

## Hijab and Mountaineering: A Semiotic Study of Piety, Agency, and Resistance in the Pendaki Hijabers Community, Indonesia

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the layered meanings of the hijab within the *Pendaki Hijabers* community in Indonesia. The research seeks to explain how the hijab functions not only as a religious obligation but also as a cultural signifier of piety, agency, and resistance, making it important to understand its role in shaping Muslim women's identity in unconventional public spaces. Using a qualitative approach, the study employed in-depth interviews, participant observations during mountain expeditions, and documentation of community campaigns. The data were analyzed through Roland Barthes' theory of cultural semiotics to identify the denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings of the hijab. The results reveal three key layers of meaning. At the denotative level, the hijab serves as a sign of obedience and piety. At the connotative level, it becomes a symbol of freedom and inclusivity, challenging stereotypes of restriction. At the mythological level, the hijab embodies resistance and social transformation through activities such as *da'wah*, the GEMAR (Gerakan Menutup Aurat / Movement to Cover the Aurat, referring to body parts that must be covered in Islam) campaign, and community service. These findings contribute to religious and cultural studies by offering new insights into the relationship between faith, gender, and physical endurance. They also suggest practical implications for gender equality advocacy, *da'wah* strategies, and the promotion of inclusive public spaces for women. The originality of this research lies in situating the hijab within the context of extreme outdoor activities—a domain rarely addressed in previous studies—and in demonstrating how religious symbols operate as dynamic cultural signifiers that bridge devotion, empowerment, and ideological resistance.

**Keywords:** Cultural semiotics; hijab; mountaineering; resistance; women's agency.

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis makna berlapis hijab dalam komunitas *Pendaki Hijabers* di Indonesia. Penelitian ini berusaha menjelaskan bagaimana hijab berfungsi tidak hanya sebagai kewajiban religius, tetapi juga sebagai penanda budaya atas kesalehan, agensi, dan resistensi, sehingga penting untuk memahami perannya dalam membentuk identitas perempuan Muslim di ruang publik yang tidak konvensional. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, penelitian ini mengumpulkan data melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan selama ekspedisi pendakian, serta dokumentasi kampanye komunitas. Data dianalisis menggunakan teori semiotika budaya Roland Barthes untuk menelusuri makna denotatif, konotatif, dan mitologis dari hijab. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga lapisan utama makna. Pada tingkat denotatif, hijab dipahami sebagai tanda ketaatan dan kesalehan. Pada tingkat konotatif, hijab dimaknai sebagai simbol kebebasan dan inklusivitas yang menantang stereotip keterbatasan. Pada tingkat mitologis, hijab berfungsi sebagai simbol resistensi dan transformasi sosial melalui aktivitas dakwah, kampanye GEMAR (*Gerakan Menutup Aurat*), serta pengabdian masyarakat. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi pada kajian agama dan budaya dengan menawarkan perspektif baru tentang relasi iman, gender, dan ketahanan fisik. Secara praktis, hasil penelitian ini juga berimplikasi pada advokasi kesetaraan gender, strategi dakwah, serta penguatan ruang publik yang lebih inklusif bagi perempuan. Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada penempatan hijab dalam konteks aktivitas luar ruang ekstrem—sebuah ranah yang

jarang dieksplorasi sebelumnya—serta penjelasan tentang bagaimana simbol religius berfungsi sebagai penanda budaya dinamis yang menjembatani kesalehan, pemberdayaan, dan resistensi ideologis.

**Kata Kunci:** Semiotika budaya; hijab; pendakian gunung; perlawanan; peran perempuan.

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary Indonesia, the practice of wearing the hijab has undergone a profound transformation, not only as a *shari'ah* (Islamic legal) obligation but also as a marker of cultural identity that extends into public spaces. Empirical data indicate a significant upward trend in hijab adoption. A survey conducted by Jakpat in 2014 with 626 respondents revealed that 63.58% reported wearing the hijab, and 54.25% of them had consistently worn it for more than five years (Pertiwi & Asnawi, 2022). Similarly, *Moeslimchoice.com* reported a rapid increase in hijab usage in Indonesia, from 47% in 2012 to 72% in 2018 (Pertiwi & Asnawi, 2022). These statistics underscore how hijab-wearing has shifted from a private act of religiosity into a widespread social phenomenon that shapes Muslim women's public identity. The growing trend also highlights its significance as both a cultural marker and a contested symbol, particularly when hijab-wearing women enter unconventional domains such as extreme sports like mountain climbing, where they continue to face social stigma and gender-based stereotypes.

Beyond these statistical trends, an increasingly visible phenomenon is the participation of hijab-wearing Muslim women in physically demanding outdoor activities such as mountain climbing. In Indonesia, groups of veiled female climbers have challenged the stereotype that the hijab is burdensome or restrictive by actively joining expeditions to peaks such as Gede Pangrango, Papandayan, Kerinci, Prau, and Rinjani. Their presence in these traditionally male-dominated terrains demonstrates how the hijab does not prevent engagement in strenuous physical activity; rather, it becomes an integral part of how they negotiate religious identity, resilience, and social agency in public spaces. This growing involvement of Muslim women in mountaineering signals a shift in the cultural meaning of the hijab—from a symbol confined to domestic religiosity toward an emblem of strength, freedom, and visibility in the broader social landscape.

One of the most notable manifestations of this development is the establishment of *Pendaki Hijabers* (PH), a religious-based climbing group founded in 2014 in East Jakarta. The community exclusively recruits Muslim women who consistently wear the hijab and has expanded to more than 84,000 members across Indonesia (Nisa, 2016)). Each climbing season, PH organizes expeditions to iconic mountains under the striking slogan "*Hijab is not an obstacle to hike*" (Nisa, 2016). The existence of this community not only signifies the entry of Muslim women into physically challenging and male-dominated terrains but also reflects a broader shift in societal understandings of religion, gender, and bodily autonomy in public spaces (Carrim & Paruk, 2021).

Given this context, it becomes essential to situate the phenomenon of veiled female climbers within the broader body of scholarship on hijab, gender, and mountaineering. Previous studies on the meaning of the hijab reveal at least three major tendencies. First, several scholars interpret the hijab primarily as a symbol of identity, ideology, and lifestyle among modern Muslim women. Second, other studies highlight women's participation in physically demanding activities, such as mountaineering, as a means of self-assertion and the pursuit of gender equality. Third, research has also framed mountain climbing as a spiritual and nationalist practice, articulated through symbolic acts such as ecosophy and the raising of national flags at summits. While these studies provide valuable insights, none have specifically examined the symbolic use of the hijab within a community of female climbers through the lens of cultural semiotics, leaving a critical gap that this research seeks to address.

The first cluster of studies interprets the hijab as a symbol of identity, ideology, and lifestyle among modern Muslim women. As a marker of cultural and religious identity, the hijab functions not only as a visible sign of piety but also as a social identifier, shaping how women negotiate their place in society and their belonging to particular communities (Alghafli et al., 2017; Sheen et al., 2018). In urban

Indonesian contexts, for example, the Hijabers Community Bandung illustrates how the hijab is mobilised to construct a modern Muslimah identity that blends religiosity with fashion and urban status (Fakhruroji & Rojati, 2017). At the ideological level, the hijab has been framed as both a political and feminist statement—used by states such as Iran as a tool of social control, yet also reappropriated by women as a form of resistance and autonomy in public life (Alak, 2020; Koo, 2014; Mir-Hosseini, 2007). Beyond religious and political symbolism, the hijab has increasingly become part of lifestyle practices, particularly through its integration with global fashion trends and social media cultures, thereby reshaping the image of the “modern Muslim woman” (Hussain, 2010; Najjaj, 2017). Nevertheless, the hijab continues to generate debates and misperceptions, especially in Western contexts, where it is frequently viewed as oppressive, while many Muslim women embrace it as an empowering choice that challenges cultural stereotypes (Newns, 2018; Winter, 2008). Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the hijab is a multifaceted signifier—at once religious, cultural, ideological, and stylistic—that plays a central role in the identity formation of contemporary Muslim women.

The second cluster of scholarship highlights women’s participation in challenging physical activities as a form of self-affirmation and the pursuit of gender equality. Studies demonstrate that involvement in physically demanding sports enables women to affirm their self-worth and challenge entrenched gender norms. For instance, research on female CrossFit athletes illustrates how women negotiate societal expectations, strengthen their athletic identity, and cultivate self-efficacy through community support (Malcom et al., 2021). Similar dynamics are observed in patriarchal contexts such as Southern Punjab, Pakistan, where women use sports as a means of resisting gender stereotypes and building resilience (Ahmed Laar et al., 2022). Despite these empowering outcomes, women continue to confront persistent barriers, including media misrepresentation, limited resources, and structural discrimination that question their femininity and capabilities in sports (İnce-Yenilmez, 2021; Maskalan, 2019). Recent systematic reviews confirm that gender inequality remains a critical challenge in sports worldwide, calling for systemic reforms in policy, education, and leadership (İşıkgöz et al., 2025; Vaquero-Cristóbal et al., 2024). Indeed, the underrepresentation of women in sports leadership positions underscores the structural nature of exclusion, reinforcing the need for institutional changes to ensure inclusivity and equity (González-Rivera et al., 2024; Lotfy et al., 2023). Taken together, these findings suggest that participation in physically demanding activities functions not only as a pathway of personal empowerment for women but also as a site of ongoing struggle for gender equality within broader social and cultural contexts.

The third cluster of studies approaches mountain climbing as both a spiritual and nationalistic practice. From a spiritual perspective, scholars have highlighted that the ascent of mountains often cultivates humility, vitality, and a deepened dialogue with nature, making climbing a medium for spiritual awakening and ethical reflection on environmental care (North & Harasymchuk, 2012; Zimmermann et al., 2021). Mountains are also rich in symbolic meaning across cultures, frequently invoked as metaphors for inner growth and enlightenment in esoteric traditions and religious narratives (De Pisón, 2012; Nosachev, 2017). Beyond its spiritual dimensions, mountaineering has historically carried strong nationalistic significance. Climbers who reach symbolic peaks are often celebrated as national heroes, inspiring collective pride, as in the case of Bangladeshi climbers on Everest (Hasan, 2015), or earlier German expeditions to Nanga Parbat, which were infused with nationalist ambitions (Nüsser & Clemens, 2003). Mountaineering has also served as a form of cultural diplomacy, as exemplified by U.S.–Soviet climbing exchanges during the Cold War, which transformed mountain summits into arenas of international dialogue (Flynn, 2024). Moreover, spirituality has been found to positively influence climbers’ responsible behaviors and satisfaction, linking physical endurance with ethical sensibilities (Esfahani et al., 2017). Taken together, these studies illustrate how mountain climbing is not merely a recreational pursuit but also a practice embedded with spiritual symbolism, environmental ethics, and nationalist aspirations, thereby positioning it as a powerful arena for negotiating identity and collective meaning.

While these three clusters of scholarship provide valuable insights, none has specifically examined the symbolic meaning of the hijab within a community of female climbers through the lens of cultural semiotics. Previous studies tend to focus either on the sociocultural significance of the hijab in everyday contexts, on gendered participation in sports, or on the broader spiritual and nationalistic dimensions of mountaineering. What remains underexplored is how the hijab, as both a religious and cultural symbol, is reinterpreted and re-signified by Muslim women who simultaneously engage in mountaineering, *da'wah*, and social activism. This lacuna highlights the need for an analysis that situates the hijab within the lived experiences of the Pendaki Hijabers community, where faith, gender, and physical endurance intersect in unique and contested ways.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyse the meaning of the hijab within the Pendaki Hijabers community by positioning it simultaneously as a cultural and religious symbol. Employing Roland Barthes' theory of cultural semiotics, the research seeks to uncover how members of the community interpret and practise the hijab symbolically in public and physically demanding spaces such as mountain climbing. By examining the hijab across denotative, connotative, and mythological levels of meaning, this study intends to demonstrate how religious symbols are re-signified in contemporary contexts, moving beyond utilitarian functions to become instruments of identity, *da'wah*, resistance, and social transformation. Through this focus, the research contributes to Islamic studies, gender studies, and cultural semiotics by addressing an underexplored intersection between faith, gender, and extreme physical activity.

From the researcher's perspective, the hijab within the Pendaki Hijabers community is not merely a functional garment that covers the *'awrah*, but a symbolic practice through which Muslim women actively negotiate their presence in public spaces and reframe their roles in male-dominated terrains. The hijab becomes a marker of collective identity, a medium of *da'wah*, and a declaration of agency that resists stereotypes portraying veiled women as passive or constrained. This interpretation resonates with Roland Barthes' theory of cultural semiotics, which posits that signs operate on multiple levels of meaning: denotative, connotative, and mythological (Barthes, 2007). In this framework, the hijab can be read first as a literal sign of obedience (denotation), then as an ideological marker of freedom and empowerment (connotation), and finally as a mythic narrative that challenges patriarchal and developmentalist discourses (myth). Thus, the present study argues that the hijab in the Pendaki Hijabers community functions as a dynamic cultural signifier whose layered meanings both reflect and contest dominant social constructions of religion, gender, and modernity.

## 2. Methods

This study focuses on the *Pendaki Hijabers* community as its unit of analysis, particularly examining how members construct and interpret the symbolic meaning of the *hijab* within the context of mountaineering and public religiosity. The primary analytical interest lies in the practices, artefacts, and discourses that constitute the community's cultural expressions—specifically, how these expressions reframe the *hijab* not only as religious clothing but as a marker of identity, resistance, and symbolic *da'wah* (religious proselytisation). The unit of analysis comprises both individual members and collective representations of the community as articulated through visual, verbal, and ritualised practices.

This research adopts a qualitative design informed by cultural anthropology and semiotics, particularly the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes. A qualitative approach is chosen because the research aims to understand meaning-making processes within a specific socio-religious group, rather than measure behavioural patterns statistically (Kaelan, 2010). Cultural semiotics provides a suitable analytical lens as it enables the exploration of symbols and signs embedded in everyday practices, allowing the researcher to examine how *hijab*, as a cultural signifier, functions within a community of practice. The qualitative design is also aligned with the interpretive paradigm, which prioritises depth of understanding over generalisability.

The primary data sources in this study are naturalistic texts and visual artifacts originating from the *Hijabers Climbers* community. These sources include social media posts (mainly from Instagram

@pendakihijabers), community banners and flags, clothing styles during group climbs, interviews with 20 members, and documented community events such as the *Gerakan Menutup Aurat* (Movement to Cover the *Aurat*). These artifacts are complemented by secondary data, such as academic literature, news articles, and religious discourse circulating in online Muslim communities that intersect with the group's ideology. These materials were selected for their representative value in constructing meaning around the *hijab* in physical and digital public spaces.

Data collection was conducted through digital ethnography, interviews, and document analysis. Digital ethnography involved systematic observation of the online presence of *Pendaki Hijabers* over a three-month period, focusing on Instagram interactions, captions, hashtags, and visual narratives. Interviews with members of *Pendaki Hijabers* were conducted in the field, mainly on Mount Prau, Dieng, Wonosobo. Meanwhile, document analysis was conducted on selected media and interview transcripts available through community publications or public statements made by key figures within the group (Hoed, 2014).

The data analysis process followed the steps of semiotic textual analysis as adapted from Barthes' two-level system of signification: denotation and connotation (Barthes, 2007). Denotative elements—such as the physical veil, uniforms, and flags—were first identified and catalogued. Subsequently, the analysis moved to the connotative level, in which ideological and cultural meanings were inferred from recurring symbols, community narratives, and associated discourses. Triangulation was applied by comparing data across different media platforms and artefacts to ensure consistency of interpretation. The result is a layered reading of the *hijab* as a signifier within a cultural system that intersects religion, gender, and space (Barthes, 2017).

### 3. Results

#### *Denotative Meaning: Hijab as a Sign of Obedience and Piety*

This study collected data through in-depth interviews with members of the *Pendaki Hijabers* community during a climbing expedition at Mount Prau, Dieng, Wonosobo. One of the informants, A. Alya, explained that wearing the *hijab* while hiking is not merely about covering the body but is a concrete expression of her obedience to religious teachings. She emphasized that the *hijab* is a symbol of spiritual commitment and adherence to Islamic law. In her words:

For me, the *hijab* is not just clothing. It's a form of my obedience to Allah. Even when I'm hiking, I want to show that I'm a devout Muslim woman (Alya, Personal Communication, 2021).

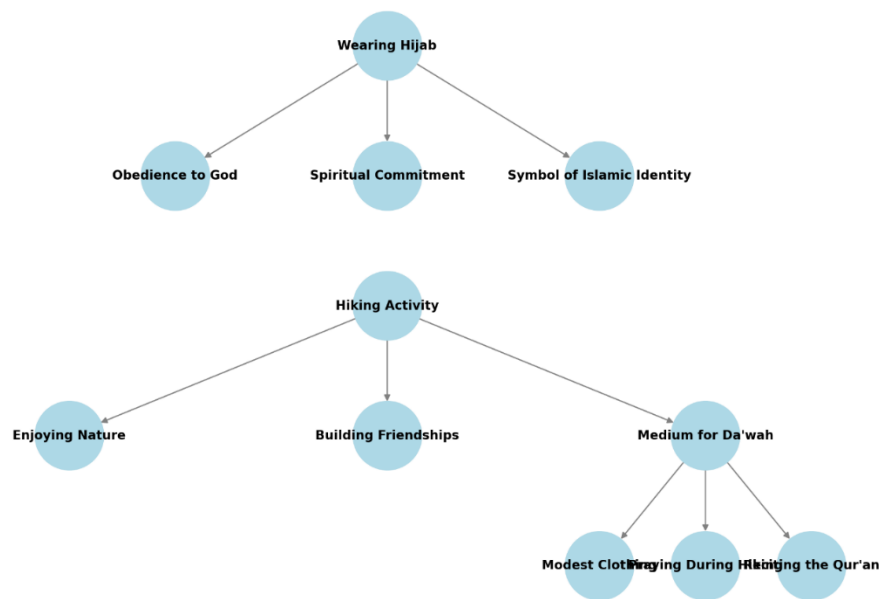
Another informant, R. Restiana, highlighted a different dimension of the community's hiking activity. According to her, mountain climbing is not only about enjoying nature or building friendships but can also serve as a means of *da'wah* (religious outreach), especially among youth. She observed that the millennial generation is highly enthusiastic about outdoor adventures, and this passion can be transformed into a contextual channel for conveying Islamic values. She explained:

Nowadays, many young people love hiking. I think it's a great medium for *da'wah*. We can show how to dress modestly, pray in the middle of nature, and even recite the Qur'an during breaks. *Da'wah* can be adapted to current trends (Restiana, Personal Communication, 2021).

These statements demonstrate that wearing the *hijab* among the *Pendaki Hijabers* community serves not only as physical protection against harsh weather but also as a religious symbol and a contextualized tool of outreach aligned with the lifestyle and interests of contemporary youth.

To further illustrate these findings, Figure 1 maps the relationship between the meanings of wearing the *hijab* and the practices of hiking activities within the *Pendaki Hijabers* community. The diagram shows how the *hijab* is consistently associated with obedience to God, spiritual commitment, and the affirmation of Islamic identity, while hiking is interpreted not only as a means of enjoying nature and building friendships but also as a contextualized medium for *da'wah*. Through practices such as wearing modest clothing, praying during expeditions, and reciting the Qur'an, the members

integrate religious devotion into physically demanding environments, demonstrating how faith and outdoor pursuits are mutually reinforcing.



**Figure 1. Meanings and Function sof Hijab and Hiking in Pendaki Hijabers Community**

Members of the *Pendaki Hijabers* community interpret the *hijab* not merely as a dress code obligation, but as a tangible expression of obedience to God and commitment to Islamic teachings—even when they are outdoors, such as during mountain climbing. For them, the *hijab* serves as a symbol of religious identity that is upheld even in physically demanding activities. Moreover, hiking is seen as more than just a hobby; it is regarded as a medium for *da'wah* that resonates with the current trends among young people. As hiking has become popular among the millennial generation, some members utilise it as a contextual way to convey religious messages—by wearing modest clothing, performing prayers, and reciting the *Qur'an* (Islamic holy book) during the climb. Thus, the *hijab* and hiking are jointly experienced as an expression of personal piety and as a form of *da'wah* that aligns with contemporary lifestyles (Juwariyah, 2019).

The data collected from interviews with members of the *Pendaki Hijabers* community revealed several recurring themes that shed light on the broader significance of the *hijab* in contemporary Muslim practice. Firstly, the *hijab* was consistently perceived not merely as a garment, but as a visible and enduring symbol of obedience to *Allah* (God in Islam). For these women, wearing the *hijab*—even during physically challenging activities like mountain climbing—was an expression of continuous spiritual commitment that extended beyond traditional settings of worship. Moreover, hiking itself was reimagined as a contemporary medium for *da'wah* (religious outreach), offering an alternative to conventional spaces such as mosques and schools. This reflects a conscious effort to integrate religious values into leisure activities that resonate with millennial lifestyles, making faith more accessible and relatable (Saphire et al., 2021).

Beyond its symbolic meaning, the *hijab* also served a practical function in the field, offering protection against the cold—particularly for the head and ears—during high-altitude expeditions. This dual role, both functional and spiritual, highlights the adaptability of religious practice in diverse environments. Furthermore, although all twenty informants agreed that wearing the *hijab* is a religious obligation for Muslim women, there was noticeable variation in how they interpreted and enacted this obligation. This diversity underscores a broader flexibility in Islamic expression, where adherence to religious norms is shaped by personal context and contemporary conditions. Within the *Pendaki Hijabers* community, the *hijab* thus emerges as a dynamic, multi-layered symbol—signifying identity, piety, and active engagement with modernity.

These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how religious identity is negotiated in contemporary Muslim communities. The *Hijabers* community exemplifies how Islamic symbols such as the *hijab* can adapt to modern lifestyles without losing their theological and ethical significance. Their practice challenges the rigid boundaries between sacred and secular, indoor and outdoor, traditional and contemporary. By wearing the *hijab* in public and physically demanding spaces, these women reclaim agency and redefine piety not as withdrawal from the world, but as engagement in it. The use of da'wah through climbing also demonstrates a strategic contextualisation of Islamic teachings, showing that religious outreach can be aligned with leisure, community building, and environmental appreciation. Moreover, this interpretation is also in line with Roland Barthes' myth theory—where the meaning of an object transcends its material form. In this case, the jilbab is not just a cloth, but a cultural signifier rich in connotations of faith, discipline, and identity (Hoed, 2014).

#### *Connotative Meaning: Hijab as a Symbol of Freedom, not Limitations*

One of the main findings from this observation is the collective spirit of the community to dismantle and replace the negative stereotypes often attached to women who wear the *hijab*. The members of the community are committed to redefining the *hijab* not as a symbol of social alienation, but as a manifestation of openness, freedom, and inclusivity.

A community leader, Lidya, expressed that the *hijab* has frequently been viewed as restricting women's mobility, when in fact, the opposite is true. She explained:

We want to show that the *hijab* is not a barrier, but rather our way of remaining free to express ourselves. Even in the world of mountaineering, we can be present, active, and contribute. The *hijab* does not isolate us—it reinforces our identity (Lidya, Personal Communication, 2021).

Furthermore, this community also organises various social and educational initiatives that reinforce values of piety and women's freedom. In addition to mountain expeditions, they are actively involved in awareness campaigns about modest dressing, book donation programmes, and other social activities that support the empowerment of *hijabi* (veiled) women in public spaces.

In the view of community members, the *hijab* does not hinder women's participation in broader social life; instead, it functions as a form of protection and a symbol of independence. Lidya added:

We never feel limited. On the contrary, with the *hijab*, we feel safer and more confident. We can continue to move, create, and be visible in society (Lidya, Personal Communication, 2021).

Referring to Roland Barthes's semiotic framework, the meaning of the *hijab* within this community has expanded from its denotative sense—as a garment covering the body—to a higher-level connotative meaning: a symbol of freedom and autonomy. This also constitutes a rejection of other connotative interpretations that tend to view the *hijab* negatively—for instance, as a marker of isolation or moral constraint. In contrast, within the narrative of *Pendaki Hijabers*, the *hijab* is “a gateway to the social sphere, not a boundary wall.”



**Figure 2.** The “*Hijab Is Not a Barrier to Hiking*” Campaign from @pendakihijabers



For instance, in a campaign featured on the Instagram account @pendakihijabers (Figure 2), the message emphasizes that the *hijab* is not an obstacle to engaging in any activity, including mountain climbing. While some groups perceive the *hijab* as a hindrance to outdoor activities such as hiking, the *Pendaki Hijabers* community asserts that the true barrier lies in one's courage, not the *hijab* itself. Consequently, beyond their online campaigns, the community also conducts public initiatives, most notably through open campaigns promoting *aurat* covering.



**Figure 3. Campaign to Cover the *Aurat* (Genitals) under the Theme GEMAR**

This reinterpretation is concretely realised through various educational and advocacy programmes run by the community, one of which is the GEMAR campaign (*Gerakan Menutup Aurat*, or Movement to Cover the *Aurat*) (Figure 3). This campaign not only emphasises the religious obligation of modest dressing but also frames it as a social movement that liberates women from judgement and discrimination. The campaign's visuals portray *hijabi* women actively engaged in various fields—education, mountaineering, and social work—as a way of challenging the stereotype that the *hijab* limits women's mobility and contribution to public life. Through GEMAR, *Pendaki Hijabers* stresses that covering the *aurat* is not a form of subjugation, but an affirmation of women's right to be visible, mobile, and heard, without renouncing their religious identity.

The *Pendaki Hijabers* community advocates for equality for *hijabi* women by rejecting the view that the *hijab* restricts their freedom. Members of the community assert that the *hijab* does not obstruct social mobility or participation—even in extreme activities like mountain climbing. They see the *hijab* as a form of protection and self-expression rather than a constraint. They are also aware of the discrimination against *hijabi* women in the workplace and public spaces, and they use the community as a platform to resist such stereotypes. Slogans like “*Hijab* is not a barrier to climbing” reflect their determination to change public narratives surrounding the *hijab*.

The process of demonstrating that the *hijab* is not an obstacle is articulated through the @pendakihijabers social media account, where, in response to persistent stereotypes against veiled women in mountaineering, the community frequently uploads photographs of women successfully reaching mountain summits. For example, see Figure 4.





Figure 4. Stereotypes of *Hijab-Wearing Climbers* and Their Refutation on Mount Rinjani

In one of the posts, a caption reads: “*Apa ndk capek? Pakek gamis lagi, apa ndk gerah? Bahaya ntar kamu jatuh?*” (Aren’t you tired? Wearing a long dress too, aren’t you hot? It’s dangerous, you might fall). This question is then answered with a brief response: “*Walah, yang bisa jawab ini silahkan di jawab.*” (Well then, anyone who can answer this, please go ahead).

The content illustrates that stereotypes against women wearing the *hijab* still persist, as reflected in these so-called “frequently asked questions.” However, the real answer appears through the visual: the woman in the photo included the location tag Mount Rinjani. The fact that she successfully reached the summit of Mount Rinjani—the third-highest mountain in Indonesia—while wearing the *hijab* serves as concrete evidence that the *hijab* is not an obstacle to mountaineering.

The data collected clearly show that *Pendaki Hijabers* consistently construct a new narrative around the *hijab* as a symbol of expressive freedom rather than limitation. Members firmly reject the stereotype that *hijabi* women are incapable or unfit to participate in physically demanding activities such as mountaineering. On the contrary, they assert that the *hijab* is a liberating part of their identity that enables them to be fully present in public spaces. Their hiking activities are not merely physical pursuits but symbolic declarations of the capabilities of *hijabi* women to overcome the social boundaries that have historically confined them (Sheen et al., 2018).

#### *Mythological Meaning: Hijab as a Symbol of Resistance and Social Transformation*

The activities of the *Pendaki Hijabers* community are not limited to the hobby of mountain climbing but extend to wide-reaching social actions, such as the *Gerakan Menutup Aurat* (GEMAR – Covering Aurat Movement), the distribution of books to Islamic boarding schools and general schools, and various forms of community service in the areas surrounding climbing sites. As previously discussed, these campaigns form part of a strategy to deconstruct the dominant ideology that frames veiled women as weak, restricted, and isolated from public spaces. Through visual narratives and concrete actions, the community attempts to shift societal paradigms, affirming that the *hijab* is not a barrier to actively contributing in society.

In this community, the *hijab* is not only understood as a garment to cover the *aurat* (parts of the body that must be covered in Islam – denotative meaning), but it is also interpreted as a symbol of freedom, independence, and female strength (connotative meaning). One community member explained:

We want to show that veiled women are also capable, can climb mountains, create, and become leaders in the community. We don't want to be judged merely by our veil, but by what we do for society (Lidya, Personal Communication, 2021).

This statement reflects a spirit of rejecting social interpretations that associate the *hijab* with limitations. They produce counter-narratives—through both concrete actions and social media posts—that the *hijab* is an entry point to public life, not a wall of confinement.

This spirit is visually represented in their community flag, which bears the slogan: “*Hijab is not an obstacle to hike.*” In this context, mountain climbing is not merely a recreational activity, but is understood as a form of social and spiritual development and a means of affirming women's agency in spaces traditionally dominated by men. It simultaneously serves as a rejection of the masculine paradigm of developmentalism—an idea that sectors such as the economy, society, and education can only be developed by men (Hunt et al., 2020). As another community member stated:

We can contribute to society while wearing the *hijab*. We can donate books to schools, help mountain communities—everything can be done without compromising our identity as Muslim women (Alya, Personal Communication, 2021).

This commitment is reflected in several social initiatives, including the donation of books to Islamic boarding schools and public schools. As shown in Figure 5, the “Donasi 1001 Buku” campaign illustrates how Pendaki Hijabers integrate social service with religious symbolism, reinforcing their identity as veiled women who actively contribute to society.



Figure 5. Book Donation Activity Supported by @pendakihijabers

Based on observations of the community's activities, the author interprets that the meaning of the *hijab* within *Pendaki Hijabers* has evolved beyond its primary function of covering the *aurat*. In Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, a transformation has occurred from a denotative to a more complex and ideological connotative meaning (Barthes, 2007, 2015, 2017). Barthes developed Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of *signifier* and *signified*, utilising Louis Hjelmslev's terminology, replacing *signifier* (*signifiant*) with *E* (expression) and *signified* (*signifié*) with *C* (content). In this context, *expression* refers to the physical form of the sign, while *content* denotes the meaning it carries. The relationship between

the two is referred to as *R* (relation), which together constitute a sign (*Sn* or *signe*). When someone engages with a sign, they undergo the E–R–C process. The primary (denotative) sign then potentially develops into a secondary (connotative) sign: E2 (=E1–R1–C1)–R2–C2.

**Table 1. The Relationship between Denotation and Connotation of the *Hijab* and its Connection to Islamic Studies**

Type of Meaning	Meaning	Explanation of Sign and Meaning
Secondary / Connotative Meaning	<i>Hijab</i> as a Sign of Obedience and Piety	E2 (E1, R2, C2): Wearing specific garments based on religious teachings. R2: Integration of religious values in wearing the <i>hijab</i> (individual) and the call to <i>dakwah</i> (social preaching). C2: Wearing the <i>hijab</i> while hiking signifies active <i>dakwah</i> by setting an example to other Muslim women through social media. This aligns with <i>dirāsah islāmiyyah</i> (Islamic studies) by linking religious norms with social conduct.
	<i>Hijab</i> as a Symbol of Freedom, Not Restriction	E2 (E1, R2, C2): Wearing specific garments based on religious teachings. R2: Affirmation that <i>hijab</i> does not hinder female participation in public spaces. C2: <i>Hijab</i> as resistance to views portraying it as restrictive. Relevant to Islamic studies by connecting normative principles with relational perspectives (stereotypes).
	<i>Hijab</i> as Resistance to Developmentalism through Social and Educational Service	E2 (E1, R2, C2): Wearing specific garments based on religious teachings. R2: Affirmation that <i>hijab</i> does not limit public participation. C2: <i>Hijab</i> symbolises equality in diversity, challenging assumptions that certain roles are exclusively male. This perspective links normative principles and relational perspectives in Islamic studies.
Primary / Denotative Meaning	Garment covering a woman's <i>aurat</i> , loose and non-form-fitting	E1: A tangible form of religious clothing. R1: A religious obligation for Muslim women. C1: The importance of adhering to religious teachings in the context of <i>‘ulūm al-dīn</i> (religious sciences).

Table 1 illustrates how the meaning of *hijab* evolves from a visual sign into a symbol of Muslim women's struggle against social stereotypes and masculine dominance in public space. At the primary level (denotation), *Pendaki Hijabers* understand *hijab* as a specific religious garment mandated by *sharī‘ah* (Islamic law) based on sacred texts, falling under the domain of *‘ulūm al-dīn* (religious sciences). This interpretation emphasises *hijab* as a canonical rule that must be followed. At the secondary level, however, *hijab* is also interpreted within the framework of *dirāsah islāmiyyah* (Abdullah, 2020). It is no longer merely a form of religious obedience but becomes a symbol of social integration (Shin et al., 2024). Within this context, *hijab* is viewed as a form of resistance to negative stereotypes that depict wearers as passive, domestic, and uninvolved in social development.

The *Pendaki Hijabers* community thus redefines *hijab* not merely as a religious garment but as a symbol of strength, freedom, and active participation in social development. They integrate outdoor activities such as mountain climbing with social initiatives like charity work and educational campaigns while maintaining their veiled identity. Through symbolic and visual narratives—such as the slogan on their flag “*Hijab* is not an obstacle to hike”—they convey the message that the *hijab* is not a barrier to movement or public contribution.

In this community, the meaning of *hijab* is transformed from a mere religious symbol to a tool for social struggle. Its members do not interpret *hijab* narrowly as a mere religious obligation but use it as

a means to affirm identity and gain recognition in the public sphere. This is evident in how they combine mountain climbing—an activity typically associated with physical strength and masculinity—with *dakwah*, community service, and awareness campaigns both directly and via digital platforms. Thus, the *hijab* becomes not a limit to mobility, but a declaration of freedom and women's capability to engage in societal development (Shin et al., 2024).

Furthermore, emerging patterns show resistance to developmentalist ideologies often dominated by men. The veiled women in this community consciously challenge social constructions that place religious-looking women on the periphery. By widely sharing documentation of their activities, they deconstruct outdated stereotypes that portray veiled women as passive and domestic. These practices integrate Islamic values with powerful visual representation, demonstrating that *hijab* can be part of a progressive and liberating *dirāsah islāmiyyah* narrative. In conclusion, the *Pendaki Hijabers* community has successfully created a counter-narrative that redefines the *hijab* from a symbol of limitation to one of participation, agency, and women's empowerment in the public sphere.

This finding shows that the meaning of the *hijab* within the *Pendaki Hijabers* community has undergone a semiotic transformation in the Barthesian sense—from denotative to connotative meaning. The *hijab* is no longer solely a symbol of personal piety but has become an instrument of resistance to the marginalisation of women in public spaces. By combining religious expression with social activism, they have constructed a new narrative that repositions veiled women as agents of change. Conceptually, this expands our understanding of the relationship between religion and social space, particularly within Islamic studies. As a religious symbol, *hijab* also embodies ideological and political dimensions in challenging patriarchal hegemony and masculine developmentalism. This supports the theory that religious symbols can function as tools of social resistance, not merely as expressions of personal devotion.

#### 4. Discussion

This study revealed three layers of meaning attributed to the *hijab* within the *Pendaki Hijabers* community. At the denotative level, the *hijab* is understood as a sign of obedience and piety, embodied through consistent use even in extreme activities such as mountain climbing. At the connotative level, the *hijab* is redefined as a symbol of freedom rather than restriction, challenging stereotypes that associate veiling with passivity and limitations. At the mythological level, the *hijab* functions as a symbol of resistance and social transformation, demonstrated through community service, book donation campaigns, and the GEMAR movement, which collectively reshape the public narrative around veiled women in Indonesia.

This multilayered finding confirms the researcher's initial perspective that the *hijab* in the *Pendaki Hijabers* community is not merely a functional garment but a symbolic practice through which Muslim women actively negotiate their presence in public spaces. At the denotative level, as Barthes explains, signs convey their most literal meaning; in this case, the *hijab* is understood as religious clothing that covers the 'awrah and signifies obedience to God. At the connotative level, signs acquire ideological and cultural values beyond their literal form. Here, the *hijab* is redefined by the *Pendaki Hijabers* community as a symbol of freedom, confidence, and inclusivity, countering the stereotype that veiling restricts women's agency. At the mythological level, Barthes argues that signs evolve into grand narratives that naturalize particular ideologies. In this study, the *hijab* functions as a myth that challenges patriarchal discourses and masculine developmentalism by presenting veiled women as active agents of social transformation. Thus, applying Barthes' cultural semiotics shows that the *hijab* operates simultaneously as a sign of piety, a marker of feminist agency, and a mythic declaration of resistance. This layered interpretation highlights the *hijab* as a dynamic cultural signifier that not only reflects religious devotion but also contests dominant social constructions of gender, space, and modernity.

The present study aligns with previous scholarship that conceptualizes the *hijab* as a multifaceted symbol of religious devotion, cultural identity, and ideological expression (Alghafli et al., 2017; Sheen et al., 2018). Similar to the *Hijabers Community Bandung*, which illustrates how the *hijab* mediates the

construction of a modern Muslimah identity that blends religiosity with urban fashion and social status (Fakhrurroji & Rojati, 2017), the Pendaki Hijabers community also mobilizes the hijab as a marker of belonging and visibility in public life. However, while earlier studies primarily emphasize urban, political, or lifestyle contexts—such as the hijab as a site of state regulation in Iran (Koo, 2014; Mir-Hosseini, 2007) or as a fashion trend embedded in global consumer culture (Hussain, 2010; Najjaj, 2017), this study introduces a novel dimension by situating the hijab within the physically demanding and male-dominated sphere of mountaineering. Here, the hijab is not only a visible sign of piety but also a practical and symbolic tool through which women negotiate their presence, articulate agency, and redefine the boundaries of participation in extreme outdoor activities. Moreover, while Western scholarship often frames the hijab as a symbol of oppression (Newns, 2018; Winter, 2008), the case of Pendaki Hijabers demonstrates how veiled women actively challenge such stereotypes by transforming the hijab into a symbol of empowerment, *da'wah*, and social transformation. In this way, the study extends existing literature by moving beyond the discursive domains of fashion and politics, highlighting how the hijab operates as a dynamic cultural signifier that bridges piety, resilience, and agency in contexts of physical endurance.

Building on these insights, the findings of this study also resonate with prior research that positions women's engagement in physically demanding activities as a pathway to self-affirmation and resistance against entrenched gender norms (Ahmed Laar et al., 2022; Malcom et al., 2021). Similar to female CrossFit athletes who negotiate social expectations and cultivate athletic identity through community support, members of Pendaki Hijabers mobilize mountaineering as a means to assert resilience, challenge stereotypes, and strengthen their collective presence in male-dominated spaces. Yet, unlike previous studies that emphasize empowerment primarily in terms of gender equality and physical capability, this research highlights the distinctive role of religious symbolism—particularly the hijab—as integral to women's agency. The hijab here is not merely a garment worn during physical activity but becomes a signifier of spiritual commitment that simultaneously affirms women's freedom to participate in strenuous outdoor pursuits. This integration of faith and physical endurance introduces a novel perspective: empowerment is not constructed solely through gender-based resistance but also through the re-signification of religious practice as a source of confidence, authority, and legitimacy. In this way, the Pendaki Hijabers case adds a new layer to existing discussions by demonstrating how religious identity and gender equality can be negotiated together in the embodied experience of extreme physical activity.

Extending this discussion, the present study also engages with scholarship that situates mountain climbing within spiritual and nationalistic frameworks (De Pisón, 2012; North & Harasymchuk, 2012; Nosachev, 2017; Zimmermann et al., 2021). Consistent with prior findings that associate climbing with humility, vitality, and dialogue with nature, the Pendaki Hijabers community similarly interprets mountaineering as an avenue for spiritual awakening. Yet, what distinguishes this study is the integration of the hijab into these spiritual practices, thereby transforming climbing into a form of embodied religiosity. While previous research highlights national pride and cultural diplomacy as central outcomes of mountaineering (Flynn, 2024; Hasan, 2015; Nüsser & Clemens, 2003), the case of Pendaki Hijabers emphasizes *da'wah* as an equally significant dimension. For these women, the ascent of mountains is not only a metaphor for inner growth but also a stage for religious expression, visible in their practices of prayer, Qur'an recitation, and modest dress during expeditions. In this sense, the hijab reconfigures the symbolic landscape of mountaineering by embedding spiritual devotion into physical endurance and by reframing the act of climbing as both worship and resistance. This study thus contributes a novel perspective: it demonstrates how the religious symbolism of the hijab intersects with the spiritual ethos of mountaineering, producing a hybrid practice that simultaneously affirms piety, fosters communal solidarity, and challenges patriarchal assumptions about women's exclusion from physically and ideologically significant terrains.

Taken together, this comparative analysis demonstrates that the present study both affirms and extends existing scholarship across the domains of identity, gender, and spirituality. In line with prior research, the hijab remains a powerful marker of cultural and religious identity; however, by situating

it in the context of mountaineering, this study expands the discussion beyond urban and fashion-oriented spaces into physically demanding terrains. Similarly, while women's participation in sports has been widely recognized as a form of empowerment and resistance to gender stereotypes, the Pendaki Hijabers case reveals that such empowerment is uniquely mediated through religious symbolism, with the hijab functioning as both a sign of devotion and a vehicle of agency. Finally, although mountain climbing has long been interpreted as a spiritual and even nationalistic pursuit, this research highlights how the hijab reconfigures the spiritual symbolism of climbing into an embodied form of *da'wah* and social transformation. The novelty of this study thus lies in its demonstration of how the hijab operates simultaneously at the denotative, connotative, and mythological levels: as a sign of piety, a symbol of freedom, and a mythic narrative of resistance. By integrating identity, gender, and spirituality within a semiotic framework, the findings illuminate the hijab as a dynamic cultural signifier that redefines Muslim women's presence in public and physically challenging spaces.

The implications of these findings can be interpreted through three dimensions: historical, social, and ideological. Historically, the findings demonstrate a shift from viewing the *hijab* merely as a legalistic requirement to seeing it as a cultural identity embedded in new social practices, including extreme sports. In the context of sports, the *hijab* functions as both a religious symbol and a marker of cultural identity, enabling Muslim women to assert their presence and faith in the public sphere (Mahmud & Swami, 2010; Williams & Vashi, 2007). However, the use of the *hijab* in sports is not free from challenges such as stereotypes, resistance, and international regulations that often position it as a barrier to integration or a safety threat (Hamzeh, 2017; Prouse, 2015). Nevertheless, studies show that the participation of veiled women in sports becomes a site of agency and empowerment, where they resist discrimination while negotiating space to display their religious and cultural identity autonomously (Carr & Power, 2020; Christianakis & Moazzam-Doulat, 2023). This phenomenon is even reinforced by commercial initiatives such as the *Nike Pro Hijab*, which provides *sharī'ah*-compliant products while simultaneously commodifying Muslim women's identity in the global arena (Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2022). Thus, the participation of Muslim women in sports, including extreme sports, illustrates that the *hijab* is not merely a limitation but a symbol of freedom, resistance, and the struggle for inclusion in multicultural societies (Knoester & Rockhill, 2021).

Socially, the reinterpretation of the *hijab* strengthens the presence of Muslim women in the public sphere and challenges stereotypes that confine them to domestic roles. However, various studies show that veiled women still frequently encounter discrimination and stereotypes in social spaces. In Canada, for instance, *hijab*-wearing women are perceived as *the other* and experience social prejudice and identity struggles (Rahmath et al., 2016). In the United States, they face Islamophobia and anti-Muslim aggression, particularly after the 2016 presidential election (Koura, 2018; Tetreault et al., 2019). In Europe, discrimination manifests in demands to unveil or alter their veiling practices despite the absence of legal requirements, reflecting entrenched colonial and Islamophobic biases. Mainstream media also frequently depict veiled women as oppressed figures, thereby reinforcing orientalist stereotypes (Sarwar, 2014; Stano, 2010). Even in Malaysia, women who choose to remove the *hijab* face online bullying and social condemnation (Noor & Abdul Hamid, 2021). Additional challenges arise in the workplace, such as in Catalonia, Spain, where veiled women struggle to access employment and social inclusion (Garcia-Yeste et al., 2021), or in South Africa, where discrimination is more prevalent among *hijab*-wearing women in lower-level positions (Carrim & Paruk, 2021). In healthcare settings, veiled women in the United States report discrimination that negatively affects their medical experiences (Murrar et al., 2024). Despite these obstacles, many Muslim women assert their agency and view the *hijab* as a form of empowerment and freedom, as illustrated by Arab Muslim women in the United States and France who reject narratives of oppression (Al Wazni, 2015; Zimmerman, 2015). Thus, the *hijab* functions not only as a religious symbol but also as a means of social struggle, resistance to discrimination, and affirmation of Muslim women's identity in the public sphere.

Ideologically, the *Pendaki Hijabers* community represents an alternative narrative to patriarchal and developmentalist discourses by redefining the *hijab* not as a symbol of limitation but as a marker of resistance and women's agency in shaping public life. This finding aligns with studies showing that



for many Muslim women, wearing the *hijab* constitutes a form of personal choice and agency rather than external coercion. Zimmerman (Zimmerman, 2015) and Al Wazni (Al Wazni, 2015) affirm that the *hijab* is understood as a means of empowerment and feminist identity by Arab Muslim women in the United States and France, rejecting Western stereotypes of confinement. Karaman and Christian (2022) also found that Muslim college women in the United States interpret the *hijab* as a religious symbol, an identity marker, and a representation of diverse feminist positions. Furthermore, the *hijab* has been practiced as a form of resistance against hegemonic representations, both from Western and Islamist discourses, as illustrated by Joosub and Ebrahim (2020) in their study of Muslim psychotherapists in Johannesburg, and by Athira and Balyan (2023) through their digital ethnography in India. Moreover, reinterpretations of the *hijab* within the frameworks of Islamic feminism and transnational feminism reveal dimensions of cross-border solidarity, such as in *The Hijab Project* in Utah (Antunes, 2022) and campaigns like *My Stealthy Freedom* and *World Hijab Day* (Rahbari et al., 2021). Thus, *Pendaki Hijabers* not only presents a contextual religious discourse but also affirms the *hijab* as an instrument of feminist agency—a cultural practice that expands Muslim women’s capacity to negotiate identity, resistance, and participation in public life.

Functionally, this study documents the dynamic reinterpretation of the *hijab* as both a religious and social symbol, providing empirical evidence that veiled women actively negotiate their identities in public and extreme environments. However, potential dysfunction lies in the reliance on symbolic narratives that may not fully dismantle structural barriers such as workplace discrimination or institutionalized patriarchy. Numerous studies confirm that *hijab*-wearing Muslim women continue to face significant discrimination across various social domains. In the workplace, the *hijab* marks Muslim women as more visible “others,” making them vulnerable to stigmatization and reduced employment opportunities (Dana et al., 2019). This discrimination operates intersectionally, combining biases based on gender, religion, and ethnicity, as evident in Europe and Catalonia, Spain, where veiled women struggle to access employment and social inclusion (Donegan, 2020; Garcia-Yeste et al., 2021). Variations in *hijab* practices even shape women’s employment experiences in Saudi Arabia, affecting recruitment and career advancement. Similar barriers emerge in healthcare, where veiled women in the United States report discrimination, being treated with less courtesy, and experiencing psychological distress due to the solo status of being visibly Muslim in public spaces (Hashem & Awad, 2024; Murrar et al., 2024). In broader public spaces, veiled women in Canada encounter prejudice and social isolation (Rahmath et al., 2016), while in U.S. public schools, they often become targets of Islamophobia (Taylor et al., 2014). Although collective initiatives such as the digital activism campaign *#HandsOffMyHijab* challenge discrimination (Rafique & Ramone, 2024), these facts highlight that without institutional support and structural reform, the impact of symbolic narratives like those advanced by *Pendaki Hijabers* remains limited to the grassroots level.

In response to the potential dysfunction arising from the limitations of symbolic narratives in confronting structural barriers—such as workplace discrimination and institutionalized patriarchy—more concrete strategic actions are required. First, public campaigns, which have so far been dominated by social media, must expand into institutional spaces such as schools, workplaces, and policy forums to normalize the presence of veiled women in diverse public roles. Second, collaboration between *Pendaki Hijabers*, women’s organizations, and state institutions is essential to institutionalize gender-inclusive policies, particularly in sports, education, and community development. Third, leadership and advocacy training for women community members must be strengthened so that they can expand activism beyond symbolic resistance. In this way, long-term impacts such as dismantling stereotypes and achieving structural transformation can be realized, positioning the *hijab* not only as a symbol of resistance but also as an instrument of social and institutional empowerment.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the *hijab*, as practiced and reinterpreted by the *Pendaki Hijabers* community, carries multiple layers of meaning—denotative, connotative, and mythological. At the denotative level, the *hijab* symbolizes obedience and piety, as women continue to wear it even in



extreme outdoor activities such as mountain climbing. At the connotative level, it emerges as a sign of freedom and agency, challenging stereotypes that confine veiled women to passive and domestic roles. At the mythological level, the *hijab* becomes a tool of resistance and social transformation, enabling women to assert their presence in public spaces and to contest patriarchal and developmentalist discourses. Collectively, these findings highlight the dynamic reinterpretation of religious symbols within contemporary Muslim communities.

The primary scholarly contribution of this research lies in its application of Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to the study of *hijab* practices in extreme sports. By focusing on the *Pendaki Hijabers* community, this study extends existing scholarship that often limits discussions of the *hijab* to urban, everyday, or institutional contexts. The research introduces a novel perspective by demonstrating how religious symbols are re-signified in non-traditional settings such as mountaineering, where they operate simultaneously as markers of faith, cultural identity, feminist agency, and social activism. This interdisciplinary approach contributes to Islamic studies, gender studies, and cultural semiotics by providing empirical evidence of how Muslim women negotiate identity, resistance, and empowerment in both physical and symbolic terrains.

Nevertheless, this research is not without limitations. The reliance on symbolic narratives, while powerful in reshaping perceptions, does not fully dismantle structural barriers such as workplace discrimination, institutionalized patriarchy, and systemic exclusion in broader socio-political contexts. Future studies should therefore integrate perspectives from policymakers, employers, and other institutional actors to examine how grassroots reinterpretations of the *hijab* can translate into structural change. Longitudinal and comparative research across different cultural settings would also enrich understanding of how *hijab* as a symbol evolves globally in response to both local and transnational discourses.

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