing. It's the one place in my life where I am just me… I think I'm always strong for other people and then it's like what about me? People associate strength with boxing, but this is the one place I don't have to be strong, it's like the one place I can fall apart… I don't have to be strong for other people here. – Asiyah*

Asiyah's repeated emphasis and forceful tone when saying the words "my" in reference to the boxing gym highlighted the scarcity of space in her life due to gendered societal roles she holds as a single mother, daughter and sister. The description of the boxing gym as her "therapy" alluded to the gym as a private space without facing the judgment and stigma attached to seeking therapy, where she could heal the wounds her *qalb* sustains in her

daily life as a single, divorced Muslim woman. Participants experienced boxing as a place where their embodied Islamic femininity felt less heavy or suspended briefly to allow them to reclaim a sense of personhood, separate from the roles and responsibilities they carry in society. Initially metaphors of dark clouds and being in a dark, small, obscured space were used to describe the state of their *aql* and *qalb* before boxing which evolved into the imagery of a balloon released into the sky or being a fast car which symbolises the sense of freedom felt in the gym.

she had these rainbow glasses on… Like when she was young, she would have like rainbow glasses on of the perspective of the world. I don't want the younger me to feel like the adult me is seeing everything black and white. It's not like that. We're still living in rainbow glasses. – Aysia

As an adultified child of first-generation migrants, boxing represents a space for Aysia where she could reclaim her childlike sense of wonder and joy about the world. The visualisation of rainbow glasses captures a sense of reconnecting with childlike *fiṭra* which participants embodied through reclaiming the right to play and have fun. For Maya, punching brought out a part of herself characterised as a "tiger" and the sound of her laughter intertwined with the rhythm of her punches captured the reclamation and embodiment of playfulness and joy mingling with the strength and power felt in being present with her emotions.

Do you want me to tell you the truth? I used to cheat. I used to go last so that people won't notice me doing too much… So let me just grab the bag and hide so no one sees me missing stuff. So then slowly I came to the front, feeling more competitive. – Maya

The confidence to take up space in the gym may have reflected participants' gradual strengthening of their connection to their *qalb*. Other participants described the tangible sense of growth and reclamation of their *aql* and body by being made to look at themselves in the

mirrors of the gym while shadowboxing and through noticing muscles developing which made them feel strong. The reclamation of *aql* through boxing which was described as a "mental sport" was demonstrated in participants' narratives of boxing teaching them perseverance, strength and stepping out of their comfort zone. Notably, Banu's confidence in herself grew through learning boxing so palpably that she felt open to competing in boxing when she'd previously thought of professional boxing as "horrifying".

I took this class as more of self-defence techniques and boosting my confidence… the other type of boxing I thought was horrifying, normally the boxing you see and hear and watch people… smashing their nose or smashing their teeth… now, I mean, if I have to continue the professional boxing, I would, yeah, by all means if there's any opportunities –
Banu

Experiencing boxing for herself, by immersing in the sensory soundscapes and smellscapes, blurred the binary between self-defence and "the other" type of boxing which represented competitive boxing. There was a sense of Banu's spatial imaginary shifting the boundary of what she could and could not do through her immersion in the gym space, which then manifested as confidence. For some participants, this narrative continued to develop with the decision to step into the boxing ring and compete.

boxing is an independent sport, where you're alone. So, you have to figure everything out for yourself… understanding that even though a lot of people are watching me outside the ring, it will be me and this other person, manifesting and speaking things into existence. – Iqra

Iqra's reflections on preparing for a fight captured her journey of her developing self-awareness and owning the story of what happens in the ring. The metaphor of speaking with her hands in the ring pointed to a wider narrative of how boxing brought out the voice of the body that was previously inaccessible to participants. The word "alone" was used repeatedly to describe the experience of being able to see and rely on oneself in the ring. Participants

developed a sense of confidence and agency which was observed in the interview as they grew in confidence while narrating what boxing meant to them. Narratives included repetition of iterations of "I never imagined I could do this" to "I can do this" which potentially demonstrated the transformation in reclaiming their sense of agency and belief in themselves.

it's quite healing in a sense of feeling like you have power in a way where you've never felt powerful before. And I have when I've been in a setting and I've had to like, be overly loud to gain that in terms of like my voice… But where if your body was maybe not safe growing up and you didn't have that power and it was abused, then I think it's sort of like reclaiming that now, like you feel very powerful. – Medina

As a child in foster care, Medina relied on her *aql* to advocate to her siblings as a way to navigate the powerlessness of her body. The embodiment of fighting movements allowed for communicating a sense of power over past trauma to her body.

My confidence and like how much boxing has, like, perfected it back to being me, but even a better version of me. Like, I feel like each time I go into the ring I'm just a better version of me coming again and again and again. Every time I go into my training sessions, I just feel like my voice is getting heard. My body is making the actions and also, I'm basically speaking through my body language like it feels like I'm being heard through just my body language. Now when I step in, I feel like my presence is heard. – Aysia

Similarly, Aysia's manifestation of her growing confidence was communicated through her senses. Through her voice, her footsteps and her proprioception in the gym, Aysia's narrative emphasised how participants experienced the journey of reclaiming agency and confidence to encompass *qalb*, *aql* and body. Participants' narratives of the gym as an emotional space challenged their earlier assumptions about boxing being an aggressive physical sport. A few participants spoke about processing grief in relation to the loss of family

members and wider societal oppression such as coping with the ongoing genocide (International Court of Justice, 2025).

So, I lost my father when I was 18, in 2010….My dad was very much a sports person. So, I always felt that connection and close to him, partaking in a sport and I still do because he loved sports and also it helps you channel emotions and grief… over the last 9-10 months now, the whole Palestine genocide… that really, really messed me up, especially for the first few months that I was just addicted to looking at stuff on the social media but feeling so helpless… I feel that heaviness when I would go in the gym just punching the bags and letting it out was the only sort of coping mechanism that I could sort of find for myself. – Faiza

Participants grappling with *nafs lawwāma* found ways to process grief and depression by connecting with the reclamation of a sense of physical power in the face of emotional powerlessness. The sound of the bell ringing which demarcated time into three-minute rounds reflected a sensorial aspect of participants' experience in coping with pain.

I really like to know this is the end, like when the bell rings… In the ring, there's only one opponent. – Asiyah

Within the boundaries of the bell ringing, participants may have been able to process painful feelings in a way that felt manageable to them. There was a sense that rather than having to express their anguish verbally, embodiment of fighting movements allowed participants to persevere emotionally and mentally through "silent battles". For some, boxing offered a rare space for expressing anger, which contradicted societal expectations of being feminine. Nadiyah's experiences of boxing gave her a place for the anger of the injustices she faced in an abusive marriage.

Sometimes when I'm on the bags I think of someone's face, I picture someone who has hurt me and it's a way of me releasing my frustration. It's often not permissible for women to be angry. … I found my voice through boxing – Nadiyah

The metaphor of finding her voice might have expressed the reclamation of independence that she lost through experiencing abuse. This reflected how the narrative of reclamation manifested in distinct shapes in older and younger participants' lives. For older participants there appeared to be more of a narrative of reclaiming a self that didn't have the weight of responsibilities, the *qalb* of who they are without the roles they play in society. Whereas for younger participants, the narrative suggested one of discovering a sense of claiming personhood they didn't know was even available or permissible.

I'm allowed to be my own person. I'm allowed to jump up and down and do fun things and be confident. Boxing does play such a big part in it… you just don't realize that you are allowed to take up space, have your own me time and your own time to relieve your stress. – Hafsa

By allowing emotional unburdening of the *qalb*, boxing may have offered a way for participants to reclaim their connection with their *rūḥ*. Participants explained how the confidence gained in their *qalb* made it possible to seek the knowledge and support needed for their mental health struggles.

I started doing my own research and realizing what mental health means and what do I think I have? Like what symptoms I have? … boxing made me more aware of myself… So, I think that played a big part with learning about my anxiety and depression. – Hafsa

Hafsa's narrative highlighted how the confidence in her *qalb* and *aql* may have supported her in drawing on enriching her *aql* to seek support for the state of *nafs lawwāma* she was experiencing. Other participants shared similar stories of how boxing participation helped their mental health.

I had a really bad eating disorder. I had bulimia … when I first started boxing genuinely saved me so much… it just helps me so much to stop my eating disorder. – Aaliyah

Other participants shared stories about boxing giving them the confidence to resist the stigma of seeking support. Aysia and Nadiyah described how boxing supported them through healing from relational trauma in abusive relationships in terms of reclaiming their confidence and self-esteem. However, for Aaliyah, while boxing helped her heal from bulimia, her experience of being in an abusive relationship with another gym member during her time as a boxer made the gym space a wounding one.

during the whole boxing time… I was in a very abusive relationship, very abusive. I was diagnosed with PTSD because of what happened to me when I was young with somebody… Being in that situation… was also like a possible reason why I stopped, because there was a time where doing boxing and hitting was getting triggering as well. … it got to a point where being in that environment was only continuing the situation. And it was feeding into the PTSD triggers as well… it was not allowing me to heal! So, I had to make a decision and stop so I could heal – Aaliyah

There is a paradox in Aaliyah's experience of boxing, carrying simultaneously healing and wounding connotations; one which initially soothed her *qalb* but then presented an environment which harmed her *rūḥ*. The hesitation in the way Aaliyah narrated her experiences of boxing communicated feelings of shame in speaking about the trauma she experienced. Notably, she only shared this towards the end of her interview. The loss of her identity as a competitive boxer was the beginning of her reclamation of her *qalb* after the abusive relationship, however she believes that boxing itself is still crucial in her journey to reclaiming her *rūḥ* fully.

100% has given me a lot more, like a lot more goodness and benefits in my life than anything. I wouldn't say anything bad came from boxing. - Aaliyah

Stories of a home away from home

Participants spoke about how their initial perceptions of boxing being a brutal and aggressive sport were challenged when they first joined the gym. Many of the women's stories started with feeling nervous the first time they went to the gym which was then followed by a sense of surprise and relief at how welcoming the coach and other women in the class were.

when I went there first time, I did feel that everybody was very friendly and respectful, especially the coach. When you see that your coach is supportive and friendly and welcoming. That makes you feel welcomed and comfortable, and I started feeling confident. – Banu

A notable narrative feature in most participants' stories was the key figure of the coach in creating an inclusive and safe space where *ḥayāʾ* was upheld. There was a tension held, particularly for *hijabi* participants who were unsure if their needs of privacy would be respected. The turning point in the stories of their first class and subsequent interactions in the boxing class were narratives of relief and gratitude when their coaches were supportive in covering up the windows and enforcing that no men could enter during class time, or having fellow gym members help them to fix their *hijab* if it was slipping during training.

They would help me by saying "oh your hair is showing, fix your headscarf". And I'd be like "thank you so much!". I never expected people to do that, ever. - Layla

The contrast of being included and respected was felt more deeply for those who had experienced hate crimes and racial trauma which reflects their experiences of embodied intersectionality manifesting as tension of the *qalb* under the scrutiny of the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2007).

I got to meet people from different cultures and make more friends… I lived a very conservative life, when I came to boxing after meeting all these wonderful women who were

from different backgrounds, I was able to open my eyes and hear more of their lives. Before I just had one narrative – Maya

Maya had previously been too afraid to leave her house on a daily basis due to experiencing harassment and hate crimes in her neighbourhood to the point that her family had to move to a new neighbourhood. As a stay-at-home mum, she grappled with isolation and not meeting anyone outside of her family, which demonstrated the impact of stigma on her life (Goffman, 1983). The metaphor of seeing multiple narratives signified the expanding of Maya's *aql* through boxing. Being accepted as a *niqabi* in the class represented a significant turning point in her narrative which allowed it to become a space of openness for her *qalb* to foster connection with others. Participants spoke about being less lonely, and being able to connect with others in an authentic way where they felt able to lower their defences and be themselves.

I'm being praised like "well done, Medina" or "Medina fix your arm". And then (my coach) would be like "Wow, there's a really hard punch" I'm being praised for something that feels a bit more true to just me. I feel like I'm like a kid learning something.… I had to learn how to use my voice… whereas this is something just more for myself and I'm being praised on it and it feels more authentic. – Medina

Medina's description of feeling seen by her coach in an authentic, childlike state of vulnerability receiving gentle guidance and praise is evocative of the notion of the gym as a home where the coach is a supportive parent. The focus shifting away from needing to use her voice to protect herself highlights the sense of homecoming her *rūḥ* experienced in the boxing class, which is significant given the context of her childhood experiences of foster care which left her unhomed in a physical and emotional sense. Being praised for strength in her punches demonstrated Mirza's (2013) emphasis on agency in embodied intersectionality. The intersection between her social class, gender and spiritual identity as a racialised woman

meant that advocating for her siblings and herself in foster care using her voice was necessitated by the oppression they faced whereas choosing to do boxing emphasised the agency she found in the intersection between her age, educational background and consequential financial independence.

Participants valued the shared sense of womanhood in female-only classes and getting the opportunity to watch other women honour their bodies. The scarcity of these opportunities reflected the impact of stigma (Goffman, 1983) on their positions as minorities in Britain. Finding a community where their *qalb* and by extension, their *rūḥ* would be honoured through the boundaries of their gendered cultural and spiritual identity being respected allowed participants to carry that sense of openness to community building beyond the parameters of the gym. Some participants shared the visualisation of a warm hug when they think of the class, others relayed an enduring sense of connection that they still held in their body and *qalb* even though they had not attended the boxing class recently.

when I think of the class, I just feel very happy and warm, like a big hug. Ohh, it just feels like, welcome home… it's just like another family away from family, like a home away from home. – Hafsa

The significance in the repetition of home, as one of the only places where Muslim women can take off their veil in the privacy of a safe space, being used to describe the gym emphasises how the boxing class is a space where participants could let down their guard. This blurring between public and private demonstrated the construction of the gym as a paradoxical space through spatial imaginary. The shared sense of womanhood Medina experienced when her sister joined boxing with her spoke to the nurturing sense of being mothered in the classes.

seeing other women honour their body has also helped me to honour mine. We motivate each other… and we both know (hesitates)… each other's traumas… when we're

boxing, we're like, "imagine this!" (referring to trauma memory), (shows punching movements animatedly)… it's like we didn't really have our mom to do that for us. So we do it for each other, we give that sort of like a womanly sort of love to each other that we didn't get… I'm like, holding like the bags/pads… And I'm like, say, you know, imagine like XYZ and then she's letting it out and you can see, like her just releasing stress from me. Like we're helping each other heal… stitching up each other's wounds. – Medina

The imagery of stitching up each other's wounds and the pride in participating in each other's healing from past trauma was visible in the way Medina's face shone with joy while narrating the experience of boxing with her sister. The contrast between Medina's hesitation and rapid pace of speech at times added to her narrative of the difficulties speaking about the trauma she had experienced. In some instances, her embodiment of the narrative through gesturing appeared to fill in the gaps when words were difficult.

Similarly, the narrative of an embodied sense of connection that surpassed verbal communication was captured in Faiza's description of how the sense of community supports mental wellbeing.

It's a way to be around people, but without really having to be around people or go to therapy. Whereas you could have like 15 women, the bags, and you might not even be talking to them, but you just feel like, OK, there's other people in the room. – Faiza

The link made between boxing and going to therapy suggests that boxing offers a healing space attuned to the relational needs of participants' collectivistic cultural background rather than Western notions of individualism upon which therapy is based. The opportunity of togetherness without having to talk highlighted the distinction made by participants between a superficial sense of community in comparison to the true meaning of community. This narrative linked to the distinction made between how participants' narratives about their wider cultural community, in comparison to the sense of community, felt in the gym. The

gaze of the cultural community was often felt as a critical, judgmental one where many participants described how there was an unspoken pressure to conform, linked to a narrative of shame and concerns around how doing boxing might be frowned upon, particularly by the patriarchal cultural and religious communities they inhabit.

Community to me is not just the word community, you have to have the actions behind it. But a lot of times I used to hear, "oh, we're a community, we're a community" and I'm like yeah but we're also kind of terrorising each other by picking out the faults in what we're doing or we're not really helping uplift each other; to me, that's community. It's how we uplift each other. I'd say the boxing gym was that whereas the school was like "hmm, we're a community!" when we're really not a community with actions. – Layla

For Layla, her majority Muslim school for girls was a space where she felt judged and criticised whereas the boxing gym represented a space where she was supported to grow. The example of having to cross the street to avoid judgment speaks to the sense of embattlement permeating participants' existence outside the gym.

It's like I'm fighting in the rest of my life all the time, this is the one place where I don't have to fight. There's no competition, there's no politics. This is the least of the fight I have. I don't have to fight for anything here – Asiyah

Asiyah built upon this narrative of boxing as a space where participants felt seen instead of being judged through the actions of fellow gym members in talking to her instead of talking about her behind her back. This excerpt was followed by a story of how her colleagues had booked to have a gathering at a pub while not being mindful of how this might make her uncomfortable as a *hijabi*. The sensorial aspect of boxing as a sport with no pretences where you face a punch head on with eyes open was highlighted as a metaphor for the distinction between the experience of interacting with others in the gym in contrast to the wider cultural community. Participants in mixed gym settings shared narratives of having

their previous impressions of men challenged within the gym which contradicted experiences of sexism and misogyny in the wider community.

It's almost like an equalizer. It's not about, you could look at me next to a really big man, you could look at it one way and say, he's really strong, he's much stronger than her and then you could watch us do a class and see that we're both doing the same exercise to the best of our ability so you could say they're both equal… In a sense it strips away all the aspects of my identity and the expectations that doesn't make us equal. Just a body doing boxing. You both put in the same effort and getting out the same reward – Asiyah

There was a sense of boxing stripping away the heaviness of the visible aspects of their identities as Muslim women and the consequential weight of stigma which led to the sense of othering they felt in the wider world. In contrast, Iqra spoke about how her height, her reach and her weight class were attributes that initially made her feel she was at a disadvantage in competitive boxing which amplified the sense of physical differences between her and her teammates.

I think stopping comparing myself really helped me build a better relationship with my team members. I used to be very closed off. – Iqra

However, through the support of her coaches which allowed her to adapt her techniques to fit her style of fighting, she stopped comparing herself which led to a deeper sense of community through learning from her teammates. The camaraderie of having a team supporting them as they step into the ring was expressed by other participants as well. However, Aaliyah's story of stepping into competitive boxing as the only woman in the gym was that of a toxic space instead of a felt sense of community.

I think because you're in an environment where you're training with men, you're sparring men, you're training with them… the only people who were in the gym were men. – Aaliyah

The absence of other women in Aaliyah's gym made it difficult for her *qalb* to feel at home in a space that felt at odds with her Islamic beliefs. Her story took a turn when she left the gym she had been competing at for the last year, to build her own community for other Muslim women through her own boxing business centred around *ḥayāʾ*. Aaliyah's narrative highlighted the concept of a chosen community which was reflected in other participants' narratives where choosing relationships which support spiritual wellbeing and mutual growth was an expression of the agency cultivated through boxing. Through becoming a part of the boxing community, participants were reminded of their agency in creating their own communities where there are spaces for them to flourish.

Stories of energising efforts to get closer to the Deen

While participants varied in their personal journey to wearing the *hijab* or *niqab*, narratives of preserving *ḥayāʾ* while boxing featured in a variety of ways across their stories. For some participants, being able to engage in boxing in a way that preserved their *ḥayāʾ* through female-only classes was what made it possible for them to step into the gym space.

would I be able to have my own… not private space, but would people actually respect that men are not going to look into… men are not going to see me. It was very, very scary for me to take off my niqab, take off my abaya and then start the boxing because I just was scared… no men are peeping. No men are seeing. – Maya

The way in which Maya's sentences trailed off and the repetition of her worry about the gaze of men signifies the gravity of preserving modesty as a central tenet of Islam. Female-only settings presented an opportunity to have a safe space to care for their bodies, within the boundaries of Islamic guidance. Medina's narrative of having connected with her *qalb* through her journey with Islam found a parallel in boxing which allowed her to connect with her body when she had previously survived mainly through her *aql*.

only when I started to go to women's gyms… where I could take it (the headscarf) off and see myself and then actually be for long periods of time outside of my house not wearing it and feeling good on the inside already cause that my hijab journey helps that… then going to like boxing and actually looking at my body move, just do things like balancing myself or like moving on different dimensions. It made me more aware of it. I think I would just be not as aware of it because I was so and I was also living in my head so much. I was in survival mode. … You're just constantly on the go! You're on the go. You're on the go! It's like I didn't have time to think about my body… I think now I have a bit more time and I've actually just see it move. I feel way more connected to it and I have more empathy for it… And then even just like reading more about the rights Islamically that my body has over me and looking at the importance Islamically of like taking care of your body and the beauty of the fact that it's not just the mind like we need to take care of everything and that your body can speak for you and sort of then looking after it and nurturing it treating it well. – Medina

Medina's definition of wellbeing expanding from the *aql* to include the *qalb* and the body touched upon the Islamic principle of *tawazun* (balance) which is one of the main principles Muslims are taught to live by. This principle teaches Muslims to achieve harmony between various aspects of life. The difficulty of finding a space outside the home where she could connect with their body while maintaining the sanctity of her *rūḥ* emphasised how being from a minoritised population made it challenging for participants to achieve *tawazun* in their wellbeing. The symbolism of the narrative in the Quran of the body parts having a voice to testify regarding one's actions on the Day of Judgment reflects the journey of Medina's growing awareness of her body through boxing. Through proprioception in the gym and the spatial imaginary of having the boundary between a public and private space blurred which offered her a shared space to witness her own body in motion, Medina was able to connect to her *qalb* through her body. The repetition of the phrase "you're on the go" highlights the

struggle in Medina's journey to shift from being in the flight of survival mode living in her *aql* to being present with her body. Similarly, Maryam expressed how boxing brought her closer to Allah by fulfilling her religious obligation to return her body to Allah in the *akhirah* in the best condition.

it has brought me closer because we have to remind ourselves that our bodies is an Amanah, belongs to Allah Subahanatallah, and being healthy physically and mentally is what Allah Subahantallah would want for us. Maintaining your mental state and physical state further helps you to get closer to your Deen because you get more motivation and you're more disciplined. – Maryam

Her narrative touched upon the Islamic concept of *Amanah* which is having integrity or fulfilling one's duty to Allah. Boxing supported participants' practice of Islam, by allowing them to honour the rights of their bodies through cultivating discipline, which helped them govern the *hawa nafs*.

boxing gives you a lot of discipline… It's not a sport that you get into because you want to go fight in the street or if they get into a situation on the street, you wouldn't go straight into boxing stance… a lot of that is about self-discipline and even if something happens outside the gym, you tend to control the situation… the way you manage yourself as a person, you control it – Nadiyah

Nadiyah spoke of discipline fostered through training translating to control over one's behaviour particularly in governing the *hawa nafs* and practicing *ḥayāʾ* in one's conduct beyond the gym space. Faiza utilised the metaphor of a blueprint to encapsulate how she applied the *sabr* and discipline over her *nafs* to how she carries herself through the world. Maya's narrative spoke of the translation of physical strength gained through boxing into the fortification of spiritual strength and discipline, making it easier for her to complete her daily prayers and engage in more acts of *ibadah*.

The laziness has gone, that's why I could actually pray more. I could pray more and appreciate Allah. Appreciate my Deen. I do that more. I feel it's the because of the energy I get out of boxing. Alhamdulillah… now the appreciation is there. – Maya

Other participants' narratives revealed how boxing taught them the art of *sabr* which keeps the *hawa nafs* in check and contributed to a strengthened sense of *Tawakkul* through the challenges that they faced.

But then when the hardship does end like in the Quran it says with hardship comes ease, right? It says with ease. Doesn't necessarily mean during the hardship that everything's gonna be fine… You just gotta allow yourself to just go for it. Don't stress. Just have Tawakkul. and just understand that Allah Subhanahu wa ta'ala knows best, and regardless of what you decide, Allah knows already what you're going to decide. Don't panic. – Aysia

Prior to boxing, Aysia described herself as a hot-headed teenager who got into many street fights. Boxing represented peace for her, which helped to change the way she navigated her family's mental health issues as well as relationship difficulties. The *sabr* and discipline gained from boxing cultivated Aysia's *Tawakkul*. Aysia's sense of peace from boxing connects to the promise of peace for those who seek the good pleasure of Allah in the Quran (The Quran, 2008, 5:16)**.** By putting her trust in Allah to ease her challenges, Aysia's narrative also emphasised how participants' relationship to their practice of Islam was a personal one between them and their Creator centred around *niyyah*. Aysia recently decided to remove her *hijab* as she does not want to wear it and shared that she needs to refocus her *niyyah* on her relationship with Allah. Similarly, the confidence Banu drew from boxing translated to a clarity in her *niyyah* in tending to her relationship with Allah.

why would I not wear my hijab or my abaya just because I might get bullied. But this is not my motive. I don't do it for these people. I do it for Allah Subahantallah, you know. I do it for myself, I feel comfortable in it. – Banu

The confidence that participants found in learning boxing skills was a turning point in the story of the way they carried themselves through the world while reckoning with the realities of being potential victims of harassment and discrimination. The repetition of "I do it" highlighted the increase in the sense of agency and power Banu felt in asserting her Islamic identity in the face of the threat of the coloniality of power.

The narrative of the dangers of wearing the veil as a visible representation of their Islamic femininity, which made them a target of gendered Islamophobia and racist attacks, recurred throughout the interviews. Participants spoke about how experiences of past trauma and mental health difficulties impacted their connection to their bodies which was restored through safe spaces in the gym. Other participants used the metaphor of light and symbolism of their chests being filled with light to illustrate how boxing brought them closer to the Deen. By the body gaining discipline in *hawa nafs* and *aql*, participants felt nourished in their *qalb*. The symbolism of light appears repeatedly in the Quran, where light represents a sign of a good person and signifies guidance from Allah (Surah An-Nur) where the path of the believer is lit by the Quran (The Quran, 2008, 4:174).

Both Aysia's and Banu's narrative also highlighted the centrality of *niyyah* to the practice of Islam, which was another way in which participants' experienced boxing as bringing them closer to their Deen. Stories of an increased sense of clarity of *niyyah* and conviction in following through with their intentions to strengthen their connection to Allah manifested in different ways across participants experiences. Some participants reconciled training in mixed gym spaces through clarifying their *niyyah* while recognising that other Muslims may perceive it differently.

you're going there with the intention to make yourself better and do your sport like you're not going with the intention to free mix and flirt. – Aysia

While Aysia, Iqra and Layla navigated training in mixed environments through keeping their *niyyah* clear, other participants like Aaliyah and Maryam chose to stop participating in mixed gym spaces to get closer to their *Deen*. The issue of being hit in the face not being permitted in Islam came up in participants' stories of weighing up the intensity of their engagement with boxing against their *niyyah* for participating.

when I been digging into Islam and found out hitting in the face is not permitted in Islam so then I created an environment where I taught sisters how to use boxing not violently more like using it as self-defence or you know catching jabs instead of just like fighting. – Maryam

For some, this led them to choose not to compete and instead focus on the self-defence aspect of learning the skills to protect themselves whereas for others, it was justified by reasoning that they should train harder to be able to evade punches and not get hit. Negotiating with these dilemmas through seeking knowledge about Islam led to a renewed sense of conviction to independently seek knowledge about their religion.

if you don't feel confident in yourself, you don't really feel like you're able to do your own research and learn for yourself. But then, once you're able to be more confident in your own knowledge and your own power… I'm gonna, take ownership of what I want to believe in and then you go out and you learn your own… stories that resonate with your life and then you become a stronger person and you get closer to the Deen as well. – Hafsa

Hafsa's narrative of developing physical power in her punches grew into realising her power in taking ownership of her relationship to her *Deen*. For participants who were training in mixed settings, the narrative arc reflected an ongoing negotiation between their personal interpretation of the boundaries of *ḥayāʾ* and their engagement in the various aspects of boxing training which involved clarifying their *niyyah* for themselves. The dilemma of having to train in mixed gyms to compete was negotiated by trusting that Allah knows the focus of their *niyyah*

were on gaining boxing skills and developing as sportswomen rather than mixing with the opposite gender. Iqra and Layla spoke about the lack of opportunities for women's only training sessions that would allow them to develop the skills to compete which highlighted the impact of structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Maryam started out learning boxing in a mixed gym space then moved to women's only classes after a month to preserve her modesty and comply with Islamic values. Interestingly, for these participants, their initial response to the question about the interaction between boxing and their faith was met with a firm sense of division which raised the possibility that the question made them feel attacked or judged. The assertiveness in their response appeared to be linked to the strength of narratives within their stories of feeling judged by the cultural and religious community.

I think (pauses) my relationship with my religion has always been separate. I never put them together… I knew I have to be consistent in my relationship with God with prayers like praying on time. I think they work side by side… I have to be consistent with training, with my relationship with God and I have to put in time every day to be close to God same with boxing I have to watch my diet to be good and train. I think it works in the same areas but I never really mix them. It's like parallels of discipline but they never really interact… I just remembered a lot of my friends were into Shisha and like going out in the evenings and I knew if I did that it would impact my sports and then now thinking about it, it would also impact my religion, it would harm my body because we need to remember every day, this body is not ours, it's Amanah, we need to bring it back in the same condition that Allah Subahantallah gave it to us… I think without knowing it I was following my religion through boxing. – Layla

Layla touched upon how the link between boxing and Islam was often subconscious and not explicit to some participants. This perhaps reflected the sense of how Islam is integral to their psyche in a way that it permeates every aspect of their being and therefore it was hard

initially for some participants to tease apart how engaging in boxing was linked to practicing Islam. Upon deeper reflection during the interview, participants noted how doing boxing actually did have a positive impact on their Deen, either through recognising that it carried similar values or represented an aspect of their worship, similar to the narratives raised by the other participants. However, for Aaliyah, the intensity of her engagement in competitive boxing was not experienced as complementary to her faith.

When you're getting older and I was trying to get closer to my religion as well… not saying that you can't do both, but I used to train very excessively and I used to always be in the gym all the time and I was thinking maybe it would be best if I was able to put more time into Islam a little bit more, do an Islamic course and just understand what would, what would actually help me? Because at the end of the day, it's the afterlife is what we should be reaching and not this life. – Aaliyah

The intensity of Aaliyah's participation in boxing appeared to raise a deeper dilemma of the tension between the inner struggle Muslims face in balancing *dunya* and the a*khirah.* Aaliyah felt that it was impossible to continue competing without compromising her focus on the *akhirah* due to the lack of representation of Muslim women in competitive boxing which meant she had to train with men. Furthermore, the time and energy it took to achieve excellence in competitive boxing left little energy for her to engage in *ibadah*. The choice of using "reaching" in her description of striving for the afterlife is resonant with Allah's promise of drawing close those who reach for Him in seeking His forgiveness, as narrated in the Hadith (Muslim, n.d., 2687b).

It is notable however that only at the end of the interview did she share that she had been in an abusive relationship with another gym member throughout the duration of competing in boxing which may have contributed to her feelings of competing being incompatible with Islam due to the unhealthy *ḥayāʾ* (shame) and state of *nafs lawwāma* evoked

by the relationship. By reconfiguring the boxing skills she had gained into a project where she set up spaces for other Muslim women to learn boxing, she transformed boxing into an act of *ibadah* which did bring her closer to her Deen.

Stories of Resistance

Participants' narratives began with the desire to learn self-defence skills which were rooted in stories of feeling unsafe in the world due to various aspects of their embodied intersectionality. For some participants, the narrative began with being scared to leave their home because they felt powerless against attack. Acquiring self-defence skills and the confidence in *aql* and *qalb* to fight against the oppression of anti-migrant sentiments, Islamophobia and racism was a critical turning point in the narratives of being able to spend time outside of the home. As a 22-year-old hijabi, Maryam started learning boxing to mitigate feelings of powerlessness in living with daily realities of racism and Islamophobia.

definitely there was a couple of events when I was young where there will be things said towards me… racial comments or discriminated comments… if this man or woman attacks at any point, what do I do? I was in that kind of lost… how do I not know if I can train and I can do all these sports… but what can actually help me to defend myself?.. let me go into boxing really in depth and see how that can have a beneficial way of navigating it through self-defence.
- Maryam

The disjointed flow of Maryam's communication emphasised the initial powerlessness in her narrative. Boxing provided a potential avenue of hope in asserting some control in dealing with living under constant threat. This assertiveness manifested in a later story towards the end of her interview in navigating an instance of being harassed.

There's been times where I would train a sister in the park. A guy approaches with his dog and he stood there for like a good minute. And I'm like are you ok sir? And he was like; I've just never seen such a thing. We were confused … he was addressing my clothing. I've

never seen such like Black Woman, and we were ... So, I'm white African and she's Bengali. We just were confused and didn't understand. He was targeting the abaya I was wearing while training the sister ... saying, no, it's bizarre. I've just never seen what you're wearing and people doing boxing with it or training. And then we just tried to ignore him and he turned around and said "you bloody Indians" to my friend ... This is something common with men in the community. – Maryam

Maryam's initial assumption of the man's comments being racially charged and rather than being about her abaya is indicative of the frequency of racist incidents, underscoring the impact of stigma and the coloniality of power in her life. The intersection between her ethnicity, gender and embodiment of Islamic identity highlights the cumulative weight of embodied intersectionality. The weariness and resignation in her voice in narrating this incident underscored the sense of having developed resistance in her *aql* to the constant threat. Similarly, as the eldest daughter in a family of Somali sisters, Layla raised the tangible threat from the annual English Defence League march in her city necessitating her being able to defend herself.

English Defence League they are like a racist group ... they used to come down to my city every year to riot ... so we wouldn't even leave our house once a year ... they used to do it every year for thirty years ... That's why I love that I know I can learn how to fight, I know that I know how I can protect myself on the ground from jiu jitsu and standing up from boxing so ... because people used to be like 'Oh I'm gonna call my brothers on you. ... I have brothers come protect me.' I don't have brothers! I have to protect myself. From a young age we already knew how to wrestle, I already knew how to defend myself. So, I'm not a vulnerable person ... if I can't keep my distance, run or defend yourself. – Layla

The normalisation of the marches as an annual event where they were confined to their house for safety bled into the generalised psychological lack of safety colouring the way she carried herself in the streets. The mention of not having brothers to protect her emphasised the

narrative of vulnerability in relation to gendered Islamophobia experienced as a woman. Layla's narrative of how learning to fight solved the issue of needing brothers to protect her highlighted how boxing blurred the boundary between masculinity and femininity. Her increased self-assurance in challenging discrimination highlighted how critical mobility from boxing translated to spaces beyond the gym. Later on in the interview, Layla spoke about how boxing changed her from someone shy and reserved into someone who would stand up when witnessing injustice.

*before, I never used to be confident enough to speak up for myself … you have sometimes really horrible people in the bus, when you're walking in so if you have an Islamic sister or like my sister doesn't wear a hijab and I wear a hijab and one person is looking at us with some rudeness and we all look at them at the same time like "**Can we help you**??" (aggressively) We're all like LOUD about what we're doing. Before we didn't used to be like that, I think they got it from me? I used to be very shy and then they saw me being more vocal and then they were like, "ok cool, if Layla can do it, I can do it" – Layla*

The repetition of "before" highlights the change in Layla's engagement in acts of resistance over time through boxing as well as how her increased engagement in resistance influenced her sisters' confidence in resisting against discrimination. By emphasising the volume of her voice and becoming more vocal, Layla's narrative spoke of engaging in resistance through her *aql* and her body. Similarly, as a migrant to the UK who felt isolated in her neighbourhood after experiences of having racial slurs shouted at her, Banu spoke about the impact of racism and Islamophobia on her *qalb* and how the muscle memory of self-defence skills brought her confidence.

the movements you learn if something happens, someone approaches you aggressively, you are already having those movements. Naturally, coming into your body, they just become so natural you're not thinking what to do … also, in the way you walk in the streets brings

confidence to your overall body, to your physical and mental health. You feel the freedom, you are not feeling stuck or experiencing that much anxiety when you are going on the streets by yourself ... I think since joining the class I've been doing anything I could you know? I've been going forward, forward, forward. I never tried to push myself backward. I never tried it to keep myself locked or, you know, like at home. – Banu

The repetition of the word "forward" in Banu's narrative movement of resistance in her *qalb* against the force of anxiety. Banu's later use of hand gestures moving laterally outwards to signify how boxing had expanded her space in the world reiterated the resistance against the fear of attack that used to confine her to her home. Participants' mapped acts of resistance beginning first in the *aql* in seeking out self-defence classes, then in the body through developing skills which then fuelled the *aql* further in terms of confidence. Maya's narrative charted a similar journey, she was bullied for wearing the *hijab* since childhood and endured hate crimes in her marital home such as arson and vandalism which made her family fear for their lives until they were forced to move to a new neighbourhood.

We're restricted in so many ways ... I wanna be restricted because I like to wear my garments fully covered. But now if I'm walking down the street, if somebody says something, I won't be hiding because I can be strong enough to tackle them ... I feel I'm very important now. Nobody can mess with me. Before I used to say, if you mess with me, I'll be patient. But now, no, no. It's like I can hold more power in the world. – Maya

Later on in her interview she articulated how boxing made her aware of her power to resist which signified critical mobility drawn from boxing. The oppression of the colonial gaze of gendered Islamophobia operationalised itself in her life as restrictions imposed by societal misconceptions of Islam as restrictive. Maya experienced a strengthening of her *qalb* by continuing to wear her *niqab* in the face of hostile assumptions which minimise her autonomy as a Muslim woman. There was an evolution in the narrative around self-defence becoming

less about physical resistance to one of an embodied sense of agency and control in the face of oppression.

It is notable that there was a split in participants' narratives as a few participants viewed boxing as only a sport rather than self-defence. However, as the interview progressed, they spoke of applying the mindset from boxing to finding a greater sense of control and confidence in challenging discrimination in the workplace. Nadiyah's story presented a significant contradiction of feeling the need to justify boxing as self-defence to her father initially when seeking permission to participate.

It's not a sport that you go out and fight in the street … those techniques you can use in the gym, you're fighting your opponents in that sport … when I first started it, I said to my dad; "self-defence class" … I'm doing it for more I'm doing self-defence – Nadiyah

She later questioned during the interview why she felt the need to seek permission from her father at all. This split reflected the recognition of how their participation in boxing was subject to the judgmental gaze from within the cultural community as well from outside the community in wider Western society. Medina's experiences of navigating the world of academia as a trainee clinical psychologist spoke to the challenges in the double bind of simultaneously resisting the coloniality of power while fighting against misogyny and cultural misinterpretations of Islam within the Muslim community.

we can have this conversation, right and we can understand that there's not a binary way of thinking. I can come to you and rant to you about being in these settings and I can also hold that actually there's a lot of issues within our own community … I'm always scared to even bring up spiritual abuse because then if I bring that up in an academic setting, they might just think, "Oh my gosh, Islam's so like, like, oppressive." … you're trying to protect your community, then you're looking to your community and there is an issue of misogyny within communities. But I'd never want Muslim men to be labelled a certain way because they'll get

that from the community and that misogyny exists everywhere. I think of my brothers, if I bring up anything I would hate for my brothers to be perceived as a certain way because they are the most amazing men I've ever met. So I don't feel as safe in certain settings to bring up anything and I don't feel as safe now walking down the street, yeah. – Medina

Growing up in the wake of 9/11 against the backdrop of Islamophobia intensified the feeling of being unsafe as she tried to challenge oppression in her professional role. While boxing did not make her feel safer in her professional role, it gave her a greater sense of control in terms of managing feelings of rage in the face of oppression. Medina's narrative shed light on the dilemma of addressing misogyny and abuse within the cultural community while facing prejudice and discrimination in a white dominant profession where Islam is already painted in a negative light. The risk of resisting oppression within the community by speaking up about it in professional settings was often outweighed by the risk of adding to the Orientalist and colonialist constructions of the Muslim community in Western society. Medina's use of the word "our" in referring to the community, may have highlighted how my identity as a South Asian Muslim researcher may have made it more possible for her to share this narrative.

Asiyah's strategy of keeping a strict boundary between the gym and her life beyond spoke to the difficulty in navigating the combined and clashing forces of oppression both from within and beyond the cultural community. This raised the double bind of the gym space which afforded Asiyah the refuge of anonymity where she is shielded from the piercing gaze of judgment both within and outside the community, but consequentially leads to the weight of oppression from the various aspects of her embodied intersectionality remaining unseen.

So, people see me and for all the criticism I get, they think I'm quite well put together. They don't say that but I feel that; "she's a woman, she's got an easy life, what kind of stress could she have." They don't see how much I fight. I'm learning how to fight here, both mental and physical. If I sat down and said no, I can't come to a meeting because I've got counselling,

then they would think "she's like damaged, she's unstable." If I say I'm going boxing, they think oh she's just having a nice time. I suppose for them they don't know it's my therapy. If I said I go to counselling twice a week people would be like "bloody hell, she's messed up." – Asiyah

The repetition of the word "fight" captures the sense of having to resist against the internal misogyny within the Pakistani community as a divorced single mum which is often endured due to the greater demands of engaging in resistance against the external threat of Islamophobia and racism. Her repetition of the phrase "boxing is my therapy" ==potentially reflected== how boxing offered a way to resist against the stigma of community judgement while finding a way to heal from the impact of discrimination on her mental health. Witnessing her physical power in boxing developing ==may have== nourished her *qalb* and *aql* to sustain her fight against oppression in terms of wider global contexts in her activism for Palestine as well as in challenging the patriarchy. The tension raised in navigating the weight of the gaze of others was a recurring sensorial aspect of participation in boxing. Banu verbalised the internalised stigma of judgment and stereotypes imposed upon her that became her own judgment against herself.

People might say … Oh, my God, that's an inappropriate place. She comes from that family. What was she doing there? They take their hijabs off there … and there are lots of guys there. That doesn't follow Sharia … although I say a big stereotype and other people judging you, but actually I judge myself as well. So, I didn't really know and I was just labelling it … until I had my own personal experience than I thought that is amazing. – Banu

The power of experiencing boxing and the clarity of *aql* in deciding for herself allowed her to resist against the fear of judgment from the Pakistani Muslim community. Maya's shift from the fear of judgment within her community to shedding the weight of the gaze with pride exemplifies the evolution in the narrative of being able to occupy a space that felt initially impermissible for Muslim women within her community.

I was scared of how people would judge me. They think it's a man's sports ... in the beginning I was just not telling people. And then when I got more confident, I'd say I do boxing and show them. People are shocked. – Maya

Participants drew a sense of delight in recognising the impact of their presence in occupying the paradoxical space of a masculine sport which contradicted the stereotypes and assumptions of their embodiment of femininity and Islam. As a nurse who started out boxing when she was a shy teenager, Hafsa spoke about her awareness that various aspects of her identity did not match societal perceptions of someone who might participate in boxing.

if you mentioned that you're doing boxing, people get very shocked and think that you're doing something very aggressive ... a little girl shouldn't be doing that. It's very dangerous. I felt like "ohh, you think I'm doing something bad?" What made me feel even more powerful is that other people would never even consider it. And here I am ... other people think I'm a quiet little girl, but I'm doing boxing and I'm enjoying it. – Hafsa

There was a sense of power drawn from subverting societal expectations of challenging the stereotypical image of a boxer. As the most experienced fighter in her gym with two fights under her belt, Aysia spoke about how the intersection between being the only woman and being the most experienced boxer gave her a sense of power.

I feel like [being a woman in a male dominated sport] there's more empowerment for me ... being a boxer and the only female in the gym as well ... when new people come in and they see me at the top of the line doing pads ... they didn't know that I was one of the most experienced boxers there – Aysia

The power emanating from the sound of her punches signalling her dominance in the sport to new gym members was a sensorial assertion of Aysia's resistance against the stereotypes which had been imposed upon her as a Bangladeshi Muslim woman. Blurring the binary between masculinity and femininity through mastery of boxing skills signified the

spatial imaginary of participants drawing power from the paradoxical space of the gym. For some participants, the muscles gained from boxing made them feel feminine while others felt they could maintain femininity as being multi-dimensional by enjoying dressing up when not training but also through being disciplined in training. Aaliyah's experience of being a competitive boxer made her feel like it was not possible to connect with her femininity while competing.

I did feel like I was lacking femininity because I never used to go out. I don't like makeup. I don't dress up like, that's just me. I was considered a tomboy to some people as well, and it's not like I wanted to be that … Ever since I kind of stopped, I was able to find my femininity again … I just didn't wanna seem like so rough … if you saw me in the streets back then, you probably think woman looks so rough. She looks so, like scary, but I didn't even want to be that. It just happened because of what I did. – Aaliyah

For Aaliyah, the narrative arc was one where her femininity was something she found once she had left competitive boxing. Her dream of becoming a wife and mother in the future felt incompatible with her competitive boxing dreams. Leaving competitive boxing was her resistance against the temptations of *dunya* as she strives to prioritise Allah's gaze of her in fixing her view on the *akhirah*. The paradox between the restrictions imposed by oppression and the restrictions embraced in complying with Islam highlights how participants drew a sense of power from focusing on the gaze of Allah over the gaze of others. There was a gradual sense of the judgmental gaze of the community weighing less on their *qalb* as they realigned their view of themselves with the gaze of Allah which suggests that participants experienced a strengthened sense of *taqwa*.

I'm able to like differentiate the voices and see this is Allah's view of me. This is Allah speaking to me and this is the voice of the people … not what I resonate with. I'm able to choose which voices I want to listen to and believe in … it makes you realize that what society might

think of Muslim women is not reality ... the Prophets (pbuh) first wife was an independent woman who was strong business woman and the boss of many men ... once you start doing your own research about women in Islam ... you realize there's so many stories of the women at the time of the Prophet (pbuh), they were so strong ... Like the wife of that companion, people think that women are scared to go into a battle but she went into a raging battle, just to give this hat to her husband ... nobody would have thought it was this woman. She doesn't even take part in battles regularly so this strength and fearlessness that she had ... that's a woman of Islam ... When I'm doing boxing, I feel like I'm a step closer to becoming like them ... if Allah put a highlight on these women for being strong independent ... teachers, educators, business women that means that's what I am striving for ... culture makes us feel like we shouldn't be like that ... it for sure makes me closer to Islam and Allah because Allah loves me even if like the average person doesn't respect women – Hafsa

Participants addressed the impact of representational intersectionality by seeking representation in stories of historical female role models in the hadith. By realigning their view of what it means to be a woman in Islam according to these stories, participants resisted against the internalised stigma imposed by the coloniality of power as well as the patriarchal misogyny in the cultural community. The aural aspect of "hearing more clearly" and the visual aspect of "seeing more clearly" may have represented the sense of clarity from their *rūḥ* which translated to fortified resolve in *qalb* to commit to their paths of resistance. The repetition of "that's a woman of Islam" in Hafsa's narrative signifies her shifting focus from misrepresentations and misconceptions around who she should be, to her *qalb* resonating with the words of Allah. Through developing the confidence to seek knowledge and take ownership of their religious learning in order to separate cultural misinterpretations from actual Islamic guidance, participants engaged in challenging patriarchal abuse of power in the religious community.

I used to go to the mosque between the ages of seven till nine … I would wear abaya to mosque because of respect, but after the mosque it's my rules of what I can wear. But the mosque teacher wanted to have the same rules inside and outside of mosque, so whenever I was leaving to go to swimming, I was wearing abaya because I was scared, I would put it into my hips so you could see my trousers and he would run after me and say "what are you wearing?!" … He kept this up until I was the age of 15 … I left the mosque. It was just how he was teaching; I'd rather not learn from him. I didn't want to give him power or be submissive, I can learn the information from anywhere else. I made it a priority to learn the religion for myself … To me it's now more direct. I don't have to wait for someone to teach me about my religion before I make it a priority … I think people don't realise that there's more than one box you can live your life in … the community made me feel like I needed to be in that box, it wasn't my family. … for a brief time when I was younger, I thought maybe I want to get married, I want to have kids, then I asked myself, who's story is this? It didn't feel like my story. – Layla

Layla's use of the symbolism of a box to depict the pressure to conform within the cultural community highlighted how the spatial imaginary from the paradoxical space from boxing in reconceptualising the boundaries of their intersectional identity translated to critical mobility in breaking out of the "box". By noticing that the cultural norms were not "her story", engaging in boxing conferred the strength in *aql* and *qalb* to choose her own story.

In the beginning of participants' narratives, there was a sense of subliminal resistance against oppression by starting boxing, centred perhaps on strengthening themselves or being able to protect themselves. This evolved into active, conscious resistance by drawing from the confidence gained from boxing to fuel critical mobility to notice and interrogate the coloniality of power and intra-community practices sustaining the way oppression was functioning in other areas of their lives beyond the gym and tackling it headfirst. This evolution demonstrated how

the paradoxical space of the gym facilitated the reimagination of spatial imaginary in their *aql* and embodiment of power in boxing which then translated to critical mobility they enacted in their lives beyond the gym.

Stories of being the change

The ending of most participants' narratives expressed the desire to share what they had gained through boxing with their cultural community. Participants' stories around entering the world of boxing reflected representational intersectionality through the scarcity of Muslim female boxers.

I was not only the only hijabi girl in the gym … There were no girls at the gym competing. There were only girls coming to the self-defence classes, but majority of them were like older women and who are white … because there is a lack of women at that level, I find it really hard to be able to push myself in that situation because like they don't really push women as much as you want them to. – Aaliyah

As the only female boxer competing from her gym, Aaliyah found the lack of representation challenging and ultimately it led to her finding competing incompatible with her gendered Islamic identity. Aaliyah decided to set up her own coaching business creating accessible spaces for women to learn boxing and self-defence skills instead, which saw her becoming the representation that was lacking in her own boxing journey.

When I was in situations where there was domestic abuse happening, I was a lot stronger than an average girl because we've been conditioned to get hit all the time. So, imagine girls who don't do boxing … what I'm doing now with helping women and creating a whole community is a lot more empowering than me boxing and inspiring ladies. Before I was just doing what I'm doing by myself, but now I'm giving a space to something more proactive with more social impact – Aaliyah

Aaliyah elaborated on how she drew from her personal experience of domestic violence in wanting to create change to protect other women by teaching them self-defence skills. The narrative arc for participants evolved from noticing a lack of representation to becoming the representation for other Muslim women. Becoming the representation to lead other Muslim women into boxing touched upon the Islamic concept of *Daʿwah* which is a vital part of Islamic practice in being an ambassador and role model for Islam.

I felt like there was a gap in society … so I was like let me be that change instead of witnessing the emptiness of sisters training well let me be that instead of waiting for the change.
– Maryam

Maryam's turn of phrase in "waiting for change" told a story of disappointment and loneliness being the catalyst for picking up the mantle of becoming a trailblazer. Maya shared a similar desire to create further communities of change for Muslim women which she used to create a badminton group for women at her workplace. In leading the sessions with the skills she learned from boxing, Maya created more opportunities for women to engage in sports. Faiza, Aaliyah, Layla and Maryam took up coaching and set up their own coaching projects in order to fill the gap in women's only spaces available for Muslim women to be able to participate in boxing.

now it's very, very different compared to back then … it was a taboo subject … especially for myself as an Asian female in boxing I used to get "ohh what do your parents say?" … now I've got a session on today and we can easily have 25 people there. When I see 15 Asian girls, so many of them wearing headscarves, I look back and I think this was never the norm and we created that platform to give that space to women, which I do feel very proud about because that wasn't around then … the mosques get me to go in and teach some of the younger girls' self-defence … it's so great to be able to run that in mosques, that's not something

that was quite common … it would have been probably more frowned upon by the males that were part of the committee. – Faiza

Chronological comparisons of "back then when I started" to "now it's so much more common" highlighted a recurring narrative feature across the stories of participants' who have been boxing for a longer time. It reflected the evolution of experiences of being a female Muslim boxer at the start of their journeys to the present day as well as the wider sociocultural shift in patriarchal power to allow for growth in opportunities available to Muslim women. Banu drew upon the imagery of her world expanding as she applied the strength gained from stepping out of her comfort zone through boxing to attending a counsellor training course. In Maya's narrative, achieving power in her punches gave her the embodied sense of bravery of being able to break barriers and achieve her goals elsewhere. When Maya started boxing, she was a housewife who then applied for a job as a dinner lady and then worked her way up to being a teaching assistant.

I was one-to-one with a child during PE and the student didn't want to do boxing … so I said, OK, I'll take over … The teacher was so impressed with me, I was using my hook. And suddenly all I see is the senior leadership peeping through the door, looking at me, giving it all, and the teacher was like, "if anybody should get an award, it should be the TA". I think the leadership was thinking "ohh my God, how come this hijabi has all this power? All this knowledge about boxing and she is basically running the class". It was so fun to see … after I left that PE lesson as I was walking down the corridor, one of the senior leadership team members came to me and said "I saw you miss. I saw you. How powerful you were, how great you were" I felt proud! I felt like I was representing people like me, for people who look at people who look like me and doesn't give a second thought, who would never think "She knows boxing or she can do boxing". – Maya

Maya's pride in having her power recognised by authority figures in her workplace underscored her journey from being someone who was underestimated and dismissed by wider society to someone who creates change in societal narratives of Muslim women by taking up space and sharing her knowledge with confidence. Hafsa shared a similar translation of her experience of breaking stereotypes through boxing galvanising her determination to aim for higher professional goals.

not just by becoming a nurse, but like going as high as I will be able to in my future career and then, be this Pakistani hijabi is a senior nurse. Inshallah ... I don't feel I should just like, "White people don't believe in me, so I'm just gonna do the bare minimum and just get on with it." No, I'm motivated and passionate about it, and I'm gonna keep fighting and keep doing as much as I possibly can and get as high as I can, prove that being a hijabi, being Asian, being Muslim doesn't mean that I'm gonna be quiet in a corner. It doesn't mean that I'm gonna stay at home or, you know, fulfil whatever stereotypes. – Hafsa

The description of "White people" not believing in her juxtaposed against "fighting" captures Hafsa's experiences of the impact of marginalisation from the coloniality of power in her workplace. Aiming for a senior position would not only involve being competent at her job but also fighting against the stereotypes imposed on her embodied intersectional identity. By emphasising how her Pakistani and hijabi identity rarely sees representation in senior leadership in nursing, Hafsa's narrative demonstrates the process of rejecting internalised stigma and applying critical mobility from occupying the paradoxical space of the gym to renegotiate her relationship to power in the workplace. The combination of "Pakistani hijabi" and "senior nurse" represents how Hafsa's fight for progression in her career creates change for other Pakistani *hijabis* like her. Both Maya and Hafsa connected in their narratives of engaging in *daʿwah* through the way they carry themselves in their professional roles which was reflected in the pride and power experienced in *aql* and *qalb*. However, for some, the pride

of becoming the change was a double-edged sword which reflected the burden of representation in a community where the lack of representation meant heavy expectations placed upon some women as trailblazers.

When I started doing boxing, I'd think "oh yeah, I want to lead, I want to be the first" … sometimes it can feel tiring … when I started doing more, people were expecting me to be more involved in other areas. They were like … come and teach here, come and do this class! I'm only one person! People from my community would be like, "you do so much sports, how come you're not teaching?" – Layla

The imposition of the ethic of care (Gilligan, 1983) on Layla emphasised the gendered expectations placed on Muslim women to be self-sacrificial by prioritising the needs of others over achieving excellence individually. Asiyah shared Layla's frustrations in the isolation of becoming the change.

What I find frustrating with the women is that they'll say "you're really inspirational for what you do" and I'm like "well, why don't you do it? I can't do this on my own, I need you to do this with me. Why can't we be inspirational?" That in a way does feel like they're washing their hands off their responsibility because it's like "oh she's doing it and she's Muslim so she's representing me." – Asiyah

Asiyah's desire for creating change through the strength of community reflected the loneliness in stepping out of the norm and the barriers in creating change without support from others. While some participants sought to create change for the wider Muslim community, others spoke about influencing change in intergenerational narratives within their own families. Medina touched upon how the barriers she had faced in accessing sports due to her family's social class led to her wanting to change the narratives in her family for the younger generation.

Fitness wasn't really modelled in my family growing up … coming from a low-income background … I never saw those stories … If you do not see women above you taking care of

themselves, you think that this is your role as a woman, how are you gonna think that it's important to take care of yourself? … there is this element of generational stories being passed on in the impact of war and colonialism … I think of my granddad, he couldn't take care of himself either. He couldn't go to the gym … he was an orphan who came from Pakistan, had to work in a factory seven days a week till he was 60 so I think it's a privilege to take care of yourself. – Medina

The intersection between her social class, gender and identity as a second generation migrant shaped Medina's difficulty in writing new narratives for her family and herself when she had not seen it modelled growing up. Medina encouraged her sister to join boxing which brought her great joy to share during the interview.

she went for her first session post giving birth, that was really motivating to see we were doing it together … there is a lot of pride to that … thinking about my nieces because my brother has two daughters. My sister has a daughter now, and they're still babies, one is seven and I'm thinking, she's gonna see women who actually really take care of themselves and love themselves … modelling that for her makes me so proud. – Medina

Medina's motivation to extend the privilege of caring for oneself to her sister and nieces demonstrates how her experiences of boxing led to her creating representation of positive embodiment, thereby reshaping her intergenerational narratives surrounding womanhood and body image. This was particularly powerful in the context of her own struggles with negative embodiment before boxing. Similarly, Nadiyah spoke of engaging in *daʿwah* by creating positive representation through her role as an aunt.

I feel like I'm like setting the example for my nieces … I want them to have, feel like they've got that freedom, and not like "women can't do this and Muslim women can't do that". – Nadiyah

Nadiyah's narrative highlighted the desire to share the critical mobility drawn from boxing by bringing the next generation of women in her family into the paradoxical space of the gym. The intersection between her gender, age and cultural background were reconfigured through the critical mobility from boxing into positions of power to effect change in her intergenerational narratives. Her experiences of misogyny in the cultural community fuelled her desire to show her nieces an alternate narrative of Muslim women who are empowered and free. Similarly, Maya's story of inspiring her nieces reflected how her embodiment of *daʿwah* by showcasing the positive impact of boxing through the way she carried herself started creating change in the story of women in her family.

We'd be having a party in the park, I'd be like "Come on, chase me. Catch me? And race me". I have the energy to do that with teenage girls and they went out, saying "Khala (term for maternal aunt), We're gonna do this." They would actually ring me up and say "Khala, we just started boxing. We look for that. We started doing this, Khala, you were the inspiration behind it. If you can do it, can you please tell my mum to do it as well?"- Maya

Inviting her nieces to race her echoed a story from the *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) where he would invite his wife Aisha (ra) to playfully race him so they could both remain physically active. Her laughter and joy radiating from her face as she demonstrated how she showed her aunties her boxing moves on a family trip to Bangladesh communicated how she was influencing change in both the younger and older generations of women in her family. However, not all participants shared this experience of creating intergenerational change. Iqra's mum objected to her competing in boxing, while Maryam's mum initially objected until she stopped sparring and started coaching other Muslim women.

Participants raised different ways of tuning into various aspects of their intersectional identities into sources of power to influence change at the intersections; be it in relation to what it means to be a racialised Muslim woman or a hijabi in a professional role or a wife,

daughter, mother or a sister. Even participants who were not currently engaged in coaching expressed desires to influence change by sharing their skills and becoming representation for the younger generation, both through sharing boxing skills as well as in their professional roles.

Growing up, I never had Asian or Black people like role models? And I was always pushing, trying to get my career out. It's been hard and I still haven't got there, even though I'm in my 40s, but when you add that pressure where you feel like you're the only one … you can work your ass off but you're not gonna get there … it wasn't very diverse … 'cause people just look at you as Asian and think "oh you just work in a call centre". They don't think that you're in a higher role. But what I'm trying to do is empower these young girls or boys that are black and Asian to say "you guys can do this. So like let's do it." – Nadiyah

Nadiyah shared stories of "opening doors" for younger racialised women in her professional role, reflecting on how she is motivated by the barriers she faced in her own professional development. Similarly, Layla interpreted her own transformation into the representation she'd hoped for growing up as an act of *daʿwah* for other Muslim women.

I'm so grateful that I've become someone I didn't get to see growing up … I've taught a lot of girls, I've taught a lot of women, that they get to see me like this and go "oh she's really like this! She says Assalamualaikum, she's saying InshaAllah, she's saying Alhamdulillah." She dresses differently and she talks differently, and she lives her life differently, but she's still practicing Islam, so I hope that tells them they can be different too but still be a good Muslim … For me, coaching and being a boxer is part of my daʿwah, a hundred percent … when people come into the gym, they don't assume I am the coach. They will look at everyone else and be like ok who is the coach? I will make sure to put my hand up and be really friendly like "Hello, how are you! I am the coach yes today I'll be teaching" and they'll be like huh?! (shocked expression) … I think in the women's class, if they're not

Muslim, the surprise is like oh a hijabi girl, she's wearing a hijab or maybe it's that I'm an African culture thing or that I'm a girl. Maybe it's not a religion thing, just the idea of an African head coach. – Layla

Layla's narrative delineated how her awareness of the perception of her ==embodied ethno-religious feminine identity== as unusual or unexpected for a boxing coach underscores her recognition of the potential power of representation that she holds. By owning her visibility and influencing the spatial imaginary of others through reshaping the boundaries of what it means to be Muslim, African, female and a boxer, she hopes that her acts of resistance will make it easier for other Muslim girls to feel like they too can step out of the norm and change the narrative of what it means to be a Muslim woman. The confluence of participants' narratives came to the conclusion that simply by existing in the world and being visible as Muslim women who box, they are changing the stories that are and will be told about Muslim women.

Discussion

Chapter Overview

The findings from the results will firstly be used to address the research objectives in the context of the theoretical framework of the Islamic theory of self, Valentine's (2007) and Mirza's (2013) iterations of intersectionality theory and feminist theories of embodiment. The findings will then be situated within the wider literature outlined in the introduction chapter. The strengths and limitations of the present study will be delineated. This will be followed by a discussion of the clinical relevance of the research findings. The chapter will conclude with process reflections on conducting the research as well as recommendations for future research.

Summary of findings

The aim of the current study is to explore how Muslim women who have participated in boxing make meaning of the activity in relations to other aspects of their identity.

The research objectives are to explore how boxing has impacted their lives beyond the sessions and to understand the interplay between their engagement in boxing and conceptualization of personhood within Islam in relation to their mental wellbeing. The findings of the current study are consistent with past literature on Muslim women's experiences of sports settings which suggest that sports participation nurtures their wellbeing and provides a sense of community but is also an act of resistance as it comes with challenges and barriers (Carr & Power, 2020; Rana, 2022; Tjonndal & Hovden, 2022).

The current findings also build upon existing literature through elaborating upon how participation in boxing is intertwined with their spiritual identity and holistic wellbeing. While the findings indicated that boxing supported their wellbeing through the widely

documented benefits of sports participation captured in a plethora of past literature (Bozdarov et al., 2022), the discussion will be focused on the aspects of the findings that may be unique to the female Muslim population. This is due to the constraints of the word limit and in the hopes of contributing novel findings to the existing scholarship. Links between the five themes from the findings:

- Stories of (re) (claiming) *aql*, *qalb*, body and *rūḥ*

- Stories of a home away from home

- Stories of energising efforts to get closer to the Deen

- Stories of resistance

- Stories of being the change

will be discussed in greater depth through the key concepts outlined in the rest of this chapter and situated within the context of existing literature in order to address the research objectives.

Spiritual identity, the body and holistic wellbeing

The use of Skinner's Islamic Model of Self (2019) offered possible mechanisms through which boxing supports Muslim women's wellbeing by complementing their practice of Islam. Participants narratives of boxing begun with struggles with various emotional and mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression, coping with an eating disorder, grief from loss of a family member and healing from relational trauma after divorce or relationship breakdowns. This suggests that some participants were in a state of *nafs lawwāma*; a state of distress felt in their *aql* which was one of the motivations which drew them to boxing. The theme of reclaiming *aql*, *qalb*, body and *rūḥ* reflected how healing their mental health through boxing promoted their spiritual wellbeing by alleviating the state of *nafs lawwāma*. However, this was not true for all participants as Iqra and Nadiyah simply wanted to try a

new sport or improve their physical fitness, but later in their interviews mentioned that boxing had helped in managing anxiety and anger.

The findings also reveal an intersectional perspective between their spiritual identity and mental health within their roles in their families and communities (Valentine, 2007). The narratives of reclamation storied how doing boxing offered moments of reprieve from other aspects of their identity where being a body in motion briefly suspended the responsibilities and burdens as wives, mothers, daughters and Muslim women in British society. Narratives of older participants with children communicated the struggle of finding time for leisure activities and sports due to the gendered responsibilities in the home and upholding the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982). This was consistent with past research on Muslim women's engagement in sports (Koca et al., 2009; Murray et al., 2015; Taylor & Toohey, 2001).

These findings highlighted how the intersection between gender, culture and age meant that boxing was one of the few spaces in their lives where they could tend to their bodies and minds. Previous research by Takhar (2005) found a blurring between self and others in collectivistic cultures, particularly for women, the present findings suggest that engagement in boxing supported participants in recognising themselves as individuals in numerous ways, particularly for younger participants. Hafsa's repetition of being "allowed" to feel joy and have fun signified a sense of agency while Iqra, describing going into the ring "alone", indicated a process of defining the distinction between herself and others.

Participants repeatedly emphasised the distinction between their relationship with Islam being a source of comfort and the cultural misogyny which was detrimental to their holistic wellbeing. The findings highlighted the role of cultural policing and patriarchal manipulation of Islamic values impacting participants' mental health, reminiscent of Bhimji's (2012) findings on patriarchal oppression due to ethnic and cultural practices within South Asian communities. While not all participants in this study were of South Asian ethnicity,

narratives of some of the participants confirmed Bhimji's (2012) assertions of the pressure to conform to cultural notions of femininity and familial expectations of servitude. However, some participants' narratives featured male family members as significant figures who encouraged their participation in boxing which supported their wellbeing, such as Medina's brother, Banu's and Maya's respective husbands and Nadiyah's father. While it is important to acknowledge the impact and reality of cultural misogyny in these women's communities, it is also critical that the findings are not overgeneralised at the risk of perpetuating Orientalist and colonial discourses on the Muslim community (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Said, 1978).

The narratives of reclaiming aspects of their personhood converged with narratives of resistance and being the change through energising efforts to get closer to their Deen. Through upholding *ḥayāʾ* while boxing, respecting the body as *Amanah* from Allah and having more energy to perform *ibadah* participants interpreted their engagement with boxing as fortification of their Deen. The findings suggest that the perseverance, patience and discipline from boxing which are characteristic traits of *adab* contributed to participants' narratives of boxing bringing them closer to their faith.

Participants' anecdotes on experiencing less laziness and more *sabr* illuminated a possible pathway from *nafs lawwāma* to *nafs mutma'inna* through participants applying discipline and perseverance gained from boxing to govern their *hawa nafs*. The sensorial aspect of making contact with the punching bag, hearing the sound of their punches and watching their muscles develop was interpreted as a physical manifestation of gaining control and agency over *hawa nafs* through the *aql*. There was also a sense of mirroring in participants' narratives between physical power gained in the body and spiritual power of the *rūḥ* which reflected their journey of getting closer to the Deen. While previous studies on Muslim women's sports participation have largely focused on the barriers presented by the

external environment, the present study demonstrates how engagement in boxing goes beyond the mental and physical benefits of boxing (Bozdarov et al., 2022) by strengthening their spiritual identity. Participants stories of how their engagement in boxing aligned with the *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) echoed Walseth & Fasting's (2003) study where participants framed their enjoyment of sports within Islamic guidance. This highlights the importance of Muslims maintaining physical wellbeing and engaging in play.

Piran and Teall (2012) defined the term positive embodiment, comprising of agency, self-care and joyfulness. Positive embodiment was demonstrated through participants narratives of reclaiming joy, playfulness and feeling free in the gym, such as Layla's imagery of the gym as a wide-open space on clouds and Asiyah celebrating muscles growing and feeling more comfortable looking at herself in the mirror while shadowboxing. These findings were consistent with Thorpe et al.'s (2020) findings where swimming was described as a therapeutic space of joy and pleasure. The evolution of their narratives through boxing demonstrated a shift towards positive embodiment in "seeing themselves in a new light" which manifested as increased self-belief, confidence and appreciation for their bodies. Participants narratives may reflect the *aql* then influencing the *qalb*, thereby improving their mental and emotional wellbeing in tandem with their spiritual wellbeing. Caring for the body through respecting it as *Amanah* from Allah nourished participants' *qalb*s and consequentially strengthened their connection to their *Deen*.

While Aaliyah's experiences of how boxing initially supported her healing from her eating disorder mirrors some other participants' ascension from *nafs lawwāma* to *nafs mutma'inna* her experiences of relational abuse and PTSD was tied to the gym environment which brought her back to *nafs lawwāma*. While it appears that boxing initially cultivated positive embodiment, the external environment of the gym was harmful to her spiritual and mental wellbeing. Her distinction between the activity of boxing and the gym environment

led to her resolving her state of *nafs lawwāma* by leaving the gym. Through continuing to train in boxing without competing, she nurtured her spiritual wellbeing by honouring *amanah* which brought her closer to the *Deen*. Participants' manifestations of positive embodiment within the boundaries of Islamic modesty illustrate how Muslim women express liberation in unique ways which differ from Western feminist interpretations of liberation and autonomy (Hamad, 2020).

These findings draw attention to the centrality of the body in relation to Muslim women's spiritual wellbeing, raising possible critique of the positioning of the body in Skinner's (2019) conceptualisation of the self. The unidirectionality of the arrow in Skinner's model suggests that the body only impacts the *hawa nafs* directly whereas participants' experiences suggested that there may be a more direct link between the external environment, body, *aql* and *qalb*. Participants' narratives of experiencing peace and an increased sense of mental clarity when they are in the gym suggests that boxing contributed to their mental wellbeing by helping them to inhabit their bodies and *aql* through mindfulness. This suggests that there may be a possible reciprocal relationship between the body, *aql* and *qalb*, contrary to the unidirectional path in Skinner's (2019) model.

Therefore, it is possible engagement in boxing highlights a bidirectional relationship between body and *aql* both through the *hawa nafs*, as well as independently. The emphasis on *Amanah* as well as stories in the *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) contributes to the argument for the significance of the role of the body in contributing directly to the *aql*. Figure 27 outlines suggested adaptations to Skinner's (2019) model, denoted by the red arrow to capture proposed pathway of the role of boxing in supporting Muslim women's holistic wellbeing.

Figure 27

Adapted Islamic Model of Self
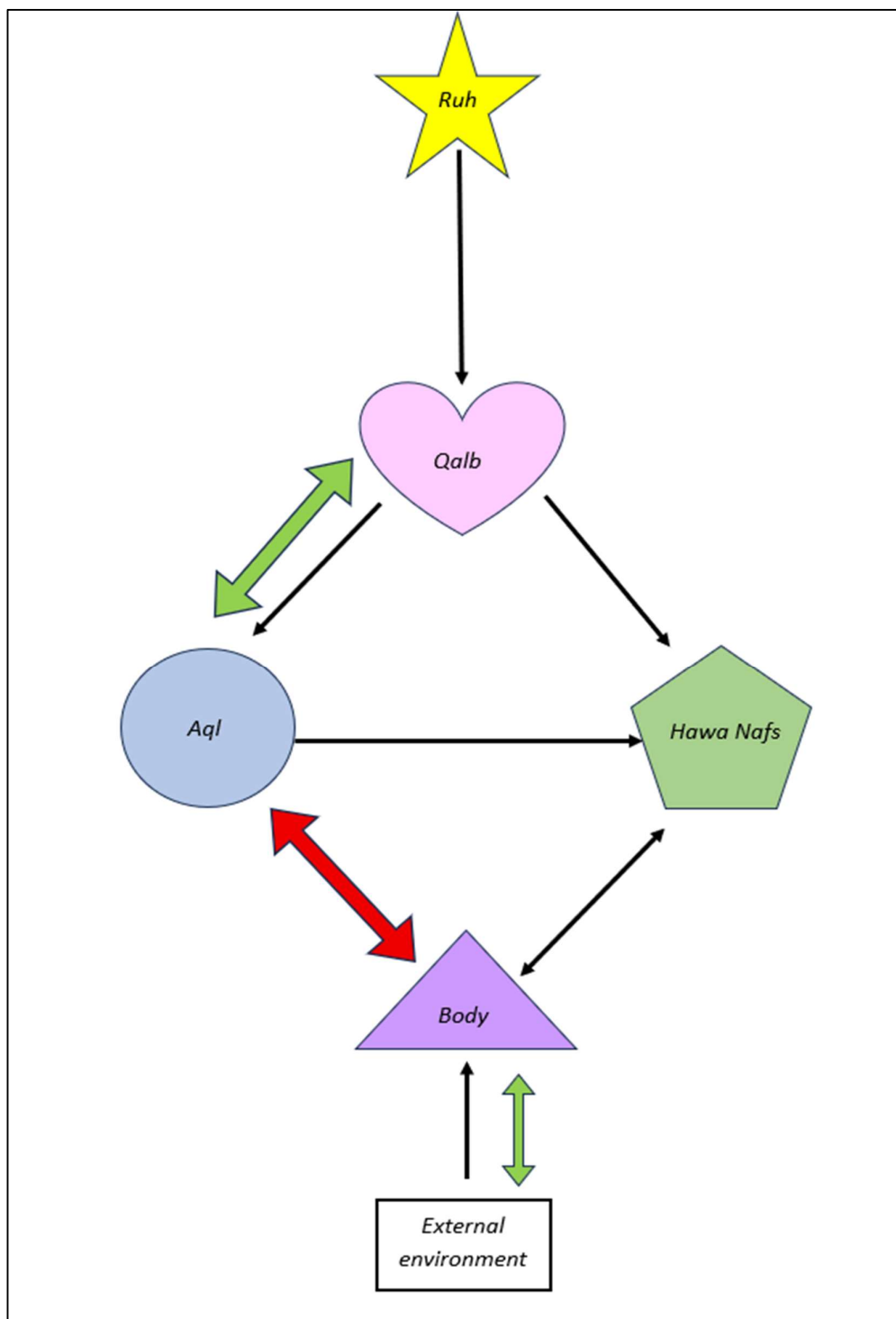
On the contrary, it may also be possible that looking after their bodies fulfilled *Amanah*. By developing discipline through boxing, they gained control in governing their *hawa nafs*. Participants may have then received Allah's blessing through clarity in *niyyah* of seeking Allah's approval through fulfilling *Amanah*. Therefore, reclamation of *qalb* and *aql* occurred through the *rūḥ*, rather than directly through the body. The narrative of boxing energising participant efforts in getting closer to the *Deen* supports the plausibility of this pathway. This second pathway would reflect the core of Islamic belief in that mental wellbeing is a blessing from Allah, rather than being a direct consequence of one's physical activity. While it is a subtle difference which speaks to a Muslim's level of *Tawakkul*, it is important that both pathways are considered in order to account for the heterogeneity in the Muslim population, where levels of religiosity may not be uniform (Ratna, 2011). Ratna (2011, p. 384) warns against "false universalisms" in delineating the role of religious identity in relation to Muslim women's sports participation hence this study does not assume one pathway as representative of all participants.

Both pathways highlight the crucial role of attending to Muslim women's spiritual identity when addressing their mental health needs. Participants' stories also suggest a symbiotic relationship between the other constructs in the model such as between the *aql* and *qalb* as well as the impact of the external environment on the body. These hypothesised relationships are represented by the green arrows added to the diagram. However, given that symbiosis in the relationship between these constructs are dependent on each individual's religiosity, it is not possible to draw clear conclusions on the extent to which the relationship between the various constructs of self may be symbiotic.

The one place I don't have to fight – Inclusivity and positive embodiment through boxing

Narratives of resistance communicated how experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination towards their "tribal identity" impacted their embodied intersectionality (Goffman, 1983). Stigma theory (Goffman, 1983) could be observed at play in participants' hypervigilance in public spaces in Britain due to previous experiences of hate crimes and racial trauma. The coloniality of power (Quijano, 2007) was spatialised as the hostile gaze of racism, Islamophobia and patriarchal judgment (Dolan, 1988) which was reminiscent of Tarlo's (2010) commentary of the hyper-visibility which compounds the othering of Muslim women in public spaces. In particular, narratives of resistance captured Bordieu's concept of "symbolic violence" which are the daily normalised systemic and societal practices which make inequality and oppression not only acceptable but regularly consented to by the oppressed. The participants in this research highlighted how the stereotypes imposed upon them as Muslim women as well as female boxers revealed the systemic racism, Islamophobia and misogyny at play. Participants' experiences concurred with Alimahomed-Wilson's (2020) argument that Muslim women experience gendered Islamophobia wherein the visibility of their embodied Islamic identity in the form of the *hijab* or *niqab* distinguished their experience of Islamophobia from Muslim men. Participants' view of themselves before boxing reflected internalised stigma expressed towards their bodies both within the community as well as in wider society due to various aspects of their embodied Islamic femininity.

Stories of finding a home away from home highlight the significance of inclusivity to Muslim women's wellbeing. The findings were consistent with Walseth's (2006) participants' experiences of sports as a heterotopia and one where they found a "second family" (Carr & Power, 2020). Creating social connections and getting to know other women, both within the

Muslim community as well as outside their community, alleviated loneliness and nurtured openness to new opportunities outside the gym. Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo (2018) asserted that the reactions of others influence one's self concept. Experiencing inclusivity in a sporting space, where physical aspects of embodied intersectionality which are stigmatised in wider society were not only accepted but deemed as insignificant in comparison to their physical abilities in sport, offered participants the chance to forge new relationships with individuals outside their community which altered the way they see themselves and others.

Feminist embodiment theory suggests the inclusivity participants experienced in the gym contributed to positive embodiment (Piran & Teall, 2012). The embodied sense of shared womanhood in boxing communicated safety to their bodies which resonated in the *qalb* as a sense of belonging which contributed to distinguishing the spatialised embodied sense of the gym from other public spaces. Asiyah's expression of the gym as "the one place I don't have to fight" demonstrated the spatial imaginary at play in finding safety in a public space. The distinction between the way their embodied intersectionality was experienced relationally (Valentine, 2007) in the boxing gym suggests that the divide imposed by the othering (i.e. us vs them) that they experienced in wider society was less entrenched, which demonstrates the spatial imaginary in the construction of the gym as a paradoxical space (Rose, 1993).

The boxing gym as a paradoxical space of power and vulnerability

For a majority of participants, having a space where their *ḥayāʾ* was respected with the option to take off their *hijab* outside of the privacy of their homes blurred the binary of public and private through the spatial imaginary (Rose, 1993). Experiencing the gym as a space where they could relax and take off their armour while still being in a public setting contributed to their mental wellbeing by nurturing their capacity for vulnerability in having

positive relational experiences, similar to the findings of Rana's (2022) study. The use of the word "therapeutic" or "therapy" in relation to some participants description of their experience of boxing signified how reclamation of *qalb*, *aql* and body is supported by narratives of a home away from home and narratives of resistance. The experience of belonging in an inclusive space where they did not need to be defended against discrimination contributed to feeling safe enough to process emotional pain through boxing. Experiences of the boxing gym as a paradoxical space of one where there was both an embodied and emotional sense of gaining power may have also facilitated participants' acceptance of their own vulnerability. Faiza's stories of telling other women that it is strong to cry and be scared while boxing, highlights the blurring of the binary between vulnerability and strength through boxing. Through the spatial imaginary, the paradoxical space of the gym was one where participants could maintain privacy in embodied togetherness, feel strong while tending to their vulnerability and find peace amidst learning how to fight (Rose, 1993).

The findings suggest that the stigma and judgment of seeking therapeutic intervention was something which made the privacy of boxing an alternative way of tending to their mental health which concurs with Hussain and Bagguley's (2013) recommendations of developing community and strengths-based approaches. However, this was not true for all participants as others had sought therapy in the past for support with PTSD, domestic violence and eating disorders. The conceptualisation of boxing as therapy highlights the potential value of movement in addressing the somatisation of distress in the Muslim female community (Anand & Cochrane, 2005).

Some participants expressed how experiences of domestic, relational and emotional abuse had "taken their voice" or "dimmed their light". Their decisions to leave these relationships were linked to various aspects of benefits gained from boxing, such as confidence and increased self-esteem. This was consistent with Chapman's (2014) finding in

relation to the silencing of women within the South Asian Community regarding issues of domestic abuse. While it is not possible to draw a causal link, the narratives of these participants who shared the sensory aspect of "finding their voice" or being able to "hear their own voice" through boxing suggests that participation in the sport may influence their mental wellbeing through making it more possible for them to speak up and leave abusive situations. Reconnecting with their intuition may represent a stronger connection between their *qalb* and *aql* through the fifth function of *qalb* which elocutes knowledge from the heart (Skinner, 2019). The symbolism of reclaiming their voice or being in the room suggests that boxing supported healing from the dissociative impacts of trauma through positive embodiment. In this way, boxing offered a path back to their *aql* and *qalb* through grounding the body in the present. Embodying strength and power in punching made their bodies a safe home for their *qalb* to return.

Faiza and Asiyah's expressions of channelling despair regarding the genocide (International Court of Justice, 2025) in Palestine into boxing highlighted the impact of wider political injustice on Muslim women's mental health. Experiencing physical pain through muscle aches and enduring rounds on the punching bag provided some participants with a way to reckon with emotional pain within the boundaries of three-minute boxing rounds. These findings were reminiscent of Spencer's (2013) findings where MMA offered an arena for participants to reckon with and process experiences of embodied suffering.

While boxing does not negate or resolve the inequalities and discrimination participants experience in their daily lives, it offers participants a window to hope. By connecting them with their physical power, boxing may support Muslim women's mental wellbeing through the embodied reminder of agency in the face of the powerlessness inflicted by their experiences of systemic inequality.

Taking the fight beyond the gym - Embodied resistance

Iterations of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989; Mirza, 2013; Valentine, 2007) offer insight into how Muslim women's spatialised, relational and embodied experiences within the gym translated to manifestations of critical mobility in challenging power dynamics beyond the gym. The narrative theme of being the change suggests that learning how to physically fight in boxing, regardless of whether participants engaged in the competitive arena, energised participants' fighting spirit towards challenging, and pushing back against, oppression at other intersections of their lives (Valentine, 2007). Bobel and Kwan (2011) conceptualised the term embodied resistance as action or inaction that challenges social norms about the body. The juxtaposition of the acceptance they experienced within the gym against the backdrop of the spatialised gaze of judgment from the cultural community (Dolan, 1988) reinforced their engagement in embodied resistance against both cultural policing and the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2007).

Participants narratives largely focused on representational intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) in resisting the intra- and inter-community cultural portrayal and stereotypes of Muslim women. Through their spatial imaginary, participants' interpretations of their engagement in boxing blurred the binary of traditional masculinity and femininity (Rose, 1993). This blurring can be observed in the contrast between participants' initial impressions of boxing as a "man's sport" and their later expressions in narratives of resistance where they redefined their femininity to incorporate being physically strong and proficient in boxing as well as upholding *ḥayāʾ*. Some participants engaged in embodied resistance through externalising anger while punching which contradicted societal perceptions of femininity. The evolution of narratives towards affirming the view of strength being feminine and encouraged in Islam suggests participants were engaged in redefining their own parameters of femininity and beauty ideals through boxing by pushing back against

the symbolic violence (Bordieu, 1991) enacted against them. Participants illustrated

engagement in embodied resistance against internalised stigma through aligning their beauty

standards with Islamic values of *ḥayāʾ* and prioritising Allah's gaze over the judgment of

others (Goffman, 1983). This sentiment was expressed in numerous ways by different

participants in connecting with the *akhirah* over *dunya* and Medina's imagery of her *niqab* as

a superhero cape.

However, Aaliyah's interpretation of the intensity of her engagement in competitive

boxing made her feel less feminine. Moving into a more traditionally masculine aspect of

boxing by competing may have contributed to Aaliyah's experience of one where her

femininity was subdued in her pursuit of athletic excellence. Her experience was an outlier

which suggests that there may be a limit to which the spatial imaginary supports critical

mobility within the boxing gym. It may be possible that her experiences of an abusive

relationship with another boxer may have minimised her sense of agency and critical mobility

drawn from boxing.

Participants' exertion of spatial imaginary (Rose, 1993) within the privacy afforded

within the public setting of the boxing gym also influenced the way participants related to

their embodiment of Islamic identity beyond the gym. For some participants, experiences of

positive embodiment of their intersectional identity within the gym translated to critical

mobility (Rose, 1993) in renegotiating their sense of power in being able to defend

themselves. Even participants who did not explicitly mention experiences of discrimination,

there was a sense of motivation translated from boxing towards their professional lives,

rooted in the awareness of the lack of representation in their respective fields and the

stereotypes imposed upon their embodiment of Islamic identity. Some participants clarified

that confidence gained through boxing augmented the strengthening of their *tawakkul* when

faced with external oppression. *sabr* and discipline cultivated through boxing was applied to

holding their composure and dealing with situations of discrimination while taking pride in their embodied Islamic identity.

Participants shared ways of exerting influence to prevent the next generation from being subjugated by cultural practices based on their positions within their community as mothers, sisters and aunties. By first positively reframing (Fahs & Swank, 2015) their own bodies, participants in this study engaged in embodied resistance in creating ways to support other women to reframe their own bodies. By modelling holistic self-care for the younger generation and encouraging daughters and sons to take part in boxing, participants enacted critical mobility in reshaping intergenerational narratives of what it means to be a "a good mother and wife" (Gilbert & Sanghera, 2004). Participants also questioned culturally defined boundaries of what it means to be a pious woman. Emboldened by the confidence in their agency drawn from boxing, participants sought Islamic knowledge independently in order to engage in reshaping societal narratives of what it means to be a good Muslim woman for themselves, based on Islamic scripture rather than cultural patriarchal practices. The gym appeared to be both a shield and a lightning rod in terms of offering respite to Muslim women during their inhabitation of the space while the presence of boxing in their lives was interpreted in a critical manner within the wider community. While participants did not experience the same intensity of familial alienation as the boxers in Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) study, the tension of the judgmental gaze of the community contributed to discomfort in the earlier stages of their participation in boxing, particularly for older participants. These findings were reflective of the significance of the detrimental impact of *izzat* on women's mental health in South Asian communities (Gilbert et al., 2004; Gunasinghe, Hatch and Lawrence, 2018). Younger participants appeared less burdened by the weight of community judgment, which may reflect shifting intergenerational narratives.

Embodied resistance comprised both action (i.e. engaging in boxing, as a traditionally masculine sport) as well as inaction (i.e. refusing to conform to Western feminine beauty and rejecting the conforming pressure of cultural policing) which represents Muslim women's involvement of their bodies as a site of sociopolitical resistance (Bobel & Kwan, 2011). The split within stories of resistance reflected the tension between cultural, spiritual, gendered and racial aspects of their identity. Given that learning martial arts is one of the activities encouraged in the *sunnah*, participants' interpretation of boxing for self-defence may reflect their *niyyah* in aligning with Islamic values through boxing. Mahmood and Woodhouse (2024) highlighted that in some Muslim communities, "sports for sports sake" was seen to be an alien concept as physical activity appeared to only be permitted for the purpose of maintaining health. This may explain why some participants viewed boxing as self-defence rather than sports. Notably, experiences of being attacked in the streets and experiencing hate crimes may have also motivated the view of boxing as predominantly a form of self-defence. In contrast, participants who had experienced gendered violence through emotional or domestic abuse did not view boxing as self-defence, which may highlight how different experiences of trauma may impact Muslim women's locus of agency and strategies in supporting their wellbeing. Manifestations of embodied resistance appeared to vary wherein participants who were more deeply impacted by gendered Islamophobia and racial trauma were focused on embodying external fight movements. In comparison, participants who had experienced emotional abuse and relational trauma appeared to be internalising embodied resistance by reclaiming their sense of agency over their bodies, *aql* and *qalb*.

Participants raised different ways of tuning into unique intersections in their identities as positions from which to engage in sociopolitical resistance. Through the critical mobility cultivated in the gym, participants drew upon different aspects of their intersectional identity, such as the position as a racialised mental health professional to renegotiate their relationship

to power. Narratives of aspiring to excellence, and achieving more in their professional and educational pursuits, were connected back to their spiritual identity, through the *niyyah* in framing their collective resistance as acts of *daʿwah*. The manifestation of *daʿwah* was framed in a variety of ways by participants; through their embodiment of a hijabi in a white dominant workplace, demonstrating exemplary *Akhlaq* in their work ethic, honing their craft as sportswomen and coaches while upholding Islamic values, and creating new communities for other women such as a badminton group and women's boxing class. By engaging in *daʿwah* to be the change in their external environments, it may be possible that participants strengthened their connection between *qalb* and *rūḥ*, further energising their efforts to get closer to their Deen.

Narratives of being the change revealed the impact of structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Participants' repetition of the rarity of finding female-only boxing classes underscored the systemic disadvantages of the scarcity of Muslim-female inclusive sports settings and the wider lack of support services adapted to address their mental health needs. This structural intersectionality necessitated them stepping up to create spaces for other Muslim women to do sports as well as becoming trailblazers within their communities in using their professional roles and coaching positions to support other women struggling with mental health issues. Aaliyah's reconfiguring of her engagement in boxing into an act of *daʿwah* where she creates change by teaching other Muslim women boxing demonstrated embodied resistance in action. Aaliyah's experience highlights the nuances of how the relationship between Muslim women's participation in sport and their holistic wellbeing is not a linear one as it is mediated by factors such as inclusivity and safety from discrimination. It is important to acknowledge the significance of Aaliyah's relationship to her spiritual identity which shaped the meanings she made around her experiences of abuse being related to displeasing Allah as well as how it influenced her coping through connecting more deeply

with Islam. However, it is also equally important to acknowledge the impact of marginalisation in Aaliyah's narrative. The scarcity of Islamic-inclusive amateur female boxing training facilities is indicative of structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Aaliyah's narrative of the lack of support for upholding Islamic values while engaging in competitive boxing reflected some of the findings in Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) study which found both Muslim female competitive boxers facing judgment and lack of support for their Islamic faith from their boxing coaches.

Therefore, choosing to leave competitive boxing was both an act of embodied resistance and a consequence of structural intersectionality which forced her to choose between her *Deen* and her identity as a competitive boxer. However, Layla's and Aysia's narratives as competitive boxers suggested that there is a distinction between interpretation of *niyyah* surrounding their participation in boxing, wherein competitive boxing was associated with negative implications for some, given Islam's stance on being hit in the face, whereas for others, they rationalised competing by associating it with intentions to better themselves and care for their bodies as well as learn the skills to coach others.

Chrisler and Johnston-Robledo (2018) posited that the more physically and mentally free and socially empowered a woman feels, the more likely she is to experience positive embodiment. While the findings of the present study suggest that Muslim women's definitions of being socially empowered may deviate from dominant Western narratives in that part of their empowerment includes practicing Islam and embodying modesty, participants narratives suggest that engagement in boxing supported participants in nurturing positive embodiment. The present study argues that for Muslim women, positive embodiment through boxing in inclusive settings nurtured their mental wellbeing through reinforcing their engagement in embodied resistance beyond the gym (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020).

While it is important to name and examine the oppression faced by Muslim women, it is important to also move beyond what has been done to them to shift the focus towards their expressions of agency and power. Therefore, by exploring the ways in which Muslim women are expressing embodied resistance within the framework of Islamic theory, the present study offers an alternative to Western feminist interpretations of liberation and autonomy (Rana, 2022). These findings highlight the tension between reckoning with structural inequality which necessitate expressions of agency and participants exerting their power and autonomy in creating change. It is crucial for discourses on Muslim women's wellbeing to recognise and respect their power in stepping forward to create change while acknowledging the inherent discrimination and systemic inequalities that precipitate them stepping up to be the change.

Strengths and limitations

The use of sensory ethnography methodology incorporated embodied communication through movements and drawings into the findings of the present study. The methodology allowed for the nuances of their embodiment of their Islamic identity and experiences of boxing to be captured. Given the somatisation of distress within this population (Malik, 2000), using an embodied methodology supported participants in communicating their iterations of embodied resistance. Furthermore, the use of boxing as a medium for eliciting their experiences while they are connected to their sense of physical power meant that the emphasis of a strengths-based approach potentially reduced their defences around sharing experiences of struggles. Given the cultural weaponisation of shame and silencing experienced by Muslim women (Chapman, 2014; Gilbert & Sanghera, 2004), it was important to incorporate mitigation of these potential barriers into the methodology of the study.

Thorpe et al. (2020) emphasised how strong reflexivity and deep cultural considerations are important when doing research with Muslim women, hence, offering interviews online, where at times participants opted to turn off their video while sharing sensitive material and painful experiences, may have been a strength in eliciting authentic stories. While the prioritisation of comfort of participants by offering both online and in-person interviews was a strength of this study, the adaptation of SE methodology for online interviews may have been a weakness of the study as the level of embodiment of boxing movements during the interviews online were reduced. Certain aspects of the sensory environment such as smellscapes and soundscapes were more challenging to capture in the results, as compared to visual observations and aspects of touch and pain. It may be helpful to address this limitation in a future study by comparing two separate groups of participants in an online interview group versus a face-to-face interview to determine which approach may offer a better way to mitigate stigma and capture richer experiences.

The utilisation of the Islamic Model of Self in this study was both a strength and potential limitation. The application of the Islamic Model of Self to an ethnographic exploration of real-world activities Muslim women engaged in demonstrated its potential use as a tool in clinical settings to incorporate the consideration of Muslim women's spiritual identity into models of intervention. However, given the limited number of constructs in the model and its potentially reductionistic depiction of tenets of faith, it may have risked creating a sense of "false universalisms" (Ratna, 2011, p.384) surrounding the religiosity of participants in this study. By offering a model to delineate spiritual identity, there is a delicate balance between imposing yet another stereotype or assumption upon Muslim female boxers rather than witnessing their stories firsthand. A potentially valuable way to address this limitation would have been to incorporate the Islamic Model of Self into the interview

questions by asking participants' to map out their experience in relation to how it impacted each of the constructs of the model.

A further limitation of this study was the supervisor's lack of understanding of Islamic faith. The power dynamics between my role as a Muslim trainee in being supervised by non-Muslim supervisors may have undermined the immersion in the model. However, this may have also proven to be a strength in maintaining a holistic view of the participants' stories allowing for consideration of alternative explanations. Given the limitations imposed by the wordcount, the exploration of all aspects of embodied intersectionality was not possible. By focusing more on religious, gendered and racial identity, aspects of social class and disabilities may have been neglected. While it is possible it did not arise in the data, it is possible that the research lens was biased by the skew of past research favouring Orientalist discourses which fixate on the intersection between gender, religion and race.

An initial attempt was made to distinguish between the conceptualisation of Islam as a cultural construct and a religious construct through the use of Skinner's model (Skinner, 2019). The constructs in the model offered a concrete way to understand how sports participation impacts spiritual wellbeing and offered framework of conceptualising how sports participation is embedded within Islamic practice. By exploring spiritual identity in this study and focusing on unique aspects of Muslim women's engagement in boxing, there is also a risk of perpetuating the othering of Muslim women by over-focusing on the relationship between their faith and sports participation, when it may not be true for all participants due to the heterogeneity in the Muslim female population.

While this study argues that adaptations and addressing specific needs would be beneficial in terms of supporting Muslim women's wellbeing, the researcher is also mindful that focusing on identity politics may deepen the sense of division between communities.

The researcher's insider position may have been a key strength in building rapport with participants while my outsider positionality as a researcher external to their community may have reduced their concerns around stories shared endangering *izzat*. Participants perceptions of the researcher and the assumptions made impacts the stories shared as Riessman (2008) suggests that stories are co-constructed between the storyteller and the audience. Through the focus of the present study being Muslim women's participation in boxing, my hypothesis is that it may have reduced the stigma in sharing mental health struggles and the complexities of their relationship with the Muslim community and their spiritual identity. However, my insider position in relation to boxing may have also undermined analytic distance and ability to hold stories where the gym was not a home for some participants such as Aaliyah.

The application of creativity in triangulation of the data, specifically through capturing their individual narrative through story maps highlights a strength of this study. By incorporating SE into the data analysis process, the story maps offer a visual of how the researcher viewed participants' individual stories. The story maps were also valuable in maintaining integrity of individual's stories while presenting overarching narratives. Another strength of the present study was the use of member checking. Participants received their own story map prior to the completion of the thesis as a way for the researcher to share her interpretation of their stories. In this way, participants were offered a sense of agency over their narratives and were invited to offer feedback and any adaptations. This built a sense of trustworthiness between the participants and researcher, as well as potentially forging bonds that may make participants more open to sharing their stories which may support future research on the wellbeing of Muslim women.

Suggestions for future research

It would be valuable for future research to extend the use of SE methodology to investigate the specific elements of boxing participation which contribute to positive embodiment and embodied resistance. Comparing the experiences of competitive and recreational Muslim female boxers would provide clarity on specific elements of boxing that supports their wellbeing. Exploration of how other aspects of embodied intersectionality interacts with Muslim women's wellbeing through sports participation would be valuable. Application of the SE methodology to compare martial arts, swimming and archery as sports encouraged in the *sunnah* in relation to value in supporting spiritual and holistic wellbeing, would be useful.

Further research which extends the SE methodology to immersion in boxing gyms, as well as a site of spiritual connection for participants such as the mosque, may be useful in mapping the overlaps between Islam as an embodied religion as well as embodiment of a sporting activity. It may also be valuable to invite participants to observe and chart their own sense of which elements of the Islamic Model of Self are nourished in their participation in boxing. Further investigation of other paradoxical spaces which sustain and contribute to embodied resistance for Muslim women would be valuable in exploring systemic approaches to improving the wellbeing of the community.

By making a preliminary attempt to map Muslim women's experiences in boxing onto the Islamic Model of Self (Skinner, 2019), I hope to prompt further research on Muslim women's experiences in community settings. I also hope for further research to explore the utility of the Islamic Model of Self (Skinner, 2019) to broaden understanding of how the facets of spiritual wellbeing support holistic wellbeing for Muslim women. Exploring the utility of the Islamic Model of Self in relation to a clinical population of Muslim women engaging in sports for wellbeing would be beneficial in establishing the use of the model for

clinical use. It may be helpful to focus specifically on Muslim women with a diagnosis of medically unexplained symptoms (MUS) to account for the somatisation of distress in the population, or to recruit Muslim women with a diagnosis of PTSD who are currently engaged in boxing.

Clinical Implications

The findings suggest that on the whole, boxing impacted the lives of participants beyond the gym in a myriad of ways. Overall, participants' engagement in boxing had a positive impact on their sense of identity and mental wellbeing. There were nuances in the distinction between boxing as an activity and the gym environment wherein some participants felt the gym had a negative impact on their mental wellbeing but boxing was still a source of joy and empowerment. Understanding Muslim women's interpretations of what boxing brought to their lives revealed a number of valuable factors to be taken into consideration in addressing the mental health needs of the Muslim female community.

The value of boxing on an individual level, in terms of reclamation of mental, physical and spiritual wellbeing, highlights the importance of considering movement-based approaches when working with Muslim women. In addition, the utility of SE approaches in eliciting their experiences in this study suggests that it may be helpful to incorporate shared movements such as mirrored body-focused grounding exercises done by both therapist and client to communicate solidarity and connection non-verbally within clinical settings to embody the safety and openness required for therapeutic work. The embodiment of fighting movements which led to positive embodiment for participants and supported their further expression of embodied resistance, suggests that incorporating approaches which support the development of positive embodiment within therapeutic settings may be beneficial for Muslim women.

The Islamic Model of Self (Skinner, 2019) offers an operationalisation of Muslim women's spiritual identity and identifies the state of *nafs lawwāma* which may be a helpful starting point for incorporating spiritual wellbeing into conversations around Muslim women's mental health. The findings of this study suggest that regardless of variance in religiosity, the *qalb* and *rūḥ* bear impact on Muslim women's understanding and meaning-making relating to their mental health.

In particular, the strategies sought out by the participants in addressing depression, anxiety and PTSD were ones which aligned with their faith. Depending on level of internalisation of religiosity, some Muslim women may position mental health as an external locus of control, or as a blessing or test from Allah. This is a key difference from mainstream mental health treatments which focus on individual choice and agency. Incorporating Islamic beliefs into mental health settings for Muslim women would place priority on collaborative approaches guided by the individual which place reconnecting with the *qalb* and *rūḥ* through prayer and reflection at the heart of intervention plans. By offering an understanding of how the body may support alleviation of psychological distress through fulfilling *amanah* and cultivating *ibadah*, clinician's may be better informed to support Muslim women struggling with *nafs lawwāma* to reach for *nafs mutma'inna*.

Pargament (1997) introduced the term 'religious constructivism' (p. 368) as an orientation towards religion for professionals to incorporate spirituality into their work with clients. Religious constructivism encapsulates an orientation of willingness on the part of the clinician to explore different worlds in an effort to formulate distress within the lens of their inner spiritual landscape and interpret it in a way that aligns with their religious beliefs. Pargament (1997) asserted that religious constructivism may facilitate engagement with religious clients. Consideration of integrating the RCOPE, the religious coping methods scale

developed by (Pargament et al., 2000) may also offer a valuable tool for incorporating spiritual identity into clinical practice.

Furthermore, the significance of the body in the findings suggest that holistic, movement-based approaches, combined with guidance in the Quran to seek forgiveness from Allah, may support Muslim women in a state of *nafs lawwama*. Naming and including the pathway from *nafs lawwāma* to *nafs mutma'inna.*in treatment plans may offer Muslim women access to mental health support aligned with their spiritual beliefs. Pargament et al.'s (1998) classifications of religious coping methods into positive and negative coping highlighted how distinguishing between the two could contribute to success in psychological therapy. Identifying and integrating client's positive religious coping strategies such as client's reframing of the stressor as a way to connect with Allah offers the possibility of scaffolding traditional psychological interventions with religious interpretations of distress. Conversely, identifying client's negative religious coping may offer clinician's a deeper understanding of the maintenance of rumination or internal conflict and harmful core beliefs (Pargament et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important for services engaged in working with Muslim women to consider their spirituality as integral to mental health interventions.

Participants' experiences of the boxing gym as a paradoxical space (Rose, 1993) of one where there was both an embodied and emotional sense of gaining power, may have made it more possible to grapple with vulnerability in that space. It is possible that rather than experiencing the discomfort of a traditional therapeutic setting where the focus is on pathology and mental health difficulties, the setting of the boxing gym connected participants to their physical strength, which supported them in accepting their emotional vulnerability. Rather than expecting individuals to practice vulnerability from a position of disempowerment that structural inequalities and the service provision puts them in, it may be valuable to explore therapeutic approaches where empowerment precedes the therapeutic

intervention. Therefore, considerations of strategies to reduce the power imbalance in clinical settings as well as the utility of strengths-based approaches to amplify Muslim women's sense of agency may foster the capacity for vulnerability to support therapeutic intervention.

Participants' use of the word "therapeutic" or "therapy" in relation to describing their experience of boxing offers insight into key factors which may be important to consider in relation to developing mental health services which meet their needs. Participants narratives suggested that the stigma and judgment of seeking therapeutic intervention was something which made the privacy of boxing an easier option. This highlights the value of community-based creative strategies to mitigate stigma and approaches to supporting Muslim women's wellbeing, that goes beyond the boundaries of clinic walls. Their experiences of having their Islamic identity respected and welcomed in the gym, suggests that embodied inclusivity and respect for their spiritual identity is crucial to creating a conducive environment. Considering community psychology approaches to working with the Muslim female population may be valuable in addressing the double bind they face in terms of community judgment. It has been found to be valuable in offering a framework for working with marginalised populations in a way that emphasises value-based, collaborative and culturally-adapted provisions (Walker, Zlotowitz & Zoli, 2022).

Narratives of embodied resistance (Bobel & Kwan, 2011) revealed the importance of mental health professionals acknowledging the wider oppression faced by Muslim women which makes it challenging for these individuals to trust that therapeutic spaces will not replicate these harms. In consideration of Rozas's (2022) 3 C's which informed the ontological positioning of this study, it is hoped that the critical realist ontological approach in interrogating how Muslim women's experiences has raised the importance for clinicians to cultivate critical consciousness as an integral element of developing understanding of how services may be failing to meet the needs of the Muslim female community (Freire, 1973).

Honouring embodied resistance and positioning ourselves as allies who are not just culturally aware but committed to social justice and anti-oppressive practice by applying critical consciousness to interrogate how the coloniality of power may be operating in the NHS, is crucial to developing services that embody community in actions by being a home away from home, which address not just the individual distress but also the systemic injustices perpetrated upon this community.

Dissemination

This research will be presented at the annual School of Health and Social Care conference at the University of Essex to staff and students on the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology course. It will also be presented in the form of a ninety-minute-long interactive workshop at the Festival of Community Psychology conference to clinical psychologists, counselling psychologists as well as other professionals working in community settings.

I will be sharing the findings with the boxing gyms involved in recruitment and interviews for this research. At the request of participants, the story maps and summarised visual compilation of participants narratives will be disseminated to all of the participants. A number of clinical professionals working in multicultural settings with Muslim female clients as well as those interested in using somatic and movement-based interventions to adapt practice when working with Muslim clients have expressed interest in reading the final research. These professionals have been clinical psychologists, counselling psychologists, art therapists and psychotherapists, but the research could also be disseminated to community organisations involved in outreach work with Muslim women such as domestic violence charities, sports charities and boxing gyms. The hope would be for the dissemination to support the development of provision of mental health interventions better adapted to meet the needs of Muslim women as well as help community sports settings such as boxing gyms

understand the value of Muslim female inclusive spaces in nurturing the wellbeing of the community.

I plan to submit this study for publication in relevant journals to aid clinical practice as well as to contribute to culturally-competent practice in relation to meeting the needs of the Muslim female community. I might publish my study in the 'Community Psychology in Global Perspective Journal' or 'Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology'.

It is hoped that these findings may contribute to addressing the gap in Muslim women's mental health provision through informing service providers and policymakers. Given the global and local context of the rise in Islamophobia and hostility towards racialised migrants, developing preventative approaches to nurturing the wellbeing of the British Muslim female community is critical. This study advocates for preserving and protecting the provision of community organisations such as sports settings by raising awareness of the potential value of these spaces for the wellbeing of Muslim women.

Reflexivity

As a researcher in the boxing gym but also a female Muslim boxer in relation to my participants, I found myself occupying both an outsider and insider position. Similarly, as a researcher exploring boxing within the academic world of clinical psychology in the UK while having grown up in a vastly different context but also identifying with the professional identity as a trainee, I found a parallel mirroring of being in both an outsider and insider position. Some of my assumptions around movement were disproved by participants who were more comfortable in engaging minimally with the movement aspects of the interview. Upon reflection, movement may have been a personal bias as some online participants even found it easier to share difficult experiences with their cameras off at times during the interview. Writing about the impact of the coloniality of power, racism and injustice while

living in my own embodied intersectional experience as a racialised Muslim migrant in Britain has been painful and difficult to manage at times. As a Singaporean who has seen the legacy of colonialism in my country and then as a migrant who had to apply for indefinite leave to remain while applying for ethical approval of this study, the footprints of the coloniality of power remain fresh in my story. Unlike some of my participants however, my privilege of being from a higher social class has afforded me the economic power to migrate from Singapore and pursue a career as a clinical psychologist. I have been reminded of my status as an outsider in this land as well as an outsider in the world of clinical psychology, where Eurocentric medical models of healing dominate the conversation and issues of spirituality and cultural considerations are often relegated to an afterthought or footnote in academic settings.

The stories participants shared bore fragments of my own narrative, forming a mosaic reflecting back to me the beautiful and painful aspects of my own relationship to boxing, Islam and my embodied intersectionality. By integrating my identity as a boxer into my professional identity, I have found a way to make meaning of the lessons I learned in the boxing ring through transforming my boxing skills into a resource. Both the professional arena of clinical psychology and the arena of the boxing gym have represented paradoxical spaces to me, where I have drawn critical mobility from each to interrogate and challenge boundaries in the other. Boxing inspired my passion for advocating for movement-based approaches in my role as a trainee while the knowledge and power of training in this profession has led me to view my skills as a boxer in a new light as I draw on my fighting spirit to advocate for social justice and engage in activism.

Conducting this research and hearing participants' stories on the oppression of Islamophobia within the wider context of the Palestinian genocide (International Court of Justice, 2025) has weighed heavily on my soul. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) explained

the connection between Muslims as the Ummah being one body wherein if one part of the body is hurt, the whole body aches (Sahih Bukhari, Hadith: 6011). My *qalb* has been heavy with the weight of injustice I have borne witness to being inflicted on Muslims both in the UK and worldwide. Many of my interviews took place during the anti-migrant racist riots of Summer 2024, where I feared for my own safety as a migrant and racialised woman and felt guilty in the safety afforded to me in not being a hijabi. Through it all, the boxing bag in my gym brought relief to my *qalb*, *aql* and body and gave me a way to hold on to myself while sitting with my participants' stories. Similarly, my relationship with Allah has offered me hope and a sense of getting closer to my *Deen* through the process of this study. In many ways, writing this thesis has felt like my act of resistance and a small contribution towards being the change for other Muslim women.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Glossary of Islamic terms: From transliteration of The Holy Quran

1. Allah Subhanahu wa ta'ala (s.w.t): Arabic phrase meaning "Glorified and Exalted is He"

2. Akhlaq: One's morality

3. Adab: One's manners

4. Akhirah: Afterlife

5. Aqidah: The theological foundation of Islam

6. Aql: Intellect

7. Dunya: World

8. Fitra: One's inner moral compass

9. Hawa Nafs: Animal drives or one's instinctive drive

10. Haya: Modesty

11. Hajj: The pilgrimage to Mecca

12. Hijab: Head scarf

13. Ibadah: Worship

14. Muslim: one who submits to God

15. Nafs Ammāra: The compelling self

16. Nafs Lawwāma: The Remorseful self

17. Nafs Mutma' inna: The well pleasing, contented self

18. Niqab: Face veil

19. Niyyah: One's intention

20. Qadr: Divine decree

21. Qalb: Inner heart

22. Ruh: Spirit

23. Sabr: Patience

24. Salah: The five daily prayers

25. Sawm: Fasting from dawn to dusk in the holy month of Ramadan

26. Shahadah: The declaration of one's faith with conviction

27. Shaytan: Devil

28. Sunnah: The teachings and examples set by the Prophet (pbuh)

29. Tawazun: Balance and moderation

30. Zakat: Compulsory almsgiving

Appendix B

Critical Appraisal notes for articles in Systematic review

A majority of studies were methodologically robust, incorporating strategies to increase trustworthiness of research, such as inter-rater coding. Three studies had small sample sizes which limited external validity of findings. Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) study only had two participants and did not describe the demographic details of the participants to preserve

anonymity. Mahmood and Woodhouse's (2024) autoethnography only had one participant and Murray et al. (2015) only had eight participants. Two studies were conducted in Muslim majority countries which was a strength in terms of providing perspectives on the experiences of Muslim women engaging in sports without Islamophobia which highlighted the cultural misogyny at play.

Lack of researcher reflexivity was a limitation in the earlier studies. Researchers did not demonstrate adequate reflection on their involvement in all stages of research. Failure to engage in reflexivity can threaten validity of findings (CASP, 2018). For example, Walseth's (2006) assertion that participants' identity as a Muslim had limited influence on their sport involvement was not substantiated with evidence that this had been explored in the data collection. Additionally, Walseth and Fasting (2003) assumed levels of religiosity solely based on visible markers of modesty. Given the researchers' identities as a white female, this description brings the cultural competency of the researcher into question and alludes to the possibility of the findings being biased by Eurocentric lenses. Conversely, Thorpe et al. (2020) and Soltani (2021) demonstrated good research practice by addressing how their own identities intersect with the research and incorporating measures to support the validity of their findings.

A majority of the studies recruited participants from a single community or setting, which limited the transferability of the findings. Furthermore, both Tjonndal and Hovden's (2022) and Murray et al.'s (2015) participants were refugees, which add the possibility of traumatic experiences and sociopolitical tension interacting with experiences of sports participation. One major critique is that at least three (Miles & Benn, 2016; Murray et al., 2015; Walseth and Fasting, 2003) studies did not provide details of the physical activity participants were currently engaged in or if they were engaged in physical activity at all. The focus of Murray et al.'s (2015) and Koca et al.'s (2009) study was predominantly on barriers, which narrowed the lens of capturing their holistic experiences of sports participation. Murray et al. (2015), Miles and Benn (2016) and Lenneis and Pfister (2017) only stated that a few participants were currently engaging in physical activity with no further details. It might be hypothesised that perhaps the sample of participants currently engaging in sports being in the minority in these studies meant that they were unable to capture the full breadth of Muslim women's experiences of sports. This may explain why only seven out of nine concepts were present in Miles and Benn's (2016) and Lenneis and Pfister's (2017) studies. Additionally, the explicit focus of Murray et al.'s (2015) study was on barriers and facilitators for physical activity of

Muslim women in San Diego which is why only six out of nine concepts were present in this study.

Furthermore, Koca et al.'s (2009) study reported that the interviews were between twenty minutes to sixty minutes and while 47 were in focus groups, only 20 took part

in individual interviews. The process of selection of participants for individual interviews was not made transparent, which may have led to bias in the findings. Murray et al.'s (2015) use of photovoice methods to overcome language barriers and empower participants was a strength. However, the use of photos may have reflected a lack of culturally awareness as Islam guidance prohibits faces being captured on photographs, which was not mentioned or accounted for in the methods. Soltani (2021) demonstrated good triangulation of data through interviews, participants' photography and participant observation. However, details of how the data from self-directed photography and participant observation was not made explicit. Furthermore, while the aim of the study was to illustrate the diverse ways Muslim women take to participation in aquatic leisure activities, a bulk of the findings placed emphasis on barriers to participation rather than experiences of being in the water. Levels of participation in sports varied across the studies, with some papers lacking transparency in reporting how many participants were currently engaging in sports, if any. Some studies included participants' reflections on retrospective participation while other studies were predominantly interviewing participants on current experiences of engagement in sports.

One major issue across of the majority of the studies is the paucity of research explicitly focused on exploring Muslim women's experiences of sports. Instead, a number of the studies, particularly the older studies, reflect a hyperfixation of the Western world on the hijab, which is reflected in the findings of these papers. While a number of these studies emphasise that Islam encourages sports, the findings still conceptualise the hijab as a barrier and centres the discussion around the barriers faced by Muslim women in accessing sports, leaving little room for capturing their individual experiences of the activity.

Several studies did not provide details on participant's frequency of sports participation or the type of sports engaged in. In order to mitigate the lack of studies based on direct interviews capturing the voices of Muslim women, the definition of sports participation was expanded to include physical activity participation. While physical activity participation in group settings bears some similarities to sports participation, the experiences of each varies in terms of level of interaction with others and sense of belonging gained. This flexibility in the definition of

sports engagement is both a strength and limitation of this meta -ethnography as it captured a wide breadth of experiences as well as common concepts. However, the variance may impact the validity of themes drawn.

Murray et al. (2015) strength in using photovoice to elicit community views

Some studies didn't consider power dynamics in role of researcher

Carr and Power (2020) only focus groups, why no individual interviews?

Walseth (2006) wide range of sports, dancing, street basketball, handball, football, field hockey, self-defence, swimming, skating and gymnastics

Strength, distinguished between expressivity-based sport communities that contribute to identity confirmation and image building and traditional sport communities

Weakness- doesn't say what method of analysis was used

Doesn't mention role of researcher and doesn't explain the suggestion that all participants were not bothered by presence of men

Lenneisand Pfister- more focus on social class, less attention given to embodied intersectionality. Data analysis, did not mention what type and used inductive/deductive? They guessed the themes beforehand? Why?

Says they considered the impact of religion without outlining religious principles, rather focused on religion as a cultural construct. Studies done in an outdoor setting were more focused on the external gaze and the emphasis placed on the veil and modesty and patriarchal limitations. Studies done in a mosque based specific setting were more centred on Islamic concepts

Appendix C

Recruitment Flyer

MUSLIM WOMEN IN BOXING

Hi, my name is [REDACTED] and I am a Trainee Clinical Psychologist at the University of Essex. I am a Muslim woman who has participated in boxing and coached other Muslim women. I would like to hear the stories of Muslim women and what boxing has brought to your lives.

You do not need to have competed in boxing or be an expert in it, if you have simply attended sessions and would be happy to share what it was like for you, I would love to hear from you.

There are few inclusive spaces for Muslim women (Muslimahs) to engage in physical activities such as boxing in the UK. Research has shown the multitude of benefits of boxing for both physical and mental health. I would like to expore how boxing classes are experienced by Muslim women and how it impacts their lives beyond the gym to capture the importance of creating more inclusive spaces for Muslim women to participate in sports.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO FIND OUT MORE CONTACT

email [REDACTED]
Ph [REDACTED]

ERAMS NUMBER: ETH2223-1524

I AM LOOKING FOR WOMEN WHO IDENTIFY AS MUSLIM, BETWEEN THE AGES OF 18 TO 65 YEARS OLD, WHO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN BOXING CLASSES

What does taking part in this study involve?

You will be asked to participate in an individual interview, either in person or online. This interview will take one hour. You will be asked questions about how boxing has made you feel and affected your life.

If you consent to an in person interview, I will be using a sensory ethnographic approach to interviewing you. This will involve us walking around the empty gym room, where your classes take place during the interview. I will be asking you questions about the sensory experience of touching the punching bag and putting on your handwraps to understand how both your body and mind feel when you take part in boxing. I will also be observing one of the classes you take part in.

For the online interviews, I will adapt the sensory ethnographic questions by asking you to picture the gym space in your mind and invite you to put on your handwraps and gloves during the interview.

What will happen with the stories I share in my interview?

Your identity will be kept confidential as the stories you share will be anonymised. I will then write a research report which will include all the stories that have been shared with me to be submitted to the University of Essex as part of my doctorate in Clinical Psychology.

Appendix D

Participant Information Sheet

University of Essex

<u>Participant Information Sheet for Research Project: Breaking out of the box- Muslim women's experiences in boxing gyms</u>

Dear participant,

My name is Shiren Goush and I am a trainee clinical psychologist at the department of Health and Social Care at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

We are investigating what boxing brings to the lives of Muslim women in the UK and how engaging in boxing impacts their lives beyond the gym. This is so that we may develop a better understanding of how of inclusive spaces for Muslim women to engage in sports interacts with their sociocultural identities.
The project will run over the course of a year. This study is being undertaken as part of fulfillment of the requirements of the doctorate in clinical psychology program.

What does taking part in the research involve?

You will be observed during your boxing class by the lead researcher, Shiren Goush. She will take notes through drawings and words capturing her observations of your experiences during the class. You will also be asked some questions on how you feel before and after a boxing session, which should only take a few minutes. Finally, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview with Shiren Goush where you will be asked questions on what boxing means to you and what changes you have noticed in your life since you started taking part in boxing classes. This interview will be audio-recorded and notes will be taken. If you consent to an in-person interview, the researcher will be using a sensory ethnographic approach to interviewing you. This will involve walking around the empty gym room, where your classes take place during the interview while the researcher asks you questions about the sensory experience of touching the punching bag and putting on your handwraps to understand how both your body and mind feel when you take part in boxing. For the online interviews, I will adapt the sensory ethnographic questions by asking you to picture the gym space in your mind and invite you to put on your handwraps and gloves during the interview

Do I have to take part?

There is no obligation to take part in the study. It's entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If publications or reports have already been disseminated, these cannot be withdrawn, however, these will only contain anonymised or aggregated data. If you decide to participate in the study and then change your mind in the future, you can withdraw at any point, even after the data has been collected.

What information will be collected?

The data will be collected in the form of audio recordings and interview transcripts. The information will be anonymous with no identifiable information following the interviews. The data collected will be transcribed and stored securely in a Box folder secured drive. The audio recordings captured will be transcribed and anonymised after the interviews and stored for up to 10 years after the completion of the project, should you agree to take part. At the end of the period, the electronic files will be deleted permanently from the secure Box drive.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

The answers which you provide will be recorded through audio recording and notes taken by the interviewer. All information collected will be kept securely and will only be accessible by myself and my supervisor. Data will be anonymised and if data which you provide is used in any publications or reports then a participant number or pseudonym will be used and identifying details will be removed. A list may be kept linking participant numbers or pseudonyms to names, but this will be kept securely and will only be accessible by myself and my supervisor. A copy of the information which we record about you, but not other participants, will be provided, free of charge, on request.

University of Essex

You will not be asked provide your name but you may be asked to provide some demographic information for analysis purposes. Data collected through this questionnaire will be aggregated and you will not be individually identifiable in any reports or publications from this research. In the instance that the information shared during your interview leads me to believe that there is a risk of harm to yourself or others around you, I have a duty of care to inform the appropriate authority.

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you would like to take part in this study, please contact me, Shiren Goush via the email provided below. The results of this study will be submitted to the examiners' board at School of Health and Social care at the University of Essex as part of the fulfilment for the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Program. It may also be published as a research paper or presented at conferences in the future. The results will be anonymised and will not contain any identifiable information linking you to the data.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Essex Ethics Sub-Committee 2. This study is compliant with GDPR guidelines which outline the legal basis for processing data. The legal basis for processing data in this study is via informed consent. The Data Controller for this study is the University of Essex University Information Assurance Manager ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

If you have any concerns about any aspect of the study or you have a complaint, in the first instance please contact the principal investigator of the project, Shiren Goush, using the contact details below. If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, please contact the departmental Director of Research in the department responsible for this project, Camille Cronin ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ Please include the ERAMS reference which can be found at the foot of this page.

We would be very grateful for your participation in this study. If you need to contact us in future, please contact me at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or Dr Danny Taggart at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

You are welcome to ask questions at any point.

Yours,
Shiren Goush

Appendix E

Consent form

University of Essex

Consent Form

Title of the Project: Breaking out of the box- Muslim women's experiences in boxing gyms

Research Team: Shiren Goush, Dr Danny Taggart and Caitlin Phillips

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the Information Sheet dated 20/11/2023 for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these questions answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without giving any reason and without penalty. I understand that any data collected up to the point of my withdrawal e.g. will be destroyed; cannot be withdrawn because it cannot be identified.

3. I have been given full information about the study and contact details of the researcher(s).

4. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely stored and accessible only to the members of the research team directly involved in the project, and that confidentiality will be maintained.

5. I understand that my fully anonymised data will be used for fulfilling the assessment criteria for the doctorate in Clinical Psychology in the form of a research paper and may be used for future research publications.

6. I understand that the data collected about me will be used to support other research in the future, and may be shared anonymously with other researchers.

University of Essex

7. I give permission for the researcher to make audio recordings and transcriptions of the interview

8. I consent to participating in the sensory ethnographic interview which will involve me physically walking around the gym space with the researcher and putting on my handwraps, gloves and touching the punching bags

9. I consent to being observed by the researcher while I take part in one of my boxing sessions

10. I agree to take part in the above study

Participant Name   Date   Participant Signature

_____   _____   _____

Researcher Name   Date   Researcher Signature

_____   _____   _____

Appendix F

Brief informal interview questions

Participants were encouraged to share the sensory aspects of their experience through exploring what it feels like in their bodies before and after sessions. Particular focus was given to how it felt to hold the equipment required to engage in boxing i.e.; putting on handwraps, slipping hands into gloves, holding the skipping rope, taking off the headscarf to change into workout clothes and how it interacts with their identity.

-How does it feel when you're warming up/enter the gym/ skipping/punching

-Where do you feel it in your body?

-How do you feel before and after the session?

-What images come to mind?

Appendix G Interview Guide

Semi Structured Interview Schedule

Themes to cover

-relationship to Islam

Gender identity within Islam

-Relationship to boxing

Gender identity within boxing

How boxing has fit within their identity as a Muslim woman

How boxing has fit within their identity as a wife/mother/daughter/community in the Mosque

Start of interview

- Emphasis consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw
- Explanation of how responses don't necessarily have to be verbal, they can respond with movement or drawings if preferred and how interview will incorporate visual approaches
- Set a time limit
- Any questions before proceeding?

Flow of movement around the gym (I will do this with them), let them take the lead as much as possible

Invite them to take me around the space the way they move through

-start with putting on handwraps

-demographic information

-then walk around the space together

-putting on gloves/related questions

-moving around the space more

-Punching bag sensory questions

-stretching/ cooldown questions

Opening questions

- How long have you been attending boxing classes and what was your journey into boxing?
- What made you decide to go to your first boxing class?

- How does participating in the class make you feel?
- What images come to mind when you think of participating in the class?

Example situation

Are you able to think of a time when you have noticed how what you've learned in the gym has shown up in other areas of your life outside the gym?

- Can you give me an example?
- What happened in this situation?
- Would this situation have played out differently for you before boxing?
- What specifically about the classes and being in the gym do you think might have created this change?
- Did anyone else notice this change?
- How have others reacted to it?
- How did you respond emotionally to this?
- What was the outcome?

Broader experience

- What images come to mind when you think of participating in the class?

- What words or movements come to mind as you walk around this gym with me?

- How do you feel whenever you put on your handwraps?

- What do you think about when you're wrapping your hands/putting on your gloves?

- What do you feel inside or think about whenever you put your hands up to defend yourself?

- Where in the gym did you stand when you first started attending these classes? Where do you stand now?

- What image or feeling comes up in your mind when you're shadowboxing?

- What spaces in your life make you feel most like all parts of your identity as a Muslim woman has space?

- Which spaces/places in your life make you feel like you can be most yourself?

- Has attending these classes changed your relationship to Allah/Islam in any way? If so, how?

- Has attending these classes affected your relationship with yourself/ your family/ your community? If yes, how?

- What have been your family's or community's responses to you doing boxing?

- How has learning boxing made you feel more connected to: Allah/your family/ others/ yourself?

- Do you take off your hijab/niqab when you're boxing? What does it feel like to have a space other than home and the mosque where you can do that? If you don't take it off, why not?

- How has boxing changed how you feel about yourself?
- When you're punching the bags/ when you put on your boxing gloves, what do you think about?
- What would you like to tell a sister who has never done boxing about your journey through boxing?
- How has your relationship to taking part in boxing changed over time?
- If they have stopped boxing- why did you stop boxing? What made it hard to continue?
- Are there any changes you have noticed in your life due to participating in boxing that made life harder for you?
- Could you draw a shape for me to represent how much space you felt you had in your life to be yourself before attending boxing
- Now draw a shape to represent how much space you feel you have in your life since you've attended boxing, or feel free to draw your own shape.
- Is there anything else you'd like to share with me about what boxing classes mean to you?
- If someone says they feel empowered you can ask how it compares to other areas/ spaces in their lives
- How does doing boxing fit with the stories of women warriors in the Hadith for you?
- What did you know about boxing when you were younger, did it feel like it was something you could do growing up as a Muslim girl?
- If they have family support- what do you think made your family supportive of you doing boxing?
- If they don't- how do you cope with your family being against it?
- Something about how boxing fits with the stereotypes others hold about muslim women

Appendix H

Example Anonymised Transcript

Anonymised interview transcript 1- Hafsa

29/06/2024

Researcher (R) - Thank you so much for being here today, its so nice to meet you. I will start with introductions so you know a bit more about me and what to expect from today…My name is Shiren, I'm a trainee clinical psychologist and this research is part of my doctorate in clinical psychology. I'm doing this research because I'm interested in Muslim women's experiences of boxing and there isn't much research supporting Muslim women's wellbeing.

So before we start chatting, I just wanted to explain that anytime during the interview, any images come up for you, like basically feel free to doodle and for some answers if you don't feel like you have a verbal answer but you have something you can draw out, not asking you to like be an artist and just literally can be a stickman or anything but if you just feel like that's an easier way to answer a question, go for it. I will also be inviting you to do boxing movements while we chat, which is optional if you'd rather stay seated, it's fine to let me know and not do the movements. I also wanted to let you know that if at any point you'd like to withdraw and end the interview, you are allowed to. Does that all sound ok?

H- Yeah, Ok

R- So as explained before, I will be guiding you through the boxing workout to explore how you feel when you're boxing. What do you think of when you put on your handwraps when you're about about to start boxing?

H- it gets me in the mindset of this is what I'm about to do, you're getting into the mindset and you're going for it on the bags

R- So I just wonder if maybe we can start by thinking about…how do you get into boxing? How long have you been attending boxing classes and what was your journey into boxing?

H- Umm, it was back way before I started my GCSE's and I think my mum saw an advert for it and it was like it was very it was like a new concept we've never seen a like a Muslim ladies only boxing class so my mum was very excited about it and got me and my sister start it and we'd been wanting to like do things with like like self-defence kind of like classes for quite a few years back then and nothing ever came to our attention umm and then so obviously when when it was ladies only, we started straight away on the first class and it was, it was amazing.

It was umm yeah, I mean, I straight away from the first first class how we like everyone was so like friendly and social and like it just became a little like a like a family away from, you know, home, like everyone got on well and everyone was ummm yeah, just so happy and like you know, able to like learn together and we all started….a lot of us never had an opportunity to do anything with self defense or like gym, anything like that, just because there wasn't many opportunities with ladies only classes. So everyone, just like, you know, started with like hardly any experience with in terms of that and then we all like became really close and learning, learning together and having fun and enjoying the classes.

(H is talking very quickly)

R- Yeah, also don't feel like you have to use formal language. It's only me and my supervisors listening to this recording, so don't feel like you have to speak as if you're on TV or anything. You might feel a bit nervous. Probably because this is a weird thing to do. Yeah, but it's just a chat between us, OK? And also don't feel like you have to use like proper English. Yeah, don't feel like you have to speak formally too. I was wondering if maybe you'd like shadowbox while we chat through this bit?

So I guess what did it feel like, if you remember, when you first heard about the women's boxing class like, what sort of images came up in your head or…..Just came up when your head, or because I know you said like you were such a novel concept when you've never been to one before.

H-Uh, I mean, I was really excited for like the new chapter, like being able to take part in it. But I remember the first day I was really nervous. I was really nervous to come into it. I think just because it was something I never done before and like even though I think even like the simple things of like socializing with new people, getting to know a whole new group of people and like and then at that point I didn't know, like what if I was the only person who who's never done boxing before? I think it was just like a mix of things and like, yeah, I think like learning a whole new skill was just nerve wracking at the time and like, "God, what if I didn't know what what to do."

R-so what's coming to mind while you're doing the shadowboxing? What's coming up in your head? How are you feeling? You can keep moving while talking?

H- umm I mean umm it's bringing back like, umm like being able to like be more aware of my body and like having that like level of control over my body and being aware of how my body works as in like, and like wanting to like…and wanting to learn more…like learn more like if someone were to attack me I feel more like that I'll be able to like…fight

R- And yeah, and I guess there's something you said about like that being a space there when there wasn't a space there before for Muslim women and do you think that maybe? But I guess I was wondering around what did it feel like? You mentioned that you wanted to self-defence before, was there a reason behind that or you said a lot of other Muslim ladies want to do self-defence too?

H-I think it's, I mean with with the community, especially like we live in, I think is there's a lot of like wanting your teenagers to learn so parents feel safer with us walking around and doing stuff to go around with our friends? Things like that and then I think it would just stop with parents to not be as stressed with us becoming more independent and but also for us it was umm we also wanted to feel more safe in like leaving the house and I think like learning self-defence just because of that extra level of safety. I feel like it gives us a lot more confidence that "no, I am strong." "I am like I am able to look after myself."

I'm if somebody tells like if somebody tells me "oh you're just a weak girl." I'd be like "no, like no, I can look after myself." I think it gives a lot of confidence.

R- How long were you boxing before you started thinking like… I am strong, I am confident. Was it right away?

H- I mean, I think there was an instant like I feel part of a community. I feel I feel like part of something. Like, yeah, I feel like I belong for sure. I think that was quite instant straight away, like how everyone got to and like got on so well when we was straight away having fun with the class. But then feeling confident in myself and feeling that like I didn't like that strength building up. I mean I'm, I mean, I think that was soon after, maybe like weeks, I think so. Yeah. And then like, even I I think within weeks I was at home saying ohh, I want to eat healthier, I feel stronger. I think it was. I think it was quite fast actually, which is shocking to me because normally it would take like…..I mean its once, 1 hour a week? You'd think you'd be like months, but I think it was like pretty soon after yeah.

R- And was it something you did then want to talk about and share with your family and friends?

H- Ohh yeah yeah for sure there. I was quite excited. I mean, I have four younger brothers, so I was like teaching them whatever I learned in the classes as well. So I think yeah, even like like getting stronger like relationship with my siblings as well because yeah, like going home and being like, "well, this is what I learned in boxing today" and then teaching them like boxing skills and them getting excited as well.

And then like like later on, that would like that even made them want to take part in like more like gym and they started to take part. Yeah, they've like the oldest one he did boxing for a bit, but now he he lives in ███████ since a bit, but I think he he goes to his own gym I think. But yeah, I think it did. Did play a part in him when to to go to the gym and do self defense, boxing and things like that as well, which is actually quite amazing. I've never thought about that before.

R- You impacted your family, it sounds like it. Then, and I guess there's so many things I'm thinking about, but one of it- I wanted to ask, do you think it made people see you differently?

H- Umm, I think no actually yes, because me before boxing. I was very shy. I I I don't. I mean, even in school like my, I think this was in year 10. I think before year 10, I didn't…like my relationship even my friends were not that strong.

I was, I didn't feel confident with like I I wouldn't go home and be like "this is my best friend."

But then yeah, I think like post boxing, I was much more confident, able to like be more myself, able to have stronger relationship with my friends and my family. Yeah, I think I was quite a different person afterwards. Way more way more, I think confidence is like a big thing. I was way more confident so and able to ….

R- How did that confidence then translate to your friendships? I know we're digging quite deep, like, how would it show up in a friendship situation or what were you doing differently that then created those stronger friendships?

H- I think it's like, you know, like how like I can only think of it as like you know, posture to like before

R- Well yeah, if you wanna do a movement or something, feel free to.

H- Yeah, like I think before, I could just imagine myself before boxing. I was more of a like hiding myself away.

R- Like curled up?

H- Yeah, just like putting myself into like, the smallest little ball. Like not putting myself out there and then post boxing, I was just more of like, you know, open so open to, like, take up more space. Yeah, I was able to take up more space,

R- Do you want to draw what that looked like? Like you, you don't have to.

(H is drawing silently for 20s)

H- I just feel like I was just more like, yeah, bigger in myself, able to take up more space and like, not afraid to. Yeah, not afraid to speak up.

R- Yeah, you almost were able to show people who you are? Yeah, and not be nervous about how they would receive it.

H- Yeah, yeah, yeah, 100%. And then yeah, I think that's like a big thing.

And then, yeah, and then I think like that, I feel stronger and more confident. I was able… that just builds into that that. Yeah, I was able to take up more space and not be scared of what people would perceive me as.

R- Has it gotten anything to do with you being able to see yourself more clearly through boxing? I I guess because what you're saying is that before you were, like kind of (points to drawing) and then yeah, and after boxing, you were able to be like, take me as I am. So yeah, was there a process like parallel to that of kind of getting to know yourself that was happening that maybe you're more able to be like, this is who I am?

H- I think so. I think so. Like I think before that I didn't really give myself the time or like to get like I didn't give myself time to like get to know myself. I was just like, oh, I'm, I'm just shy person. Like I like or I I don't really know which part of myself I like. But then after that I was able to like go through the process of like learning about myself. It would be like, well, I do know I like this part of myself and and I can build on this. It was more of yeah, like I think it it did play a big part of my self-development and like oh, ok, If I don't like this part of myself, not necessarily like but like I can listen yeah, I can work on it and this is how I can build it and keep becoming better rather than just ohh I don't like myself and I'll just stay in this little bubble.

R- what do you think of when you're punching the bags?

H- umm I feel very strong and powerful and I feel like anything, whatever comes in my life I can just take it on, it's possible

R- do you feel like indestructible?

H- yeah! Yes! I feel indestructible. Yeah I feel so strong and like my whole body is coming alive, and all the energy and all is just coming out.

R- where in the gym did you stand when you first started classes and has it changed over time?

H- Yeah I think when I started I used to always try and hide behind everyone so like I would be like at the edge of the gym or at the back or whatever where I could hide away. But now umm I'm happy to be right at the front or right in the middle of the gym wherever. I'm able to enjoy the session the most that I can.

R-Do you feel like all the space is your space?

H- yeah yeah…yeah I feel like I can be wherever I want right? And I enjoy the sessions most that I can.

R- Yeah. If at any point I say something that feels like ohh no, I don't think that's right. Just tell me. But you know, like how in boxing you kind of face up to what's coming rather than, you know, turning away or hiding. Do you think that's kind of what was happening with the way you started to face up to who you were? So you can then see who you are and who you're not, but then also because of all the hard work you're putting in boxing of, like learning that hard work does lead to something….What's on your mind now, what are you feeling? (While K is punching the bag)

H- very very powerful I could take anything on right now. I have so much energy! Even though technically you should be getting tired I just feel more energy and more energy and more alive!

H- I believe so yeah, I mean thinking about it now, I've never I I don't think I've ever thought about it this deeply. But I do believe that it's true because yeah, I mean, boxing… boxing like even like all the small things like that. Like you don't think about it while you're doing it in boxing, but it makes such a big difference in your life like learning how to like at the beginning, you don't. You you don't even know how to like confidently wear a boxing glove. But like from from going from that to like being able to like do a whole like a boxing class and being confident and being strong and people being like, wow, your punches are so strong. And when I learn from my coach like that change is just amazing. And like that, just feeds into our life umm and teaches us so much strength and perseverance. And yeah, whatever struggle comes our way, like we, we know that we can get through it. If you got through, we can learn like, you know, we learn that in boxing and now we could bring that into our life as well.

R- Ohh, I guess I was thinking about how you said, you know, in your family then that improved your relationships and also how you said like a lot of Muslim women, they don't get space to do these things. Do you feel like boxing has changed the way you see your identity as a Muslim woman in any way, but like what you're able to do, or how has that interacted? I guess that's what I'm trying to understand.

H- Umm, I mean, I think there's a lot of stigma with Muslim women having it's not not being strong or not being, not going out there and learning like let's say self-defence or something that makes them stronger. But I think this is a big thing that proves that no, when we are given the opportunity like of like we want to just for our own comfort, we want it to be ladies only when we are when we are given those opportunities for ladies only classes we do take it up, we do take part and we become really strong in ourselves and our and like and I think that um…..

Both lose track about what we're talking about and trail off…

R- How long have you been boxing? And how old are you?

H- I'm 23. And uhhh, I think it's about 15 years old. Yeah 15 or 16. Umm so from about 15 to about 20, I think I was pretty like every, every week I was going and I was very regular with it. Hardly ever taking breaks off but then after from about 20 to 23 with work and things I've been in and out of boxing. And I think there in there somewhere, there's about a year or so that I didn't go boxing at all just because I got into alot of work and and with my shift pattern and things, I just got very lazy, which is my fault. And then I think the last time I was boxing, I think it's been like a couple of months maybe since everything happened. Yeah, I think it's been a good couple of months that I just haven't gone again.

R- Could you tell me a little bit more about your professional journey and what that's been like and I guess has anything you've learned from boxing kind of, how have you noticed it showing up in your work?

H- I believe so. I mean, I I've never liked thought about. I think I think if I did, didn't have boxing. I think because I boxed before I started work, I think I would have just been such a different person. Not not being as like like able to voice my opinions like with nursing I need to be like authoritative. I need to like speak up when I need to for my patients. I need to and then and then yeah, I need to face my challenges. Like if if something's like too. Yeah, not right or too scary or "Oh my gosh, I've never seen that". Yeah, because nurses are not always at the top, so you're having to challenge having to change things.

And yeah, and some people take their umm…. even though in in healthcare is not supposed to be a hierarchy, they do make it one. There's depending on where like I would say doctors uh have, like, done their training it it can, it can play a part and then you just be like," absolutely not.

you can't.". I mean like you have to you have to like learn how to be strong in yourself, to like, speak up and say "I don't. I I'm not OK with that like tone, let's say when you speak to me", you have to be able to do that.

Luckily, I haven't had to deal with doctors being like that with me, but there is certain nurses with certain personalities that I've had to speak up and and that even like patient's parents, because I work with children. When parents were being and like like there, they be hard in terms of like they be trying to challenge us and like make out that we're doing wrong things and we're just like, "who's the nurse here?"

R- So I think it's what you said about taking up space and yeah, exactly, knowing that you have the right to take up space.

H- Yeah, and not allowing them to make me feel less than and being like, no, I I know what I'm talking about. I am strong. I'm I am qualified in this and competent. Competent so. So I'm I'm so you know, I I'm not gonna just take whatever they say say to me. I I am gonna. I was gonna say fight back, but not not fight back.

R- Yeah, but yeah, in a mentally and yeah, you kind of stand your ground with with boxing, yeah.

K- Which I I believe did come a lot from boxing. Because before then I I was a very shy person. So I think I think it's just I remember how quiet I was. Oh my God, I think I was shaking on the first day. I was so nervous. But then my coach spent extra time giving me tips and coaching me. Things like that makes such a big difference. I was like, wow, my coach wants to spend extra time with me. Well, yeah, I think it it that even like that built so much more confidence cause like it's not normal for like coaches to spend extra time with you. So like, I'm just like I must be a bit important or like, nice.

It was really nice that you just you know how, like the impact the coach made with all of us, how, it wasn't like, it wasn't like, like she's like our like….not boss. Because you know what our boss, but like she's not like a coach that's just like really strict with everyone in that we don't feel like it wasn't like very strict, she actually cared about us as people. So yeah, yeah, I think it makes such a big difference. Like the way that like we got coached from her for a few years or however many years, it was quite a few years. But like the impact she made in like where like I I would call her a friend for the rest of my life I think and like I think she's made that impact with like the whole class used to be like so close that even if we haven't spoken for months or year it's still gonna be like when we do meet up yeah like it's still like when we're just the same community and it's such a big community.

R- Umm, I guess something else I'm trying to understand is do you think you would have felt the same if the activity had been different? Like if it had been football or some other thing? What's the special thing about boxing?

H- I think like if you compared to like football think that's just, I don't know. I think boxing, where it comes with like you're, you're learning so many different things, not just like with other sports like football. I think it's you do gain like strength from it over time. You do gain like team working skills and it's like more fun. You know, boxing is really fun as well….

R- I mean, that's how I'm trying to understand what's special about something from Muslim women.

H- Like I said, yeah, no, I think it boxing like it it has compared to other sports, it 100% makes us feel way more like stronger in ourselves like we can like we're able to like I don't know I I just can't really say much more than like we could take up more space where it would like. We just feel so much stronger.

R- I could suggest some ideas of what it could be. And then you can say no or yes? I guess is there something around being in what's not usually like football? Yeah, people won't really be as shocked if a woman plays football. Whereas it's a more male dominated sport? Yeah, as well as the idea of aggression, you know, kind of. Do you think that something around like boxing being something like violent or aggressive and that's almost like the furthest thing from what for what the culturally a Muslim woman should be or is told to be?

H- Yeah, I think there's something around that. That's actually, yeah, no, I agree. Because I remember when I like, did my first placement in a hospital, which was a long time, maybe like 6-7 years ago. And I mentioned I was doing boxing, but then I then I didn't realize that people would think like if I say boxing, I'm doing like professional boxing. But I just said I'm doing boxing and then everyone got so shocked and said "Ohh you should stop doing boxing. That's very or you're gonna. You're like you're gonna break your face in."

And also it's like everyone gets, yeah. No, I think if you mentioned that you're doing boxing, people get very shocked and think that you're doing something very aggressive and like, yeah or a little girl shouldn't be doing that. Its very dangerous. I I felt like "ohh, you think I'm doing something bad?" What made me feel even more powerful, that other people would, would never even consider it. And here I am like other people think I'm a quiet little like girl, but I'm doing boxing and I'm, you know, I'm enjoying it. And like you know, and I'm getting better every every week and getting stronger and like yeah, getting more confident and able to.

R- Is there something too around challenging stereotypes you think then of like what people think you should be or you are from looking at you and then saying well no there's something I do that isn't in whatever model that you try to fit me into?

H- Yeah. No, I think that's challenging stereotypes is really like a big thing as well, so everyone, a lot of people have like what if they think of like a Asian Muslim girl? They have a certain stereotype that they've got. They really have their set, like stereotypes or beliefs of what I'm my life looks like. And then when I be like, well, this is what I'm actually doing. I'm doing boxing. I'm not getting an arranged marriage. I'm I'm becoming a nurse and then it's just like "what?" (mimics shock on faces of others). And then and then their brain, just like all over the place like this is this isn't what I thought you would be like. And then, yeah, no, I think it's really powerful that I can do that. And then, yeah, and I think no, I actually like with me being able to break stereotypes with my boxing, now I'm even I think that another way it's coming to my work. I'm like, well the another like I can also break stereotypes, by becoming a nurse and then not just by becoming a nurse, but like going as high as I will be able to in

my future career and then, you know, be like this Pakistani hijabi is is a senior nurse. Inshallah.

R- And so do you think it's made you more motivated and like push made you feel like you can achieve more like more is available and accessible to you like you don't have to settle?

H- Yeah, for sure for sure. I'm not, I don't feel like all I should just like, "White people don't believe in me, so I'm just gonna just just do the bare minimum and just get in with it."

No, I'm just like I I am motivated and passionate about it, and I'm gonna keep fighting and keep doing as much as I possibly can and get as high as I can. And I'm gonna break stereotypes and and, you know, prove that being a hijabi, being Asian, being Muslim doesn't mean that I'm gonna be quiet in a corner. It doesn't mean that I'm gonna stay at home or, you know, fulfil whatever stereotypes.

R- What are the other stereotypes that you feel are on you?

H- I mean, I think there's even, I mean, even in work, I'm even when I'm in my uniform, at work, in nursing, people do ask strange questions like "oh is your parents getting like gonna get you married off soon?" And you know, I'm just saying, no, I don't think so. Like nobody asks, nobody asks the white women. Or like what white man gets asked, what is your parents gonna get you married off soon. So you're gonna get married next year, or the year after? It's honestly so odd. No as far as I'm aware my parents haven't mentioned anything about me getting married. I'm kind of focused on my work here. I think like that's the main thing that shocks me, but umm what else. I don't know, I think like. I can't remember anything in particular.

R- I want to say if any of these questions, if you remember something later that you just wanna say it, feel free to.

H- Yeah, I might remember later.

R- When it comes up, don't feel like you have to answer in any sort of structure, I'm not asking questions in any structure. Yeah, I guess the other thing is how…. before boxing, do you think you felt constrained by the stereotypes? Were you aware of the stereotypes put on you or how did it feel in terms of thinking about what's thought about you or because it sounds like what you're saying is there were boxes and you felt like you had to fit into the box, it might not have been a box, it might have been a very cramped space or something.

H- Yeah. I mean, I think as a teenager, I didn't…..ahh, I mean, I went, I went to a like a girl's only Muslim secondary, so I don't think I really realized what stereotypes were. I think like the main thing was like if you go out in the street as a as like a group of us hijabis like I knew there was people just like staring at us or like, maybe, like, whispering to each other. Or like just giving us weird umm you know, I was just like, yeah, people are racist, but I didn't know that like in like specifically what the stereotype was. I think I just wasn't very aware of like what people think of me.

R- Like different?

H- Yeah, I yeah, I think, yeah, like. And then the thought of like going into like a public. Like the space like public school or whatever afterwards was very different, like because I wouldn't have felt I like…like public school.

R- Did you go to a public school after that? Was it when you went into nursing?

K- I went to ████████████, which is a mixed for just one year. Ohh I didn't, I didn't enjoy it at all. Oh, but I think that's just more because I realized they didn't. That wasn't what I wanted. I chose biology, chemistry and maths. Yeah, I was trying to do it because I think like everyone just thinks you do, GCSEs, then A levels go to university. I mean, I was doing that and then I realized I was not what I wanted to do. So then I did my research….

R- Were you boxing at the time?

K- Yeah, I was.

R- Do you feel that you were able to say no, I don't want to do that was in any way influenced by boxing? It's alright if its not all. It doesn't have to be.

H- Ummm….I think it must have played a part because especially being the oldest sibling, I feel like you its very hard to go against the grain and just like do what you want.

Its like I felt like I had to do what was expected of me like, even even if my parents didn't make me feel like that, like, even like the community. Like everyone's like everyone like everyone goes to a levels and university and everyone else is doing fine. Why am I struggling? But then I was like, yeah, I think it it must have played a part. Like if I if I'm not enjoying a levels and that I I went ahead and started doing my research and what I could do instead, and then I found the apprenticeship route for nursing, which is absolutely it was perfect for me and I think yeah, the confidence and like being able to like say no, I'm gonna do what's best for me.

R- Yeah, yeah, it must have been also doing something different against the norm, that kind of was what you were doing with boxing.

H- Yeah. Yeah, it's not normal. It's not. It's not part of the normal thing for someone who wears a hijab. There's a sense maybe that once you step out of the norm once, it gets easier to do this? Breaking the norm going forward? Because then you've already done it once or twice, and then you can just keep doing it again and again. And you just like. Well, I've. I've I've done something that's not expected of me before now it is. So what's one more thing that I you know, people don't expect me to change that career path or whatever. But yeah, I can. I've done it before so I can do it again.

R- Yeah, yeah. That really resonates with me and my journey through boxing. Is there any image that comes to mind for it and you can say no for like what you were saying about that I've done it once so I can do it again or like the sense of like stepping out the of the norm? If there isn't, that's fine.

H- Ummmm…I don't know, I can only think of a….I'm not great with imagery, but I can only think of like I don't know, a ladder. So like like I don't know like….umm… (starts drawing) And so, like you start, start with that one level and then you you….it's really hard but you break out and then you might just go going flat for a while and then just like, you know, you just keep breaking out and then next time every step is easier. And then it just keeps getting easier and easier.

Yeah, I don't know if that's a good image at all, but I like. This is the hardest step. And then everyone and every step like gets easier and like is less force required to like, yeah, break out of it? It's a bit like when you start boxing and punching really hurts for quite long time, like your arms are just not used to that movement. And after awhile it just becomes flow. Yeah. Yeah, that's that's a good sign.

R- Like less resistance as you go, is what you're saying? Does the resistance get less or do you not? Basically does the resistance stay the same and you just don't care about it as much because you're getting stronger. Or is the resistance reducing if you get what I mean? Yeah, like as in like how hard the thing is is the same. But I'm like it's still the same level of hard to break is it? Is that what you're saying?

H- I think so. But like like but my strength and perseverance has got stronger. I think that's what it is.

R- Yeah. Yeah. And what is the resistance? Sorry if my questions are really abstract. What do you think that resistance is? Is it society? Is it your own self? You get what I mean? What's making it hard to break?

H- I think it's. I'm like thinking with umm….I think it's like being different and like its like stepping away from what other people… like

R- is it the fear?

H- Yeah, like the fear of like, yeah, fear of judgment, I think is a big thing or, like, fear of, like, disappointing others. Like let's say if I do something that my family don't wouldn't expect of me is like fear of that judgment or like or like even like older sister guilt plays a lot in my life, so like doing things that I'm just like, even though I feel guilty doing it as an older sibling and or I should, you know, do this and this and this, you know, putting myself as a second one, but then I shouldn't have to do that all the time. So yeah, there's a lot of guilt.

I think it's a very South Asian thing. We are. We yeah, I think we do tend to become as people pleasers quite a lot with, I think it's very much for South Asian females, I think men don't really care too much about what other people think about them actually. I mean, there's like a famous thing with us and that "what would others? What would other people think?" And like South Asians tend to live by that saying so much. And like where I think my generations like really trying to fight, you know, trying to break it and get away from that, because especially being Muslim is nothing that we shouldn't be living our life according to other

people, we should be caring more about what God thinks about us. So stop thinking about what people think about.

R- Where do you think that caring so much about what other people like, where does that come from for the women, do you think it's the men doing that?

H- I think women do it to women as just as much as like men might be doing it to women as well. I think there's a I'm not sure where it started, but the whole society….Yeah, I think the whole society is just just like has this thing where like….like the ladies have to be perfect all the time and like and then the and like, I think the easier thing to do would always be to like thinking about it, the whole community, I think it always easier to just keep going back to what's like the community, what they say, what's safe and like what they find is normal… more like what their parents did, what their community did back home.

So yeah, like for for example, if you see like older men and women this there's always gonna be umm like if if women want to do something different like" oh, I want to go to work or whatever." And then the man is like "wait, who's gonna look after the house?" for example. I don't know. This is very like generic but like then and then it's like they they. That's like that constant fight of, like, but then what people are gonna think. What, like, oh, you're leaving the house? By yourself? What people are gonna think if people randomly come to come to our house to like they they expect a full spread? Your house must be ready. All the food is supposed to be ready, anyone can turn up at like whatever time in the morning, whatever time of night and you're supposed to be like it's supposed to be perfect. Yeah. You're supposed to be treated like royalty and I think that's that's still like, even if you like, break away from that, obviously we're trying really hard, but I think like our generation is really trying hard to break away from that. But then I think, still subconsciously, but it's still there.

R- So even if you fight it for yourself, I think like being aware of it is hard.

H- Yeah being aware of it, so like if that if that thought starts coming in, it's very hard. But if that thought starts coming in and then you become aware of it and just like, no, I I I'm not. I'm not living my life according to what other people expect of me. So right this time I'm gonna. I'm finding a way I'm doing what I want to do, but then every time you realize that your thought patterns going towards that way to like fight it and come back.

R- Does the voice become softer over time, like compared to when you were a teenager, is the strength of the voice changing at all?

H- I think so. I think it it does get quieter and it and like I think it's like less regular as well.

So like the certain, I think they'll be like certain like big things in life that it it starts like the screaming a bit more. Then then, then the voice comes back a lot and louder. Like I'm still here but, but yeah. Yeah, but I think day to day it does get quieter and you're able to like able to become your own person a bit more, which is, yeah.

R- Do you think there was a time in your life, perhaps before boxing, where you thought that that voice was your own voice in your head? Was there a process of realizing that that voice wasn't your own voice?

H- I think so because like, I mean, as a teenager, I don't think I ever thought like like this is a thought, but I don't have to believe it because I I believe every single thought that I had every single like anything negative or anything like putting my putting myself down or anything like that. I100% believed everything that was coming into my head and anything that anybody said to me. I believed that I I don't think there's ever a point where I felt confident enough that somebody's somebody saying something negative to me. But no, I don't believe it. So I'm not gonna really like I'm not gonna live according to what they're saying to me, but but now, now I am able to recognize this is this is what I like. This is what I'm thinking. This is what I believe and then this is and then separately. This is the negative thinking coming in. Now I'm able to like separate them and choose what I believe I think.

R- Wow…did anything else other than boxing help you with that? What helped?

H- I mean, the main thing I've ever done is boxing. I think boxing and then like and then with that helping like me choose my career path and like the way I'm doing my training.
And then yeah, like working full time and being passionate about my job.

And like I think like the fulfilment I get from doing nursing and training to be a nurse and like like looking after children at their most sickest, I think that that makes me such a stronger person as well because if they trust me when they're the most sick and like parents are trusting me to look after their children as well, I think that builds those my like personality and like strength and confidence a lot as well. And if I could do that, I should be able to do anything.

R- How boxing changed…has boxing impacted your mental health in any way?

H- Ohh for sure for sure. I mean, before, before boxing. I mean, I didn't obviously being a teenager, I didn't know anything about mental health. I mean one one time I umm….I think it was in year 10. So it's probably, I'm not sure. Maybe like just before boxing or around the time of starting boxing. A teacher, was asking a question and I I said to the person sitting next to me what what I would have said to the teacher, but then she said. And then the student said to me "oh, you should put your hand up and say it to the teacher."

And I was like, absolutely not. I would never ever do that. No chance, don't even mention that again, absolutely not! And then she's like, "do you have anxiety?" And I was like, what's anxiety? I've like never ever ever heard of such a word before. And then from that I started, I went home and I started researching what anxiety was.

And then a few years later, I realized there was like a then…..then I was trying to like like, research on anxiety and depression…I I thought there was the same and then a few years later I realized they're completely opposites, completely different. And then I was like, I thought I had both, so I thought it was similar, but no. Then I realized I I think it was about 18 or 19, if I have both, that means I actually have both. It's not like a mixed state. They're very different, very different things. So like I think it it did like I started like doing my own research and realizing what mental health means and like you know what what do I think I have? Like what symptoms I have? And then like coping mechanisms and like what I can do to help myself, you know, like even breathing exercises and not just, you know, like before, I didn't

know what it was, I was, I was just living with it and thinking that I'm just crazy, but then after that I was able to. I was able to like by doing research and like you know, know more about myself. But like how we were saying, like boxing made me like, more aware of myself. And like, you know, learning more about myself, things like that. So I think that played a big part with the.

So like I was, you know, sitting there thinking about like, well, this is the thought process I have, this is this is what I struggle with and then like instead of just living with it.

R- Was there a sense of being able to think more clearly as well? Because it sounds like it was like this being able to think and separate out things?

H- Yeah, but you know, I think like even like if I think before boxing, like with all the depression, all the I like, I I just remember life to be really blocked, like like a big block and, like, really dark. Like not really knowing what's going on, not understanding the thoughts that are going through my head, not understanding what I want and what I like. Everything was just really dark, like a like small, cramped space.

No, I I think it's started off with like I guess small cramped space and then it was just like like always darkness and maybe like a like a really dark, depressing cloud around around myself, you know, like you have a grey, depressing cloud.

And then and then. Now I just feel way more like, you know, there is just more space. And there is just more light.

Yeah, just more way more space now and, like, way more like space allows you to see things.

R-Yeah, when everything just like a crammed room, you can't see anything.

H- Yeah, yeah. Yeah, you can't really like understand what's going on. You can't really. You don't have like this space to like, have that thought process and and understand what you're thinking and what you wanna do.

R- And I guess I have a few questions regarding the like your journey of understanding, do you think it's quite common in the like South Asian Muslim community that there's no awareness of mental health? Do you think a lot of women around you suffer with it and don't kind of ever realize and find out?

H- Yeah. Yes, I think there's there is a big part of that like there's so many like mothers who have that. You can tell that they they are struggling. They have depression. They, they, they they forget how to look after themselves after having children. But then they don't. I don't think they ever have that time to reflect and realize what's going on like ohh like "I'm. I'm gonna do like this self care thing to make myself feel better" or "this is this is what I'm gonna do when I feel, you know, depressed or stressed or anything like that." I don't think they have the time to do that.

They just….. I think there's like a big toxic umm…umm…. What's that…yeah, toxic culture and like, not recommendation….expectation, that's the word expectation on them that it doesn't matter what they're going through, they have to just keep going. They're not allowed a break. They they have to, let's say, cook every day. They have to look after their children every day and then they, I think like like, you know, like being recognized for your hardships.

That's not a thing. I don't think. Like they don't. I don't think they hear a lot of "thank you for your help. I really appreciate what you're doing for our family." I don't think they hear that much at all, so I and I think that makes a big difference.

R- It's like they don't get space to be a person.

H- Yeah, I yeah, I think they don't. I mean, after years of life like that, I don't think they really know who they are anymore. I've heard.

Yeah, I heard. I've heard a lot where where like like now, now that we are breaking that toxic culture, people like three years after having a child, they're saying, I'm now having time to like like learn who I am again and do things that I enjoy and like that's that's now we're breaking that toxic culture. But back in the day like like, yeah, four, five children and they never have a break then. And they never like they don't, they don't know what a break is. They every single day just have to keep going. Lack of sleep doesn't matter, they just keep going every day. They and nobody's ever said like like, you know, "you must be tired, do you want a break.?" There's nothing like that. They just have, they just and then and like because of like how ingrained that thought is in them, even if somebody on that day is not saying, not saying like, oh, just keep going, Go like go do this and go do that…they just, they don't really know how to stop. They don't know that they are allowed to have a break or they you know that they are allowed their own space. I don't. Yeah, I think they just…..

R- That makes me think of how you said earlier about how in the boxing class there was space for you to be. And because you had that one space that it started to spread the rest of your life.

H-Yeah.

R- And it sounds like, because if for the women who don't have that space, yeah, they just never realize that they even they. If you live your life with no space, then you don't even realize that it's possible to have space.

Do you think there was something about your anxiety and depression and through boxing like feeling joy, that made you think "ohh, it is possible to feel something different."

H- Yeah. No, I I yeah. Because it makes you have a like a different perception, perspective, perspective, perspective on life like, yeah, if I could…feel happiness, I'm allowed to be happy.

I'm allowed to feel strong. I'm allowed to like, you know, I'm allowed to speak up and laugh and enjoy life. I'm allowed to and, you know, be my own person. I'm. I'm you know, I'm allowed to jump up and down and you know, you know, do fun things and, you know, be

confident. And yeah, it it does play such a big part in it. And I think if you if you don't have that, you just you just don't, you just don't realize that you are allowed to be like that. You're not that you're allowed to, like, take up space and umm, yeah, like, you know, have your own like, you know your own me time and your own like you know time like relieve your stress.

R- Yeah. Yeah, I guess you've talked about how you feel when you're in the boxing class. Yeah, this might sound a bit of a weird question, but I'm also trying to figure out how the body feels. What is the feeling you feel inside or what? What what comes up in your body when you're in the class and where does that feeling start? Does it start when you think of going for the class? Does it start when you enter the gym?

H- Yeah, I mean, I think like that that you know that adrenaline rush, like, the exhilarating feeling that is like in the class like and like like especially like a lot of us. I remember saying that or when we wake up we we just wanna lie in and we don't…it's hard to like actually get out. But but then, once we do that, once we start walking or driving to boxing and we just get more like excited, we get more happier

R- When you feel the excitement, where do you feel it in your body? I guess when you're talking about boxing, there was a sense that your face was lighting up so I was wondering, is there anything happening in your body?

H- Yeah umm uh I think I mean like its the whole, I think like it's just like the like. I don't know the mid section just like feels way more like happy.

R- When I ask women how they feel in their body…

H- It's very hard!

R- It's because almost like we haven't been allowed to be in our body. Yeah, it's like I don't… know what's going on in my body I don't know, like I mean.

But I guess what I'm trying to understand is and it's OK to take a moment to think about it or feel like you don't have any sort of clear answer, but does your body feel differently when you're in the gym space or when you're punching as to when you're out there on the street?

H- Umm, I do know it does feel different. I mean like right now. Like, I'm like, I think that there's like a tingling in your like in my limbs. And like I think my chest just feels way more like open. Yeah, yeah, I think it just feels way more like open. Like there's light there. I just feel way more to feel like I can breathe better.
Yeah, for sure.

R- I guess the logic behind my research is for the community, there's a lot of high levels of feeling their distress in their body, but never being able to say it. Umm, so a lot of headaches, a lot of body aches instead of depression. So the logic is that I wanted to include the voice of the body in the research.

H- And actually understand what it's telling you. Actually understand what your body is telling you.

R- Yeah. And also because there's a lot of stigma in the community, even about speaking. Do you feel like that's a barrier at all in terms of Muslim women like taking up space or speaking up about what's hard, that sense of like, feeling almost like Islam gets weaponized against them, like saying that or you have to be grateful all the time instead of saying things are hard.

H- I I think so. I think there is like a….I mean, I think like it's like Islam and then culture gets mixed into that. Yeah. Yeah, I I think it gets mixed in a lot and then people forget which parts are religion and which parts culture. And then there's like in Islam, yes, you're supposed to be grateful for everything. Every Blessing we have we're supposed to be grateful, but then Islam doesn't stop you from feeling the sadness. Like, there's so much like. And then, like, Islam teaches us how to get over that. Like a list of doas (prayers) to say this

Say there's like even like the the food, the prophets (saw) used to eat when he was sad like we could we. That's what we should be learning, but instead people….I think it's like barley, I think. Yeah, yeah, I think it's like a barley. Like whenever you're like sad or like you're in grief, you should have this prophetic food. It's like barley, I think it has like honey milk. So it's like really like, it's like really soothing for your body. So like this, but I haven't tried it yet.

R- Yeah, we should be living by the Hadith, but we're not.

H- So like there's I think people yeah, like they they take one thing and they turn it into something that its not. So yes, we are supposed to be great and grateful and blessed and happy. But it's not a toxic happiness where you supposed too like, even if you're sad, you're happy. When when there is like, if there's some sort of sadness or grief happening in your life, you're allowed to feel it and you and there's ways to like cope and that we can learn from Islam. But there is obviously like you're not Islam doesn't, Islam tells us to like, not sit in it so much that like years, years down the line, but still being sad about like this small thing there's there's Islam teaches us ways so like, let's do this, this and this so that we can get over it and then move on. And so we can live a happy life.

R- Ohh, how does boxing fit into the stories of like the women in the hadith for you?

You know, the women, like does that come to mind for you? And I guess what I'm asking about is has boxing changed your relationship with Allah. Has it impacted it all, interacted with it in any way?

H- I mean there is. It makes it makes you more want like want to do more research about women in Islam and when you do, you realize there's so many like the the women at the time of the Prophet (pbuh) like they were so strong. I mean the Prophets (pbuh) first wife was an independent woman who was strong, who was a, you know, who was a business woman, who who was the boss of many men. Like, that's like Islam. Like the women of Islam, like, they are very strong and very like, you know, like like, I don't know, it's just very different to what people think of, like Muslim women like, like, we are our role models are women that are, like, people look up to and there's so much to learn from them and like they're strong. They were powerful, they were warriors.. And like, there's even one of the close companions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), his his wife was so strong. She was, she was an amazing like a like a horse rider. I think she was a warrior.

R- What I was asking is like, yeah, it made you wanna seek your own knowledge and find out more?

H- Yeah. So like like, it makes you realize that what society might think of Muslim women is not is not reality. Like if you look back into like role models of Islam, yeah, what were the women like? Like the wife of that companion, people think that women are like, you know, scared to go into a battle. But she she went into a like a raging battle, just to give this and that that her husband like, like it was like, every every single battle battle he went into, he wore this certain hat to make him, make him feel more like I think more like like brave. He used to wear this hat, every time, but he forgot it this certain time. And then she she didn't think ohh it's a battle….I'm gonna. You know, I feel scared. She went in like like this, like on a horse.

She was like like going very fast and she was fearless. And just just to give her husband this, this hat and and and and the men that were all there, they they thought like an Angel had come because of like, the speed that she was going going in.

And nobody would have thought it was this woman. She doesn't even take part in battles regularly so like this strength and the fearlessness that she had it's just like that's like that's a woman of Islam.

R- Is that what it feels like you've gotten closer to?

H- Yeah, yeah and yeah, I feel like I'm a step closer to becoming like them. And like, if that's like the you know, if Islam puts like a highlight on women like that, that means, you know, that's that. That's like the, what I am striving for.

R- I guess there's something around what you're said around, like taking ownership of your religion and taking ownership of learning about it. And taking that into your own hands and almost like the power of your gaining your own knowledge, or rather than just taking for granted that learning from what society makes sense of that.

H- Yeah. Yeah, for sure. Like if you I think if you don't feel confident in yourself, you don't really feel like you're able to do your own research and learn for yourself. But then, once you're able to be more confident in your own like knowledge and your own like power, I suppose you're you're like, I'm gonna, like, take ownership of what I want to believe in and then you go out and you learn your own. You know your own stories that resonate with your life. And then yeah, I think and then it and then you become a stronger person and then yeah, you get closer to the Deen as well.

R- Like I was, I was thinking about Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her).You know how she was a scholar and she taught all the men. Yeah, but yeah, that's something around. Leadership is like kind of becoming your not not your own, looking for role models. Yeah, because was there something around the journey towards maybe not seeing the version of the person you wanted to be, umm, in the women around you in society. And then being able to find it in the Hadith and the stories like was there I guess. Have you been able to find Muslim women role models and what has the impact of that been on your life?

H- I have and I think it's it's been very powerful because before you you feel like ohh but me wanting to be independent or me wanting to be I don't know, career driven or me wanting to be, you know umm strong, a stronger person who goes out in the community and does, you know, does their own thing like is is weird. And then and then there is a point where culture plays in and then you start thinking I might be being a bad Muslim for this.

R- Its so easily twisted against you, into, "are you a bad Muslim?"

H- Yeah and then and then once you start, once you start doing like feeling like.

No, I'm gonna do my own research and, like, get closer to Islam for myself. And then you do learn your own like you know you learn your own religion then and then you find your own role models and you realize no, actually me becoming a strong person, me becoming independent and things like that is actually I'm getting closer to the the big role like female role models in Islam and it makes you feel so much more so much more like stronger in myself.

R- Like strong in what you're doing. Even though maybe you don't see it being done by others. Yeah, you're like, I am going in the right direction.

H- Yeah, and yeah, you don't. You don't feel like you just doing random things. You, you know you're doing the right thing and you know that you know, you're like you're you're yeah, makes you feel closer to Islam and Allah as well because you know that if Allah put a highlight on these women for being strong independent, you know teachers, educators, umm, like business women. And there's like, there was this female who was who was a daughter of a doctor, and she was, like, doing major surgeries in battle and like women like that. And then, if, like its culture, that makes us feel like we shouldn't be like that, but then Islam tells us no, that is what women are. Women are amazing. We are strong like I mean our bodies are so strong and our minds are so strong and Allah like when you when you start doing these like learning about what, how Allah speaks about women. You realize if like Allah loves women so much and its culture that tells us that they don't.

So yeah, it for sure makes me closer to Islam and like you know Allah as well because Allah loves me even if like the average person doesn't doesn't respect women. Allah respects like not respects but like He love us so much and like puts us on such a like like a high status just by just by being born a woman. Yeah, Allah loves us so much.

R- It sounds more like you've been able to hear Allah's voice more loudly as opposed to the people around you.

H- Yeah, like, yeah.

R- Before it was harder because you were not confusing, but you were assuming that voice was the same as Allah's voice?

H- Yeah, it was. Yeah, like everything was all mixed in. I didn't know what what was the right voice? Yeah, talking about like, how before, like, yeah, things have got clearer in that way.

Like I'm able to like differentiate the voices and be like this is Allah's view of me. This is Allah speaking to me and this is the voice of the people that I....this that's not what I resonate with.

Yeah. And then I'm able to choose which voices then I want to listen to and yeah, resonate with and listen to and believe in.

R- Are there any changes you have noticed in your life from participating in boxing that has made life harder for you in any way?

H- I don't think anything's become harder. Umm, I think it's just how we were saying before.

Like if people get it's doing boxing just I mean it. Other people like you know, be like, am I doing the right thing? But it just it just amused me. It just made me feel really like, hah! if you think I'm not doing it like you know I don't, I shouldn't do it. But I am doing it so I think that's amusing, but I don't think anything else has become harder.

R- So is there anything else that I've haven't asked about? Haven't asked that you like to share with me about what the boxing classes mean to you?

K- Umm, I think the boxing like even if I'm not going to boxing like I I like for for a few weeks or months or whatever, I still think like that that community or that like that feeling that comes with boxing will always stay. So even if I'm not part of that like.....

R- So, even if you're not active it sounds like there's something that happens in that space that just doesn't exist anywhere else other than that space?

H- Yeah, exactly. I think it's just like I think how we were saying like that my like my chest just feels way more like light and like open and like I can just like breathe better and see better and like able to like....

R- It reminds me of how Allah (swt) says like you know the good person is filled with light?

H- Ohh yeah yeah. That's really beautiful actually. Yeah like able to like just hear the voices more clearly. Like it just really does stay with. Stay with me for I I think it will stay with me forever, even if I don't like, if I'm not actively doing boxing, I think it would just always be a part of me and like the friendships we've made in boxing as well. I think even if, like, we're not talking for years when we do meet of like, that's just like, lifelong friendships, I think and like that community that we've built, it's just I think it's just so it's just so strong and amazing.

R- How is it possible for a space like that to exist? So what makes that bond so strong, or what does it look like?

H- Yeah, I think, yeah, I think just because it was something so like not expected. For me anyway, it was something that I've never like experienced before and and like even like even in like Secondary school, I was never a sporty person. I didn't enjoy PE. I was always really shy umm and like but other people used to enjoy PE or whatever. I used to just be like hiding in a corner and not taking part, but then and then boxing even though like it's a sport. But then I was I was taking part and I was enjoying it. And I was learning and you know, like

people were saying that, like, how good my punches were, whatever. And like and and people would like newcomers would like, would like, ask me questions, and I would be able to, like, help them and things like that. I like stuff like that. The confidence in like that comes with that. I think that that would just stay with me forever. Yeah, I think its just made me feel like its made me feel like I can be that person. I'm not the shy child from school that doesn't know how to do anything, and like, you know, just stays in a corner. But I am it like when I'm passionate about something and when I learn something, I am able to become that person that people look like, look up to. Yeah, like you know, they can learn from me.

R- In the case of with your mental health, anxiety and depression. Did you try to get therapy for it? Was there any other things you did to get support? You don't have to answer if you don't feel comfortable with.

H- No, I think I think it was about Ohh say about like two or three years after I started boxing. I I realized I'm you know, I I I did like online therapy thing, but I don't know if you've heard of better help. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I did that for a while. I'm not sure how long actually, but I did that for a while and I think that that helped quite a lot, but I think of do you know how I was saying like before before boxing I I wasn't in a space where I was, like, doing research about mental health and like and like I was like learning about myself and like learning about my coping mechanisms and things like that.

So like, I think that did play a part in like later on me realizing that it will be beneficial and that you know yeah, it takes so much like bravery to actually like I essentially like ask for help and ask for other people to like, you know? Yeah. So I think it did play a big part in like me being able to make that step, which I was very like, I didn't know whether I would be brave enough to do therapy. Umm but yeah, no, I I made the big jump. I did it for one, I think it did help a lot in terms of me being able to like learn like how to communicate my feelings.

R- The way you explain things very clearly, you have a good knowledge of mental health.

H- Yeah. I think especially with like ADHD like once you start learning something you just go into rabbit hole of like you keep like yeah, for years I was just like I mean I find mental health like fascinating.

R- What images come to mind like if you close your eyes and think of the class? Are there any images or any shapes or any random things that can be completely random?

H- Ah, I'm so bad with like imagery, but when I think of the class I do like I just, it's just like a like a nice like I just feel like just just very happy and like warm just really warm. Like a big hug. Ohh, it just feels like like you go there. It's like, welcome home.

Yeah, it's like you just go there, you just know that everyone's just like, you know, there for each other everyone's like gonna like like you won't be attacked in this space.

R- Yeah. And does that feel quite different to what it's like being out there in the world?

H- For sure. Yeah. Yeah, for sure. Like when you go outside in different different environments, you know that there's gonna be at least one person that gives you a weird look or somebody that's gonna not understand where you're coming from or.

I just in other scenarios like other environments. I just don't feel like I ever even in work because it's a very white dominated area area and even though it's like obviously it's still a female dominated, but it's still white dominated. So like being being, I mean even safe not yeah having I guess like having to defend yourself, it is. There's always like, if I'm wearing my uniform, I found that, but I when I'm I'm when I'm wearing my uniform. When I'm not wearing my uniform, it's very different. Yeah, it's so funny. Like I would see the same people, but then if I'm not wearing, when I'm not wearing my uniform, I probably get side eyes or and yeah. Or people would wouldn't smile like they would when I'm wearing my uniform. When I'm wearing my uniform, there's like that forced smile. So there is that. But then even then, if I compare myself to when I'm wearing my uniform, like if I compare myself to other white nurses, there is there's way more like even the same it's the same like patients and not like the same parents like patients. Parents like able to like. I know there's like that level of, like, relatability, but then they're they're way more like like they're able to, like, have nice conversations. They're laughing, having jokes.

Umm no I think its just me, like me being colored and wearing a hijab, I think there's like that, "you're so different. I'm not gonna put the effort into" so then I have to put the extra effort, which is fine, I'm the nurse. Like so I I will be. I will put the extra effort, but then there's gonna be certain people that don't give that back. So even with like, even if it's like parents or patients, parents or if it's other nurses like, I just don't think I'll ever be on the same wavelength as them. Like like I would never like. I mean because of like different life experiences and like me, me choosing to cover and them not. Yeah, I think I don't know.

R- It's like, yeah, so like the, this is like the one place where it feels like, yeah, you can just be.

H- Yeah, yeah, for sure. Like it is a matter of what you're doing. Like like. I don't know, it just doesn't matter what what I choose to do outside of boxing. In boxing, everyone's, like are the same with like, like same conversation, same wavelength, same like, but all there for each other. We're all like learning together, having a laugh together. Yeah, it just it just feels like we're all, you know, they're together. Same same stage.

R- When you were boxing, would you take off your hijab when you were in the room? If you did, what was it like having that one space outside the home where it's safe enough to take off your hijab? What did that represent to you?

H- It feels so good because I most the time I think I don't know like you just feel like even if there's like other women's only classes. But then they don't go to like even that extra mile to just cover the windows. So for us, it feels like you're still not like 100% welcome because they won't go that extra. Yeah, they won't adapt to, like, just do that one extra thing or two extra things just to make you feel comfortable, to be able to, you know, take the hijab off or whatever. But then you know in boxing, being able to do that, you just feel like you feel so

accepted, you feel like they've given me the space to be able to feel comfortable and like I trust like no one's gonna, you know, come in and just, like, make me feel uncomfortable. So like you just feel so like respected as well for who you are and what your needs are. Yeah, so respected and like if they've gone the extra mile to do that, that means that they're not gonna judge me for, you know, like, for, for whatever else about me.

Like I yeah, I feel so respected and accepted. And yeah, it just felt. So it's just, it's just like another like a family away from family then isn't like home away from home.

R- You might have answered this is some other way. I'm just gonna ask in case what spaces in your life make you feel the most like all parts of your identity as a Muslim South Asian woman has space? Which spaces make you feel the most like you?

H- I mean, do you know how I was saying, like, even at work, there's still that level of I I know for sure that I'm not gonna be at the same level? Umm, I think the most like myself I felt was that boxing like like that, that confidence that I felt at boxing where like, you know, like I there was no judgment. And yeah, I think boxing is like the place where I thought the most relaxing myself, to be honest, I can't really think of anywhere else.

R- Are you as relaxed at home?

K- Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R- And I guess also when you talked about you teaching your brothers boxing. Through boxing, do you feel like your role or your place in the family has evolved or changed in any way?

H- I think it has evolved in the way where I'm my my younger like my younger brothers probably see me as more like more energetic, more fun. They're able to, like, play, fight with me without, you know? Feeling any type of way like I I think and then I think that just helped them feel more like especially with the age gap, it probably helps them feel way more like related like. They don't feel like I'm just like older sibling that's really strict that's, you know, that's always gonna tell them off, they feel like they can play with me. They can, like you know, do fun things. I think it has played a role like I'm and like able to like even they probably feel more able to like, you know, have fun and things like that with each other as well.

R- Its almost like you opening up has made the able to open up with you?

H- Yeah, I think so. I think yeah, it help. I think like its like a chain reaction, isn't it? Or domino effect that if one person has more fun and just like you know opens up and becomes more more of themselves than like like other people in the family would be able to as well.

R- It's almost like you've given them permission to do so. I just have one last question.

What I wanted to ask was you mentioned that the toxic culture is changing like the younger generation is doing a lot. What's making it change or what's caused the change or what started the change at least and you don't have to speak for everyone just for yourself?

H- Umm, I think what I'm seeing is umm, I don't know what's like starting off like what's started it, but then I think my with my generation, they're more. they're more like getting out into the community that like in the previous generations, like especially women they would tend to just stay at home kind of thing like they might leave the house for shopping.

R- Like connection over isolation?

H- Yeah. So there's way more like, you know, going out, making more friends like, yeah, connecting with community a lot more and choosing to have, like, careers choosing to like, if you're passionate about something, you could, you're actually able to go and do something about it.

R- But then where does that come from?

H- Umm… I think just being more confident in yourself and like being like and like fighting for what you want. Again, where did that come from? I don't know where its come from.

Yeah, I think knowledge is so powerful. And like yeah, I suppose, like in previous generations didn't have that accessibility to knowledge like

R- Yeah, often there would be someone at the mosque telling them what to do. And that was the only source of knowledge. I mean, there was there is the Quran.

H- But yeah, I think, yeah, no, I think if you think about like very like culture dominated like areas back home, their only source of knowledge probably is the men at home. Yeah, they probably wouldn't even be given the space to go to the mosque, to be honest. Actually, they're probably, for women. Their like most their knowledge, is just from the men.

Like they whatever men come home with that. That's that's what they learn from, I think. And like I think that is like that's a massive difference now where the women are doing their own research, going to mosque learning for themselves, like reading the Quran, translation of the Quran…. Yeah, they're doing their own knowledge and they're gaining their own knowledge. I would, I think is very powerful and then knowing that you can like, you know, get educated as well, like back in the day, if like back back in the day like my grandma's generation, it was, I think my mom says like it was common for them to, like, go into like, a year five, year six, and then stop, stop school. Yeah. And then and then from then they would just be at home doing housework. And then obviously, like if you're if you're not going to school, you don't have anymore, you're getting progressively isolated. You don't feel like you have the space to, like, gain your own knowledge and like, become your own person and you just you just like this is this is my sole job to just stay at home, do the housework and then the men are the ones who bring in knowledge and like whatever the men say goes kind of thing. And I think that feeds into that whole toxic thing of like, you know, men…..

R- And if the men are not practicing Islam correctly then its just gone.

H- Yeah, but now we're women are able to make their own life choices. And because that makes us so much more independent and strong. And you know, like what? Even if the men

are saying this thing or like people in the family are saying this thing, you're doing your own thing. Yeah, you can make your own judgment. And yeah, which I think is really powerful

R- Is there anything else you'd like to share or any final thoughts on how the interview has felt for you?

H- No, I think it's been really nice to like go over the whole thing because there's a lot of things that I've never like had to like, think, thought about, like, like questions on. No, like, I've never thought, like in depth of what? Like how much boxing is like made a difference in my life and this has made me realize like is actually is actually fed into like so much of my life. And like even day-to-day, without even realizing what like is probably made such a massive difference. And like I think I without boxing, I would have been such a different person.
So I think yeah, like is fed into like I probably like every every part of my life I think which, yeah. And made me feel like I can make my own choices.

R- how do you feel after boxing?

H- that's it now, I feel like I just have so much energy. It just really makes you have so much energy. I can just go out and do whatever I need, I'm not going to just go home and waste my time, whatever has been on my to-do list I feel like I can do anything and everything now. I feel so strong and powerful.

R- Thank you so much for your time today, and for your responses. We have now reached the end of the interview; we can do a cool down stretch together if you'd like. Just to explain what happens after this, I will be listening to the recording and transcribing it and then analysing all the interviews together. I will contact you after I've done the initial analysis of your interview if you're interested in sharing your feedback on the initial analysis.

H- Yes I'd like to, thank you!

R- That's the end of the interview, I'll stop recording now

H- Ok

Appendix I

Example of Data Analysis

Empathy for/Honouring my body

And then I think even though, you know, I chose, I wanted to wear the headscarf and I wear an abaya and I absolutely love it, it does make it easier for me to, like, just not focus on my body because that isn't a focus of attention for other people.

So then it makes it easier for me not to focus on it.

And again, I I love wearing it so much.

0:26:15.573 --> 0:26:21.203

Medina

But I think as a one of the consequences of it is that I I don't pay attention much to my body.

📄 Thesis interview Medina--Meeting Transcript

0:26:21.213 --> 0:26:25.993

Medina

So there was a huge disconnect to it as and then it just allowed.

0:26:26.3 --> 0:26:33.743

Medina

So it kind of just reinforced me disconnecting from my body based off other things growing up and it's only from going into sports again and going to gym again that I was like, Oh my gosh, no.

0:26:33.833 --> 0:26:54.763

Medina

And then even just like reading more about the rights islamically that my body has over me and then looking at it more from that lens and looking at the important islamically of like taking care of your body and that you know the beauty of the fact that it's not just the mind like we need to take care of everything and that your body can speak for you and sort of then looking after it

Becoming a model of women who love themselves fr the next

Feeling included/ A shared sense of community in

Bonding with sister through boxing

Strengthened relationship with siblings

Helping each other heal from trauma through boxing

Impact of social class/ being from low income family in accessing sports

Mindfulness/ being fully present (merged)

Self conscious about body image

Getting praised for something I do just for me/I don't have to fight

Releasing stress/ a space for anger

Breaking the silence of being in foster care

Perseverance

Loves travelling solo

Healing trauma by feeling I am powerful

Boxing class healing discrimination experienced in other

Grief of not doing boxing sooner

Learning how to take care of myself

Feeling stronger

Sports as a coping mechanism for dealing with being in foster care

Building confidence

Emphasis on using voice to advocate as eldest sibling

Stepping out of my comfort zone

Empathy for/Honouring my body

Experieneces of being in foster care growing up (merged)

not feeling safe in mixed gyms

Safe space of female only classes

Importance of taking care of the body/ rights of the body in Islam

Inspired by seeing women do sports

A man's sport

Lack of media representation of Pakistani women in sports

Seeking knowledge independently about Islam

Separating cultural and patriarchal misrepresentations of

Boxing brought me closer to Islam

Misogynistic judgment of Muslim women within Muslim community

internalised sociocultural expectations of women to be self-sacrificial

Embodiment of Islam through actions

Taking pride in religious identity

Younger brother was her guide to Islam

Fitness not modelled in family growing up

More conviction in professional role (merged)

Witnessing and experiencing Islamphobia in professional role

Challenging and questioning whiteness in professional role

Boxing embraces multifaceted dimensions of femininity

Quick filter quirks

Appendix J

Ethical Approval

28/11/2023

Mrs Shiren Mohamed Goush

Health and Social Care

University of Essex

Dear Shiren,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2223-1524

I am pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "Breaking out of the box: Muslim women's experiences in boxing gyms" has been reviewed on behalf of the Ethics Sub Committee 2, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

The application was awarded a favourable opinion subject to the following **conditions**:

Extensions and Amendments:

If you propose to introduce an amendment to the research after approval or extend the duration of the study, an amendment should be submitted in ERAMS for further approval in advance of the expiry date listed in the ethics application form. Please note that it is not possible to make any amendments, including extending the duration of the study, once the expiry date has passed.

Covid-19:

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid-19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. You will be kept informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix K

Extracts of reflective log from observations/interviews

Shinen reflection on 11th Thesis interview

Doing this interview amidst the muslim hating riots and "civil unrest" (pogroms) was poignant. Between 30th July – 8th August there have been numerous reports of Muslim migrants, any South Asian or coloured refugee being attacked. It feels like a significant act of resistance to be doing my thesis on the acts of resistance of Muslim women in these times.

Pain of being researcher, not therapist

There's been a hard rock of grief, almost like physical pain in the hours since this interview. It's almost as if I entered the space of trauma during this interview. I found it hard to breathe and I was much more cautious about asking questions. Is it because her story is the one that has bore the most resemblance to mine? The pain of giving it up at the pinnacle, the abusive relationship? Boxing being the wound and the cure all at once? Having to leave a gym because of an abusive relationship... having to give it all up because of the gym culture. Having to feel like Allah is displeased with you. This interview was excruciatingly painful and I feel sad that she had to talk about it. But also in awe of her strength in talking about it. I wish I could tell her, the abuse didn't happen because you displeased Allah. But I don't know either if I have displeased Allah. But He is a merciful God.

Appendix L

Extracts of Observation notes

mixed adult boxfit observation male coach

2 women 3 men

only asian woman with hijab

mirror

while shadowboxing so I moved out of her view

Palestineshirt headscarf (headwrap)

— likes less busy class

only 4 people

ring

for exercises at the end, physical distance closed between her and other participants she took the same spot at the start

entrance

Choice to interact with others but no pressure to

Focused on technique

After skipping — tired

looks at the ceiling or floor while skipping

I feel like I'm dancing

"This is my spot"

— furthest forward

Smiling increased as class progressed

— getting to control what is seen

— duality of being seen/unseen

rhythmic skipping punctuated by the bell music pounding in my bones

music makes it better

expressions of pain

both ladies

— lack of understanding from coaches / non-muslim males about not wanting contact

once I moved
— her movements got looser and more relaxed

resistance activity

2 to one bag

sounds of mutual punching

position of bag

balanced by pressure of both person's fist

Staccato thumping of speed punches

When I asked what she's thinking while punching — her dad & mum popped into her head

Talking & joking more towards the end

— more laughter and interaction

her movements got more loose & uninhibited

since doing boxing, do you feel more open to getting therapy?

what's your favourite punch?

Does the boxing gym feel like home to you?

yes

home from home

sounds of grunting strong laid exhales

silence after "hold!" followed by loud punching & breathing & timer

observation
only
Two women
only
asian woman

quieter
music
playing

sounds of
bag being
hit

light
punching

bandanna
loose t-shirt
tights

coach is a mixed race woman

movement drills

door covered

Ring

bags

bags

photos on
the wall are
of men
but covering
on window
of door says
keep out
women only

sour
smell of
sweat

expression of pain

laughter
playfulness
smiling

light punches
focused on
technique

mostly
focused on their
own bag

no handwraps
just gloves

was chosen
to demonstrate with
coach

looking after
one another
in partner drills

gaze fixed
on partner
closed guard
stance

moving
forward
into opponent

ringing of
bell from
the next
room

stretching
done while
standing
in the ring

harder punches
when partner
changed

challenging
one another
playfully

Big smiles after
every drill

interaction
through
partner drills

both with
similar levels
of force

the
way
she wore
her hijab
changed
towards
the end

lots of laughter
when stretching
and chatting

Appendix M

Member-checking feedback

Aaliyah

Assalamualaikum, I just wanted to say like….sorry for replying so late but that….I just….I was getting emotional from reading it. I don't know how you captured every single thing I said to a 't', obviously I know you got the recording but still like reading that just made me feel nostalgic, oh my god it just made me feel like….an emotional rollercoaster while reading it, you pretty much captured everything, that's basically like my life, my thoughts, on a piece of paper!

Like the pictures are great, the pictures are so good. Like MashaAllah honestly, everything there was like amazing! And I'm just wondering like….Wow! I probably really needed that, like right now because I've been feeling like..abit lost. Like I want to go back as well…well not like I wanted to go back but…it's really hard to not want to go back, you know what I mean?

It does capture it, it really does. That's literally my story on a piece of paper!! It's scary…oh my God, thank you so much.

Medina

Oh my days, I just went through it and I was like…WOW…I was just like…Wow!! Its just incredible, I really can't vocalise how incredible it is, its like you conceptualised like parts of my life in a…you know, it got me to think about my narrative to some degree…your illustrations, the way you put it, you are so creative. It's actually incredible, the way you are able to put together so much information that I gave, into such a succinct story, without diluting it? Like it was so powerful when I was reading it. It was like I was ohmygosh like honestly you have such a talent it is amazing. When you said you were going to send something, I didn't realise it would be to this degree, its like you…even the images and everything, its just so beautiful! Honestly, its's amazing! Thank you so much for sharing it with me! Its incredible

Hafsa

Omygosh MashaAllah I honestly can't belive you've created that from my words. Feels so surreal and comforting seeing that all on one page…I love the way you've shown the growth and achievements with the staircase 🥺 I never thought my words or story could be seen like this 🥺 🥰 🥰

Asiyah

I LOVE IT WOW it's actually a really lovely reminder for me….Awww Masha'Allah bless you … it's wonderful … there are a couple of pictures in particular I like…Seeing your story board reminds me why I love boxing but Insha'Allah I'll still go on Fridays and might even

do a double session… so that'll be equivalent to Monday and Wednesday… it's just I can't do every Friday but will see how it goes

Maya

I love this, that is beautiful, thank u for this. I will print it out tomorrow.
Sorry for late message, I was in a meeting & then went to make Iftar. I love it!

Layla

This is so beautiful, my heart. This is perfect, I forgot how much I spoke about myself 😂

Aysia

I have three brothers, not two and I would prefer the name Aysia but everything else looks all good. Legit this is so good! I love how you captured the lightbulb moment and my journey in boxing

Faiza

Reacted with a thumbs up

Iqra/Maryam/ Nadiyah

Did not respond

Banu

Declined when asked if she would like to see her story map, said she was too busy.

Appendix N

Approval to exceed thesis word limit

Approved: Request to exceed thesis word limit – GOUSH 2207964 DCP

Postgraduate Research Education Team

To: ⊙ Mohamed Goush, Shiren

Cc: ○ HSC Doctorate in Clinical Psychology Administrators;   ○ Postgraduate Research Education Team

Dear Shiren

We received your request to submit your thesis with a word count of up to 48,000 words.

The Faculty Dean (Postgraduate) reviewed your request and they have approved for you to exceed the standard word limit for a Professional Doctorate thesis (40,000 words) by 8,000 words.

Let us know if you have any questions or queries.

Kind Regards,