

Visible Muslims, Political Beings:  
The Racialized and Gendered Contours of a Digitally-Mediated Muslim Womanhood

Inaash Islam

Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in  
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Sociology

David L. Brunsma, Chair  
Anthony Kwame Harrison  
Suchitra Samanta  
Bonnie Zare

May 10, 2021  
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Muslim women, social media, influencers, Muslim womanhood, hijab, racialized

Copyright © 2021 Inaash Islam

## Visible Muslims, Political Beings:

### The Racialized and Gendered Contours of a Digitally-Mediated Muslim Womanhood

Inaash Islam

#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to examine how contemporary contexts of Islamophobia contribute to shaping notions and performances of Muslim womanhood. I center Muslim female social media influencers in my analysis and examine how they perform and (re)define Muslim womanhood through fashion, aesthetic labor, the hijab, and modest embodiment practices online. The specific research question that undergirds this project is, “How do contexts and discourses of Islamophobia contribute to shaping notions and performances of Muslim womanhood?” My data is derived from interviews with Muslimah social media influencers in the US, UK, and Canada; a survey with their social media followers, and a content analysis of their photo and video posts on Instagram and YouTube. Findings suggest that racialized and gendered expectations of Muslim womanhood emerge on the one hand, from the western non-Muslim community’s racialized perceptions and understandings of Muslim women and Islam, and on the other, from the western Muslim community’s reaction to its racialization in the global war on terror. The result of these expectations is the imposition of representational and moral responsibilities on Muslim women, who are regarded as visible and public representations of the Muslim community and of Islam as a faith. Findings also suggest that in response to the burden of these expectations, Muslim women exercise their agency to mobilize Islamic feminisms to their advantage in order to negotiate with, resist, and critique western Muslim and non-Muslim expectations of modesty, piety, empowerment, and the hijab. Consequently, Muslimah influencers are forcing western Muslim and non-Muslim communities to reevaluate their expectations of who fits within the category the ‘Muslim Woman’ while also opening up a discursive space for the possibility of new formulations and conceptualizations of Muslim womanhood that are more aligned with egalitarian Islamic feminist interpretations of Muslimah ways of living and being.

## Visible Muslims, Political Beings:

### The Racialized and Gendered Contours of a Digitally-Mediated Muslim Womanhood

Inaash Islam

#### GENERAL ABSTRACT

In this research study, I examine how Islamophobia has contributed to shaping western Muslim and non-Muslim community perceptions and expectations of Muslim women. I focus specifically on Muslim female social media influencers to understand how they perform Muslim femininity, modesty, piety and the hijab on Instagram and YouTube. I collected data from interviews with Muslim female social media influencers in the U.S., UK, and Canada, a survey with their social media followers, and photos and videos posted by Muslim female influencers on social media. My findings show that Muslim women must contend with expectations from western non-Muslim communities, whose perceptions of Muslim emerge from Islamophobic understandings of Muslims and Islam. Simultaneously, Muslim women must contend with certain moral and representational responsibilities imposed on them by Muslim communities in the west, who are currently working to address and counteract Islamophobia, by posing a positive image of Muslims and Islam in the eyes of the western public. My findings also show that in response to the burden of these expectation, Muslim women critique these gendered burdens by exercising their agency to interpret Quranic scripture on modesty, the hijab, and gendered behaviors with an Islamic feminist lens. In doing so, they are forcing Muslim and non-Muslim communities to reevaluate the moral and representational burdens placed on Muslim women's shoulders, while also offering a space where others can conceptualize and perform Muslim womanhood in ways that align more with egalitarian Islamic feminist interpretations of Muslim women's ways of living and being.

*For Ammi and Abbu.*

*Thank you for always believing in your girls.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the generous guidance of my dissertation committee. A special thanks is due to my committee chair, Dr. David L. Brunsma, for his continuous support and genuine mentorship throughout my graduate career. Under your wing, I have grown as a scholar and person, and have come to understand what ideal mentorship looks like. For that, and for so much more, thank you. To my committee members, Drs. Anthony Kwame Harrison, Suchitra Samanta, Saher Selod, and Bonnie Zare, thank you for your dedication, support and guidance on this project. Your encouragement and enthusiasm for me and my work have made my PhD a most thoughtful and rewarding experience. Thank you for generously sharing your time, feedback, and wisdom. I also want to thank friends, colleagues, and faculty in the Department of Sociology, many of whom have contributed to my scholarship and professionalization. In particular, thank you to Sadie Giles, Dr. Pallavi Raonka, Joong Won Kim, Dr. Megan Nanney, Dr. Slade Lellock, Dr. Lipon Mondal, Dr. Ellington Graves, Dr. Jennifer Bondy, Dr. Dale Wimberley, Dr. Nicholas Copeland, Dr. Karl Precoda, and Dr. Shannon Bell. Thank you for your insight, positivity, and intellect; your support has been integral to my academic journey.

I thank my best friends for their constant love and encouragement: Ayesha, Summiya, Kashifa, Hamna, and Emmet. Even though we are all states and countries apart, I have never once felt your absence. Thank you for celebrating my milestones with me, for making constant duas, for accompanying me, and for being there when I needed you. I love you all. A very special thank you to my lovely aunt, Dr. Myriam Huet. Thank you for your guidance and advice throughout the years. Thank you for believing in me, for reading my work, for checking in with me, and for supporting me personally and professionally as I grew in academia. I love you.

To my family, immediate and extended: When I came to the U.S. in 2011, I had no idea that being separate from you all for so long would be the most difficult part of my graduate experience. I am grateful for the visits that I have been able to make back home, and for the calls and messages I have received from you. Ammi, your daily calls have hardly allowed me to miss you, and for that I am so so grateful. Baba, you are an inspiration and a role model to me. Thank you for paving the way, for working so hard, for believing in your daughters, for supporting all of us, and for loving us unconditionally. I couldn't begin to thank you both for all that you have done for us. We are so lucky to have you as our loving and always-supportive parents. To my sisters, Izza and Haneen, I love you both, and am grateful to celebrate this milestone with you. Izza, thank you for inviting me to Baton Rouge during breaks; your home has been a refuge to me, and I am grateful to have somewhere to call a second home. Haneen, thank you for bearing with me as I asked you to read my work. You have no idea how much it helps to have a passionate sister in the social sciences willing to read entire manuscripts and give me feedback. You gave me the breakthrough that I needed, and I genuinely don't know if I could have done this without you. Ammi, Abbu, Izza and Haneen, I can't wait to reunite with you all, and celebrate becoming the second Dr. Islam in the family. I miss you and love you.

Alhamdulillah.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER ONE: Visible Muslims, Political Beings: An Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER TWO: (Un)Veiling Expectations: The Racialized and Gendered Politics of the Muslimah Influencer Dejabi Controversy .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>CHAPTER THREE: When Modesty Meets Aesthetic Labor: Performances of Muslimah Modesty as Antithetical to Aesthetic Labor in the Fashion and Social Media Influencer Industries .....</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: “You think that’s modest?”: Policing Muslimah Modesty and Aesthetic Labor in the Digitally Mediated Modest Fashion Industry .....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: Summary and Future Directions for Research.....</b>	<b>144</b>
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>155</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: Sample of Muslimah Influencers .....</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: Interview Guide.....</b>	<b>174</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: Qualitative Survey Protocol for ‘Audience’ .....</b>	<b>176</b>
<b>APPENDIX D: Recruitment Materials .....</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>APPENDIX E: Codebook.....</b>	<b>183</b>

## **CHAPTER ONE: Visible Muslims, Political Beings: An Introduction**

The purpose of this project is to examine how contemporary contexts of Islamophobia contribute to shaping notions and performances of Muslim womanhood. I pay particular attention to how western Muslimah<sup>1</sup> social media influencers are subject to racialized and gendered expectations of Muslim womanhood as a result of their hypervisibility on social media platforms. I also examine how they perform and (re)define Muslim womanhood through fashion, aesthetic labor, the hijab, and modest embodiment practices through their digital labor online. The specific research question that undergirds this project is, “How do contexts and discourses of Islamophobia contribute to shaping notions and performances of Muslim womanhood?” My data is derived from interviews with Muslimah social media influencers in the US, UK, and Canada; a survey with their social media followers, and a content analysis of their photo and video posts on various social media platforms.

For the purposes of this study, Muslim womanhood is defined as the qualities and practices of embodiment that characterize, distinguish, and represent cisgender Muslim women. While using this definition is relevant in terms of identifying the characteristics and expectations of performances of Muslim womanhood, I do not seek to generalize the experiences of all Muslim women, and recognize that race, class, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and even the decision to wear the hijab all contribute to the diverse experience of Muslim womanhood. With that said, in this study, I make two key arguments regarding Muslim womanhood. First, I argue that racialized and gendered expectations of Muslim womanhood emerge on the one hand, from the western non-Muslim community’s racialized perceptions and understandings of Muslim women and Islam as informed by discourses of Islamophobia and the global war on terror. On the

---

<sup>1</sup> Muslimah refers to Muslim woman.

other, these racialized and gendered expectations emerge from the western Muslim community's reaction to its racialization in the global war on terror. This reaction takes on a gendered nature, resulting in the imposition of certain representational and moral responsibilities on Muslim women's shoulders, who are regarded as visible and public representations of the Muslim community and of Islam as a faith. Second, I argue that in response to the burden of these expectations, Muslim women exercise their agency to mobilize Islamic feminisms to their advantage in order to negotiate with, resist, and critique western Muslim and non-Muslim expectations of modesty, piety, empowerment, and the hijab, especially as these relate to conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood. In mobilizing Islamic feminisms to critique racialized and gendered expectations, Muslim women are forcing western Muslim and non-Muslim communities to reevaluate their expectations of who fits within the category the 'Muslim Woman', while also opening up a discursive space for the possibility of new formulations and conceptualizations of Muslim womanhood that are more aligned with egalitarian Islamic feminist interpretations of Muslimah ways of living and being. Notably, this brand of feminism is not designed to disrupt the gender binary, but is intended instead to challenge the responsibilities attached to one's gender.

Contemporary notions of Muslim womanhood emerge from orientalist, racializing, and Islamophobic discourses that are contemporarily evident in the global war on terror. In particular, the U.S.'s war on terror has culminated in a racialized era of post-9/11 politics, where the global phenomenon of Islamophobia influences, and is thus deeply embedded in regional and international politics, giving rise to how publics conceive of, and perceive Muslims and Islam (Cainkar 2009; Beydoun 2018; Cainkar and Selod 2018). However, the phenomenon of Islamophobia is not unique or new to the post-9/11 era (Cainkar and Selod 2018). It is the result



of a historical process of orientalism and racialization that has resulted in the demonization of Islam and Muslims, and the pitting of the two against Christianity and the west (Said 1979). Embroiled within much of this process is the role of mass media and the proliferation of racialized misrepresentations of Muslims and Islam (Said 1979; Kerboua 2016). Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as barbaric, uncivilized, misogynistic, and prone to violence or terrorism are deeply embedded within the western imagination, mainly due to flagrant misrepresentations of Muslims in films, television, news, and in how racialized policies instituted by nation-states are relayed to the general public to garner support for political agendas (Shaheen 2001; Hasan 2012). Consistently in these portrayals, the hijab or the burqa clad woman remains a constant icon, often used as a political device to symbolize Islam's misogynistic qualities, which must then be countered via the militaristic and epistemological mobilization of western ideals of feminism, freedom and equality. Made to seem synonymous with the Muslim woman, the markers of the hijab, abaya and burqa have consistently been used to define the 'Muslim Woman' image which, when contextualized in contexts of Islamophobia, "overrides all other [identities] to constitute these women's primary identity" (Cooke 2008:131). In doing so, these discourses, representations and racialized markers have arguably shaped notions of Muslim womanhood and undergirded the gendered and racialized experience of Muslim women in the 21st century. The (re)presentation of Muslims within mass media and social media have influenced public perceptions of Muslims and Islam, giving rise to how these publics treat Muslim communities (Beydoun 2018). The critical role of mass media in the creation, manifestation, and continuation of the global phenomenon of Islamophobia thus necessitates that we examine how Muslims, and especially Muslim women within mass media and social media in particular, are constructed and (mis)represented.

As networked spaces, social media platforms are one of the more accessible media forms available for people around the world to use. In fact, in 2018 alone, the total number of social media accounts worldwide was 3.2 billion, growing by 13% from the previous year (Chaffey 2018). Muslims in particular, are using these spaces for a multitude of reasons, which include sharing information about Islamophobia, maintaining transnational ties with their relatives, managing their domestic or international businesses, or creatively representing themselves in ways that subvert orientalist perceptions of Muslims and Islam – to name a few (Lewis 2013; Bouclin 2013; Boubekour 2016; Janhmohamed 2016; Evolvi 2017; Peterson 2018). One of the more interesting phenomena that have emerged since the introduction of social media platforms, is the profession of the social media influencer.

Social media influencers are in essence, tastemakers who use social media platforms to exercise their credibility and power as knowledgeable and trendy authorities in order to influence the purchase and lifestyle decisions of an audience (Freberg et al. 2011). The phenomenon of influencers is not new. They have existed long before the use of digital and social media, as celebrities, musicians, artists, actors, etc. and have been involved in the world of marketing. Influencer marketing involves “marketing products and services to those who have a sway over the things other people buy” (Kádeková and Holienčinová 2018:91). In this occupation, brands utilize and leverage the popularity and authority of influential people to reinforce brand values or sell products to consumers. This kind of marketing is similar to word-of-mouth marketing, and relies on the influence of publicly recognized and trusted individuals for their endorsement of products and brands (Mantel et al. 2016). While there is often an element of marketing or economics associated with the influencer profession, influencers may also work in their capacity as artists, social activists, journalists, musicians, travelers, etc., often using their platforms as a

space for creative expression, storytelling, opinion pieces, and in the cause of social justice issues. However, if they choose to pursue the influencer profession as a source of economic empowerment, then it is more than likely that an influencer will engage in some form of marketing or brand advertisement (Belgatti 2017). Understanding the nature of the influencer profession is key if we are to embark on a research project that situates Muslimah influencers self-presentation, surveillance, and digital labor front and center.

Now numbering in the thousands, Muslimah social media influencers have joined the millions of social media influencers on Instagram and YouTube, having first emerged on these social media sites around 2010. As a result of their popularity with a niche audience interested in modest fashion and positive Muslim female representations, Muslimah influencers have come to amass large followings on YouTube and Instagram, thereby diversifying and increasing the number of Muslim female representations on visual and social media (Tarlo and Moors 2013). Consequently, these women are also subject to a number of gazes, inclusive of western, non-western, Muslim and non-Muslim gazes – all of which are currently informed and influenced by the racialized and gendered discourses embedded in the global war on terror. At a cursory glance, a majority of their creative work can be understood as consumer-focused content that focuses on mundane topics such as fashion, beauty, and lifestyle (Tarlo 2009). While Muslimah social media influencers and their work might be easily dismissed for being non-political, too mundane, or simply too focused on such stereotypical gendered practices, their work is very much situated in racialized and gendered regional and global geopolitics, and is thus shaped by the characteristics of the societies and regions in which they reside and do their work (Tarlo 2009; Tarlo and Moors 2013; Lewis 2015 [2013]). In this sense, we can better approach the concept of mundane-as-political, allowing us to contextualize the work and performances of Muslimah social media

influencers and gain valuable insight into the kinds of racialized and gendered politics and expectations that may shape how they present and perform their Muslim womanhood. For example, in 2017, British Muslimah social media influencer Dina Tokio produced a YouTube documentary titled #YourAverageMuslim, which has been understood as a response to orientalist misrepresentations of Muslim women in western media forms (Islam 2019) and as a challenge to Muslim female socioeconomic exclusion in the U.K. (Warren 2018). Similarly, fashion theorist Reina Lewis interprets western Muslimah social media influencers' curation and presentation of modest fashion as a way to "reinterpret community and ethnic forms in relation to contemporary life" (2013:3) by subverting notions of Muslim backwardness and the perceived inability of Muslims and hijabi Muslim women to assimilate in western (i.e., 'modern') society.

Keeping the nature of Islamophobic contexts in mind, it is thus crucially important to emphasize that social media influencers do not exist or work in a vacuum. Through their presence and creative work on social media, Muslimah influencers' self-presentations and digital labor relay important information about the racialized and gendered politics and gazes that are shaped by the sociocultural and political contexts in which they work. By the very nature of their Muslim female identity as situated in the global phenomenon of Islamophobia, their choices, self-representations, messages, and performances of Muslim womanhood on social media are political, even though they may seem non-political. To clarify, by 'political' I refer to the politics of being, the politics of choice, and the politics of gaining, maintaining and using power. Such politics can be both conscious and unconscious. When contextualized, their work is political in that it informs us of how race, gender, religion, citizenship, etc. intersect, are understood, and function to shape notions of Muslim womanhood within the contexts in which these women reside and work. As such, Muslimah influencers and their work on social media serve as appropriate gateways into

understanding the social forces that construct notions and expectations of Muslim womanhood, as well as Muslim women's performances and definitions of Muslim womanhood, as these are informed by the racialized and gendered politics evident in larger contexts of global Islamophobia.

In the sections that follow, I provide an overview of existing scholarship on Islamophobia, mass media representations of Muslim womanhood, and Muslimah social media influencers. I then follow this section to describe my methods of study and posit my project's overarching research question. I then engage in a reflexive discussion of my positionality as a Pakistani, Muslim, hijabi female researcher, and conclude this introductory chapter by providing an outline of the dissertation chapters.

## **THEORETICAL CONTEXTS**

There has been abundant scholarship in the past few decades that offer insight on the ways in which Islamophobia manifests in the United States and abroad (Ho 2007; Hasan 2012; Zempi 2014; Garner and Selod 2015; Moosavi 2015; Beydoun 2018, Selod 2018a[b]). Highlighting this context is necessary if we are to fully comprehend, situate, and appreciate the digital presence and labor of Muslimah influencers in the west. Examining the work of these women requires that we explore the ways in which Muslims, and Muslim women in particular, have been subject to orientalism, racialization, and Islamophobia (Said 1979; Selod 2018a; Beydoun 2018). In a post-9/11 context, one cannot discuss orientalist representations, racialization and Islamophobia as being distinct from one other. Rather each overlaps with, and informs the other, all-the-while incorporating issues of religion, culture, notions of the Other, nationalism, identity, belonging, immigration, surveillance, and symbolic boundaries (Cainkar 2009; Selod 2018a[b]; Beydoun 2018). Furthermore, these issues also cannot be considered context specific to a post-9/11 world or relegated only to the context of the United States; in fact, these discourses have persisted over

centuries and in different regions, reproducing the same ideologies, albeit in different forms (Kerboua 2016). As such, in this section, I apply a gendered lens to show how Islamophobia has been articulated and theorized as a global phenomenon, specifically as it manifests in relation to Muslim women, orientalism, and racialization in mass and social media.

### **Islamophobia in Western Contexts**

There are a number of definitions of Islamophobia. Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1979, Islamophobia has been understood in terms of the west's association of Islam with negative stereotypes, sentiments, and images. In contemporary discourse however, the term was popularized after it emerged in a report entitled "Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All", which was published in 1997 by the Runnymede Trust. In this report, Islamophobia is defined as a "useful shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam—and, therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims" (Runnymede Trust 1997:1) Since then, this term has been circulated in the media, often (inaccurately) being understood as the 'irrational fear' of Muslims and Islam (Ontario Human Rights Commission 2005), or as an "unfounded hostility towards Islam...unfair discrimination against Muslims individuals and communities' (Weedon 2004:165).

While there has been much disagreement on the precise definition of Islamophobia, its roots are more easily identifiable. In his book *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* Khaled Beydoun argues that Islamophobia is simply a "modern extension of the old ideology that branded Muslims as inherently suspicious and unassimilable, and cast Islam as a rival ideology at odds with American [and other western] values, society, and national identity" (2018:37). The old ideology he is referring to is orientalism, which understands Islam and its followers as inferior, subhuman, unassimilable, savage, violent, and warmongering: "Islam was everything the West was not, and it was assigned these and other damning attributes in order to

elevate the West and characterize it, and its people, as progressive, democratic, and modern” (51). These conceptions were initially offered by early European travelers and Crusaders, and ensued in a “clash of civilizations” discourse that has dominated Muslim-Christian/western interactions since the 7th and 8th centuries (Kerboua 2016:20).

Early systems of knowledge on the East and of the Muslim world were created by western academics, institutions, artists, and governments in order to produce an order of western hegemony. These produced knowledges are portrayed to be the only and most legitimate source of knowledge of the Muslim world, treating it as a monolith, promulgating ideas of Otherness, and authorizing a power relationship between the west and the Muslim world, whereby the former culturally, symbolically, economically and politically dominates the latter (Said 1979). In taking the form of an ideology and discourse that defines how the orient ought to be perceived, orientalism thus shaped and continues to shape the ways in which the west perceives and interacts with Muslims, thereby laying the foundations for Islamophobia as it manifests today.

### ***The Role of Media in Islamophobia***

Media forms play a key role in facilitating orientalist and Islamophobic discourses. Edward Said keenly notes, “aesthetical works cannot be immune from contamination by ideological connections” (Kerboua 2016:10). The prolific work of Edward Said (1979) offers some of the most detailed and insightful analyses of western depictions of Muslims that have appeared in artwork, travelers’ diaries, and historical documents over centuries. The limited visual representations of Muslim women that existed early artworks and media forms, often portrayed them as oppressed or subjugated often in relation to Islam and Muslim men. In fact, Said shows that these works portrayed Muslim men as violent, sexist barbarians and Muslim women as “conspirators, victims or sexually available” (Hirji 2011:34). The resulting controlling images (Collins 2000) of Muslim

men and women in contemporary film productions, news stories and even in liberal feminist scholarship have established a gendered discourse of the oppression and patriarchal control of Muslim women which still determines how the west perceives and interacts with Muslims in the west and abroad. In fact, in an analysis of over 900 American-produced films from 1896 to 2001, Shaheen (2001) finds that Hollywood films are consistent in constructing negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims: “Seen through Hollywood’s distorted lenses, Arabs look different and threatening” (2001:175). In his study, he discovers that only a few characters were depicted as heroic Arabs, most others were portrayed as villains. These individual characters helped to establish a threatening citizenry, or a common enemy against whom the viewers could rally against. However, such depictions have not been restricted to just the screen. Shaheen writes, “Over a period of time, a steady stream of bigoted images does, in fact, tarnish our judgement of a people and their culture” (177). These depictions seek to dehumanize the subjects they portray, often deepening “suspicions and hatreds” (176) and reinforcing the binary logic of the west versus Other that still dominates western thinking.

Post-9/11, a gendered version of the clash of civilizations discourse has increasingly been used in mainstream western news media and film, to represent Muslim women specifically within the discourse of “anti-terrorism”, by placing Muslim female bodies as subjugated in relation to Muslim and Arab males (Maira 2009:632). On screen images of Muslim women in the hijab, burka or abaya have been used to portray them as victims of their husbands, sons, and the Muslim patriarchy (Falah 2005; Kassam 2008; Al-Fartousi and Mogadime 2012). Such images are used in conjunction with narratives that emphasize the west’s obligation to emancipate these women, while also fighting terrorism in foreign lands. In fact, according to Abu-Lughod (2013), these narratives and their persistent reproduction in news, films, and television shows have made it



possible for the United States government to garner public support for military programs in the Middle East since 2001.

Watt (2012:34) makes an observation regarding the orientalist portrayal of Muslim women, arguing that oftentimes “stories about terror, war, and the oppression of women in far off lands are frequently accompanied by photos of silent, anonymous, covered women who are often not directly connected to the content of the articles” (Jiwani 2005; Falah 2005; Kassam 2008). When such portrayals do not name these women or provide any information regarding them, they explicitly participate in the silencing of the subject. Not only are such representations used primarily to catch the viewer’s eye, therefore exploiting these women and their bodies, but they also generalize women’s experiences, as “images of women from one part of the world are routinely placed with a story from another” (Watt 2012:34). The disregard of these women’s experiences, their diversity, subjectivities and particularities, all perpetuate an erasure of their individuality. The Muslim woman, and her Muslim womanhood is used to present a narrative that supports a story constructed by those interested in reproducing essentialist notions about Islam, Muslim women, and the orientalist subject, solely for the purpose of their own sociopolitical agendas (Abu-Lughod 2013; La Fornara 2018).

Notably, the hijab plays a significant role in the gendered representation of Muslim womanhood in media and in policy. Reifying the anti-terrorism agenda necessitates the production of an identifiable cultural front upon which counterinsurgency efforts can focus (Jacobs 2011). Visual portrayals of Muslims serve to produce this cultural front, which is based on racialized understandings of Muslims as threatening, or of Muslim women as oppressed by Muslim men (Kassam 2008). One of the ways in which such understandings are maintained is through the focus on the hijab/veil. According to Ahmed (1992:152),

“Veiling – to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies – became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (or, in the language of the day, Islam’s degradation of women) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies.”

In visual depictions of eighteenth and nineteenth century orientalist works, the hijab/veil was viewed as a marker of female exoticism and Otherness (Said 1979). Images produced in post-9/11 orientalism, however, rearticulate the hijab/veil as a religious and patriarchal mechanism of oppression that is imposed on Muslim women by Muslim men (Ahmed 2005). Al-Fartousi and Mogadime (2012) note that “...although the Muslim dress may correspond to positive attributes of modesty and privacy in an Islamic context, the practice has entered into Western societies as a symbol of fundamentalism and extremism” (170). These images and visual depictions have typically been accompanied by stories and scholarship that reproduce notions of victimization and oppression which emphasize cherry-picked distressing conditions of Muslim women (Falah 2005; Hasan 2012; Medina 2014). Consequently, Islamophobic portrayals have critically constructed a Muslim womanhood that is not only embedded in religious and patriarchal oppression, but is also singular and visually identifiable as the covered/hijabi/burqa-clad/abaya-clad woman, who must be liberated from her subordination.

### ***The Role of Liberal Feminist Scholarship in Islamophobia***

In a review of western feminist scholarship’s relationship with Islam, Hasan (2012) finds that such scholarship is typically the result of “ignorance, prejudice and the overbearing effects of colonial adventures” (57) as it denigrates Islamic teachings and relies on the caricature of a

misogynistic Islam in order to establish the “bifurcation of an ‘egalitarian west’” (Ho 2007:290). Such a bifurcation is not only Islamophobic in nature, but when placed in a post-9/11 context, has also been used to justify Islamophobic military and political agendas, such as the invasion of Afghanistan after 9/11. Hasan argues that “the most prominent representation of the country [Afghanistan] and its people (in Western media) was the inferior condition of its women” (Hasan 2012:58). Not only was western media responsible for circulating such images to the American public in order to garner support for the invasion, but one of the leading contributors in this circulation was First Lady Laura Bush: “Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes... The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Washington Post 2001). Such stories imply and essentialize the Muslim woman’s plight, which presumably can only be addressed through the “moral ascendancy of the West to create an artificial urgency to save brown women from brown men” (Spivak 1994:93). These images and scholarship do a disservice to Muslim women by participating in the construction of colonial feminism (Ahmed 1992), maintaining western cultural hegemony, and essentializing Islamic cultural practices, all-the-while failing to consider the actual subjectivities and the social truths of the women with whom they are so concerned (Mahmood 2005).

Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) follow this line of thinking, arguing that certain narratives and liberal feminist scholarship on minority women tend to ascribe social constructions that may or may not be acknowledged as social truth by those subjugated to those constructions. In her analysis of Afghani Muslim women and the hijab/veil, Abu-Lughod (2002) asserts that these women only adopted the veil in order to disavow western social constructions. She argues that while the burqa (a local form of covering for Pashtun women in Afghanistan) is seen by the west

as an oppression exerted by Muslim patriarchy, it is actually a symbol of respect and modesty, and serves as a form of “portable seclusion” (785) for the Afghani women who wear it. It allows these women to move in and out of segregated spaces while observing the moral requirements that are standard in their society. Thus, by ignoring “indigenous women’s movements and the complexities of race, nationalism and class at work” (Maira 2009:641), visual media and accompanying discourses place themselves as authorities that speak for these women, all-the-while maintaining essentialized knowledges that, when consumed by the public, are rendered as common sense. However, as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) state, when some social truths are not recognized as ‘truth,’ the racialized might find the need to find spaces or platforms where they can begin to resist such narratives and constructions. As my project will demonstrate, the accessibility of social media platforms, and the freedom of interpretation in Islamic feminisms offers Muslim women, and Muslimah social media influencers in particular, with alternatives to western feminist and Islamophobic discourses that continue to misrepresent and mis-define them and their Muslim womanhood.

### **Muslim Communities’ Racialization and Relationship to the State**

As a group, Muslims have not been understood in racial terms, however, the racist ideology of Orientalism and the racialized contexts of 9/11 have opened up the possibility for this group to acquire racial meaning (Said 1979, Bonilla-Silva 2006). Religious signifiers can acquire racial meaning when they become treated as being inherent to an individual/group. As one of the most visible markers of Islam, the hijab signifies meaning in that it is associated with Islam, its wearers are viewed as cultural threats (Cainkar 2009) and therefore unassimilable, and are constantly in need of saving by the west (Abu-Lughod 2013). Muslim men (or brown men in general) sporting beards or with Muslim sounding names are seen as potential terrorists and a threat to homeland

security (Cainkar 2009, Selod 2018). These racial meanings in combination with racial law and policy and “the internalization of existing stereotypes create[s] the political and social contexts for the treatment of Muslim men [and women] as the ‘other’” (Selod and Embrick 2013:650) produce a process of racialization. Selod (2018a) defines racialization as “the process by which bodies become racial in their lived realities because of biological and/or cultural traits as a result of the intersection and cooperation between ideologies, policies, laws, and social interactions that results in the denial of equal treatment in society.” As a term, racialization perhaps best encapsulates why and how Muslims have come to experience Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism.

For western Muslim youth growing up after 9/11, experiences with racialization have meant an exposure to orientalist (mis)representations of Muslims and Islam in media discourse, microaggressions and hate crimes, and a constant questioning of their loyalty to the nation, their religion, and belonging as citizens of the west (Selod 2015). Notably, the racialization of Muslims is highly gendered, with Muslim men’s lived experiences differing greatly from the lived experiences of Muslim women (Selod 2015, Selod 2018b). In her study on Muslim American experiences of racialization, Selod (2015:78) finds that her participants encounter “de-Americanization, cultural exclusion and a denial of a national identity” in their everyday lives. The Muslim-Americans in her sample report having their legal and social citizenship questioned and undermined by law enforcement and the American public. Selod also finds that Muslim-Americans who are easily identifiable as Muslims, through their display of religious and cultural signifiers, often experience “higher levels of scrutiny and interrogation about their American identity” (Selod 2013:80). Gendered religious signifiers such as a Muslim sounding name, the headscarf (hijab) and other religious clothing increase the likelihood that a Muslim will be racialized by western agents. These signifiers identify these individuals as Muslim, marking them as seemingly unable

to integrate into U.S. society, since “the hijab does not just signify foreignness; it represents an ambiguously defined geographic part of the world that is antagonistic to democracy and American values: the Muslim world” (Selod 2015:84). Hence, the assumed incompatibility of their religious identity with their ability to be American increases their susceptibility to becoming racialized especially by the public (Mir 2011), and also opens up the opportunity for them to experience Islamophobia in its many forms.

Islamophobia as it manifests today is most “contingent upon media representations” and political rhetoric circulated by the state (Beydoun 2018:42). Beydoun argues that Islamophobic behavior is inspired by the state’s and media’s continuous and strategic circulation of Islamophobic and racialized discourses and representations. For example, the Pew Research Center shows that in 2016, following the presidential campaign and election of Donald Trump, the reported number of hate crimes or assaults targeting Muslims surpassed the number of reported assaults after 9/11 (Kishi 2017). In its annual report in 2015, the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported of seventy-eight attacks on mosques in the United States that year, which again, exceeded the number of attacks on mosques after 9/11 (Rathod 2016). Hate crimes such as these, and other acts of Islamophobia at the hands of the public are examples of “private Islamophobia” (Beydoun 2018:33). Private Islamophobia typically targets specific individuals, particularly those who are visibly Muslim, or are assumed to be associated with Islam on the basis of their race, ethnicity, signifiers or other markers of mistaken association (Selod 2018, Beydoun 2018). Some sensationalized (and horrific) acts of private Islamophobia include the shooting of three Muslim students at Chapel Hill, North Carolina by Craig Hicks in 2015, the murder of Sikh man Balbir Singh Sodhi six days after 9/11, and the abduction and murder of 17-year-old hijabi Nabra Hassanen in 2017.

According to Beydoun, private Islamophobia is only one of the kinds of Islamophobia that we see unfold in today's sociopolitical climate. Beydoun argues that we should not limit our understanding of Islamophobia as only something undertaken and practiced by individuals. Rather, privatizing Islamophobia seeks to hide the Islamophobia that the state perpetuates through law and policy. Using the term "Structural Islamophobia", Beydoun argues that state level Islamophobia is "the fear and suspicion of Muslims on the part of government institutions and actors" (2018:38). This kind of Islamophobia manifests through the creation and implementation of laws, policy and programming which situate the Muslim identity as a threat to national security. In fact, the racialized identities of 'Muslim-as-terrorist' become a political commodity to be traded on the micro (individual), meso (media discourse) and macro (state) levels for the purposes of serving particular social, economic, and political agendas. According to Byng (2012), the reorganization of federal agencies to enforce immigration policy, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, the opening up of communication between law enforcement agencies, state and local police departments, visa policies and NSEERS<sup>2</sup>, etc. all target Muslim and Arab identities. Such policies, changes, and practices specifically use the racialized identity of Muslim-as-terrorist to rationalize and justify the moral legitimacy of such practices. As such, structural Islamophobia strategically utilizes notions of identity, the national imaginary, and the Other, thereby reviving orientalist stereotypes of Islam and Muslims as foreign, dangerous and inherently prone to terrorist acts. In recognizing the different ways in which Islamophobia has been conceptualized and mobilized in contexts of the west, we can better understand the kinds of racialized and gendered social forces to which Muslim communities, and Muslim women in particular are subject.

---

<sup>2</sup> NSEERS, or the National Security Entry-Exist System (also known as INS Special Registration) is a system initiated in September 2002. It was designed to register the arrival and departure of targeted foreign nationals from 25 countries based on their religion, ethnicity and national origin.

While these key works critically elucidate how Muslim communities in the west and globally, continue to experience racialization and Islamophobia, a key focus of work that is missing from this scholarship is how Muslim communities have *reacted* to their racialization through the intersection of gender. My project seeks to fulfill this gap. While this study does not specifically identify strategies of negotiation, it argues that the community-level reaction to the racialization of Muslims takes on a gendered nature, in the form of racialized and gendered expectations imposed on the community's most visibly Muslim members: Muslim women.

### **Muslimah Social Media Influencers**

Irrespective of gender, Muslim youth are finding ways to dis-identify with orientalist and racialized stereotypes and perceptions of Muslims, and instead rearticulate alternative representations that align more with their self-perceptions (Peterson 2018; Islam 2019). Social media plays a large role in unlocking the affective and political potential of such work. This is particularly relevant because of how social media has integrated into our everyday life. We can no longer approach 'social life' and its many aspects as occurring only in 'real life'; in fact, there is no longer a distinction between the virtual and real, as "the online is just as real as the offline" (Miller et al. 2016:7). Social media platforms replicate actual sociality, social issues and interactions, and therefore should be regarded as spaces where the virtual and the actual blend together. Moreover, in the context of this project, the Islamophobia that manifests offline in the lives of individuals and communities may transcend the boundaries of real-life, to take shape in social media spaces via the transference of affect and social experience. Recognizing this is crucial if we are to embark on an understanding of performances of digitally-mediated Muslim womanhood as evidence of how notions of Muslim womanhood are constructed both online and offline. By their very presence on social media, Muslimah influencers are subject to offline and



online social forces, multiple gazes, racialized and gendered expectations, and Islamophobic discourses – all of which shape their performances of Muslim womanhood. These performances are further shaped by the cultural and economic forces involved in the social media influencer profession and industry, in which Muslimah influencers are active participants.

The popularity of the internet and social media platforms in the past decade has shaped the landscape of the influencer profession. Social media has democratized influence and fame, making it easier for the ‘everyday’ individual to gain public recognition and fame (Freberg et al. 2011; Casaló et al. 2018). Additionally, if an influencer wishes to pursue the influencer profession as an economic venture, then they will most likely have to participate in influencer marketing (Belgatti 2017). In the endeavor for marketing, brands have evolved from using well-known personalities, to paying relatable, everyday consumers (i.e., influencers) to represent the brand and promote its products to their large followings on social media platforms. This avenue of influencer marketing has proved to be very lucrative with the rise of social media (Belgatti 2017). More and more brands are looking for new opportunities to represent themselves and thus, are in search of individuals who might use branded products to “tell their story” (Kádeková and Holienčinová 2018:92). Brands typically target social media influencers who have already cultivated niche and loyal audiences that not only find their influencer authentic and relatable, but are also likely to purchase products endorsed by their influencer (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016; Casaló et al. 2018; Nandagiri and Philip 2018). Brands exploit the social relationship cultivated between influencer and audience as their marketing tool in order to achieve their marketing objectives (Kádeková and Holienčinová 2018:92). Hence, for those influencers seeking to profit from a career as a social media influencer, maintaining a close relationship with their audience and curating a performance as a genuine and relatable individual is central to their work and success.

Luckily for contemporary Muslimah influencers, they have cultivated an audience interested in the blend of faith, fashion and lifestyle. These audiences are a key untapped market for brands looking to expand their marketing, which makes contemporary Muslimah influencers a prime target for brand collaborations (Caffyn 2016; Sharkey 2016). As with any other popular influencer, amassing a large following takes great time and effort to cultivate over the years. The close relationships that have been established between Muslimah influencers and their audiences means that not only are they trusted for their authenticity and opinion leadership as influencers, but their influencer-audience interactions make them a valuable resource for brand marketing ventures (Caffyn 2016; Sharkey 2016; Casaló et al. 2018).

There is little to naught literature that examines Muslimah influencers, their work, or the relationships that they have cultivated with their audiences. Drawing on my own experience as a follower of early influencers, I regard the early allure of Muslimah influencers as being the result of the fact that Muslimah representations were a rarity in mainstream and social media. The first Muslimah influencers appeared on YouTube in 2010, partaking in the alternative space to mainstream media, for the purposes of curating modest fashion tutorials and discussing issues that pertained to them. Mainstream media was (and still is) a space inaccessible to most Muslim women, as they are underrepresented and misrepresented in these spaces (Hirji 2011). However, with the ease and accessibility of social media platforms, Muslimah influencers and other Muslim women have found a space beyond the physical where they can connect with others, participate in important conversations, offer one another ideas on how to blend fashion and modesty through DIY tutorials, and more importantly, take control over shaping discourses about Muslim women (Bouclin 2013; Lewis 2013; Woodhead 2013; Peterson 2016; Evolvi 2017).

While a majority of the uploaded content of Muslimah influencers on YouTube, Instagram and blog sites is focused on fashion and lifestyle, much of their work also seeks to address many of the struggles faced by Muslim youth growing up in the west (Lewis 2013; Tarlo and Moors 2013). These women can be understood as relatable, everyday young Muslims who also face the problems of the average Muslim youth in the west. A cursory glance of the content created and uploaded by influencers on their YouTube channels, Instagram pages, and blog posts shows them discussing and addressing a variety of topics, which range from seeking advice on how to find a suitable partner for marriage, to parenting problems or how to wrap a hijab. Thus, these platforms serve as critical spaces where Muslims might discuss or comment on private and public issues that emerge from or are informed by the racialized and gendered contexts within which they live and reside.

In order to connect with their audiences, Muslimah influencers mainly use the social media platforms of Instagram, YouTube, blog sites, and Facebook. For the purpose of this study however, I focus more specifically on the Muslimah influencer work produced on YouTube and Instagram, as these are the platforms they tend to utilize the most. The visual nature of these platforms encourages Muslimah influencers to engage with and manipulate visual perceptions and representations of Muslim womanhood. YouTube serves as an experiential platform and is used by Muslimah influencers to embody their shifting, multiple, and conflicting subjectivities through visual demonstrations (Lewis 2013; Tarlo and Moors 2013). Through the production of vlogs, tutorials, outfit of the day (OOTD) looks, YouTube challenges, collaborations, etc., these influencers emphasize their visual performances to utilize aesthetics and display authenticity through their digital personas. They also use humor and social criticism to develop a relationship with their audiences, and portray a different version of the Muslim that their audiences might be

unfamiliar with. YouTube channels are also used creatively to better define and present influencers' complex roles and hybrid identities as Muslim women in the west. Engaging with YouTube in creative ways is one way in which these women show that they are in fact, cognizant of their intersectional positionalities as social, cultural, political, aesthetic, juridical and religious subjects (Bouclin 2016).

While YouTube is regarded as a mode of visual storytelling, Instagram operates a little differently. As an inherently visual social media platform, Instagram conveys meanings through photographs and short video-clips, with text and hashtags used as needed for context. There is a strong community element on Instagram, with the hashtags being used to build community and categorize images. Due to the ease of using and posting on Instagram (as compared to YouTube), users are more likely to focus on documenting their everyday lives, which results in regular, if not daily posts on the platform. On this platform, the aesthetics, style and personality of influencers are key to producing and maintaining a compelling Instagram presence. However, "understanding how to tell a visual story is also important on this platform" (Mantel et al. 2016:43), as being successful as a Muslimah influencer requires that one uses visuals effectively, maintains a close relationship with their audience, and most importantly, is distinctively unique as compared to other influencers. For Muslimah influencers, Instagram is a particularly important and effective platform for their digital work. Due to the efficiency of the platform, in regards to time, cost, accessibility to a wide audience, and the ease in creating content, Instagram typically takes a primary role in many Muslimah influencers' jobs as influencers and brand collaborators. However, for others, Instagram may only serve as a supplemental platform to their primary roles as full-time YouTubers or bloggers. In either case, influencers use these social media platforms in conjunction with one another, performing different functions for similar projects.

While social media offers significant cultural, economic, and political opportunities to Muslimah influencers, their (hyper)visibility on these platforms subjects them to a variety of gazes (e.g., western, non-western, Islamophobic, and Muslim community gazes) all of which surveil and subject Muslim women to certain assumptions and expectations. Since they are rendered so visible in others' view on social media, Muslimah influencers – especially hijabi ones – tend to be generalized by their audiences and the broader public as a singular representation of Muslim women, and Muslim womanhood. Their self-presentations, words, messages, actions, embodied practices, sartorial choices, and *life* choices all become burdened with the responsibility of representing Muslim women, Muslim womanhood, and the Muslim community and faith. Consequently, the responsibility of their personal and public choices, and their gendered, racial, or religious performances renders Muslimah influencers subject to the surveillance and scrutiny of Muslim and non-Muslim communities, both of whose experiences and understandings of Muslims and Islam are shaped by discourses of Islamophobia and the global war on terror. So, while they are uniquely hypervisible Muslim women with public lives, examining the kinds of public scrutiny that Muslimah influencers experience is indicative of the racialized and gendered responsibilities placed on everyday Muslim women in Islamophobic contexts, primarily because Muslim women in the west share something in common: they are racialized beings, and are constrained in their behavior as a result of the Islamophobic contexts in which they reside. In the following sections, I describe my methods of study and include a reflexive statement, followed by my chapter outlines.

## **METHODS**

The main research question that this study poses is: How do contexts and discourses of Islamophobia contribute to shaping notions and performances of Muslim womanhood? I approach this research question through the study of Muslimah influencers' visibility on social media, their

interaction with their social media audiences, and their aesthetic labor on social media platforms. I derive my data from interviews with 14 Muslimah social media influencers residing in the US, UK, and Canada; a survey with 180 of their social media followers; and a content analysis of 250 photos and videos collected over 2.5 years from 30 western Muslimah social media influencers' public Instagram and YouTube pages. I focus on western Muslimah influencers in particular, because they perform Muslim womanhood and aesthetic labor on *public* social media platforms, and are thus subject to western, and global Muslim and non-Muslim community gazes, which are consistently surveilling their gendered, religious, and racial performances on these platforms. Thus, Muslimah influencers serve as an appropriate gateway to understanding both the performances of Muslim womanhood and the nature of the racialized and gendered contexts that give rise to conceptions of the contemporary 'Muslim Woman'.

### **Methodological Approach**

This research takes a relativist approach, grounded in notions of subjectivity and multiple truths (Haraway 1988), which evolve and change according to individual and collective experiences, and sociopolitical contexts. In order to gather data and analyze these aforementioned research questions, I employed a qualitative and inductive methodological approach (Hesse-Biber 2014). I collected data through three methods of inquiry: a semi-structured, qualitative, in-depth interview, a qualitative survey with self-identified social media followers of Muslimah influencers, and archival digital data from Instagram and YouTube (Kozinets 2010). I used NVivo, a qualitative software program to organize, categorize and analyze my qualitative data.

As a feminist researcher, I chose to incorporate a feminist methodological praxis into my research and methodology, in order to remain cognizant and reflexive of my position and power as a researcher (Lather 1986). This is particularly necessary, as I am a Muslim woman who is

studying a marginalized and racialized population that lives and operates within a post-9/11 context (Garner and Selod 2015). As this study is concerned specifically with marginalized women, I am also cognizant of centering their issues and lived experiences within the context of this research and the sociopolitical contexts in which they reside. I believe that a feminist methodological praxis will allow me to be more conscious and careful of the nuances that tend to be overlooked in insider research.

### **Research Design and Sampling**

This study incorporates a cross-sectional examination of Muslimah social media influencers. As such, my unit of analysis is the individual. My sample for this study is western Muslimah social media influencers who:

1. identify as Muslim, female, and as an influencer;
2. whose influencer work falls under the categories of ‘fashion,’ ‘beauty,’ and ‘lifestyle’;
3. who reside in the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom;
4. who have a following of more than 5,000 on Instagram.

I chose to focus primarily on Muslim women, because 1) they are an understudied population, especially in the field of sociology, gender and race, and 2) because liberal feminist research has historically misrepresented and misunderstood Muslim women and their experiences, thereby necessitating the need for feminist research that effectively situates the voices and agency of Muslim women. While there is no specific definition of ‘social media influencer,’ I understand social media influencers as individuals who have an online following (i.e., audience) in a particular niche, and who possess the power and influence to affect the purchasing and cultural decisions of others, because of their authority/knowledge/position or relationship with their audience (Casaló

et al. 2018). I chose to focus only on influencers whose work falls under the categories of fashion, beauty, and lifestyle because a majority of Muslimah influencers undertake aesthetic labor in these areas, and are consequently critiqued for their aesthetic labor, performances of femininity, and practices of modesty and faith as these intersect with aesthetic labor.

I chose the ‘west’ as my geopolitical context of study primarily because of the detailed documentation of Islamophobia and racialization of Muslims post-911 within contexts of the U.S., Canada and the United Kingdom. (Beydoun 2018, Selod 2018). Muslims have been a part of these nations for a long period of time, and the institution of particular anti-Muslim policies (e.g., the 2017 Muslim ban which banned the entry of citizens of 7 Muslim majority nations, and Quebec’s passing of Bill 62 which banned the face covering or niqab hijab in areas or occupations of public service) complicates the notions of citizenship and belonging of Muslims (Selod 2018a). The massive diversity of Muslims and the boom of Muslimah social media influencers in these three locations, in addition to the nuanced topics that they address and the difficulties that they may experience in their online and offline lives make western Muslimah influencers a particularly noteworthy sample for examination.

The final criterion, which includes having a following of more than 5,000 social media users, was created to ensure that the social media influencers included in the study had significant experience with social media, the influencer profession, and audience interaction. These three aspects of experience play a role shaping the pressures that racialized and gendered expectations and surveillance create on influencers during their influencer journeys online. I used a non-probability sampling technique to acquire my sample (Maxfield and Babbie 2009). As there is no publicly available comprehensive list of all western Muslimah social media influencers currently active, I compiled an extensive list of 270 Muslimah influencers who met the criteria in the



research design. I then reached out to each influencer via email, asking them to participate in the study. Over the course of 5 months, I conducted Zoom interviews with a total of 14 Muslimah influencers who responded to my email interview request. Out of these 14 influencers, 9 were from the United States, 3 from Canada, and 2 from the United Kingdom. Ethnically, 3 identified as mixed race, 2 as Egyptian, 2 as Pakistani, and 1 each as Somali, Nigerian, Black American, Hispanic, Syrian, Palestinian, and Lebanese.

My interviewees had Instagram followings ranging from 6k to 577k. Since a number of my interviewees were ‘non-elite’ (i.e., had low-ranging followings that were less than 10k), I sought to balance my data by including digital data collected from the social media pages of ‘elite’ influencers. Baulch and Pramiyanti (2018) use the distinction between elite and non-elite as founders and ordinary members respectively, to conduct their own study on Indonesian Muslimah influencers. Although Baulch and Pramiyanti do not specify the numbers they used to determine who is elite and who is not, for the purposes of this study, I consider ‘elite’ influencers as those with above 100,000 followers on Instagram, and ‘non-elite’ influencers as those with a following of more than 1,000 followers and less than 100,000 followers on Instagram. My rationale for dividing the sample into elite and non-elite, and for using these specific numbers is that elite influencers have a different experience and operate on social media in a different manner than non-elite influencers, due to 1) the large followings they have, 2) the possible length of time they have spent in establishing a rapport with their audience, 3) the popularity and visibility they enjoy, 4) the freedom or restriction of speech/opinion that might come with being popular, and 5) the kinds of brand/company collaborations and opportunities they are offered. If we are to contextualize the work of social media influencers within Islamophobia, then it is important to analyze and understand the nuances of being a social media influencer, which includes the kinds of risks or

freedoms the profession may involve. Consequently, my final sample consists of interviews with 14 Muslimah influencers, and digital data collected from the social media pages of 16 elite Muslimah influencers, resulting in data collected from a sample of 30 Muslimah influencers within the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom. A detailed breakdown of the influencers in this sample can be viewed in Appendix A.

### **Data Collection**

I employed a qualitative and inductive methodological approach to collect data from three sources: qualitative interviews, an online survey, and photos and videos collected from 30 Muslimah social media influencers' Instagram and YouTube pages (including the 14 whom I interviewed). My interviews began in June of 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was fortunate in the context of this study since many influencers were quarantining and working from home. In my Zoom interviews, I asked my participants questions about their experiences and presumed responsibilities as social media influencers, their relationship with the hijab and modest fashion, their experiences with brands and modest fashion companies, their perceptions on whether they viewed themselves as representatives of the Muslim community, or whether they believed their audiences viewed them as such, and the kinds of challenges they faced in their modeling and social media careers (Appendix B). Notably, 13 out of 14 of my interviewees wore the hijab. All identified as participants in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry, and aligned with work that fell under the labels of 'fashion', 'beauty' and 'lifestyle'.

In order to account for the audience's voice, perception of modesty and modest fashion, and gendered or racialized criticisms of Muslimah influencers, I distributed a qualitative survey amongst 188 self-identified followers of Muslimah social media influencers. In June of 2020, I shared this survey online via Reddit, a popular social media platform that has several sub-Reddits

populated by followers of Muslim and non-Muslim social media influencers and aficionados of modest fashion (e.g. Hijabis, influencermarketing, ModestDress, fashion). In this survey, I ask my respondents questions about their perceptions of Muslimah influencers, why they follow these influencers, whether they participate in modest fashion, and how they define modesty and modest fashion (See Appendix C). Due to the nature of online spaces, it is difficult to determine where the respondents are geographically located, unless of course they are asked specifically about their location. However, in order to maintain respondents' anonymity, I did not ask questions regarding their location, but instead chose to ask demographic questions including their gender, religion, and age. In order to examine the kinds of gazes and gendered and racialized scrutiny to which Muslimah influencers are subject as a result of their aesthetic labor, I believe that it is necessary to account for how audiences perceive, feel about, and expect from Muslimah influencers who claim to be adherents of modest fashion.

My final source of data were Instagram and YouTube photos and videos of 30 British, American and Canadian Muslimah influencers who explicitly discuss modest fashion, modesty, and their aesthetic labor as active social media influencers, models, designers and entrepreneurs in the modest fashion industry (Appendix A). I included preliminary digital data that I had been collecting since October 2018, but I actively surveilled the 30 aforementioned Muslimah influencers' Instagram stories daily from June to January 2021, in order to collect any pertinent data (via screenshots) related to conversations of modesty, modest fashion or aesthetic labor. I quickly found that Instagram stories, while particularly valuable data sources, are frustratingly fleeting, given that posted photos and videos vanish after 24 hours. Nevertheless, the data I sourced from these Instagram stories proved to be particularly enlightening in terms of staying aware of current controversies and conversations surrounding modesty and Muslim womanhood. Future

scholars might consider this reflexive methodological memo should they endeavor to use Instagram stories as a data source in their own work. In total, I collected around 250 photos and videos from Instagram and YouTube over a time period of two and a half years (2018-2021).

### **Data Analysis**

Although the data for this project vary in nature, they were analyzed using Nvivo. For the interviews, I transcribed them using Otter.ai, and then undertook a multistep inductive thematic coding process to analyze the textual data in Nvivo. Visual materials such as videos and photographs collected through YouTube and Instagram were analyzed and coded using visual media analysis. Belk and Kozinets (2017) encourage researchers to code audiovisual data directly from video materials “rather than transcribing it into words and then coding the resulting transcripts” (270). They suggest this approach by arguing that transcription loses the data that makes visual work so compelling, in addition to the “tone and nuances of the verbal material” (270). As such, I conducted a content analysis of the visual media by coding it twice: first as audiovisual data, and then through a textual analysis of the video’s transcription. Doing so allowed me to holistically approach all audiovisual material in this study’s data collection. My coding themes were produced through open coding, and I developed thematic codes around the themes of Islamophobia, modesty, modest fashion, Muslim communities, religiosity, responsibility, industry, identity, pressures, representation, hijabi, and immigrant, among many others. I used the same codes for all three of my data sources, building upon and splitting each thematic code with subthemes. My codebook can be viewed in Appendix E.

### **Ethical Concerns**

There are a number of ethical concerns in this research. My utmost priority has been to ensure that my interviewees do not experience personal harm in the duration of their participation in this study. During recruitment, I provided them with both the IRB consent form, and the interview protocol so that they were aware of the procedures and questions of the study (Appendix D). As a Muslim myself, I am abundantly aware that for many Muslims, privacy can be a major concern. In Muslim lives, surveillance occurs on a daily basis, not only by the state or the public, but also by their own communities – including the online communities in which they participate (Cainkar 2009; Cainkar and Selod 2018; Beydoun 2018). As such, when many choose to participate in public spaces such as YouTube and Instagram, they are not only surveilled but also participate in self-surveillance. From a feminist praxis standpoint, it is important to consider surveillance and privacy as an ethical concern, as researchers must remain cognizant of the power relations in the process of research, and of the positionalities of the researched within the particular contexts in which they live. Donna Haraway argues that in feminist research, researchers need to engage in a “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating” (1988:589), which allows for participants’ knowledges and experiences to be considered as “situated knowledges” (592). Hence, it would not be too far-fetched of an assumption to state that influencers and users on social media platforms all reside in a post-9/11 context where surveillance of Muslim populations is part of their lived experience. Within this context, and concerning the population under study, I am cognizant that privacy is a significant ethical concern. It was for this reason that I chose to give my participants the option to remain completely anonymous through the use of a pseudonym. However, notably, none of my interviewees chose to be anonymous. I believe that this is because of the nature of the influencer profession. As public figures on social media, anonymity may not be conducive to their professions as influencers. Influencers rely on publicity

and public relation opportunities to develop a brand name and public presence for the purpose of gaining opportunities in brand marketing and advertising. For this reason then, anonymity may not serve an important purpose to influencers, which explains why none of my influencer participants chose to be anonymous.

As another ethical concern, I could not guarantee that participants would not experience harm from this study, especially as I consider the role of politics of interpretation in the research process. Politics of interpretation is understanding that acts of interpretation are influenced by political interests. While I do not have overt political interests, I do have a research agenda, which may influence how I have interpreted the data. However, as Wolcott (1994) asserts, I will be keeping in mind that the goal of interpretation is “to reach out for understanding or explanation beyond the limits of what can be explained with the degree of certainty usually associated with analysis” (10-11). In order to do so, I sought to consciously contextualize the data in order to ensure minimal interference of any latent political interests in the process of interpretation. Additionally, while I do not occupy a blatant position of power over the researched within the field, I recognize that I possess some power and authority as a researcher when I interpret the words of the interviewed. It can be argued that my interviewees might experience some harm if they see their comments being interpreted in a manner that they did not intend. As such, in this research process I regard myself as a co-creator of meaning as I interpret the words of the researched.

Considering that archival data collection in this project is a methodological strategy conducted online, I am also cognizant of the fact that this approach presumes class. When undertaking online methods, it is important to recognize that online spaces are classed spaces. Such spaces can often further marginalize the already marginalized, especially when it is assumed that

individuals of all backgrounds have access to these spaces. By recognizing this drawback, we can address issues of representation, by making it abundantly clear that the perspectives offered by influencers are partial and involve class, and are thus not generalizable to an entire population.

## **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations of this study. Firstly, there are a limited number of interviews that were conducted. Since there was no monetary incentive for participation in this study, I faced significant difficulty in acquiring influencers, and attribute this difficulty in large part due to the nature of their profession. Since the influencer profession involves monetary compensation for their creative work, the lack of monetary incentive may have contributed to influencers' disinclination to participate in this study. Thus, while some may rightfully critique this study for lack of interview data, the additional data collected from surveys and influencers' digital photos and videos has culminated in enough data to allow for a thorough analysis of expectations and performances of a digitally-mediated Muslim womanhood. Secondly, this study lacks the critical perspective of the 16 influencers who were not interviewed, but whose digital data were collected. Although these digital data were crucial and informative in many ways, it might be argued that interviews with the 16 influencers would not only have offered their individual perspectives, but would also have added to the depth of this study. Additionally, it might also be argued that the social media photos and videos posted by influencers are not 'authentic' in that these posts are managed to maintain a certain image and reputation of the influencer in question. However, there have notably been times where influencers have chosen to be candid, sharing their thoughts and perspectives on femininity, modesty, aesthetic labor and the hijab in particular. Furthermore, in the interviews, many of my participants were also candid in sharing their thoughts and experiences, and often apologized for their candor, or for oversharing during

their interviews. I regard these moments in particular, to be an indication of my interviewees trying to share their genuine perspectives and thoughts on issues that they deem important to themselves.

## **Reflexivity**

It is important to acknowledge my status and positionality as a brown Pakistani Muslim female researcher documenting influencers, some of whom I have followed for more than half a decade. While I am an insider in some ways, I am also very much an outsider. Considering the insider and outsider positions allows me to reflect on the relevance of intersectional aspects of my identity, such as religion, gender, and race, to the research process. Garland et al. (2006) argue that while some aspects of a researcher's self-identity might enable them to document nuanced experiences of minority communities, the same aspects might also lead to a misrepresentation of the experiences of minority members. Thus, I recognize the greater awareness and understanding I might have of minority experiences, but have also remained actively conscious of the skewed perspective that my insider status might provide in the interpretation process of the data.

In my data collection and analysis, my own positionality as a hijabi Muslimah placed me in a position of privilege in that I understand and personally relate to many of the issues that my participants discussed. Not only do I wear the hijab in the non-traditional way that many hijabi influencers do (thereby signaling an association to the modest fashion and Muslimah influencer industries), I also occasionally watch YouTube videos of hijabi influencers and follow them on Instagram as well. I also have prior knowledge of Pakistani Muslim culture, some understanding of the kinds of cultural expectations of Muslim women evident in Arab, Pakistani and Indian Muslim communities (for example, I frequently attend Friday services at a local and ethnically diverse mosque and am aware of how these communities expect Muslim women to behave, appear and present), and I am part of a college institution where Muslim youth actively discuss the issues



brought up by Muslimah influencers, albeit in offline spaces. My lived experience and insider knowledge has allowed me to gain insight into the nature of the social forces that Muslim women (online or offline) face in their everyday lives. In terms of analysis, I will certainly state that my insider knowledge of the Islamic faith has also proven to be invaluable. In the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation, I discuss various Islamic concepts of modesty, awrah, and nafs – concepts that a non-Muslim or outsider may not necessarily be aware of. Consequently, my positionality has given me a keen understanding of the nuances that undergird Muslim womanhood – an aspect of my life and being that I must also perform as part of my social reality as a hijabi Muslimah living in the United States.

While my insider status has been invaluable to this study in many ways, it has also posed a number of challenges. Outsider researchers can often use their unfamiliarity with the research group to their advantage by emphasizing their differences and seeming unknowledgeable in order to elicit in-depth answers from their participants. Fielding (2008) argues that it can be useful to be viewed by participants as naïve so that participants are detailed about their responses, in an attempt to educate the researcher about their lived experiences. This, Zempi (2014) argues, is one way in which an outsider researcher can place the participant in a position of authority over the researcher. This was not the case in my interviews. Oftentimes, my interviewees – knowing that I was Muslim, would share their thoughts, conclude with “You know what I mean?” or, “You know what I’m saying”, and not elaborate further. After receiving a few responses in this manner, I actively sought to ask them to elaborate. This allowed them to clarify and be detailed in describing exactly what they meant, which ultimately then enriched my data and resolved the issue of insider familiarity. While I cannot change or circumvent my insider status, I do recognize the particular benefits of the outsider status in this regard.

Another particular drawback of my insider status emerged in discussions of the hijab. As previously mentioned, I wear the hijab in a non-traditional way (the turban style). This particular kind of hijab is not necessarily uncommon, but is more prevalent among young Muslim women, Egyptian Muslim women, Somali Muslim women, and women who are either influencers, or identify with cultural trends in the modest fashion and influencer industries. In online and offline discussions among Muslim communities, there have been criticisms of the turban hijab by those who regard this form of the hijab as improper, un-Islamic, or immodest (A Muslimah's Blog 2013; Ahmed 2018). Some critics of the turban hijab argue that while this form of hijab represents a 'new' kind of Muslim woman who not only ascribes to cultural trends and modest fashion, but represents a 'Modern Muslimah' who is well-integrated into western society, it also happens to marginalize those who do not represent the Modern Muslimah or ascribe to modest fashion. For example, Afia Ahmed of Amaliah.com states:

“This isn't about cultural differences or interpretations of a dress code. It's about pressures to conform to either or... It's about young Muslims trying to navigate through this world faced with an identity crisis and two unattainable standards to live up to. It's about the creation of a binary. Where once we saw Muslim women in long dresses and head coverings, we now see a whole new Muslim woman, but where does that leave those who still ascribe to the former?” (Ahmed 2018)

For those who either cannot afford to partake in modest fashion, or don't want to participate for cultural or religious reasons, their exclusion from the notion of the Muslim woman re-inscribes orientalist meanings on their bodies and sartorial practices. By wearing the hijab in traditional

ways – thereby supposedly signaling their unwillingness to integrate – Muslim women who are already marginalized in western societies, are further marginalized not only by non-Muslims, but also by Muslims who follow cultural trends in the modest fashion and influencer industries. Having already been aware of this nuance, I considered manipulating my turban hijab during my interviews, but ultimately decided against it. My reasons for this decision lie in my unwillingness to alter my appearance for the purpose of eliciting specific kinds of information, and this decision proved to yield some interesting conversations. For example, during my discussion of the hijab with Sarah Rayan Al-As, she candidly shared that although she thought the turban hijab was beautiful, she did not believe that it fell within the Islamic requirements of the hijab. Conversely, Subeena Zubairi, who did not wear the hijab, shared that if she wore the hijab again, she would wear it in the turban style as I do, because it aligns more with her understandings of the requirements of the hijab. Conversations such as these gave me insight into how Muslim women conceptualize practices of the hijab, and mobilize Islamic feminisms in the interpretation of the hijab’s Islamic requirements.

Lastly, I will comment on my discussions of dejabing with my participants. Dejabing is a particularly contentious issue among many Muslim communities. The act of taking off one’s hijab, although arguably personal, is embedded in particular racialized, gendered and theological politics that shape individual and community expectations and performances of Muslim womanhood. Since it remains such a contentious issue, I was very careful with how I asked my participants questions about dejabing. Notably, very few of them commented on the topic at all, many indicating that they didn’t want to comment since it was either none of their business what other Muslim women did with their hijabs, or that they simply did not want to share their perspectives on the issue. Thus, I sought to gather most of my data on dejabing from the social media pages of

those influencers who have dejabed. Having had followed some dejabi influencers for more than 5 years, I observed the online and offline fallout from their dejabing, and will also admit that I was initially disappointed when I saw some of them dejab, but never once thought that the hate that they received was justified. Thinking back on my disappointment, I believe that this stemmed from viewing these women as strong Muslim role models (as I mention in the second chapter). Having observed them begin their influencer journeys, make waves in the modest fashion and social media influencer industries, and break orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women, I regarded them as strong role models who were paving the way for how Muslim women ought to be perceived. Thus, when they took off their hijabs – a visible marker of their Muslimness, I was disappointed to see them take off a marker with which I strongly identify, and see integral to my identity as a Muslim woman. Regardless, my disappointment was soon overtaken by a clarity in understanding that not only do Muslim women take off their hijabs for a number of reasons, but that these same influencers are living personal lives and make personal decisions that they are forced to share with the public, due to the nature of their professions. Consequently, this clarity sparked my interest in the issues surrounding dejabing and how this personal act and its reception are often informed by racialized and gendered expectations of Muslim women and Muslim womanhood.

In this reflexive statement, I have sought to share with the reader, my candid thoughts and perspectives on my positionality as a hijabi Muslim woman who has been an active social media follower of Muslimah influencers. In the following section, I conclude this chapter by describing my chapter outlines.

## **CHAPTER OUTLINES**

The chapter following this section is entitled “(Un)Veiling Expectations: The Racialized and Gendered Politics of the Muslimah Influencer Dejabi Controversy.” In this chapter I

contextualize contemporary conversations around Muslimah social media influencers' public acts of dejabing (i.e., taking off the hijab) within discourses of Islamophobia to offer insight into the kinds of racialized and gendered responsibilities that are imposed on Muslim women in western spaces. Using the aforementioned data sources, I identify and describe the three kinds of expectations held of Muslimah influencers in western spaces: The Good Muslimah, the Strong Muslimah, and the Doubly Burdened Muslimah. My data shows that Muslimah influencers navigate and negotiate with these expectations in various ways, but in doing so, run the risk of the double bind – that is, critiquing the Muslim community's gendered surveillance at the cost of reinforcing Islamophobic and liberal western feminist narratives of Muslim misogyny and Muslimah oppression. This chapter highlights how, for Muslim women, navigating public expressions of faith in western spaces is constrained by both racialized Islamophobic discourses, and Muslim community pressures and gendered expectations of embodying an Ideal Muslim womanhood. In unfolding the nuances involved in the challenges and negotiations of dejabing publicly, I emphasize that we can glean a better understanding of the kinds of racialized and gendered pressures facing Muslim women – hijabi or not – in Islamophobic and increasingly secularized western contexts today.

The third chapter of this dissertation is entitled “When Modesty Meets Aesthetic Labor: Performances of Muslimah Modesty as Antithetical to Aesthetic Labor in the Fashion and Social Media Influencer Industries.” This chapter examines the complex relationship that Islamic principles of modesty share with aesthetic labor in the intersections of the social media influencer and fashion industries in order to argue that modesty remains a key tenet of conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood. In unpacking this relationship, I show how modesty, as it is understood by Muslim male interpreters of Islamic texts, and by cultural authorities in secular

circles of fashion, is deemed to be antithetical to aesthetic labor within the influencer and fashion industries. By placing Muslimah social media influencers at the center of this conflict, I show how Muslimah influencers involved in these industries face challenges that are unique to Muslim women in racialized contexts of western spaces. On the one hand, Muslim women are expected to modify their performances of modesty to align with secular expectations of fashion and aesthetic labor, but on the other, they are expected to observe modesty according to how Muslim male scholars<sup>3</sup> interpret Islamic principles of modesty. I conclude by arguing that this conflict illustrates that modesty – as a Muslim virtue, is deemed fundamental to contemporary conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood, and plays a key role in shaping the kinds of racialized and gendered expectations that are held of Muslim women by western Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

In the fourth chapter entitled ““You think that’s modest?”: Policing Muslimah Modesty and Aesthetic Labor in the Digitally Mediated Modest Fashion Industry,” I examine how Muslimah social media influencers are policed for, and negotiate with the policing of their modesty and aesthetic labor in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry. My findings show that influencers are policed for their hypervisibility on social media platforms, and for their failure to observe Muslim male interpretations of Islamic modesty. Consequently, in response to their policing, Muslimah influencer apply Islamic feminist interpretations of Quranic principles of modesty to critique their policing while also reconciling the perceived incompatibility of modesty with their aesthetic labor. Using these findings, I make two critical arguments in this chapter. First, I argue that in using Islamic feminist interpretations, Muslimah influencers operate as pious critical

---

<sup>3</sup> Such as Mufti Taqi Usmani, Ibn Majah, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Mohammed Ash-Sharawy, Mohammed Nasr Adeen Al-Albani, and Mufti Ebrahim Desai.

agents, who redefine modesty through an Islamic feminist lens for the purpose of forcing the Muslim community to reevaluate its patriarchal conceptions of modesty and expectation of modesty as the sole responsibility of Muslim women. Second, I argue that by examining the policing of Muslimah influencers, and their negotiation of policing, we can glean a better understanding of the kinds of racialized and gendered expectations of Muslim women that shape contemporary notions of Muslim womanhood in current contexts of Islamophobia.

In the fifth and final chapter of this dissertation, I reiterate the critical findings of this study and conclude by providing future directions for research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: (Un)Veiling Expectations: The Racialized and Gendered Politics of the Muslimah Influencer Dejabi Controversy**

### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter contextualizes contemporary conversations around Muslimah social media influencers' public acts of dejabing (i.e., taking off the hijab) within discourses of Islamophobia to offer insight into the kinds of racialized and gendered responsibilities that are imposed on Muslim women in western spaces. I use data collected from interviews with 14 Muslimah social media influencers, a survey distributed among 188 of their social media followers, and 250 social media posts produced by Muslimah influencers, to identify and describe the three kinds of expectations held of Muslimah influencers in western spaces: The Good Muslimah, the Strong Muslimah, and the Doubly Burdened Muslimah. My data shows that Muslimah influencers navigate and negotiate these expectations in various ways, but in doing so, run the risk of the double bind – that is, critiquing the Muslim community's gendered surveillance at the cost of reinforcing Islamophobic and liberal western feminist narratives of Muslim misogyny and Muslimah oppression. This study highlights how, for Muslim women, navigating public expressions of faith in western spaces is constrained by both racialized Islamophobic discourses, and Muslim community pressures and gendered expectations of embodying an ideal Muslim womanhood. In unfolding the nuances involved in the challenges and negotiations of dejabing publicly, I emphasize that we can glean a better understanding of the kinds of racialized and gendered pressures facing Muslim women – hijabi or not – in Islamophobic and increasingly secularized western contexts today.



## INTRODUCTION

Looking down at her phone, while donning a neon green hoodie and bow in her blonde hair, British Muslimah<sup>4</sup> YouTuber Dina Tokio sits on her couch reading user comments from her recent YouTube videos:

*“You are a hoe.*

*“As a Muslim woman, I hate women like Dina. They are messed up and they make Islam look bad.*

*“Dina, now that your Hijab is fully off, will you be modeling some bikinis and thongs too? Or making a podcast in the bedroom with Sidney<sup>5</sup>?*

*“Fake ex Muslim ho.*

*“She looks so bitchy without the hijab I swear and I just came to tell you stop following this bitch she already called us toxic and a cult, she looks like she came out of a strip club, disgusting.*

*“Boycott Dina’s channel. She and her honorable husband are fooling us. It is more than the hijab off... it is an intended manipulation of Muslim community. She influences young Muslims and is misleading them.*

---

<sup>4</sup> ‘Muslimah’ is a term that refers to a ‘Muslim woman’.

<sup>5</sup> The user’s term ‘Sidney’ is a reference to Dina Tokio’s husband Siddique Khan.

*“You’re a disgusting hunk of a person. You filthy traitor. Your platforms are finished. Go advertise your traitor self to some western feminist scum. you and little Sid really deserve each other, both scum.*

*“Fake Muslim bitch.”*

Uploaded to YouTube on January 1<sup>st</sup> of 2019, Dina’s video entitled “The Bad, the Worse and the Ugly”<sup>6</sup> ends at 47 minutes and 52 seconds. The entirety of the video is spent with her reading comments and reactions to her having *dejabed*, i.e. removed her hijab; a truly brutal and rather painful scene.

Tokio first started her YouTube channel in 2011, gaining notoriety on the platform as one of the few hijabi<sup>7</sup> Muslims with a social media presence. She quickly rose to fame, amassing millions of dedicated followers on YouTube and Instagram. With her quirky and candid videos and fashion lookbooks, Tokio came to be known as a staple in the modest fashion world and on Muslim social media spaces. Tokio’s decision to dejab was made public in 2018, when she chose to upload a photo of herself without the hijab on Instagram in November (now removed from her Instagram). In making this decision public, she began to receive significant backlash from her followers and non-followers on social media who criticized her and accused her of leaving Islam and betraying the Muslim community by misrepresenting the hijab, Muslims, and Islam, while also profiting off of the image of a hijabi. Although much of Tokio’s social media feed was filled with hateful comments, there was also much encouragement and commendation from social media

---

<sup>6</sup> URL: [The Bad, the Worse and the Ugly - YouTube](#)

<sup>7</sup> ‘Hijabi’ refers to a woman who wears the hijab, or headscarf.

users who praised her for making and sharing her decision so publicly while navigating the overwhelming backlash on her multiple platforms.

The publicity of Tokio's decision and its consequent fallout generated conversations across various social media platforms as well as offline. These conversations occurred predominantly in Muslim spaces among Muslim youth who followed Muslimah influencers like Tokio, and concerned issues involving the hijab, Muslim women, Islamic theology, and the presumed responsibility of influencers towards their followers (Gregory 2020; Alsaffar 2020). Soon after Tokio's dejabing, the online Muslim community began to notice that other Muslimah social media influencers had also begun to take off their hijabs. Popular influencers like Ascia Akf, Aaliyah JM, Saufeyya Goodson, Haifa Beseisso, Devotedlyyours, and most recently (in 2020), Pearl Daisy aka Amena Khan, began to dejab publicly. A cursory glance at their social media pages from when they were publicly dejabed shows that they all experienced the varying levels of visceral backlash and outpouring of support. Ensuing conversations about an apparent 'trend' of dejabing among Muslimah influencers, and its impact on their Muslim followers gained momentum once more in the comment sections of their social media posts. Furthermore, these conversations continue with every additional influencer who dejabes on a social media platform.

At this point, readers might be asking themselves, why did Tokio and other Muslimah influencers receive such visceral reactions to their decisions to dejab? Is there something about the act of dejabing that warrants this much gendered violence and scrutiny? More importantly, what can we glean from these reactions and conversations, that provides us insight into the kinds of expectations and pressures facing everyday Muslim women in these contexts?

This chapter contextualizes contemporary conversations around Muslimah social media influencers' public acts of dejabing within discourses of Islamophobia to offer insight into the kinds of racialized and gendered responsibilities that are imposed on Muslim women. I identify and describe the three kinds of expectations that are held of Muslimah influencers, and arguably, other visible Muslim women in western spaces: The Good Muslimah, the Strong Muslimah, and the Doubly Burdened Muslimah. My data shows that Muslimah influencers navigate these three expectations in various ways, but in doing so, run the risk of the double bind – that is, critiquing the Muslim community's gendered surveillance at the cost of reinforcing Islamophobic and liberal western feminist narratives of Muslim misogyny and Muslimah oppression. This study highlights how, for Muslim women, navigating public expressions of faith in western spaces is constrained by both racialized Islamophobic discourses, and Muslim community pressures and gendered expectations of Muslim women, and 'Muslim womanhood' in particular. In unfolding the nuances involved in the challenges and negotiations of dejabing publicly, I emphasize how we can glean a better understanding of the kinds of racialized and gendered pressures facing Muslim women – hijabi or not – in Islamophobic western contexts today.

## **HIJAB IN DISCOURSES OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

Dejabing as an act is problematized in both Muslim minority and Muslim majority countries, primarily because of the ways in which the hijab is situated in discourses of race, religion, and gender. As a “gendered embodied spatial practice” (Gökarıksel 2009:657), the hijab cannot be disconnected from the context in which it is practiced. The hijab serves as a rhetorical and political tool in politics of secularism, feminism, extremism, and more contemporarily, in the racialized politics of the global war on terror (Cainkar and Selod 2018). A number of scholars including Lila Abu-Lughod, Fadwa El-Guindi, Leila Ahmed, Etsuko Maruoka-Donnelly, and Saba

Mahmood, have unpacked the gendered and racialized history of the hijab in countries like Iran, Egypt, Algeria, and the United States, among many others, only to find that the hijab has consistently been strategically used by power structures *and* by Muslim women in critically complex ways.

For example, El-Guindi (1999) finds that in 1936, the Iranian ruler Reza Shah made a controversial move to enforce the removal of the hijab, i.e., *Kashf-e-hijab*, in order to promote secularism and modernization in Iran. The enforcement of *dejabing* was an attempt to increase women's participation in society, but ultimately alienated many hijabi Muslim women from society for fear of being forced to remove their hijab (Hoodfar 1993). During the 1970s however, the hijab in Iran became a revolutionary tool by which Muslim women protested the Shah's rule and demanded dignity and respect for women in private and public spaces (El-Guindi 1999). Similarly, in her study of the hijab in Algeria, Leila Ahmed (1992) finds that the hijab was used by Algerian women as a symbol of resistance against French colonization. In her analysis of Afghan Muslim women and the veil, Abu-Lughod (2002) asserts that these women adopted the veil in defiance of westernization and secularism. Abu-Lughod argues that while the *burqa* (a local form of covering for Pashtun women in Afghanistan) is seen by western discourses as an oppressive tool enforced by the Muslim patriarchy, it can actually serve a symbol of respect and modesty, and serves as a form of "portable seclusion" (785) for the Afghan women who wear it in public spaces. Finally, in a study of the adoption of the hijab in the United States, Etsuko Maruoka-Donnelly (2019) finds that after 9/11, more Muslim women began wearing the hijab in an effort to assert their religious identification with Islam in the face of increasing Islamophobia.

All of these crucial studies underscore one important fact: the hijab is an embodied spatial and temporal practice that *must* be contextualized in the contexts in which it is practiced. Along

these lines then, the act of dejabing is *also* an embodied spatial and temporal practice that ought to be contextualized in the contexts in which it is practiced. Moreover, the lived experiences of dejabi women are not only distinct from those of hijabi women, but are also temporarily distinct from the lived experiences of non-hijabi Muslim women. Although the act of dejabing and its temporal experience is short and fleeting, the experience that this act generates can contribute to some of the most defining moments in a Muslim woman's life, especially by changing or cementing her relationships with, and understandings of race, religion, gender, community, and identity. As such, if we are to unpack how the act of removing the hijab offers insight into the expectations held of Muslim women in western contexts, then we must begin by contextualizing the hijab in the racialized and gendered politics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **The Hijab In Discourses Of Islamophobia**

The global war on terror produces, reifies, and relies on the 'clash of civilizations' discourse, which essentializes notions of Islam, Muslims, and the Muslim world in order to allege that Islam and its adherents pose a visceral threat to western ideals of freedom, democracy and equality. Mass media portrayals of Muslims in western media have worked in tandem with structural policies and liberal western feminism in order to uphold these essentialized notions by emphasizing specific dimensions of Islamic theology and Muslim lifestyles, and by constructing a threatening Muslim Other. Of course, the Muslim Other is gendered; Muslim men as Other are portrayed as angry, dark skinned, bearded and violent men prone to brutality, while Muslim women are portrayed as subjugated by the Muslim patriarchy, and almost always clad in black abayas or hijabs, symbolizing oppression (Maira 2009). Images that emphasize the oppressive characters of Muslim men and the oppression of Muslim women have been used in conjunction with liberal western feminist narratives of the west's obligation to "save brown women from brown men" (Spivak

1993: 93). Saba Mahmood and Rochelle Terman have critiqued liberal western feminism for being complicit in the “imperial project” (Terman 2016, 86) which puts forward a neo-orientalist logic that is used to justify “their geo-political domination by posing as the liberator of Muslim women from native patriarchal cultures and religions” (Terman 2016, 78). Such a discourse has dire consequences, as Abu-Lughod (2002) argues. Abu-Lughod like Terman, also claims that the imperialist project and feminist perception of the hijab does great harm, in that the neo-orientalist logic is used to justify wars and gather support for military troops in order to “save and liberate Muslim women” (2002: 785). In fact, these narratives and the persistent reproduction of such images in news, films, and television shows made it possible for the United States government to garner public support for military programs in the Middle East (Islam 2019; Cainkar and Selod 2018)

In observing the visual portrayals of Muslim women, Diane Watt (2012:34) argues that “stories about terror, war, and the oppression of women in far off lands are frequently accompanied by photos of silent, anonymous, covered women who are often not directly connected to the content of the articles” (Jiwani 2005, Falah 2005, Kassam 2008). These images and visual depictions have typically been accompanied by stories and scholarship that reproduce notions of victimization and oppression which emphasize cherry-picked distressing conditions of Muslim women. Consistently in these portrayals, the hijab or the burqa clad woman remains a constant icon – notably, the non-hijabi Muslimah is virtually absent from the conceptualization of the ‘Muslim woman’. In these discourses, Muslim women “were required only to symbolize Taliban oppression and for this purpose, the sight of the burqa-clad woman was all that was required.” (Hussein 2007:7). As a political device, the hijab is thus used to generalize all Muslim women’s experiences, and erase their subjectivities and diversity so that a distinct, essentialist image persists: the oppressed hijabi.

This image in particular, is the single identifiable cultural front upon which the global war on terror's counterinsurgency efforts focus (Cainkar 2009). Evidence of its usefulness in this regard is apparent in France, Belgium, and the Canadian province of Quebec, where Islamophobic policies that are supposedly addressing multiculturalism, integration and secularism are used to discriminate against Muslim women and reify the notion that Islam and Muslims pose a cultural threat to these secular societies (Al-Fartousi and Mogadime 2012). The hijab has continued to play an overwhelming role in Muslim women's lives during the global war on terror – whether they wear it or not. Made to seem synonymous with Muslim woman, the hijab has consistently been used to define the 'Muslim Woman' image which, when contextualized in Islamophobia, "overrides all other [identities] to constitute these women's primary identity" (Cooke 2001:131). In doing so, this marker has arguably shaped notions of Muslim womanhood and undergirded the gendered and racialized experience of Muslim women in the 21st century.

The global war on terror has also relied heavily on the politicization of the hijab in discourses of gender and race in liberal western feminism and orientalist feminism<sup>8</sup>. Christina Ho critiques these feminisms for being "made...essential to the war on terror, in that it enables Islamic societies to be condemned for being uniquely oppressive to women" (2010:1). By problematizing Islam as an uncivilized and misogynistic religion that imposes the hijab on all (Muslim) women, these feminisms have exacerbated the perception of Islam and Muslim lifestyles as a cultural threat to the west. Noting the importance of the hijab in liberal western feminist critiques of Islam, Saba Mahmood writes "[t]he veil, more than any other Islamic practice, has become the symbol and evidence of the violence Islam has inflicted upon women (Mahmood 2005: 195). This remains the

---

<sup>8</sup> Orientalist feminism, according to Christina Ho is "a discursive strategy that adroitly appropriates feminist concepts, and now draws on a much more sophisticated feminist conceptual toolkit; compared to its colonial-era counterparts." (2010:434)



crucial junction where liberal western feminism and orientalist feminist discourses seek to problematize the hijab. These feminisms assume that when given a free choice, Muslim women would reject the headscarf (Carens 2000:159). Contrarily, studies on the adoption of the hijab have overwhelmingly shown that in different contexts and at different time periods, Muslim women have been known to choose to wear the hijab, oftentimes in direct defiance of their families' wishes (Maruoka-Donnelly 2018; Afshar 2008; Mahmood 2005; El-Guindi 1999). Due to their inability to account for the standpoints of Muslim women who may choose to wear the hijab, liberal western and orientalist feminists continue to produce skewed interpretations of Islam and Muslims. In so doing, western hegemonic identity politics as used by such feminisms occupy an epistemic privilege that downgrades "any form of non-western knowledge", leading to epistemic racism (Grosfeugal and Mielants 2006:8). Feminist liberal western and orientalist discourses continue to contribute to racism, Islamophobia, and religious intolerance by misrepresenting the hijab and by homogenizing the experiences of Muslim women as a singular 'oppressive' experience. This is primarily why feminist scholarship that emerges from Muslim women's lived experiences is needed; the hijab and the act of dejabing need to be understood from the standpoint of the women themselves who make these choices.

### **The Hijab and Dejabing in Postcolonial Feminist Scholarship**

Of course, there has been much postcolonial feminist scholarship that contradicts liberal western and orientalist feminist understandings of Muslim women and the hijab. The work of Lila Abu-Lughod, Leila Ahmed, and Fadwa El-Guindi are testaments to the nuanced and important scholarship in this realm. In her book, 'Politics of Piety', Saba Mahmood (2005) critiques liberal feminism in its limitations to understand the relationship of Muslim women with the hijab. She pays particular attention to their understanding and conceptualization of *agency*. Mahmood's main

argument lies in the contradiction of liberal feminism's conceptualization of agency, which is "agency understood as capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)" (2005:8). This approach to agency focuses specifically on resistance to forms of power (mainly patriarchal) that impose a subordinate role on those interested in undertaking resistive actions. Using evidence from her study of the role of Egyptian women during Egypt's Islamic revitalization in 1995-1997, Mahmood argues that this understanding of agency is not only reductive regarding the experiences of the Muslim women who chose to participate in the mosque movement<sup>9</sup> during this time, but also fails to capture the motivations behind these women's adoption of the hijab, organization of halaqas<sup>10</sup> and public religious interpretation of religious scripture. These undertakings of piety do not conform to liberal western feminist and orientalist feminist interpretations of agency in that they do not 'resist' tradition, the weight of customs, or any other forms of patriarchal power, but are in fact an appropriation of them. Thus, these undertakings simply cannot be understood in the reductive liberal western feminist understandings of agency. Instead, Mahmood suggests, we must broaden our conceptualization of agency, as not only resistance to norms, but also the inhabiting of norms. In the case of either taking on the hijab or taking it off, agency must be conceptualized not in terms of the resistance vs. conformity narrative, but in a different narrative altogether: *negotiation*.

As studies of the hijab have demonstrated, Muslim women are motivated to wear the hijab by a number of factors that do not conform to liberal feminist conceptualizations of agency, or dichotomous narratives like resistance vs. conformity or choice vs. force. Their decisions to wear

---

<sup>9</sup> The mosque movement referred to here is an Egyptian religious revival movement in the 1990s that involved the inclusion and incorporation of new leadership and participatory roles for women in urban local mosques.

<sup>10</sup> i.e., "religious study groups"

the hijab may sometimes require *negotiating* with discourses of Islamophobia that inscribe oppression, cultural threat, national security threat, backwardness and a milieu of other racialized meanings to the hijab and the hijabi, in addition to negotiating with inscriptions of piety, spirituality, agency, secularism, and femininity, among others (Maruoka-Donnelly 2019). Similarly, the dearth of studies on the act of dejabing have shown that this gendered bodily practice also requires negotiation as a result of being motivated by a number of factors that are contextual to a historical and political frame (Izharuddin 2018; Lewis 2015; Fadil 2011). In her study on dejabed and non-hijabi Muslim women in Belgium, Nadia Fadil (2011) finds that her participants took off their hijabs for a number of reasons including, questioning the religious and cultural importance attributed to the hijab, dissociating from the faith, increasing their career and employment opportunities by removing the racialized marker, aesthetic reasons, broadening conceptualizations of the hijab from a pious symbol to a cultural one, and the belief in one's ability to live according to the high standards often placed on hijabi women by other Muslims. Fadil notes that in Muslim minority societies like Belgium, the non-hijabi body is marked as 'secular' and 'liberal' and thus, more integrated and assimilated in secular society as compared to its hijabi counterpart. She suggests that the "implicit assumption adopted here is that not-veiling follows from a gradual adaptation to prevailing European secular worldviews, whereas veiling indicates a disruption" (Fadil 2011: 88).

Contrarily, in a study conducted by Alicia Izharuddin (2018) on non-hijabi and dejabed women in Malaysia, Izharuddin finds that the non-hijabi body in a Muslim majority society is viewed as "a radical moral failure" in that the subject is viewed to have undertaken an act of noncompliance to the established ethics of Malay culture and the Muslim faith (4). Due to strong cultural expectations of Muslim women to wear the hijab in Malaysia, Muslim women who dejab or choose

not to wear the hijab are believed to have deviated from normative identifications with Islam and Malay femininity (i.e., religious and cultural compliance) – both of which involve the practice of head-covering. Consequently, these women become subjects of social surveillance by their communities, and must negotiate with social pressures of conformity. Notably, this occurs in both Muslim majority and Muslim minority societies due to hijabi Muslim women being viewed by their communities as visible representatives of the faith who are expected to be more pious, and are thus held to higher standards of religious practice (Mahmood 2005). The hijab thus functions not only as a social and cultural symbol, but also as a litmus test of a woman’s faith, modesty, piety and level of religiosity. Mahmood’s analysis of the expectations of piety on Muslim women in Egypt demonstrates that Muslim women are viewed by their communities to be responsible for preserving the sanctity of the Muslim community by preventing (and protecting against) their sexualization by the male gaze, by exhibiting piety by manifestly wearing the hijab, and by adhering to modest practices, which include avoiding eye contact with men and dressing modestly<sup>11</sup>. Thus, when Muslim women fail to act in accordance to these moral codes or cultural guidelines, they threaten the sanctity and image of the Muslim community and become subjects of the Muslim community’s gendered surveillance and criticism. Those who engage in such criticisms are cynically referred to in the desi<sup>12</sup> Muslim community as ‘the haram police’. Hussein (2007) explains this phenomenon by suggesting that “Communities that are fearful and besieged are unhealthy places for women. In such circumstances, the importance of women’s dress as a mark of cultural loyalty is heightened, and transgressions of such loyalty are regarded with greater seriousness” (14). Thus, Muslim women who take on the hijab, dejab, or contemplate dejabing,

---

<sup>11</sup> In most Muslim male scholarly interpretations of modesty, dressing ‘modestly’ is often understood to be wearing loose garments that cover the entire body, showing only the face, hands and feet (below the ankle). Refer to Chapter 3 and 4 for details on how modesty is understood in Muslim circles.

<sup>12</sup> Desi is a colloquial term that refers to cultures of South Asia, mainly Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

must consider the disruptive or normative implications of their decisions with regards to negotiating community expectations of piety and femininity as it relates to their bodies.

Most critically then, in the context of both Muslim majority and Muslim minority societies, the act of dejabing is an act that necessitates negotiation with – on the one hand, the assumption that not-veiling is conformity and veiling is disruption, and on the other, the assumption that veiling is conformity and not-veiling is disruption. Thus, Muslim women’s decisions to wear the hijab or to dejab are shaped by daily social and cultural pressures and tensions with which they must negotiate. Arguably, in western spaces where immigrant communities (including ethnic Muslim communities) negotiate with cultural and structural expectations of integration in addition to rising pressures of secularist conformity, Muslim women who dejab must simultaneously negotiate with (1) dominant majority assumptions of wearing the hijab as disruption and dejabing as conformity, *and* (2) Muslim community assumptions of wearing the hijab as conformity, and dejabing as disruption. Caught between these social pressures and assumptions, Muslim women who dejab have a tense relationship with the narratives of resistance vs. conformity that are undergirded by Islamophobic and liberal western feminist discourses. Thus, the act of dejabing and those who choose to undertake it cannot be understood in terms of these dichotomous narratives, and neither can their acts of negotiation. By broadening these narratives to one that emphasizes negotiation, we might perhaps view Muslim women as “political agents” in contexts of Islamophobia who are capable of negotiating with social and structural forces, rather than as “passive victims in need of... salvation” (Ho 2007). Only then will we be able to account for their critical subjectivities and the nature of gendered and racialized expectations held of Muslim women, as these relate to the act of dejabing.

### **The Usefulness of Muslimah Social Media Influencers in Contexts of Islamophobia**

Given that we know that dejabing occurs amongst Muslim women in Muslim majority and Muslim minority contexts, what would be the purpose of studying Muslimah *social media influencers* who dejab? As some of the most hypervisible Muslims on social media, Muslimah influencers have come to amass large and dedicated followings on their social media platforms (Tarlo and Moors 2013). While their social media content is viewed mostly by their audiences, a majority of whom are young, affluent, Muslim women (Janmohamed 2016: Tarlo and Moors 2013), they – and the image of the Muslim woman that they come to represent – are also subject to western, global, and non-Muslim gazes. As the aforementioned studies have illustrated, these gazes – when contextualized in contemporary contexts of Islamophobia, carry with them their own set of assumptions and expectations of what a Muslim woman may look or behave like. Consequently, and rather critically, the behaviors, actions, words, and overall gendered and religious performativities of Muslim women are regarded by these gazes as a general representation of the communities of which they are a part. Somewhat problematically, being a Muslimah influencer can involve not only the heavy burden of representation, but also the invitation to be scrutinized and critiqued by the communities that follow and surveil them. Thus, when Muslimah influencers decide to take off their hijab and share this decision publicly with their audiences, they find themselves in a complex situation whereby they experience, and must negotiate heightened public scrutiny and gendered surveillance. By publicly removing the marker of the hijab, dejabbi Muslimah influencers open up conversations around what constitutes Muslim womanhood, who represents the Muslim woman, and what the gendered or racial responsibilities are for those who identify, or are perceived as ‘Muslim woman’ in the public eye, and in contexts of Islamophobia. So, while they are uniquely hypervisible Muslim women with public lives, examining the kinds of public scrutiny that Muslimah influencers undergo when they make the

decision to dejab is indicative of the gendered responsibilities placed on everyday Muslim women in Islamophobic contexts, primarily because hijabi Muslim women in the west share something in common: they are racialized beings, and are constrained in their behavior as a result of the Islamophobic contexts in which they reside.

## **(UN)VEILING AND NAVIGATING RACIALIZED AND GENDERED EXPECTATIONS**

In this section, I identify and describe the three racialized and gendered expectations held of Muslim women, as evidenced by the conversations surrounding Muslimah influencers who publicly dejab. This section also includes a description of the ways in which Muslimah influencers negotiate with, and critique these expectations. The three identifiable expectations are: The Good Muslimah; The Strong Muslimah; and The Doubly Burdened Muslimah.

### **The Good Muslimah**

*“They're not hijabi anymore and probably bad Muslims”*

The Good Muslimah expectation is grounded in the perception that only hijabi women are *practicing* Muslims. This notion is the result of mass mediated, limited, and reductive Islamophobic narratives that have generated a myopic public perception of Muslim women that equates ‘Muslim womanhood’ with the image of the hijabi. Due to this perception, hijabi women come to be regarded as ‘representatives’ of the faith and the Muslim community, in the eyes of non-Muslims/the west, and western/global Muslim communities. As public representatives, hijabi Muslim women are expected to behave as Good Muslims who closely observe their religious practice, publicly demonstrate their commitment to the faith, and seek to identify with the Muslim community via the hijab. Those who do not wear the hijab, are not regarded as ‘representatives’ of the faith or Muslim community, and also not regarded as ‘authentic Muslims.’ According to

Hussein (2007), women who don't wear the hijab are often regarded as being 'less Muslim' by some Muslims, since the lack of this visible marker is assumed to be an indication of one's inclination towards disidentifying with the faith. Hussein further explains that the assumption of being 'less Muslim' is also because non-hijabi Muslims do not experience the discrimination and harassment that are commonly directed at women in the hijab – a key experience of hijabi Muslim women in racialized and Islamophobic spaces. Thus, non-hijabi women are viewed as less authentically Muslim and thus, not worthy of being 'representatives' of the faith. In her interview with me, Muslimah American influencer Jana Al-Akhras<sup>13</sup> notes how the hijab is tied to her perception as a representative of Muslim women, stating:

*“I mean, I don't find myself an image of Muslim women by any means. Like, every single Muslim woman is a different person, hijab wearing or not. I wonder if I would be thought of as a representative of Muslim women if I wasn't wearing hijab. Like, if I took off the hijab tomorrow, would I still...would anyone still want me to be the representation of Muslim woman? I think not.”*

Al-Akhras' comment underscores her acknowledgement of the fact that Muslim and non-Muslim publics perceive hijabi women as being representatives of the faith, and tend not to hold the same expectation of non-hijabis. This is explained primarily by the inscription of faith on a Muslim woman's body via the hijab, marking those who wear the hijab as identifiably Muslim and associated with 'Muslimness', and those lacking this marker as ambiguously Muslim (if perceived as Muslim at all) and thus associated with the lack of Muslimness.

---

<sup>13</sup> Jana Al-Akhras, Instagram handle: @thealakhras



The notion of one's Muslimness as being tied to their hijab is also grounded in one's perceived religiosity. Saba Mahmood (2005) keenly notes that in many Muslim communities, the hijab is often viewed as an exterior means to achieve interior piety. Thus, for a hijabi who dejobs, the removal of the hijab is perceived by publics, and especially Muslim communities, as a proclamation of the subject's dissociation from the faith. A number of my survey respondents regarded the dejabing of influencers as an indication of dissociation from the faith, and were disappointed in their decisions to remove the hijab:

*"I unfollowed them [dejabi influencers] - I feel like it's them taking a step back from religion.*

*"Personally, it's just sad. It feels a little like they sold out. They stop talking about Islam like it's a past relationship.*

*"It makes me feel sad because it shows that they were not able to see the beauty of Islam."*

Through the act of dejabing, the piety of a Muslim woman and her commitment to her faith are rendered questionable. The perception here is not only that a dejabi Muslim woman has become impious, but also that she is lacking in faith, does not pray, or has chosen to leave the religion. In a Question-and-Answer video<sup>14</sup> in which she responds to audience assumptions about herself, British influencer Annam Ahmad sought to respond to the assumption: *"Because you took your scarf off, you're not a practicing Muslim anymore."* She states: *"Absolutely not. You know, wearing a scarf is part of your faith. People say and think that [she's not a Muslim anymore] but*

---

<sup>14</sup> "You stopped wearing hijab because of pressure. Answering your assumptions about me." Annam Ahmed on YouTube. March 24, 2019. URL: [You stopped wearing hijab because of pressure. | Answering your assumptions about me - YouTube](#)

*it's not true, you know. Like, I'm still a Muslim.*” Similarly, in a video<sup>15</sup> where she explains her decision to dejab, Muslimah American influencer Hanan Tehaili states,

*“This change that I'm making is between myself and God. It's a religious change that I made, although I still maintain my religion and believe in my religion dearly. So, I don't want you guys to think of me as any less of a Muslim because I still am [a Muslim], and a practicing one at that.”*

Consistently, dejabi influencers have critiqued audience assumptions that the hijab is a litmus test of their religiosity and religious practice. In many of their explanation videos, dejabi influencers including Dina Tokio, Aaliyah JM, and Ascia Akf have emphasized repeatedly that not only are they practicing Muslims despite having taken off the hijab, but that audience speculations of their dissociation from the religion are ludicrous and un-Islamic in nature. To this end, in a video interview with her husband, Dina Tokio remarks, *“You know what's funny. When a lot of people just assume that you've left the religion because you've taken off your hijab. I just find that like really crazy.”* Similarly, British influencer Aaliyah JM states,

*“I just don't think it's fair to attack and call people hypocrites for taking the hijab off, and calling them non-believers, or that they've left the fold of Islam because they've taken their hijab off. You don't*

---

<sup>15</sup> “Life Update (Hijab, Social Media Negativity)” Hanan Tehaili on YouTube. Feb 22, 2020. URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncQ\\_ftnhpTA&t=96s&ab\\_channel=HANANTEHAILI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncQ_ftnhpTA&t=96s&ab_channel=HANANTEHAILI)

*know what is going on. I think we all need to sort of understand and be a bit more open to whatever that person is going through.”<sup>16</sup>*

The explicit explanation of their continued association with the religion, in addition to their emphasis that the hijab is not an indication of one’s religiosity are attempts for influencers to dissociate the hijab from expectations of piety. For many Muslims, this association is critically problematic as it not only imposes added responsibilities on hijabi women to publicly perform their piety through the Good Muslimah image, but it also prevents the conception of Muslim womanhood as being one that can be performed by, and as a non-hijabi. This critical nuance is explained by the perception of the non-hijabbed body, (i.e., the body that has either never worn the hijab, or has not been associated with the hijab for an extended or identifiable period) as not making an active proclamation of association from the faith (i.e., by donning the hijab). Thus, in its unmarked state, the non-hijabbed body is regarded as either already lacking in piety and faith, or is rendered separate from the Muslim identity and faith, due to the absence of the racialized marker for an extended period. In reality, this is untrue. In her interview with myself, Muslim American influencer Noha Hamid<sup>17</sup> makes this critical untruth explicitly clear by saying,

*“There are definitely a lot of people that do not wear hijab, that I feel are more connected to God and are better Muslims and more religious, than other people that do [wear the hijab]. But the assumption is that because I wear the hijab, I’m Muslim, and I am made to seem more religious, at least to a certain extent. In all*

---

<sup>16</sup> “Why I took my Hijab off and then put it back on” Aaliyah JM on Instagram Reels, October 7, 2019. URL: [Aaliyah on Instagram: “Hey guys, so this was a highly requested video that you guys have been wanting from me so I finally sat down, faced my fears of recording!...”](#)

<sup>17</sup> Noha Hamid’s Instagram Handle: @nohahamid

*honesty, it probably does make me look better in the Muslim community.”*

Hamid’s comment underscores the implications of ‘seeming’ more or less religious, pious, or committed to the faith via the hijab, especially in terms of non-Muslim and Muslim community perceptions and social relations. The association of piety, Muslim womanhood, and ‘Muslimness’ with the hijab can be defining characteristics that ultimately hinder or facilitate a Muslim woman’s reputation in her Muslim and non-Muslim communities, as well as her perceived approachability to others in a secular society (Fadil 2011), her career options in times of Islamophobia (Lazreg 2010), and even her marriage prospects in and outside of Muslim communities (Izharuddin 2018). Nevertheless, by sharing their motivations and thoughts on dejabing, Muslimah influencers are creating the space for conversations that are temporally and contextually necessary for Muslim and non-Muslim communities in western and non-western spaces. The possible consequences of Muslimah influencers making explicit and public statements that separate the association of the hijab from piety (and thus, dejabing from impiety) are (1) that they are broadening the western public’s conceptualization of the Muslim woman as one who may or may not wear the hijab but is *still Muslim*, and (2) that they are forcing Muslim communities to reevaluate their conceptions and ascriptions of piety to only those women who wear the hijab. However, with ongoing conversations in online and offline spaces, whether these consequences manifest still remain to be seen.

### **The Strong Muslimah**

*“Depending on the way the influencer acts and dresses other than with the hijab, it motivates me to try to be a better Muslim myself. If they take off their hijab, it feels like it’s harder to look up to them.”*

Hijabi Muslim women – as visible representations of the faith, are viewed as the face of the Muslim community – not only in terms of the gaze of non-Muslim publics, but also in the eyes of Muslim youth. These Muslim women are expected by western Muslim communities to serve as strong role models for young Muslims in the west who are forming their Muslim identities while navigating private and structural Islamophobia (Beydoun 2018). This process of navigation can be challenging for many Muslim youth who must learn to deal with Islamophobia in different ways. In societies where secularism is valued and Islam is demonized, some Muslim youth contend with Islamophobia by increasing their identification with their religion and cultures, thereby seeking to reinforce ideas of multiculturalism and inclusion in the face of their racialization (Nagra 2011; Islam 2017). Other Muslim youth navigate the racialized pressures of Islamophobia and secularization by hiding their Muslim identities and religious affiliation from their peers, avoiding discussions of religion, or by dissociating from their religion altogether (Syahrivar 2020). As visible Muslims, hijabi Muslim women in particular are viewed as ‘Strong Muslimahs’ in that their visibility serves as a statement of resistance to Islamophobia and pressures of secularism. As Strong Muslimahs, Muslim women can become a source of pride for Muslim communities who are not only contending with Islamophobia collectively, but are looking to find ways to encourage Muslim youth to increase their religious affiliation and practice in the face of secularization. Muslim women are thus expected by their Muslim communities to guide young Muslims on how to navigate the difficult terrain of being a visible and practicing Muslim in spite of Islamophobia, and in spite of pressures of secularization<sup>18</sup>.

---

<sup>18</sup> Due to the lack of scholarship that examines Muslim manhood and masculinities, and expectations of Muslim men by their Muslim and non-Muslim communities, I cannot make any explicit arguments on how Muslim women’s experiences contrast with those of Muslim men.

Muslimah influencers are especially more susceptible to the Strong Muslimah expectation due to their hypervisibility on public platforms. As ‘influencers’, and thus, *influential* Muslimahs, these women have significant social and cultural power and can influence the decisions and thought processes of their followers. In sharing how they resist and navigate the contemporary challenges of being a Muslim woman via their careers, education, and family life, etc., they embody the expectation of the ‘Strong Muslimah’ by guiding others on how they might also navigate these challenges. Some of my survey respondents seemed abundantly aware of the responsibility of Muslimah influencers to fulfill the ‘Strong Muslimah’ expectation, and thus expect these hypervisible women to yield their social and cultural power accordingly. One respondent said, “*I think young Muslim girls are seeing representation in these influencers. They may be inspired to dress more modestly or wear the hijab because of them [influencers].*” Audiences thus view Muslimah influencers as having the responsibility and duty to not only be good and virtuous representatives of Muslim womanhood, but to also serve as strong and successful role models for their followers and guide their followers on how to resist Islamophobia, identify as a proud Muslim in western spaces, and stay defiantly Muslim in the face of Islamophobia.<sup>19</sup>

The expectation of the Strong Muslimah is drastically disrupted through the act of dejabing. When a Muslimah influencer chooses to dejab, Muslim audiences view her dejabing as an indication of, on the one hand, her moral failure to remain pious and steadfast in the face of secularization, and on the other, a ‘failure-of-resilience’ to contend with Islamophobia and the pressures of secularization. Studies have shown that wearing the hijab can not only be significantly challenging for Muslim women in terms of navigating pressures to conform to western standards

---

<sup>19</sup> It is important to note, that the Strong and Good Muslimah expectations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but in fact often inform one another to give rise to the third expectation: the Doubly Burdened Muslimah.

of beauty (Syahrivar 2020), but it can also pose a visceral threat to their lives (Beydoun 2018; Cainkar 2009). The hijab exposes one to isolation, anti-Muslim racism, hate crimes, gendered violence, gendered scrutiny, and discrimination, while also hindering one's ability to gain employment and pursue an education (Selod 2018a). In her explanation video<sup>20</sup>, dejabi Arab American influencer Ascia Akf notes how the hijab became a marker that hindered her social interactions and opportunities, *"I think the [hijab] in the beginning was, for me, an identifier. And the older that I got, I started hating that identifier. Because it was a means to judge me without me even opening my mouth."* Similarly, in my interview with hijabi British influencer Manal Sharif<sup>21</sup> (who also wears the abaya) she shares how her preferences for religious dress have hindered her career opportunities as an influencer and model:

*"I think the only way that anytime that my religion becomes some sort of glass ceiling has been in modeling. One time, a lady that I was modeling for said to me, 'Why don't you just take your hijab off? You look so much better without it.' And obviously, I'm aware that I look better without it. I'm aware that within the modeling industry, I wouldn't get as far [while wearing the hijab], but I accept that because I'm don't intend to change the way I do my hijab or the way I dress."*

For the many Muslimah influencers whose careers are bound to the beauty and fashion industry, the pressures of navigating Islamophobia within these industries while also conforming to secular western standards of beauty can be immensely challenging. Like Manal, these

---

<sup>20</sup> "This might disappoint you" Ascia Akf, The Hybrids on YouTube, Jul 10, 2018. URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt3t4yT4bzl&ab\\_channel=TheHybrids%2FAscia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt3t4yT4bzl&ab_channel=TheHybrids%2FAscia)

<sup>21</sup> Manal Sharif's Instagram Handle: @manalmiaa

influencers are forced to negotiate with the limited options available to them. Either they remove their hijabs and/or modify their religious dresses for the purpose of availing industry opportunities, or they pass on these opportunities and avail the scant opportunities that cater to the needs and preferences of Muslim women. If they choose the first option and dejab, audiences perceive their decisions as a moral failure, in which they have chosen the *Dunya* (i.e., worldly success) over their *Deen* (i.e., faith and religious practice). Commenting on this, one survey respondent remarked:

*“I think [dejabing] also shows how getting into social media or beauty/fashion influencing slowly erodes at religious inclinations for modest dressing. Modesty starts internally and is then reflected outwardly, and if you start focusing too much on the outward like in influencing, it can diminish the internal.”*

In her interview with me, Muslim American influencer Subeena Zubairi<sup>22</sup> commented on the topic of Muslimah influencers dejabing by noting that western beauty standards and working in western secular influencer, beauty and fashion industries may contribute to one’s decision to dejab. Furthermore, Zubairi also shares her thoughts on how, having worn and taken the hijab off twice in her adult life has taught her how difficult a decision to take off the hijab can be for Muslim women:

*“I know how hard it is. To me, it's vanity. There's no other reason. It's vanity. And it's... I just think it's sad when I see [influencers dejabing]. I always feel like it's sad because there's so many younger followers watching them, and I think it makes it easy for [followers], when they're on that tipping point [of taking off the hijab], [watching*

---

<sup>22</sup> Subeena Zubairi, Instagram handle: @subeenaz



*influencers dejab] makes it easier for them to take it off. But you know, wearing the hijab is extremely hard, and it's a very hard decision to take it off. It takes years of thinking, should I? Shouldn't I? Should I?"*

Sharing the difficulties of wearing the hijab is important because it enables the speaker to reflect on the challenges of being a visible Muslim in contexts of Islamophobia, it comes with its own potential danger. It may dissuade others from visibly identifying as Muslim for fear of potential discrimination. One survey respondent noted the consequences of Muslimah influencers sharing how the hijab may be challenging: *"Obviously [taking off the hijab is] not great for younger hijabi followers, as it may lead to them thinking that the hijab is too hard to wear."* Consequently, when Muslimah influencers remove their hijab, and explain that they were motivated to do so because of the challenges of Islamophobia, their Muslim audiences assume that they have failed in their roles as Strong Muslimahs. The perceived failure of Muslimah influencers in this regard can be emotional for many of their followers, who also begin to doubt in their own ability to face Islamophobia head on as a visible Muslimah:

*"It's disappointing because it makes me doubt wearing the scarf a little.*

*"Disappointing as these hijabi influencers helped so many women feel confident and comfortable wearing the hijab and often built their whole brands on the basis of hijab.*

*"I think everyone is free to do as they please, but "influencers" need to realize how their actions in general affect*

*their audience. I think removing the hijab is fine, but an influencer needs to let her impressionable 13-year-old followers know that her personal decision doesn't mean hijab is wrong, and should encourage the people who follow her to focus more on following their own hearts than copying everything she does.*

*“It's obviously up to them, but sometimes it makes me feel strange. I don't currently wear the hijab in terms of a head-covering, but I look up to the influencers who do. Depending on the way the influencer acts and dresses other than the hijab, it motivates me to try to be a better Muslim myself. If they take off their hijab, it feels like it's harder to look up to them in that regard, although it does not at all detract from the way I feel about them as a person.”*

Influencers are keenly aware of how pressures to serve as a Strong Muslimah emerge from the power of their platforms. This is primarily why in many dejabi influencers' explanation videos, they explicitly mention that their decisions are meant to be their own, that these decisions are personal, and that they do not intend on 'influencing' others to make a similar decision. In an attempt to make this distinction, they draw a line between the self and the representative, by emphasizing that they are not role models for others, and do not wish to serve as role models to others. Ascia Akf makes this explicitly clear in her explanation video<sup>23</sup>, stating *“I don't feel the need to explain my decision to anybody. I am not meant to be your Muslim role model. That was not what I ever set out to be.”* Notably, the ascription of 'influencer' is complicated when they

---

<sup>23</sup> “This might disappoint you” Ascia Akf, The Hybrids on YouTube, Jul 10, 2018. URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt3t4yT4bzl&ab\\_channel=TheHybrids%2FAscia](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt3t4yT4bzl&ab_channel=TheHybrids%2FAscia)

make the distinction between being an ‘influencer’ and being a role model. While they continue to identify as ‘influencer’ – strictly in terms of influencing one’s consumer choices, they distance themselves from being a role model, or an ‘influence’ on others’ behaviors and personal life choices (which exclude consumerist choices). We can see this in a video interview<sup>24</sup> of Dina Tokio with her husband, whereby she emphasizes a rejection of responsibility to serve as a role model for her followers, stating,

*“I don't want you guys to follow in my footsteps. Like, I actually don't want you to do that. You have to remember, for the 13, 15, 16, 18, 19-year-olds watching... I'm 30. I've had two kids. I mean I'm in a different stage of my life to you guys, and I really don't want you to copy me.”*

By saying that she doesn’t want others to ‘copy’ her life choices, Tokio attempts to distinguish a difference between her personal and public self. In this manner, she chooses to render her personal choices in her private life as separate from her role as a social media influencer who may influence others’ behaviors and marketing choices. The tension of this distinction is rather delicate, in that while she is attempting to separate her personal choices from her public self, she is still influencing others’ behaviors and consumerist practices as a result of her profession as a social media influencer. Similarly, in her explanation video<sup>25</sup>, Amena Khan also makes a similar statement, although she specifically acknowledges how religious identity plays a role in the assumption of responsibility,

---

<sup>24</sup> “Dinatokio Drama” Sid and Dina on YouTube. Nov 3, 2018. Url: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHKzkvcKAZM&t=3s&ab\\_channel=SidandDina](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHKzkvcKAZM&t=3s&ab_channel=SidandDina)

<sup>25</sup> “Change.” Amena on YouTube. June 3, 2020. URL [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QonbA2xpUaA&t=3s&ab\\_channel=Amena](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QonbA2xpUaA&t=3s&ab_channel=Amena)

*“Don't even be swayed by my decisions. You know what I mean? Like I'm just saying, stick to your guns and don't let anybody else's decisions affect what you do. Look I'm not a religious figure – I've said that from day one. It's one of the reasons why I became quite reluctant to make videos where I talked about my faith, because I was kind of being put in this position of responsibility which I absolutely was not comfortable with.”*

In distinguishing the weight of her personal decision from the responsibility of a religious or *visibly* religious figure, Amena Khan seems to clearly understand the communal responsibility placed on Muslim women in terms of guiding others on how to be a Good or Strong Muslimah in western contexts. Nevertheless, despite the attempts of influencers to disavow responsibility, and separate the weight of their personal decisions from the public responsibility to guide others, there is no doubt that Muslimah influencers' decisions to dejab has implications on their audiences and on Muslim youth. For example, one survey respondent noted the complexity of this predicament, and Muslim community expectations for Muslim women to serve as 'Strong Muslimahs':

*“I understand that they choose to be on a public platform and show their life as a Hijabi "influencer" but it's also strange to me that people want to hold them "accountable" for their own personal choices. Some go as far to curse and threaten them and their families because they choose to take off their hijabs. They just took off their hijabs! They didn't murder or commit a heinous crime! I honestly feel like it's all overly paid attention to. Most Muslim parents are happy that their daughters choose to wear a hijab because of these*

*"influencers," but when these same influencers decide to take it off, the parents and other women go on a hating parade. I mean, if people feel like the people they looked up to disappointed them in some way, then maybe it's time to reevaluate who they should really look up to."*

This comment clearly articulates the gendered nature of the burdens and expectations of performance and behaviors that are ultimately placed on the shoulders of Muslim women – influencer or not. The predicament that faces all Muslim women – i.e., that in contexts of Islamophobia and under the gaze of the west, they are constantly viewed as representatives of Islam and the Muslim community – is something that many Muslim men do not have to contend with. Perhaps the awareness of the gendered nature of this burden and the calls of Muslimah influencers for Muslim and non-Muslim communities to reevaluate their expectations may inspire some form of change in gendered expectations of accountability.

### **The Doubly Burdened Muslimah**

*"Sometimes I wonder whether the pressure came from outside (anti-Muslim prejudice) or inside (Muslims' attitudes of 'might as well not do it at all if you're not going to XYZ'). Based on the comment sections, I often think the latter is more likely."*

As politicized bodies, Muslim women's bodies are uniquely burdened with gendered assumptions and expectations of the western imagination, which are grounded in suppositions of Islam's misogynist and patriarchal characteristics (Abu-Lughod 2013). Muslim men, while racialized and gendered in different ways, do not experience the kinds of gendered expectations that Muslim women experience (Selod 2018b). More importantly, the impetus to contradict these burdens as a result of being visibly Muslim may also be less immediate for Muslim men than for

hijabi Muslim women because of their self-presentation and its resulting shaping of social interactions (Selod 2018b). For example, due to the politicization of the hijab and the hijabi in discourses of Islamophobia and liberal western and orientalist feminisms, Muslim women who wear the hijab are not only especially vulnerable to these expectations and assumptions, but are cognizant of these expectations and actively work to contradict them. Numerous studies have demonstrated that one of the prevailing assumptions of these discourses is that, as a result of ascribing to a patriarchal and misogynist religion that seeks to control and oppress them, Muslim women lack the agency to make everyday decisions for themselves (Ho 2010; Mahmood 2005). Muslimah influencers appear to be particularly cognizant of this narrative, which is why in their explanation videos, they explicitly contradict the assumption of lacking agency and choice in the decision to dejab. In a number of these videos, Muslimah influencers begin their explanations by explicitly stating, for their audience's benefit, that the decision to take off the hijab was their own, and was not motivated or enforced by their male relatives or their religion. For example, in her explanation video entitled 'Change'<sup>26</sup>, British influencer Amena Khan states,

*"I wore the hijab for as long as I did because it was my choice. I never felt oppressed, by anyone; I never felt that I was not being myself. I fully embraced it [the hijab]. It was purely a choice thing. Nobody forced me to wear it. Nobody's forced me to take it off. There hasn't been like some external influence at play here or anything like that... I felt empowered before I wore the hijab, I felt empowered*

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

*whilst I was wearing it, and I feel empowered right now [without it]”*

Here, Amena Khan alludes to, and explicitly contradicts the narratives of agency and disempowerment of Muslim women that often prevails in Islamophobia and liberal western/orientalist feminist discourses. This explicit contradiction is not only for the benefit of those in her audience who may harbor such assumptions, but also for the benefit of the western gaze and the liberal feminist gaze, both of which continue to dominate mass mediated narratives of Muslim womanhood, and evidently, shape the decisions and gendered performances of everyday Muslim women.

Other influencers have also sought to emphasize their agency in making the decision to *dejab*. In the video interview with her husband<sup>27</sup>, Dina Tokio explicitly discusses the western gaze and its assumptions of the lack of Muslimah agency:

*“You know one of the things I’ve always repeated over and over again is, that most women who choose to wear the headscarf, they choose to do it, you know? Like there’s no force in it. And it’s, it is a choice. It is not like what the west or the media wants to say, that ‘we’re forced do it, and we hate it’ and all this stuff.”*

While these statements are a necessary contradiction of the discourse of agency (or the lack of it), such statements can also be problematized. In emphasizing that not only was the decision to wear the hijab (or *dejab*) their choice, but that most Muslim women make these *choices*, Muslimah

---

<sup>27</sup> “Dinatokio Drama” Sid and Dina on YouTube. Nov 3, 2018. Url: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHKzkvcKAZM&t=3s&ab\\_channel=SidandDina](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xHKzkvcKAZM&t=3s&ab_channel=SidandDina)

influencers reinforce the oft-used force vs. choice narrative that many Muslim women have used to combat Islamophobia. Shakira Hussein (2007) posits that the force vs. choice narrative pits the force narrative – i.e., that the hijab is a symbol of a patriarchal force used to oppress women, against the choice narrative – i.e., that the hijab is an exercise of women’s choice, and is a symbol of female empowerment. These narratives have been used extensively by Muslims and the Muslim community in western spaces to critique Islamophobic assumptions of Islam and Muslim community cultures. However, Hussein argues that both of these narratives, while necessary, are inadequate for describing the “complex negotiations that Muslim women employ with regard to dress” (2007:1). The decision to dehab cannot be explained away as being either a choice or as being enforced. Rather, it is a decision that is negotiated and shaped by multiple internal and external factors. Tokio makes the limitations of the force vs. choice narrative abundantly clear in her critique of the Muslim community’s reaction to her dehabbing:

*“[the hijab] It’s supposed to be a choice. But at the same time, when somebody like me comes out and says ‘Ok, I don’t actually want to wear it all the time anymore,’ I literally get vilified for it. So, like, then is it really a choice? Like how is it a choice only when you decide to wear it, but not a choice when you decide not to wear it? Like, if the whole community’s going to gang up on you and make you feel some kind of pressure to the point where you’re actually not wearing it for the right reasons, or you’re not wearing it ‘correctly’,*



*then how is that a choice? If people are going to vilify somebody for taking it off then is it a choice for them?”<sup>28</sup>*

Here, Tokio points out the complex ambiguity of the Muslim community in its approach towards hijab/dejabling as choice. While the hijab is made to seem as a choice for Muslim women, the Muslim community’s gendered social surveillance of Muslim women’s bodies and choices constrains Muslim women’s decision making, particularly in regards to their decision to remove the hijab. It is these constraints with which Muslim women must negotiate. Due to the stigma around it in the Muslim community, Muslim women who are considering dejabling understand that their decision will not only expose them to community scrutiny of their gendered and religious behaviors, but will also be understood by other Muslims as betraying association with the faith, their failure to contend with Islamophobia, and their presumed lack of piety – among other ideas. Furthermore, these constraints, and the negotiation of the decision to dejab are only further complicated in Islamophobic contexts where the larger Muslim community seeks to contradict narratives of Muslim misogyny. Thus, the decision to dejab cannot be conceptualized adequately in terms of discourses of agency, or in terms of the force/choice narrative. Instead, just like the decision to don the hijab, dejabling is a complex negotiation that is embedded in particular social and cultural contexts.

In aiming for transparency, some Muslimah influencers have sought to share their motivations for dejabling with their audiences. For some Muslimahs like Dina Tokio’s sister Toosy, the racialized and gendered discrimination against identifiable Muslim women in Islamophobic western societies was an external motivator for dejabling. In an interview with YouTuber Nadir

---

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Nahdi<sup>29</sup>, Toosy describes how perceived meanings of the hijab resulted in her differential treatment by coworkers:

*“I just couldn't deal with people. People's reactions. I didn't want to be the center of attention Even at a day at work, I would come into work, and everyone [treats me differently], like, because the hijab's always is part of the conversation at work. With people that I'm working with, they'll ask “Oh, what's your hair like? And other kinds of standard typical crap that they come out with. That used to stress me out. So I knew that because [I wore the hijab], it was always going to be a part of the conversation with people I work with. I just didn't want to handle that.”*

For many Muslimahs like Toosy, the burden of the hijab in contexts of Islamophobia can prove dreadfully heavy. Racial meanings ascribed to the hijab serve as a way to shape the relations and interactions of publics with Muslim women. Even when these interactions are not uncomfortable or awkward, the marker of the hijab and its meanings can hinder a Muslimah's chances at developing a successful career (Tariq and Syed 2018; Ali et al. 2015). For many, removing the hijab may prove a useful but difficult decision that ultimately prevents them from being rendered as visibly Muslim, thereby opening not only their employment opportunities, but also their opportunities to blend into western societies as unmarked beings.

For many other Muslims, it is not Islamophobia that is the driving external factor that motivates their dejabing, rather, it is the Muslim community's gendered social surveillance of

---

<sup>29</sup> “Karavanserai Ep 3. Ft. Dina and Toosy Tkio – Would I have Done any different?” Nadir Nahdi on YouTube. May 8, 2020. URL: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPRZ-QFR2HI&t=2s&ab\\_channel=NadirNahdi](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPRZ-QFR2HI&t=2s&ab_channel=NadirNahdi)

Muslim women. Muslim communities often ascribe the gendered burden of piety onto hijabi Muslim women, thereby expecting them to perform high levels of religiosity. Consequently, when hijabi Muslim women fail to meet these standards, onlookers who are sometimes referred to as self-appointed ‘haram police’ within the Muslim community socially surveil these women by scrutinizing their gendered and religious performances. This surveillance is often critical and harsh, which may cause Muslim women to believe that they are, and will continue to be unable to live up to community standards of hijabi women. British influencer Annam Ahmed describes this situation best:

*“Being a Muslim influencer seems to me to be so much tougher than being a Caucasian influencer or any other race or any other religion. Because unfortunately, there's a large group of Muslims that just pass a lot of judgment online, and if you're not doing something that they think you should do, they say you're not doing it right at all. That pressure is very, very difficult to take mentally. You end up questioning yourself a lot; you just think, ‘Yeah they're right. My way of doing things is wrong. [The pressure and judgement] its part of the reason why I stopped wearing it.”<sup>30</sup>*

The expectation of Muslimahs to not only represent the faith accurately and authentically (even though to do so is theologically, practically, and socially impossible), but to also perform publicly as perfect Muslims requires much negotiation. The external judgement might lead to internal feelings of inadequacy, where, as visibly identifiable Muslims, hijabi Muslimah influencers might

---

<sup>30</sup> “You stopped wearing hijab because of pressure. Answering your assumptions about me.” Annam Ahmed on YouTube. March 24, 2019. URL: [You stopped wearing hijab because of pressure. | Answering your assumptions about me - YouTube](#)

view themselves as having a responsibility towards their audiences and Muslim youth in particular. These feelings of inadequacy may be reconciled with the removal of the hijab as an identifier of one's Muslimness, and therefore distance oneself from gendered expectations of being a visible representative of the faith. This negotiation is not lost on the followers of Muslimah influencers. One survey respondent noted the external pressures facing Muslimah influencers, and remarked: *"Sometimes I wonder whether the pressure came from outside (anti-Muslim prejudice) or inside (Muslims' attitudes of 'might as well not do it at all if you're not going to XYZ'). Based on the comment sections, I often think the latter is more likely."*

For Muslimah influencers and other Muslim women who dejab or consider dejabing, their decision to dejab is ultimately a lengthy process of negotiation. In this negotiation, these women account for various external and internal factors and constraints, which are shaped primarily by the contexts in which these women reside. Thus, due to the nature of this decision-making process and the context in which it occurs, the decision to dejab cannot possibly be grounded in prevailing force/choice narratives, nor can it be explained by simplified discourses of agency. Therefore, while they make the 'choice' to dejab, to what degree are they 'choosing' if they are constantly facing hostile critics drawing on two different discourses?

## **CONCLUSION: THE DOUBLE BIND**

After a weekend of receiving a surge of hateful comments on her Instagram photos, the newly-dejabed Dina Tokio posted a controversial Instagram story in which she accused the hijabi Muslim community of being a toxic cult: *"This 'hijabi' community is starting to become a very toxic cult...the obsession & entitlement is appalling...I'm out"* (The National 2018). Following this post, another conversation began to brew on her social media pages, where users began to critique her for calling out her critics. The main critique lobbied against Tokio was that by

responding to and critiquing the backlash on her social media, she was inevitably fueling hateful attitudes towards the Muslim community in an already Islamophobic climate (Haris 2018). The same critique has been lobbied against other dejabi Muslimah influencers who have criticized the hate that they have received on their platforms, including Aaliyah JM, Ascia Akf, and Amena Khan. These Muslimah influencers and every dejabi influencer after them, have had to delicately navigate the criticisms and controversies surrounding their decisions to dejab. The culminating conversations and navigation of these conversations by dejabi Muslimah influencers is indicative of a phenomenon often experienced by women in minority communities: the double bind.

According to Adelman et al (2003), the double bind of ‘gendered racism’ and ‘racialized sexism’ is a phenomenon experienced by women of minority communities. Due to their marginalized positions in both the majority and minority communities in which they belong, women who speak out about “the oppressive practices in their own community, such as gendered violence, can result in being treated like a traitor by their own community, while also reinforcing negative stereotypes of the majority society of oppressive, backward cultures” (Ho 2007:296). As a result of simultaneously facing racism and sexism from the majority society, and sexism and male domination in their own minority communities, women from minority communities are constrained in their critiques of their minority community, for fears of “reinforcing the dominant group’s stereotypes, possibly leading to further racism and discrimination toward the minority group” (Adelman et al. 2003:117). For Muslimah influencers who reside in contexts of Islamophobia and whose actions and decisions are constrained by both racialized sexism and sexualized racism, critiquing Muslim community expectations of Muslim women runs the dangerous risk of the double bind. In this double bind, they risk reinforcing Islamophobia and liberal western and orientalist feminist assumptions of Muslim oppression, Islamic misogyny, and

gendered surveillance. On the one hand, for the Muslim communities in western societies dominated by Islamophobic discourses, Muslimah influencers' public critiques pose a threat to their efforts to resist and subvert narratives of Muslim misogyny. But on the other, these critiques are strategic efforts of Muslim women that aim to force Muslim communities to have important and necessary discussions regarding their gendered expectations of Muslim women, at a time when being a Muslim woman is undeniably challenging. These critiques, according to dejab Muslimah influencers like Tokio, are a call for the Muslim community to not only reevaluate its imposition of gendered responsibility on Muslim women, but to also reevaluate its focus on Muslim women's bodies and chosen public expressions of faith. Nevertheless, what is clear throughout the dejab controversies that have manifested on social media spaces, is that Muslim women who reside in western societies and who decide to dejab must simultaneously negotiate multiple expectations as a result of the many gazes to which they are subject. Escaping the double bind requires significant maneuvering, which is only further constrained by the gendered and racialized expectations held of Muslim women by their western Islamophobic and western Muslim communities.

In this chapter, I have contextualized online conversations surrounding dejab Muslimah influencers and their public acts to dejab within contexts and discourses of Islamophobia and liberal western and orientalist feminisms in order to show that there are three specific gendered and racialized expectations with which Muslim women must contend and navigate: the Good Muslimah, the Strong Muslimah and the Doubly Burdened Muslimah. The Good Muslimah expectation is grounded in the perception that only hijabi women are practicing Muslims. As public representatives, hijabi Muslim women are expected to behave as Good Muslims who closely observe their religious practice, publicly demonstrate their commitment to the faith, and seek to identify with the Muslim community via the hijab. Thus, those who do not wear the hijab, are thus

not regarded as ‘representatives’ of the faith or Muslim community, and also not regarded as ‘authentic Muslims.’ As for the second expectation, hijabi Muslim women in particular are viewed as ‘Strong Muslimahs’ in that their visibility serves as a statement of resistance to Islamophobia and pressures of secularism. As Strong Muslimahs, Muslim women are often the source of pride for Muslim communities who are not only contending with Islamophobia collectively, but are looking to find ways to encourage Muslim youth to increase their religious affiliation and practice in the face of secularization. Muslim women are thus expected by their Muslim communities to guide young Muslims on how to navigate the difficult terrain of being a visible and practicing Muslim in spite of Islamophobia, and in spite of pressures of secularization. Finally, the third expectation, which is the Doubly Burdened Muslimah, is grounded in the assumption that Muslim women who wear the hijab or take off the hijab do so not out of their own choice, but because they are forced to do so by others. Simultaneously, this same expectation also expects Muslim women to contradict the denial of agency, and to present their choices as their choices, even though their choices may be influenced by external factors, such as the Muslim community’s gendered social surveillance of Muslim womanhood. These three expectations are evident in the analysis of the conversations and controversies surrounding the dejabing of several Muslimah influencers in recent years.

My study has shown that as a result of being politicized bodies in contexts of Islamophobia, Muslim women are clearly not afforded the flexibility to experiment with their public expressions of faith. I have sought to emphasize the importance of understanding and accounting for how Muslim women negotiate these expectations, as this provides insight into the kinds of constraints that determine Muslim women’s lived experiences and decisions. As Muslim women in Islamophobic contexts, their lived experiences and decisions are inevitably constrained by the

external forces of Islamophobia which determine how western non-Muslim and Muslim communities not only perceive Muslim women, but also what they expect of Muslim women. The constraints of these forces determine how Muslim women make their decisions, and ultimately illustrate how fundamentally different Muslim women's lived experiences are to the lived experiences of Muslim men in these same societies.

There is a dire need for future research in this area, particularly in regards to the experiences of non-hijabi and dejjabie women in these contexts. Future research might also focus on the motivations for dejabing and the factors that are involved in the process of navigating this decision. Furthermore, we know little of the gendered expectations of Muslim men in times of Islamophobia; examining the lived experiences and Muslim community expectations of Muslim men may provide insight into the gendered and racialized burdens and responsibilities with which Muslim men must contend. Lastly, this study leaves the reader to ponder about the possibilities of contemporary conversations around dejabing and gendered expectations currently occurring in online spaces. These conversations offer Muslim women and men the opportunity to discuss of gendered expectations of Muslim women, and the heavy toll these expectations have on Muslim women who decide to hijab or dejab. The trajectory of these conversations may prove a worthy endeavor for future research, particularly in regards to the reevaluations and changing expectations of hijabi, dejabi, and non-hijabi Muslim women.



**CHAPTER THREE: When Modesty Meets Aesthetic Labor: Performances of Muslimah  
Modesty as Antithetical to Aesthetic Labor in the Fashion and Social Media Influencer  
Industries**

**ABSTRACT**

This chapter examines the complex relationship that Islamic principles of modesty share with aesthetic labor in the intersections of the social media influencer and fashion industries in order to argue that modesty remains a key tenet of conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood. In unpacking this relationship, I show how modesty, as it is understood by Muslim male interpreters of Islamic texts, and by cultural authorities in secular circles of fashion, is deemed to be antithetical to aesthetic labor within the influencer and fashion industries. By placing Muslimah social media influencers at the center of this conflict, I show how Muslimah influencers involved in these industries face challenges that are unique to Muslim women in racialized contexts of western spaces. On the one hand, Muslim women are expected to modify their performances of modesty to align with secular expectations of fashion and aesthetic labor, but on the other, they are expected to observe modesty according to how Muslim male scholars interpret Islamic principles of modesty. I argue that this conflict illustrates that modesty – as a Muslim virtue, is fundamental to contemporary conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood, and plays a key role in shaping the kinds of racialized and gendered expectations that are held of Muslim women by western Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

**INTRODUCTION**

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of November 2020, Halima Aden – a Black American Muslimah model, announced in a series of posts on her Instagram story that she was officially stepping back from the world of modeling. This announcement came as a shock to many, given that Aden has been a

trailblazer in the fashion industry, emerging as the first Black Muslim hijabi model to be featured on the cover of *Vogue* magazine, to model in a burkini in *Sports Illustrated*, and to walk the runway in a hijab for Kanye West's brand Yeezy. In her series of posts, Aden explained that her decision to step back from the industry was because, except for a few Muslim-conscious brands and designers, the fashion industry had forced her to compromise her religious beliefs and the way in which she wore her hijab:

“As I've said many times, being a minority inside of a minority inside of a minority is never easy. Being a 'Hijabi' is truly a journey with lots of highs & lows. With that said, my hooyo macaan (mother) has been pleading with me for years to open my eyes. Thanks to Covid & the break away from the [fashion] industry I have finally realized where I went wrong in my personal hijab journey.” (Figure 1)

Sharing pictures from numerous shoots from her modeling career, described how most shoots required that she change her hijab from its traditional form, to one that showed her neck and accentuated her chest and silhouette. She stated that over time, she had less and less control over how her hijab was styled, with some shoots opting to have her wear the turban hijab as an alternative to her traditional hijab, or using jeans or jewelry to cover her hair. These shoots, she argued, compromised how *she* wanted to wear the hijab, practice her faith, and represent Muslim women. Aden implied that by attempting to change, cover up, or detract the viewer's focus from her hijab in its traditional form, the fashion industry was not only taking attention away from her hijab and her identity as a Muslim woman, but was purposefully hiding some of the most important aspects of her faith.



In one of the photos Aden displayed on her story, she is depicted to be leaning against what seems to be a gray carpet. In its accompanying caption, Aden writes “*Not every shoot is for a HIJABI. Fully clothed yes, but what is even happening? Just no.*” (Figure 2). This photo and its caption highlight the point of Aden’s story – that for Aden, the hijab and *being* a hijabi Muslimah entail more than the covering of her hair or body; these entail a practice and performance of modest embodiment that are aligned with her conceptions of modesty. In making this abundantly clear, Aden is emphasizing the close relationship that the hijab shares with her modesty, and the relationship that her modesty shares with the performance and conception of Muslim womanhood.

Aden continued to criticize the fashion industry and its demand for “aesthetic labor”<sup>31</sup> (Mears 2014) for forcing her to compromise her principles of modesty, and adding to her feelings of alienation from her faith. Consequently, Aden stated that she had no choice but to prioritize her Deen (i.e., faith and religious practice) by leaving the industry altogether. Concluding this series of posts, Aden claimed that if she was going to return to the fashion industry and do justice as a proudly practicing, modest hijabi Muslimah model, then she was going to engage in aesthetic labor on her own terms, in ways that aligned with her principles of modesty and the hijab, and work with brands and agencies that were willing to cater to her needs and preferences as a hijabi Black Muslimah. Notably, Aden’s decision and critiques of the industry succinctly illustrate the complex intersection and relationship that modesty, the hijab, and Muslim womanhood share, especially as these are involved in the modeling career of a renowned Black Muslimah in the fashion industry.

Muslim women who reside in western spaces are simultaneously subject to multiple and sometimes contradictory heteronormative gendered, religious and racialized norms and expectations that emerge from the social contexts in which they reside and form their subjectivities. For example, as this paper will demonstrate, religious and cultural expectations of modesty and heteronormative western secular beauty expectations may send conflicting and complex messages to Muslim women engaged in the aesthetic labor. These messages, and Muslim women’s negotiation with these messages may create emotional and mental stress and confusion which may ultimately be harmful to these women’s well-being. As was the case with Halima Aden, her decision to step back from the industry proved to be a negotiating tactic with the pressures of these

---

<sup>31</sup> According to Ashley Mears (2014), aesthetic labor “encompasses work in which individuals are compensated, indirectly or directly, for their own body’s looks and affect” (1332).

conflicting messages, and ultimately relieved her of the mental and emotional stress that she was undergoing throughout her modeling career (BBC 2021).

### **Reactions to the Halima Aden Moment**

News of Halima Aden’s decision set the social media platforms of Instagram and Twitter aflame, generating conversations among social media influencers<sup>32</sup>, celebrities, and social media users who either commended her for stepping back from the fashion industry, or critiqued her for implying that modeling, or wearing the hijab in alternate ways (i.e., the turban) compromised core Islamic principles of modesty. Due to the fashion industry’s substantial intersections with influencer marketing and the social media influencer industry, a large number of Muslimah influencers are active participants in the fashion industry. Many Muslimah influencers agreed with Aden’s comments on the reality of the pressures facing Muslim women within these industries. Conversations surrounding Aden’s Instagram story were particularly prevalent among the social media pages of popular Muslimah social media influencers like Amena Khan, Yasmeena Sabry, and Nabiilabee who shared Aden’s posts on their own Instagram stories, thus generating conversations on their own social media pages. For example, in support of Aden’s decision, Yasmeena Sabry, an American Muslimah model and influencer posted a photo of herself on her Instagram with the accompanying caption:

“thanks to the amazing @halima we’ve finally started a healthy convo about hijab and its relationship to the fashion industry. I got so many DMs last night from hijabis who’ve been dying to get this

---

<sup>32</sup> Social media influencers are tastemakers who use social media platforms to exercise their credibility and power as knowledgeable and trendy authorities in order to influence the purchase and lifestyle decisions of an audience (Freberg et al. 2011).

convo started. Can we finally be real with each other? HIJAB IS NOT EASY. It's never been easy. We ALL have our highs and lows. Why not go through this together? Why not support each other? Be KIND to each other?"

(Figure 3)

As Sabry states, the relationship of the hijab and modesty in the fashion industry is rather complex. Not only must hijabi Muslim women contend with the reality that their religious preferences may not be met in industries where one's success is dependent



Figure 3

on the extent to which they are willing to mold themselves to the demands of aesthetic labor, but the difficulties of these realities are only further exacerbated by the criticisms and gendered scrutiny that Muslim women face in these industries. Such criticisms are made by other Muslims who deem the social media influencer industry, the fashion industry and their demand for aesthetic labor as hypersexualized and thus, an immodest undertaking for practicing or hijabi Muslimahs. Arguably, according to some Muslimah influencers, Aden's comments paradoxically reified these very criticisms.

For example, in an Instagram Live session on November 26, 2020, Canadian Muslimah comedian and influencer Salma Hindy critiqued Aden's statements for dangerously reproducing the idea that modeling, aesthetic labor, and wearing the hijab in alternative ways are immodest. In this Instagram Live, Hindy made two important arguments. First, she argued that there are significant problems with Aden equating the hijab with modesty; by making this equation, Hindy argued that Aden was implying that non-hijabis, or hijabis who wear non-traditional<sup>33</sup> forms of the hijab are somehow immodest and voluntarily compromising their religious principles. Second, she argued that the practice of aesthetic labor in the influencer and fashion industries are not necessarily immodest if they happen to align with a Muslim woman's own understandings of modesty. As she was making these arguments in real time, Hindy began to receive a number of responses from her viewers who demanded that Hindy apologize for criticizing Aden, and instead support her as a fellow hijabi Muslimah, given that Muslim women continue to be policed on their hijab, behaviors, and bodies by non-Muslim and Muslim communities (Ahmed 1992; Abu-Lughod 2013). While Hindy stated that she did in fact support Aden for her decision, she did not retract her criticisms of Aden's statements, arguing instead that one's participation in the influencer or fashion industries did not necessarily mean that one was pursuing the temptations of the Dunya (i.e., worldly success) over the Deen.

The reactions to Aden's statements and the conversations surrounding Halima Aden's decision underscore the complexities evident in the equation of the hijab with modesty for Muslim women, and the relationship between aesthetic labor and modesty in both Muslim and non-Muslim circles. Conversations and understandings of modesty inform us not only of the nature of qualities

---

<sup>33</sup> Traditional forms of the hijab include wearing a scarf that covers the head, is pinned under the chin, and has additional cloth that covers one's chest.

attributed to Muslim womanhood, but also inform us of how Muslim womanhood is performed in these circles. Modesty as it functions and is understood within these spaces, and especially in the space of secular fashion, cannot be understood as separate from the racialized and Islamophobic contexts in which these spaces are situated. Tarlo and Moors (2013) suggest that although there have been differences in the ways in which nation-states pre- and post-9/11 have sought to regulate Muslim women's dress, there are two underlying arguments that are always present in these discourses. First, Muslim women's covered dress "has been considered both a sign or instrument women's oppression and part of the spread of undesirable forms of Islam" (18), and thus poses a visceral threat to secular western nations. Second, advocates for regulating Muslim women's dress have justified their actions by arguing that those who wear Islamic modes of dress like the hijab or the niqab, are considered to be more strongly connected to 'undesirable' forms or aspects of Islam. These modes of dress are perceived to be "signs of a political fundamentalist, orthodox or segregating form of Islam, constructed in opposition to a positively valued liberal secular or moderate Islam" (Tarlo and Moors 2013: 19). We can see both of these arguments evident in France where visibly demonstrating one's religious affiliation through religious symbols is considered to be a sign of one's propensity towards communalism and cultural segregation. Religious symbols in France in particular, are viewed as threatening to the republic – however, notably, these religious symbols tend to only be perceived as a threat when they are Islamic in nature (Bowen 2007). The assumption that Islam promotes segregation, is anti-assimilationist or anti-republic constructs Islam as irreconcilable with European, North American, western, and secular notions of freedom, democracy, gender equality, and modernity. Due to the neo-liberal nature of global markets, nation-states' structural policing of Muslim women's dress and their Islamophobic assumptions, discourses, and notions of Islam ultimately impact how brands, fashion



and lifestyle companies, and the global fashion industry conceptualize modesty role in fashion. These discourses thus determine how willing these industries are in terms of incorporating and catering to the needs of Muslim women and their aesthetic labor.

When situated within this context, the Halima Aden moment brings up a few critical questions that have emerged in the conversations surrounding Muslimah modesty and aesthetic labor: Who is modest? How is modesty defined? Who gets to define it? More importantly, how does modesty intersect with aesthetic labor in the influencer and fashion industries, especially for Muslim women who sell images of ‘modesty’ via their aesthetic labor? This chapter unpacks the complex relationship that Islamic principles of modesty share with aesthetic labor in order to examine the attribution of modesty to conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood within broader contexts of Islamophobia.

## **FASHIONABLE MODESTY AND MUSLIMAH INFLUENCERS**

The proliferation of modesty in fashion is not a relatively new phenomenon (Tarlo and Moors 2013; Lewis 2015). ‘Modesty’ is understood in a myriad of ways due to being culturally and context dependent, but can be generally defined as “propriety in dress, speech or conduct” according to Merriam-Webster. Although modesty in fashion has existed in many forms throughout history (Lewis 2015), it has only recently been popularized in secular mainstream fashion (emerging as ‘modest fashion’), due to the pervasiveness of information communication technologies, and more specifically, social media networks. In particular, the developments of electronic commerce in the past two decades have facilitated the “development of specialist brands manufacturing and selling modest fashion” (Lewis 2013:2), which have been only been encouraged by the “enormous market potential of Islamic customers” (Esposito 2020: 117). These ‘Islamic customers’ are known as “Generation M” (Janmohamed 2016), a group of Muslim

millennials who are not only avid consumers but are also energetic entrepreneurs who use digital technologies like social media to pursue a lifestyle that blends faith and modernity (Gauthier and Martikainen 2020). In the pursuit of these lifestyles, many Muslim millennials have taken to social media platforms for inspiration on how to live and perform fashionable lifestyles. Consequently, they find inspiration in the form of Muslimah social media influencers, who are regarded as trendy authorities on issues related to lifestyle, fashion, and faith. The popularity of Muslimah influencers on social media platforms has resulted in them having significantly large followings – often numbering in the hundred thousands or millions. Consequently, these millennial Muslims have pronounced purchasing power and commercial influence, making them serious contenders and customers in global markets like the fashion industry (Janmohamed 2016).

The cultural and economic power of Muslimah influencers has not gone unnoticed by fashion brands and companies who are constantly searching for new marketing opportunities and ways to reach the untapped market potential of Generation M. Muslimah influencers continue to be sought after by these brands, and participate in marketing opportunities not only as collaborators and models, but also as producers and designers. Esposito (2020) notes that “many brands are proposing modest fashion collections, both high-end as D&G, Max Mara or DKNY, and big retailers like H&M or Uniqlo” often utilizing the cultural and social power and influence of Muslimah influencers to suggest ways in which they might “combine modesty with style” to sell products to modest-fashion-forward consumers (117).

Modesty has a special place in many Muslimah influencers’ digital journeys in influencer marketing, with a number of influencers first beginning their digital journeys in search of modest fashion, by either sewing their own modest clothes or by pairing apparel creatively to achieve a modest look. Some Muslimah influencers like Dina Tokio and Amena Khan took advantage of

customer and brand interests, by beginning business ventures that specialize in modest fashion apparel. For example, Dina Tokio opened several online webstores since beginning her social media platform in 2011 (e.g. Doosy, Days of Doll, Dina Tokio) and Amena Khan currently still has her original webstore ‘Pearl-Daisy’ running online. With the monetary interests of fashion and lifestyle brands now backing these influencers, the lucrative potentials and virality of Muslimah social media influencers in the fashion and modest fashion industry further propelled and popularized modesty in the fashion mainstream. Much to the credit of Muslimah influencers and Generation M, the growth of the modest fashion industry has expanded significantly in the past decade, generating \$254 billion in 2016 and is currently “expected to be worth \$373 billion by 2022” (Caron and Salam 2018). On the basis of its current trajectory then, it is imperative that we gain a better understanding of the growing demand for modest clothing and sartorial strategies founded on values of modesty, and the experience of Muslim women in the industry itself.

Of course, it goes without saying that the influencer and fashion industries have worked in tandem to make the modest fashion industry so successful. Influencer marketing on social media is currently a multi-billion-dollar industry (Mediakix 2018) dominated largely by women, who produce “vast quantities of digital content that integrates promotions of products and services” (Drenten et al 2020: 42). The monetization of this digital content by ad revenue and brand promotion of products and services is what determines the success of digital content. However, the monetizable success of influencers hinges primarily upon how well influencers and marketers are able to take advantage of the ‘attention economy’. In the attention economy, “attention is both a scarce and valuable resource that functions as a form of capital, which, once measured, can be marketized and financed” (Drenten et al 2020: 42). For both influencers and brands, the quantification of attention depends significantly on the kinds of digital content that an influencer

creates, and on how they present this content to their large followings. According to Drenten et al (2020), for influencers, their bodies and the ways in which they present their selves via selfies or photos often determine the levels of successful monetization of the attention economy. For women in particular, the conformity to “heteronormative prescriptions of attractiveness and femininity is fundamental in gaining attention” (42). Using makeup, posing in suggestive ways to accentuate the body, and engaging in aesthetic labor are crucial ways in which an influencer can maximize the number of likes and the levels of audience engagement with their posts. These likes and engagement in turn, are a quantification of the attention economy and ultimately determine the monetizing potential of an influencer’s post, and the success of the influencer in the influencer marketing industry itself.

For Muslim women, monetizing the attention economy requires that they not only engage in aesthetic labor to monetize their bodies, but also engage with the *gaze* by using their bodies as a subject of focus. As the next section demonstrates, it is the inherent emphasis of the elements of attention in the fashion and influencer industries that creates a complex situation whereby modesty and aesthetic labor are rendered incompatible.

## **MODESTY AS ANTITHETICAL TO AESTHETIC LABOR**

Despite gaining traction in the modest fashion industry in recent years, modesty has occupied an uncomfortable place in the world of fashion. Understood to be inherent to most notions of modesty is the “desire to *avoid attracting attention*” (Esposito 2020: 118). Not only does modesty run counter to underlying principles of the attention economy, but it also runs counter to one of the basic principles of fashion, which is the desire to attract attention and engage the gaze through the emphasis of the body, corporeal aesthetics, and visual culture – especially as these are mobilized through aesthetic labor. In the following subsection, I describe Ashley Mears’ concept

of aesthetic labor and situate Muslimah influencers' aesthetic labor at the center of my discussion. Following this subsection, I illustrate how aesthetic labor is deemed to be antithetical to modesty in Muslim and non-Muslim circles.

### **Aesthetic Labor**

Due to the inherently visual nature of the more popular social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, the role of aesthetic labor is key to monetizing the attention economy on these platforms. According to Ashley Mears (2014), aesthetic labor “encompasses work in which individuals are compensated, indirectly or directly, for their own body’s looks and affect” (1332). For those who engage in aesthetic labor, commercial benefit is best generated through foregrounding embodiment, which is done through “the screening, managing and controlling” of individuals’ physical appearances, by the industries in which individuals work (1330). In the fashion world, models for example, engage in aesthetic labor through “the on-going production of the body and the self, necessitating that they are ‘always on’ and unable to walk away from their product – which is their entire embodied self” (1336). The production of the body and the self is undertaken through exercise, weight maintenance, skin care, makeup and other forms of bodily work to ensure that models and their bodies ‘look right’ for the industry’s demands. For Muslimah influencers, aesthetic labor takes shape in the form of managing the presentation of self via makeup, fashion, lifestyle, and conformity to heteronormative gendered and religious expectations of Muslimah femininity and womanhood.

Notably, however, aesthetic labor is more complicated than the simple screening and managing of individuals’ outward appearances – it is also about performativity. Engaging in aesthetic labor requires that one appeal to “the senses of customers... [by being] perceived to be ‘good looking’ or simply having the ‘right look’” (Warhurst and Nickson 2009: 389). In the case

of Muslimah influencers, having the ‘right look’ depends on how well they align the presentation of their embodied selves with notions of modesty, since as Muslim women within these markets, they are selling modesty, religious and ethnic diversity, and the Muslimah identity to their audiences – a large portion of whom are also Muslim. Simultaneously, being perceived to be ‘good looking’ within these industries depends on the success to which a Muslimah influencer and her body are made commodifiable. Drenten et al (2020) suggest that “women’s self-presentation on social media is highly sexualized” (44) primarily because sexualized bodies on social media are more commodifiable in the attention economy than those bodies that do not engage in sexualized comportment and dress. Similarly, Mears’s analysis shows that companies regularly commodify sexualized female bodies through “uniforms to highlight sex appeal or by positioning women to attract a male gaze in offices, or by encouraging women to give off the impression of being heterosexually available in the tourism sector” (2014: 1338-1339). By engaging with the “male gaze” (Mulvey 1989), women’s aesthetic labor is sexualized and women are sexually objectified, creating a blurry distinction between aesthetic labor and sexualized labor (Mears 2014: 1339).

While the aesthetic labor of Muslimah influencers may not necessarily be explicitly sexual in nature, their embodied subjectivities may create a problem of sexual objectification which runs counter to notions of Islamic modesty. Mears argues that for women within these industries, the “commonly accepted use of female bodies for their aesthetic value normalizes all women as display objects whether they enter into such an agreement or not” (1339). As hypervisible Muslimah bodies with fashionable subjectivities that engage gazes – male or not, Muslimah influencers with their focus on gendered embodiment and modest performativity are transformed into display objects, rendering themselves subject to “high level of scrutiny of their bodies” (Mears 2014: 1339). In many Muslim circles, it is primarily the sexualization, and drawing of attention to

one's body in aesthetic labor that is deemed problematic and inherently immodest, especially in accordance to Muslim male interpretations of modesty as an Islamic virtue. Consequently, Muslimah influencers engaging in aesthetic labor become tangled in a complex web of expectations, gazes, and gendered and racialized scrutiny by other Muslims and non-Muslims, and are judged on their ability to live up to and perform modesty within the frameworks of Islamic theology, aesthetic labor, sexualized labor, and the attention economy.

### ***Muslim Male and Patriarchal Interpretations of Modesty***

Modesty as a virtue is relevant to not only Islam, but is also part of the Christian and Jewish religious traditions (Lewis 2015). Islamic conceptions of modesty do not differ drastically from Christian and Jewish conceptions, but its prescriptions in religious texts are more detailed than those described in the Bible and Torah (Salam et al 2020). Specifically, in both the Qur'an and the Hadith, the concept of modesty is considered to be an ethical requirement of both Muslim men and women. Understood to be a key attribute of the faith that is practiced by steadfast Muslims, modesty has been translated and interpreted from Verse 31-32 of Chapter 24 of the Qur'an as thus:

“Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their sons, their husbands sons, their brothers or their brother's sons, or their women, or the slaves whom

their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! Turn you all together towards Allah, that you may attain Bliss.” (Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali 2013)

These verses articulate guidelines on how Muslim men and women ought to express modesty and with whom. There are four aspects of Islamic modesty, as typically interpreted by *male* scholars: “lowering the gaze, guarding the private parts, guarding or concealing ‘*awrah*’ [tangible and intangible intimate parts of the body, like one’s privates, voice, and character], and concealing or not revealing adornments<sup>34</sup>” (Salam et al 2020: 175). These aspects are not only prescribed in terms of how to interact with those who are one’s ‘mahram’ (a member of one’s family as related by blood or by other ties of kinship, or with whom an individual does not have to observe guidelines of modesty), but are also applicable in terms of interacting with unrelated people in the public sphere.

According to Salam et al (2020: 175), the implications for Muslim men and women to observe and practice modesty when “partaking in a marketing communications activity like modeling for advertising” are particularly complex, given that modesty, and *awrah* in particular, prescribe concealment of one’s body and character. Modesty’s prescriptions, as understood by male scholars, are deemed antithetical to practices of aesthetic labor in the influencer and fashion industries, given their propensity for engagement with the (male) gaze, the focus on the physical

---

<sup>34</sup> ‘Adornments’ are understood by male scholars as items or practices that may add to one’s beauty, such as jewelry, makeup, hair dye, and perfume.



aspects of one's embodied self, and emphasis on sexualized comportment through provocative or visually engaging poses. Along these interpretations of modesty then, even if a Muslimah is deemed to be fully covered in advertisements or in her social media photos (thereby covering her private parts, and concealing her adornments), her embodied performativity is ultimately in conflict with modesty's demands for guarding awrah.

Moreover, the engagement of the gaze in aesthetic labor is rendered particularly problematic, as it invites others to gaze upon one's embodied self. More specifically, it is the invitation of the male gaze that is rendered critically problematic. In Muslim male interpretations of modesty, Muslim women are permitted to allow visual access of their embodied selves to other women, children, and certain men with whom they are related to by kinship. Although Muslimah influencers can restrict who can view their social media profiles by either making their social media accounts private, or by granting follower access to specific people, they do so at the cost of limiting their entrepreneurial opportunities in the influencer marketing industry. Since influencer marketing relies on the attention economy, making one's social media private or limiting the access of one's followers based on their gender identities will result in limited likes, follows, and audience engagement upon which the attention economy is quantified. Since many Muslimah influencers rely on the entrepreneurial opportunities of their social media platforms to support their lifestyles and careers, limiting visual access to their platforms is not considered a viable option to maintaining or practicing modesty. Similarly, in the fashion industry, images, narratives, and advertisements are disseminated through various mass media forms, which self-evidently cannot be restricted to certain gazes. Thus, Muslimah influencers in both these industries face the inevitable fact that they will be gazed at by non-mahram men, thereby rendering their aesthetic labor as directly in conflict with Muslim male interpretations of modesty.

This nuance is only further complicated by the imposition of responsibility on Muslim women to enable *others* to lower their gaze and thus, observe modesty. By inviting others to gaze upon them, Muslim women are regarded as encouraging others, especially men, to disregard observing the first prescription of modesty, which is “lowering the gaze”. In allowing others to gaze upon them, Muslim women engaging in aesthetic labor are deemed to be violating or corrupting not only their own principles of modesty, but also others’ principles and observations of this virtue. In her examination of the function and regulation of ‘pious’ dress in Tehran, Indonesia and Turkey, Elizabeth Bucar (2015:20) argues that women are assumed to be “particularly vulnerable to moral corruption” because, as mothers (or potential mothers) they are deemed responsible for the moral education of future citizens. Taking this argument a step further, I suggest that that Muslim women’s modesty is regulated by both Muslim men and women, primarily because Muslim women are deemed responsible for the morality of the Muslim community, and especially Muslim men. According to Alshech (2007), classical Muslim jurists interpret the rationale for Islamic modesty as the regulation of physical modesty for the purpose of preserving of sexual morality and social reputation:

“modesty laws were devised not only to segregate women by diminishing their visibility and limiting their approachability but also to shield information pertaining to a woman’s sexuality, beauty, physiology, and any other aspect that, if revealed, would place a woman in the spotlight. The laws provided women and their families with the necessary social distance, allowing better control of sensitive information and reducing the possibility of public humiliation and, possibly, personal discomfort” (2007:289).

In this argument, Alshech posits that these interpretations of modesty perform the social function of simultaneously guarding the physical and symbolic privacy of women, and safeguarding the social reputation of families. Alshech further articulates that “by regulating physical and visual access to women’s bodies and by restricting the flow of sensitive information about them, Islamic law allowed people (primarily the male members of a woman’s family) to protect and control their social image and public reputation” (269). With Muslimah influencers unable to control the ‘flow of sensitive information’ about themselves on social media (unless of course, they privatize their social media), Muslimah influencers inherently contradict Muslim male interpretations of Islamic prescriptions of modesty, while simultaneously failing to preserve the morality of the Muslim community. In this manner, modesty – as it is interpreted by Muslim male scholars<sup>35</sup>, becomes an impossible practice for those influencers engaging in aesthetic labor on social media or in fashion.

While it is important to acknowledge the social function that modesty may play in Muslim communities, it is also vital to note two issues involved in this discussion of modesty. First, Alshech (2007) fails to mention that Islamic modesty laws are based on the interpretations of religious scriptures by Muslim *male* scholars. And second, these patriarchal interpretations specifically advocate for regulating women’s physical modesty, rather than (equally) regulating men’s. The latter point in particular, remains a popular source of contention among Muslimah influencers and other Muslim women, who use an Islamic feminist lens to argue that Quranic scripture on modesty explicitly places the responsibility of observing modesty equally on both men and women, and notably, also calls upon men to observe modesty first (Lodi 2020). However, due to the widespread

---

<sup>35</sup> Such as Mufti Taqi Usmani, Ibn Majah, Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Mohammed Ash-Sharawy, Mohammed Nasr Adeen Al-Albani, and Mufti Ebrahim Desai.

acceptance, dominance, and proliferation of Muslim male scholarly interpretations of Quranic scripture in Muslim communities around the globe (as supported by both Muslim men and women), such Islamic feminist interpretations of Quranic scripture are more often dismissed than taken seriously.

### ***Secular Fashion and Religious Modesty as Incompatible***

Despite modesty's enduring role in the history of secular fashion, it continues to be viewed as antithetical to aesthetic labor because it is perceived to represent old-world values rooted in religion. Contextualizing secular criticisms of Muslimah modesty and aesthetic labor in Islamophobia shows that modesty's incompatibility with aesthetic labor is grounded in the conceptualization of modesty as an inherently oppressive attribute rooted in Islamic tradition. More specifically, Muslim modesty in secular circles tends to be considered synonymous with the hijab, which, as various literatures have shown, has been regarded as an oppressive tool of a patriarchal and misogynistic religion (Abu-Lughod 1992; El-Guindi 1999). By conflating the two, secular approaches to Muslim modesty in fashion illustrate a distinct lack of understanding of how modesty functions and is understood by Muslim women. For example, in one of Aden's criticisms of the secular fashion world, Aden critiques fashion authorities for their limited understandings of how modesty is more than the hijab, and the covering of one's body – it is also about bodily comportment and, to an extent, managing the gaze. Arguably, the secular fashion world's limited understanding of Muslim modesty, and conflation of this attribute with the hijab underlies the discomfort that many Muslim women feel as they undertake their aesthetic labor in this industry. However, this lack of understanding can be explained by contextualizing the hijab and modesty in long-standing discourses of Islamophobia in the post-9/11 fashion world.

There is a plethora of research that examines how the hijab, Muslim women, and their bodies have been situated in Islamophobia discourses of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Ahmed 1992; Cainkar 2009; Abu Lughod 2013; Mahmood 2015; Selod 2018; Cainkar and Selod 2018). Tarlo and Moors (2013) note that historically, “both Muslim empires and the colonial state expressed concerns about how Muslims should appear in public” (17) due to the implication that Muslims and Islam are inherently unassimilable in non-Muslim societies, due to Islam’s supposed propensity for violence, misogyny and gendered oppression. A brief glance at the complicated histories of the hijab in relation to the nation-states of Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Belgium and France in particular, is evidence how Muslim women’s modesty and dress have been surveilled, controlled and managed for the purpose of ‘liberating’ Muslim women from Islam and Muslim men (Ahmed 1992; Mahmood 2005; Abu-Lughod 2013). With the increased global migration of Muslims to non-Muslim majority nations in the 1980s and 1990s, conversations and controversies on Muslim hijabs, face veils, ethnic dresses, and other visible corporeal forms of Islamic association emerged, complicating how Muslims were, and still are positioned in these racialized states (Abu-Lughod 2013). Tarlo and Moors (2013) note that in Western Europe and North America in particular, the growth of neonationalism and the events of 9/11 created a “gendered shift towards assimilationist policies, with Muslims pressured to prove their loyalty to European nation states and their central values, not simply by adhering to the law but also through their everyday behavior and appearances” (17). For Muslimah influencers interested in pursuing opportunities in western secular influencer and fashion industries, these policies place added pressures to regulate one’s corporeal forms by distancing the self from any association with Islam. Many find that this distance can be achieved by changing the ways in which they wear hijab, or by abandoning the hijab altogether (Maruoka-Donnelly 2018). Without the racialized marker of the hijab, and thus, the

ascription of modesty as a religious virtue, Muslim women have a better chance at navigating the Islamophobic spaces of secular fashion while undertaking aesthetic labor.

Secular fashion spaces have also avoided employing visible Muslim women in brand campaigns altogether (Bucar 2017). Due to underlying Islamophobic narratives in the global war on terror, fashion authorities make the choice to exclude Muslim women from the fashion space in order to distance themselves and their brands from any association with Islam or Muslims. Elizabeth Bucar notes that in recent years, several fashion houses have made claims that Islam was “polluting fashion” (2017: 195). Bucar cites Jonathan Newhouse, chairman of the board of Condé Nast (a global media company that publishes *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *New Yorker*) who asserted that “the freedom required for fashion” is incompatible with Islam and Muslim values (195). Similarly, in 2016, Pierre Bergé the co-founder of Yves Saint Laurent accused modest fashion designers of encouraging the oppression of women by incorporating modesty into fashion. In a radio interview, Bergé is reported saying “Designers are there to make women more beautiful, to give them their freedom. Not to collaborate with this dictatorship which imposes this abominable thing by which we hide women and make them live a hidden life” (Bucar 2017: 196). It is the conflation of the hijab with modesty that undergirds these sentiments, which have been echoed continually in the past few decades, despite – and perhaps in *response* to the rise and popularity of modest fashion, and the increased presence of hijabi Muslim women in fashion advertisements and catwalks. However, it is important to note that it is the regulation of Muslim women’s bodies and dress by nation-states and mass media pre- and post-9/11 that underlies and informs these sentiments, and the conflation of modesty with the hijab.

Supporting Islam by allowing Muslim women to engage in aesthetic labor is considered a betrayal of secular and western values of freedom, which can be reconciled by excluding Muslim

women altogether. As such, the global war on terror and nation-states' regulation of Muslim women's embodied practices have critically informed the practices of the secular fashion industry, and limited the kinds of fashion-centered opportunities available to Muslim women in western spaces.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

As the number of Muslimah influencers engaging in the fashion and influencer industries continues to grow, they continue to face the challenge of navigating a landscape where secular authorities in the fashion world lack an understanding of the meanings of modesty for Muslim women. Consequently, these authorities are unable to adequately meet the needs of Muslim women planning to undertake aesthetic labor and take advantage of fashion and social media related opportunities (Tarlo and Moors 2013). Simultaneously, the questioning of their faith and modesty (and the lack thereof) by fellow Muslims illustrates the potentially-complicated relationship that modesty shares with aesthetic labor in Muslim circles. These challenges shape the kinds of racialized and gendered expectations held of Muslim women. On the one hand, Muslim women are expected to modify their performances of modesty, or abandon them altogether in order to gain employment in the fashion and influencer industries; but on the other, Muslimah influencers are expected to observe modesty in accordance with patriarchal interpretations of Islamic scripture. Failure to do either results in being forced to abandon one's hypervisibility on social media and one's aesthetic labor altogether, or being exposed to the policing of other Muslims, which may harm Muslim women's reputations within their communities, and poses a risk to their mental, emotional and physical health.

The pressures of these challenges critically illustrate that modesty – as a Muslim virtue, is deemed fundamental to the Muslimah body, and thus, fundamental to contemporary conceptions,

performances, and expectations of Muslim womanhood. Treated as an attribute of the Muslim woman, modesty not only shapes the Muslimah lived experience, but also hinders or facilitates her social, cultural and economic opportunities by denying or enabling her aesthetic labor. Due to the nature of Islamophobic discourses in current contexts of a post-9/11 era, and due to the proliferation of patriarchal interpretations of Islamic scripture in Muslim communities, modesty is pitted against the pursuit of any kind of aesthetic labor in the fashion and influencer industries, thereby creating what may seem to be unsurmountable challenges in these industries, with which Muslim women must then contend.

According to commodity scholar Balbir Singh (2017), the hijab and Muslim women in particular, have been fundamental to the rise and lucrative potentials of the global fashion industry, especially as it currently intersects with influencer marketing. Given that Muslim women play an important role in these industries, understanding how modesty functions, is understood, and can be catered to, should be of significant interest to modest fashion brands and companies seeking to take advantage of the purchasing power of Generation M. These industries might also consider reevaluating how they might cater to the needs of Muslim women in order to embody efforts of diversity and inclusion in brand campaigns that they seemingly advocate. Furthermore, if Muslim women are to succeed in these industries without – or in spite of the gendered scrutiny of Muslim communities, then we must also examine the ways in which these women reconcile their modesty with their aesthetic labor, while simultaneously negotiating with the policing of their modesty and aesthetic labor. Future research might consider examining the varying ways in which modesty is conceptualized by Muslim women, and the importance that modesty plays in shaping their lived experiences. Such research may prove invaluable in offering insight into how the influencer and fashion industries might best cater to Muslim women and ensure that they have the resources they



need in order to undertake aesthetic labor in ways that do not conflict with their understandings and practices of modesty.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: “You think that’s modest?”: Policing Muslimah Modesty and Aesthetic Labor in the Digitally Mediated Modest Fashion Industry**

### **ABSTRACT**

In this chapter, I examine how Muslimah social media influencers are policed for, and negotiate with the policing of their modesty and aesthetic labor in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry. My findings show that influencers are policed for their hypervisibility on social media platforms, and for their failure to observe Muslim male interpretations of Islamic modesty. Consequently, in response to their policing, Muslimah influencers apply Islamic feminist interpretations of Quranic principles of modesty to critique their policing while also reconciling the perceived incompatibility of modesty with their aesthetic labor. Using these findings, I make two arguments in this chapter. First, I argue that in using Islamic feminist interpretations, Muslimah influencers operate as pious critical agents, who redefine modesty through an Islamic feminist lens for the purpose of forcing the Muslim community to reevaluate its patriarchal conceptions of modesty, and expectation of modesty as the sole responsibility of Muslim *women*. Second, I argue that by examining the policing of Muslimah influencers, and their negotiation of policing, we glean a better understanding of the nature of racialized and gendered expectations held of Muslim women, and the ways in which Muslim women are working to (re)define notions of Muslim womanhood.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the past decade, the proliferation of modest fashion on social media has illustrated the complexities of religion and modesty as these intersect with fashion and digital media (Bucar 2017). Typically considered to be in critical contradiction to one another, modesty and fashion blend together into modest fashion to become a functional sartorial practice that appeals to both

religious and areligious folk alike (Lewis 2013; Hjelm 2015). With the prevalence of social media and influencer marketing in particular, the modest fashion industry has flourished online and offline, creating abundant opportunities for Muslim women to become involved as avid consumers, producers, and curators of modest fashion (Lewis 2015). Muslimah social media influencers in particular, have taken to the world of modest fashion, now emerging as authorities on modest fashion who are using social media to curate and advertise modest fashion in ways that incorporate certain Islamic understandings of modesty (Baulch and Pramiyanti 2018).

Modest fashion has provided Muslim women with ways to outwardly express their devotion to their religion, their spiritual commitments and their dedication to piety (Lewis 2013; Bucar 2017). Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors find that for Turkish and Indonesian Muslim women, “covering is both the means to produce a pious self and an expression of that piety” (Tarlo and Moors 2013: 6). Similarly, Gökarıksel and Secor (2012) find that the fashionable sartorial practices of Muslim women engage and mediate elements of the self, which include “the body, comportment and desire (nefis)<sup>36</sup>” (857). Thus, despite being situated in the realm of secular fashion, modest fashion acts as a regulation of Islamic moral conduct, working to control how one’s body was interpreted by others, revitalizing one’s commitment to inner and outer piety, while also harmonizing dress and bodily conduct (Mahmood 2005). As icons of the digitally mediated modest fashion industry, Muslimah social media influencers come to embody the piety and modesty that they exhibit in their sartorial practices, by engaging in aesthetic labor and serving as key authorities who define, articulate and perform a kind of modest Muslim womanhood. Their hypervisible and public ‘modest’ aesthetic labor on social media has only propelled Muslimah

---

<sup>36</sup> Also referred to as ‘nafs’.

influencers into the public eye, subjecting them to the various gazes and policing of local, national, and global Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

While the encounter between faith, modesty, fashion and social media has created significant opportunities for Muslimah influencers and other women who look towards social media for inspiration on modest fashion, it has also raised certain challenges. Conversations around modesty, its role in fashion, and Muslim women's involvement in the modest fashion industry have pervaded online and offline spaces, creating important discourse among Muslims and non-Muslims regarding the role of everyday religion in the fashion sphere (Bucar 2017). In secular and racialized societies, attempts to reconcile Islamic faith and fashion are assumed to be efforts to incorporate religious ideologies, doctrine or patriarchal norms in an individualistic, material, and secular practice of embodiment (Tarlo and Moors 2013). On the other hand, in Muslim circles, there is a perceived "frivolity or haram<sup>37</sup> quality of fashion" that places the practice of fashion as incompatible with religious practice and modesty (Lewis 2015:246). For Muslim women, their interest in fashion is viewed by older generations as being a secular activity that gets in the way of one's piety and modesty (Williams and Kamaludeen 2017), and thus ought not to be practiced or pursued at all. With more Muslim women engaging in modest fashion there are rising concerns among Muslim communities regarding how modesty is being performed through aesthetic labor, how it is being represented, and how it is being interpreted by Muslim women. According to Ashley Mears (2014) aesthetic labor "encompasses work in which individuals are compensated, indirectly or directly, for their own body's looks and affect" (1332). For Muslimah influencers, aesthetic labor takes shape in the form of managing the presentation of self via makeup, fashion, lifestyle, and conformity to heteronormative gendered and religious expectations of Muslimah

---

<sup>37</sup> Haram refers to 'forbidden'

femininity and womanhood. While the aesthetic labor of Muslimah influencers may not necessarily be explicitly sexual in nature, their embodied subjectivities may create a problem of sexual objectification which runs counter to mainstream notions of Islamic modesty. Such alternate perspectives to modest fashion and Muslim women's involvement in modest fashion have not only pitted modesty against fashion and aesthetic labor, but have also made Muslim women vulnerable to Muslim community critiques and the policing of their (im)modesty and aesthetic labor in modest fashion. Such policing is not only adding to the racialized and gendered pressures that Muslim women face at a time of rampant Islamophobia, but is also shaping Muslim women's behaviors and performances of Muslim womanhood within racialized contexts.

In this chapter, I examine how Muslimah social media influencers are policed for their modesty and aesthetic labor as participants of the digitally mediated industry of modest fashion. In addition to examining such policing, I also investigate how they negotiate with their policing by using Islamic feminist interpretations of modesty in Quranic texts. My findings show that influencers are policed for their hypervisibility on social media platforms, and for their failure to observe Muslim male interpretations of Islamic modesty. My findings also show that in response to their policing, Muslimah influencers are applying Islamic feminist interpretations of Quranic principles of modesty to critique such policing, while also reconciling the perceived incompatibility of modesty with their aesthetic labor. I make two critical arguments on the basis of these findings. First, I argue that in using Islamic feminist interpretations, Muslimah influencers operate as pious critical agents, who redefine modesty through an Islamic feminist lens for the purpose of forcing the Muslim community to reevaluate its patriarchal conceptions of modesty, and its expectation of modesty as the sole responsibility of Muslim women. Second, I argue that it is by examining the policing and negotiation of such policing by Muslimah influencers, that we

glean a better understanding of the nature of racialized and gendered expectations held of Muslim women, and the ways in which Muslim women are working to (re)define notions of Muslim womanhood.

I begin this chapter by illustrating how Islamic principles of modesty are interpreted in by male Muslim scholars. I then delve into how modesty is commodified as both a virtue and an aesthetic in the aesthetic labor of Muslimah influencers in the modest fashion industry. I follow this section by describing how Muslimah influencers are policed for their modesty and aesthetic labor. Finally, I show how Muslimah influencers negotiate with this policing, and conclude with a brief discussion of the implications of this study.

## **MUSLIMAH MODESTY**

Fashion has historically been associated with the secular, and yet, there is a long and complex history of religion's significance in the realm of fashion (Lewis 2013; Tarlo and Moors 2013). Fashion is intrinsically a form of expression, and in its historical intersection with religion, this expression has manifested as an outward articulation of one's faith, piety, and spirituality (Lewis 2013). In the case of Islam, corporeal practices have been mobilized to foreground faith and spirituality, represent one's religious affiliation, and manifest certain religious virtues to which one aspires. Many Muslim women have viewed fashion and religion not as two opposing concepts, but rather as sartorial practices that take shape as 'ethical projects.' Bucar (2016) finds that amongst Indonesian women who engage in modest sartorial practices, the faith-fashion interface or ethical project of "fashion-veiling" is a "sanctification of the material world by using secular fashion trends to achieve Islamic goals" (69). The project of reconciling religion and fashion through fashionable faith or modest fashion combines two seemingly incompatible symbolic systems: "veiling, which references tradition and divine revelation, and fashion, which is ever-

changing and driven by consumer desires” (Bucar 2016:69). In this manner, Muslim women blend their faith and religious practice with fashion in order to outwardly express and achieve their inner devotion to piety and spiritual commitments to their faith.

Notably, the notion of modesty is often what is associated with Muslim women’s outward expressions of religious affiliation and piety. Piety in particular, is given a strong importance in Muslim practices of faith, and although it is considered to be a key attribute of any ideal Muslim (regardless of gender), *Muslimah* piety tends more often to be conflated with a woman’s sartorial choices as an outward expression of her modesty. Muslim women’s piety is measured by not only how well a *Muslimah* covers or whether she wears the hijab, but also by *how* she wears the hijab, and how she performs her modesty through embodied practices and behavior. Piety’s critical relation to *Muslimah* modesty is evident in Saba Mahmood’s (2005) study of Egyptian Muslim women in the 1970’s Islamic revivalist movement. In her work, Mahmood finds that modest sartorial practices are considered to be “a means to produce a pious self and an expression of that piety” (Tarlo and Moors 2013:6). For these women, sartorial practices of modesty, such as wearing the hijab, khimar, or abaya are thus a means by which a *Muslimah* might achieve and perform the Islamic virtue of piety. Due to the perceived correlation of one’s sartorial choices with modesty and piety, Muslim women’s outward appearances are regarded in Muslim circles as an indication of her religiosity, devotion to faith, and inner piety (Medina 2014:877). Consequently, if a *Muslimah* makes certain sartorial choices or engages in aesthetic labor in ways that do not align with mainstream (read: male scholarly) understandings of modesty and expectations of its expression, then she is likely to be policed, and have her behavior and sartorial choices regulated through criticisms, ostracization, and sanctions by family, peers, and members in her Muslim

community. Of course, in order to fully comprehend the nuances undergirding such policing, it is important to first acknowledge how modesty is typically conceptualized in Muslim circles.

### **Muslim Male Interpretations of Modesty**

In Islamic conceptions of modesty derived from the Qur'an and the Hadith, modesty is considered to be an ethical requirement of both Muslim men and women. Understood to be a key attribute of the faith that is practiced by steadfast Muslims, modesty has been translated and interpreted from Verse 31-32 of Chapter 24 of the Qur'an as thus:

“Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for them; and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their sons, their husbands sons, their brothers or their brother's sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! Turn you all together towards Allah, that you may attain Bliss.” (Translation by Abdullah Yusuf Ali 2013)



These verses articulate guidelines on how Muslim men and women ought to express modesty and with whom. Muslim male scholars have identified four aspects of Islamic modesty in these verses: “lowering the gaze, guarding the private parts, guarding or concealing ‘awrah’<sup>38</sup>, and concealing or not revealing adornments” (Salam et al 2020: 175). These aspects are prescriptions for how one ought to interact with one’s ‘*non-mahram*’ (someone who is not a member of one’s family as related by blood or by other ties of kinship, or with whom an individual must observe guidelines of modesty) in both private and public spaces.

For Muslim women in particular, these four aspects involve not only the sartorial practices of covering oneself, guarding one’s awrah, and concealing adornments<sup>39</sup>, but also involve the regulation of one’s behavior (Boulanouar 2006). According to Muslim male scholar Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (1992), Muslim women must observe modesty by limiting others’ visual access to their self, and by avoiding the sexualization of their bodies by others, through both regulating their clothing choices and their embodied performativity. For example, according to Muslim male scholar Mohammed Ash-Sharawy (1991) Muslim women are expected by those in Muslim circles to prevent their sexualization by others, through the avoidance of drawing attention to themselves, thereby lowering their own gaze, and encouraging others to lower their gaze as well. Muslim women do so, and are *expected* to do so, by concealing their personalities and personal characteristics, by not engaging in provocative behaviors, and by not drawing attention to their outer or inner beauty. These prescriptions are tricky for Muslimah influencers to abide by, given that aesthetic labor in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry demands that they engage

---

<sup>38</sup> *Awrah* is understood as tangible and intangible intimate parts of the body, like one’s privates, voice, and character.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Adornments’ are understood by male scholars as items or practices that may add to one’s beauty, such as jewelry, makeup, hair dye, and perfume.

with others' gazes, emphasize their physical and personal characteristics, and engage in forms of sexualized comportment through provocative or visually engaging poses, for the purpose of selling modest fashion on digital platforms.

The critical juncture where modesty conflicts with Muslimahs involvement in the digitally mediated modest fashion is in aesthetic labor's demands of women. Mears (2014) argues that the "commonly accepted use of female bodies for their aesthetic value normalizes all women as display objects whether they enter into such an agreement or not" (1339). As hypervisible bodies with fashionable subjectivities that engage the gaze – male or not, Muslimah influencers with their focus on gendered embodiment and modest performativities are transformed into display objects, rendering themselves subject to "high level of scrutiny of their bodies" (Mears 2014: 1339). Consequently, even though Muslimah influencers may self-identify as 'modest' Muslimahs, not only does their aesthetic labor run counter to notions of modesty as interpreted by male scholars like Al-Qaradawi (1992), but their hypervisibility on these platforms also conflicts with expectations of Muslimah modesty. Given that Muslim male interpretations of the Quran and Hadith tend to be pervasive and generally accepted in Muslim communities around the globe, such interpretations give rise to widespread critiques of Muslimah influencers for their presupposed immodesty on social media and in the modest fashion industry (Boulanouar 2006).

It should also be noted that within these same interpretations, the hijab is inevitably conflated with modesty and piety. While male and female religious scholars continue to debate over whether the hijab is compulsory in the Islamic tradition, most interpret the Quran's inscription of the hijab (33:59) as directing Prophet Muhammad's wives and daughters and the wives of his companions to cover themselves so as to become identifiable as women of Islam, and to prevent being harassed by others. This verse was revealed in the context of Mecca around 600AD, in

response to complaints of women being molested by men (Ahmed 1992, Aslan 2005). At the time, women who covered were known to have high status and strong tribal affiliations. Other clans were therefore less likely to provoke or harass these women for fear of backlash by their tribal members. While this verse is understood to have been directed specifically towards the wives and daughters of the Prophet and the wives of his companions – notably for a particular social purpose that is unique to a specific cultural and temporal context, male Muslim scholars have extended this verse to mean that “all believing women must or at least should wear the hijab” (Medina 2014:877). Moreover, male interpretations of this verse draw a connection between the hijab and the male gaze (Al-Qaradawi 1992; Walters 1995; Kaplan 1996), insisting that a woman must cover in order to avoid sexual harassment and male desire. Since the male gaze holds power in the objectification and sexualization of women by commending female bodies “that [are] appealing to the heterosexual man and de-valoring the bodies that fail to do so” (Glapka 2018), a Muslimah’s rejection of the hijab and other modest sartorial practices is viewed as an invitation to be sexualized by others. Muslimah influencers who have taken off their hijab on their social media are particularly vulnerable to this perception, and consequently become the recipients of cyberbullying, and gendered policing by others (see Chapter Two). In drawing a connection between the male gaze and the hijab, and by placing responsibility of observing modesty on Muslim women’s shoulders, Muslim male interpretations of the Quran and mainstream practices of Muslim communities have treated the hijab as a “litmus test of a woman’s level of faith and modesty, Islamic credibility, and indicative of her level of religiosity and piety” (Medina 2014:877). This treatment has made the racialized marker of the hijab an even more burdensome symbol for Muslim women, many of whom are hijabi and must contemporarily contend with anti-Muslim violence as a result of being identifiably Muslim in contexts of Islamophobia.

Of course, the demands and expectations of such Muslim male interpretations raise a number of other complications for Muslim women. In particular, the idea of the hijab or other modest embodied practices as protection from the male gaze, male assault or unwanted sexual desire is highly problematic. In fact, “it may be interpreted similarly to ‘Western’ societies viewing rape as something that is provoked by the manner in which a woman dresses” (Medina 2014:877). Muslim women are undoubtedly vulnerable to the gendered violence and policing by Muslim communities regardless of being covered or uncovered, modest or ‘immodest’. The conflation of the hijab with one’s modesty, and modesty with one’s piety poses a significant burden on Muslim women who are told that “(1) she can only be modest if she wears the hijab; (2) wearing it will allow her to enter paradise; or (3) wearing it is a way to protect Muslim men by helping them focus on their religion instead of on her” (Medina 2014:877). The Muslimah body thus becomes the prime focus of the Muslim community’s social discipline, establishing a woman’s religious and social worth by measuring how much or how well she covers, and how well she performs a modest Muslim womanhood. Along male interpretations of modesty then, Muslimah influencers’ (hyper)visibility on social media, their aesthetic labor in the modest fashion industry, and their performances of modesty and Muslim womanhood are thus rendered to be in stark contrast to mainstream Muslim community expectations of modesty, exposing them to gendered policing. Such policing has significance in Muslim women’s lives, as it shapes Muslim women’s behaviors and performances of modest Muslim womanhood, while also informing Muslim women’s critiques, resistance, and negotiations with their policing.

## **SELLING AND POLICING MODESTY**

One of the major reasons why Muslimah influencers are so popular on social media is because of their skills at incorporating modesty in fashion. Tarlo and Moors (2013: 82) suggest

that modest fashion has been the most popular solution to “the problem of what to wear developed by young Muslims in Britain and Europe” and arguably, around the globe as well. When asked why they follow Muslimah influencers, a vast majority of my survey respondents indicated that they followed Muslimah influencers mainly for this reason:

“I love seeing fashion kept within the modest boundaries.”

“I dress modestly and I’m always looking for inspiration.”

“They inspire my modest wardrobe and conservative lifestyle.”

“[I follow them] For inspiration for modest fashion.”

“They’re often relatable, [I follow them] for fashion and outfit inspiration.”

“I love their style and confidence. The unique ways of styling current trends are awesome too.”

The responses from my survey participants show that Muslimah influencers and their proficiency in curating modest and fashionable looks are clearly filling a void for affluent Muslims who are interested in finding ways in which they might merge Islamic prescription of modesty and trendy fashion through the process of ‘bricolage’ (Hebdige 1979). However, the demand and appreciation for modest fashion is not limited just to Muslim consumers. In fact, this demand goes beyond boundaries of religion. In some of the survey responses, a number of my respondents voluntarily shared that as non-Muslims, they follow Muslimah influencers primarily because of their modest fashion expertise:

“The main reason I do pay attention to their posts is their dress; they are beautiful and modest. Great for inspiration even as a non-Muslim.”

“Lots of their modesty standards are similar to mine, even though I am Apostolic Pentecostal (Christian). They also dress beautifully while staying modest.”

“I’m white agnostic but I watch some YouTube videos from Muslim women for ideas, tips, tricks on modest fashion.”

“Modesty is a virtue that defends purity of the heart and the soul. Practically, for me that means dressing in a way that isn’t gaudy, wearing high necklines, skirt length at least to the knee, shoulders covered, and veiling during mass (I’m Catholic)”

Clearly, the appreciation of modesty in fashion is not restricted to one’s religious affiliation. Although Islamic prescriptions of modesty differ slightly from Christian and Jewish prescriptions of the notion, the embodiment of modesty by Muslim women through fashion is variable enough that it has significant potential to be adopted by members of other faiths and non-faiths. The ability of modesty to blend with fashion in ways that go beyond religious tradition demonstrates how, as a sartorial preference, modest fashion has significant potential in being coopted, appreciated, and most importantly, *commodified* in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry (Lewis 2015). In this manner, when Muslimah influencers curate, don, and perform modest fashion to their audiences via their social media, they are selling modesty in two distinct ways. First, they are selling modesty to Muslims, in a way that not only aligns with parts of

mainstream Islamic conceptions of modesty (like covering one's skin and intimate body parts), but also intersects with contemporary fashion trends that are considered modern, fashionable, and attractive. Second, Muslimah influencers are selling modesty as an *aesthetic*. Although modesty as an aesthetic is not mutually exclusive from the selling modesty as a (potentially fashionable) religious prescription, it is rendered more palatable to the secular eye through the practice of modest fashion, than is modesty as a religious or cultural prescription (Lewis 2013). The flexibility of modesty as both a religious prescription and as an aesthetic is primarily what makes modest-fashion-forward Muslimah influencers and the modest fashion industry so successful. Selling the aesthetic of modesty to not only Muslims, but also non-Muslims creatively pushes the boundaries of fashion, filling a void in the fashion industry for those who are interested in modifying fashion to meet their modest preferences.

The two distinct ways in which Muslimah influencers sell modesty underscore one important facet about modesty as it is digitally and socially mediated. Modesty as a virtue, value, or practice is not limited to one's sartorial choices, but is also inclusive of one's presentation of self, embodiment practices, and engagement with the gaze. As a result, modesty – as both an Islamic principle and an aesthetic, subjects Muslimah influencers to the gendered and racialized policing of their bodies, embodiment practices, and digitally mediated aesthetic labor. Thus, the relevance of understanding modesty as it is conceptualized, practiced, and policed in this industry, offers insight into the nuances undergirding conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood. In the next section, I demonstrate the ways in which some of my Muslimah influencer interviewees experience the policing of their modesty and aesthetic labor.

### **Policing Modesty and Aesthetic Labor**

Muslimah influencers' modesty and aesthetic labor are policed upon the basis of three critiques: (1) They prioritize the Dunya (the worldly) over their Deen (their religion) by focusing on physical appearance rather than the personal and spiritual characteristics of the self; (2) Their hypervisibility on social media and in the modest fashion industry is in violation of Islamic principles of awrah, and (3) Their aesthetic labor in these industries invites their sexualization by others, which is inherently in contradiction to core principles of Islamic modesty. These three critiques serve as the basis for which Muslimah influencers and their aesthetic labor in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry are deemed inherently immodest.

### ***Prioritizing the Nafs***

In the first critique, Muslimah influencers' aesthetic labor is deemed immodest because it encourages them to focus on, and constantly manage their outward physical appearances and feminine beauty, at the cost of spiritual salvation. The criticism here is that the inherent demands of aesthetic labor distract or even erode one's inclinations towards observing modesty in terms of purifying the *nafs* (the worldly self). Purification of the *nafs* is undertaken by consciously working to improve the self through one's moral convictions, ethical practices, and spiritual devotion, all of which are important for one's spiritual salvation. Muslimah influencers who engage in aesthetic labor are presumed to be lacking in spiritual convictions, and are perceived to be lacking in faith, weak in piety, or irreligious altogether. For example, one survey respondent noted that the demands for aesthetic labor may in fact be the reason why many Muslimah influencers have been observed to dejab (take off the hijab), or alter their modest dress in ways that might be deemed immodest:

“In some ways I think it also shows how getting into social media or beauty/fashion influencing slowly erodes at religious inclinations for modest dressing. Modesty starts internally and is then reflected



outwardly, and if you start focusing too much on the outward like in influencing, it can diminish the internal.”

The assumption here, is that the embodiment practices involved in Muslimah influencers’ aesthetic labor, and their focus on their beauty and presentation of self motivates Muslim women to abandon their practice of religion. In western and racialized Islamophobic contexts where Muslim communities are continuing to face pressures of secularization, the expectation for Muslim youth to cling to their faith and religious practice remains strong (Haddad and Smith 1994; Bulut and Ebaugh 2014). Social media observers of Muslimah influencers’ internal convictions presume that the demands for aesthetic labor chip away at a Muslimah’s inclination towards striving against the nafs, thereby lowering her dispositions towards modesty and commitment to the faith. However, these assumptions do not come only from those who follow Muslimah influencers; these assumptions are evident *amongst* Muslimah influencers as well. For example, in her interview with me, hijabi fitness and health instructor Zainab Ismail specifically distanced herself from the term ‘influencer’ and demarcated herself as different from other Muslimah influencers by implying that Muslimah influencers engaged in aesthetic labor and fashion in particular, were not particularly practicing Muslims:

“A lot of girls doing fashion are barely practicing. If at all, I mean. I know several of them personally, many don't even pray. This is where you know modesty and what it means and why we're doing it kind of gets lost in the shuffle. All you see is you're bombarded by people with plastic surgery, botox, fake lips, fake noses, everything is all filtered up, they're wearing two tons of makeup. I just think it spawns, you know, insecurities, low self-esteem, anxiety, and

depression. Muslims trying to look like non-Muslims is not attractive. It puts too much pressure. This is why I don't like the 'I' word [influencer]. I find it to be a Dunya-derogatory construct that puts people into a place where they have greater arrogance and are distanced from their Deen. The whole influencer and beauty and fashion business just really sow the Dunya deep into their heart. So, I wouldn't even want to be lumped into that group [of influencers] at any point."

For Zainab, the influencer industry itself is problematic for the Muslimah who seeks to prioritize her nafs, and her Deen over the Dunya. The aesthetic labor in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry, and this industry's hyper-focus on feminine beauty and the physical self are perceived as ways by which a Muslimah becomes precariously distanced from her Deen. Zainab's candidly critical assertions that Muslimah influencers are lacking in piety, don't pray, and prioritize the Dunya are evident of the common audience perception that aesthetic labor in this industry reduces one's inclinations towards observing modesty and improving the nafs. In this manner, Muslimah influencers' modesty and their religiosity are rendered questionable by their aesthetic labor, and they are deemed to be 'bad' Muslims for actively prioritizing their physical appearances and other worldly temptations (like monetary success or audience attention) over their spiritual salvation.

### ***Hypervisibility as in Conflict with Awrah***

In the second critique, Muslimah influencers are criticized for their hypervisibility on social media platforms, in advertisements, and the fashion industry at large. Muslim women's hypervisibility in these spaces is deemed to be in violation of Islamic principles of awrah, which

involve concealment, or guarding of one's tangible and intangible self (physical body, private parts, character, and even one's voice). It should be noted here, that the terms 'concealment or guarding' do not refer to the shielding of one's body from others' sight, or the silencing of one's voice. Patriarchal, and often Islamophobic assumptions tend to regard the religious prescription of concealment of women's awrah as being a prescription for women to hide away from others' view. Often times, these assumptions are made in conjunction with mass-mediated images of Muslim women in abaya or the niqab, which serve as evidence of Islam's misogyny (Abu-Lughod 2013). In Muslim male interpretations of modesty, the concealment of awrah refers instead to avoiding drawing attention to one's body and the lowering of one's voice when speaking to others. In other terms, it is generally understood to imply that observers of modesty try not to 'live loudly', in terms of how they present themselves to others, and how they interact with others. In her interview, Muslimah American comedienne Nadiah Pierre's described to me how she is often policed for living loudly:

"I will say that in terms of how I outwardly experience joy; people have tried to police that. Because you know, in my videos online, I'm sharing how excited I am about something on my story, I'm being loud, I might be playing music, I might be doing all these things. And people are like, 'Oh, you know, as a woman that wears hijab, you just shouldn't do this. You shouldn't say this, it's not modest.' And it's like, why not? *Why not?* I definitely do think I'm expected to do different things and behave differently, because I'm visibly Muslim and I wear the hijab."

A cursory glance at Muslimah influencers' social media photos and videos shows that, like Pierre, depending on their personalities, Muslimah influencers engage with their audiences through certain performative measures. Some pose provocatively, thus engaging the gaze, while drawing one's eye to their angled silhouettes, fashionable clothes, and flawless makeup. Others giggle, smile, and laugh at the camera, acting candid and goofy, thereby showing their personable characteristics. Others yet, record videos of themselves singing to songs, speaking boisterously to those on and off camera, and engage their viewers by inviting them to observe candid snippets of their everyday lives.

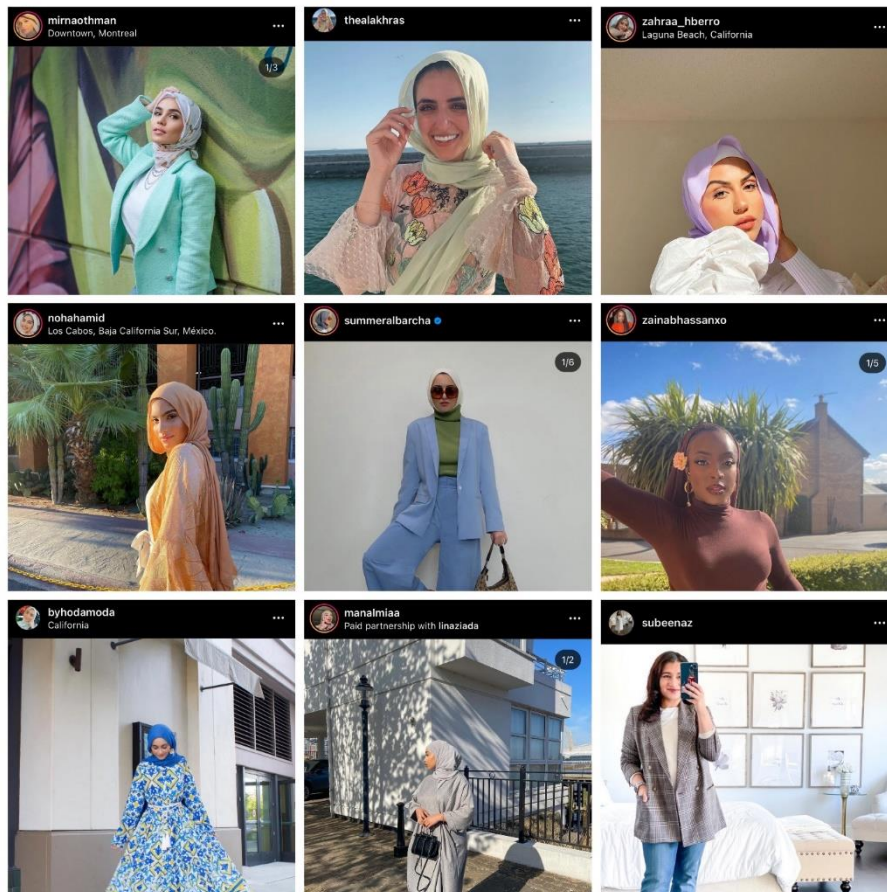


Figure 4: Pictured here are nine of the interviewees in this study.

In all of these cases, Muslim women are hypervisible, and are thus ‘living loudly.’ The element of awrah, especially for hijabi women, thus becomes entangled in the aesthetic labor of one’s influencer work, for the simple reason that these women are hypervisible. One survey respondent noted the particularly complex relationship between hypervisibility and modesty, stating “*A significant number of Muslim women choose to stay off public social media for modesty reasons.*” These reasons undoubtedly emerge from the desire to avoid attracting attention and compromising one’s awrah. In her interview with me, Muslim Canadian influencer Sarah Rayan Al-As made the complication of hypervisibility, aesthetic labor and modesty abundantly clear:

“I’m going to be honest. I understand why people see [influencing] as an immodest thing. In Islam, like, obviously we have the order to lower our gaze and to be modest. And for girls, our voices are our awrah, so your voice is part of your modesty. So, you can’t, or you shouldn’t speak too loudly, and you can’t, you know, act too *out there*. You have to lower your gaze and be modest. So, when you’re out there on social media, whether you like it or not, your pictures are everywhere. You don’t have control of where it goes, or who sees it. And obviously, you can’t really customize your viewers to just females, or to a certain audience. So, with that comes old men, young men, horny men, like all types of people seeing your photos. And so that’s where the question of modesty comes up, where it’s like, is it really modest if your pictures are out there being seen by everyone?”

Sarah clearly illustrates the precariousness of Islamic prescriptions of modesty as they are performed by hypervisible Muslim women online. First, she shows that Muslimah influencers end up compromising their commitments to conceal their awrah due to their hypervisibility and performative engagement with their audiences. Second, she acknowledges that when their selves are rendered as “display objects” (Mears 2014: 1339) to be looked at by others through photos and videos that emphasize the self, Muslimah influencers’ awrah is compromised due to becoming subject to the gaze, and the *male gaze* in particular. The lack of control over who gets to ‘gaze’ upon them is particularly problematic. The nuance of ‘who gazes’ underlies the third critique of Muslimah influencer modesty and aesthetic labor.

### ***Aesthetic Labor and Sexualization***

In the third critique, it is the facet of sexualization in aesthetic labor and its relation to the gaze that determines the perception of Muslimah influencers as immodest. In the process of subjecting themselves to the gaze as digitally mediated display objects, Muslimah influencers and their bodies become sexualized. However, it is not only their performativities as sexualized display objects that determines their immodesty, it is also what their hypervisible sexualization does to *others* that determines their immodesty. Those who police Muslimah influencers’ modesty and aesthetic labor criticize them for actively ‘inviting’ the gaze and their sexualization by continuing to participate in aesthetic labor on social media. In the case of Maryam Deanna, a Muslim American influencer from New York, it is her extended family who criticize and police her for her perceived immodesty on social media:

“I definitely do have family who are on Instagram and who follow me. They definitely criticize me so much. They criticize the way I dress, the way I pose, and what I post. They’ve ended up creating so

much family drama. They've constantly criticized me and my parents by asking, 'Why is your daughter sitting like this? Why is she wearing this? Why is she putting this on social media?' It's been difficult to deal with."

Even though Maryam is fully covered in all of her photos, often posing in ways that draw attention to her outfit rather than the angles or silhouette of her body, her extended family's critique of her aesthetic labor is that her performativity and visible presence on social media is immodest because it makes her publicly available to others' gazes. The knowledge that there are some in their audience who view them as display objects, and some in their audience who will police them for their behavior, modesty and aesthetic labor, causes Muslimah influencers significant anxiety and forces them to reconsider how and whether they should continue to participate in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry. In Maryam's case, her passion for fashion motivated her to block her extended family from her Instagram page, thereby resolving the issue of their active policing in her personal life. In her interview with me, Lebanese Canadian influencer Mirna Othman commented on how the knowledge that others were going to police her regardless of what she wore often gave her pause when deciding what to wear and what to post:

"I do feel that sometimes, I am judged more. Like, if I wear something that is tight, if I wear hijab a certain way, or if I post something in particular, people feel that they have the right to say like, this is not the way I should wear whatever I'm wearing, or that this is not the way I should behave."

Mirna shows that the knowledge that she will be policed emerges from an understanding that her body is made a display object to others' gazes. Furthermore, Mirna also acknowledges

that through her aesthetic labor and hypervisibility, her body, chosen embodiment practices and performativity are made into ‘justifiable’ objects of policing by those who believe they have the right to police Muslim women’s bodies and modesty. In this third critique, the policing of Muslim women shows that in the eyes of their critics, Muslimah women are not immodest because they are not themselves ‘lowering their gaze’; they are immodest because they are inviting others to gaze upon them – and are thus *preventing others from lowering their gaze and observing modesty*. This critical nuance underscores the heavy, gendered responsibility of observing modesty and ensuring that others also observe modesty, that is placed on the shoulders of Muslim women by the global Muslim community.

As a result of *being* and *presenting* as Muslim women on social media platforms, Muslim women who engage in aesthetic labor in the modest fashion industry are ultimately subject to certain gendered religious and cultural expectations and are thus policed for their behaviors, embodiment practices, and commitments to modesty. Consequently, many believe that they are required to modify their behaviors, abandon their aesthetic labor altogether, or find ways to negotiate with their policing in order to navigate the complicated relationship between modesty and aesthetic labor. In the following section, I show how Muslimah influencers negotiate with the policing of their modesty and aesthetic labor through the adoption of Islamic feminist interpretations of modesty.

### **NEGOTIATING THEIR POLICING WITH ISLAMIC FEMINISM AND IJTIHĀD**

Muslimah influencers negotiate their policing by employing an Islamic feminist approach to modesty in order to argue that aesthetic labor in the modest fashion industry is not necessarily antithetical to modesty. According to Margot Badran (2002:2), Islamic feminism is a “feminist discourse and practice articulated within an Islamic paradigm.” Islamic feminism uses the recourse



of *ijtihad* to encourage women to contextualize Islam and “produce knowledge to affect change in their communities” for the purpose of working towards, and achieving gender equality (Anwar 2018: 226). At its core, *ijtihad* is a practice of knowledge production which is undertaken through the contextual interpretation of religious scripture. When merged with an Islamic feminist lens, *ijtihad* centers women as knowledge producers, who reinterpret Quranic scripture contextually, taking into account the historical context and the social conditions in which the Quran was revealed. Islamic feminist *ijtihad* reinterprets Quranic scripture through a feminist lens, and thus “exposes the inequalities embedded in current interpretations of Shari’a – fiqh – as constructions by male jurists rather than manifestations of the divine will” (Mir-Hosseini 2006: 644). Islamic feminist *ijtihad* has been viewed by Islamic feminists as an important feminist strategy and intervention that offers an alternative perspective to “an almost exclusively male dominated Quranic interpretation” (Eyadat 2013: 363). By offering this perspective, *ijtihad* and Islamic feminists who study its practice by women are showing “what difference the gender of an author makes” with regard to Islamic interpretations and Islamic legal jurisdictions (cooke 2000:95).

Contributors to Islamic feminism and the study of *ijtihad* such as Amina Wudud, Fatima Mernissi, Margot Badran, and Asma Barlas have shown that within Islamic scripture and Sunnah (traditions and practices of Prophet Muhammad PBUH), “egalitarian principles are extremely predominant and that disadvantaged gender roles are the result of patriarchal cultural norms from ancient times, rather than gender inequality being intrinsic to Islam” (Eyadat 2013: 363). Through this lens then, gender equality is interpreted as inherently part of, and rendered compatible to the Islamic tradition, contrary to both liberal secular western feminisms, and Muslim patriarchal understandings of feminism, and gender in Islam. Thus, the use of Islamic feminist *ijtihad* has significant potentials in terms of subverting both male dominance in interpretation of religious

scripture, and the use of religious scripture for perpetuating gendered inequalities, social injustices, and the dominance of patriarchal social systems (Eyadat 2013). Consequently, both Islamic feminism and *ijtihād* remain relevant to the negotiating tactics of Muslim women, as they continue to be policed according to male interpretations of Islamic principles of modesty.

In terms of *how* they negotiate with their policing, Muslimah influencers make two specific arguments using *ijtihād*. First, they emphasize that modesty is and can be interpreted in a number of different ways. For example, for some influencers, modesty is understood as more than just whether one covers their body or conceals their *awrah*; it also involves a purity of intentions, and a priority of one's relationship with God. Second, they argue that the aesthetic labor that they undertake on social media and in the modest fashion industry is a form of *dawah* (proselytizing Islam), and is undertaken in the pursuit of encouraging others to observe religious morals and virtues, such as modesty. Using *ijtihād* in these two ways, Muslimah influencers publicly articulate a reconciliation of their modesty with their aesthetic labor, and share their interpretations of modesty, thereby exercising what Rachel Rinaldo (2014: 824) terms "pious critical agency." According to Rinaldo, "pious critical agency is the capacity to engage critically and publicly with religious texts" (2014:824). As pious critical agents, Muslimah influencers show that not only can "Islam be a resource for women's agency but that religion and feminism can intersect in surprising and unexpected ways" (824). Rinaldo's concept of pious critical agency is particularly relevant in capturing Muslim women's involvement in the meanings of religious texts, and their practice of these meanings in politicized discussions. Furthermore, the use of pious critical agency in the negotiation of their policing has implications in terms of advocating for their gendered and political equality as racialized, gendered and politicized beings in western, Islamophobic and Muslim community contexts.

## **Ijtihād and Varying Interpretations of Modesty**

In terms of the first strategy used by Muslimah influencers, they use ijtihād to argue that there are varying ways in which modesty is, and can be interpreted. For example, on October 30, 2018, British-Egyptian Muslimah influencer Dina Tokio (who had at the time stopped wearing her hijab publicly) shared an Instagram story photo of her book ‘Modestly’ in which she writes:

“For some women, outer modesty is the main focus, for others it’s a bit of both and for others the inner focus is the priority. All in all Muslim women are at different levels of faith and are adopting modesty either physically, spiritually or both, at their own different levels each day. It is an independent, personal experience. It can be a struggle, a joy, a journey – each woman has her own unique experience. Ultimately it should always come down to choice and ensuring your own emotional wellbeing is thriving.”

In the caption accompanying the photo, Tokio writes: “*For the ones that think I can’t have a book called #modestly out...you might want to actually read it.*” Tokio shared this particular page from her book in response to critics in her audience who alleged that because she had taken off the hijab, she was no longer ‘modest.’ In this post, Tokio demonstrates the relevance of ijtihād for Muslim women, in order to push back against her critics and argue that Muslims conceptualize and embody modesty in different ways. For those who engage in ijtihād, modesty can be conceptualized within the parameters of Islam and through one’s choice, emotional wellbeing, and understandings of faith. Offering different ways in which modesty can be conceptualized stands in stark contrast to the assumption that there is one way to conceptualize and observe modesty. Moreover, given that male conceptions of Islamic modesty tend to be more prevalent within

Muslim circles, Tokio's caption serves as an Islamic feminist statement that places the responsibility and possibility of employing *ijtihad*, in the hands of Muslim women.

Similarly, in their interviews, some of my Muslimah influencer interviewees shared their varying interpretations of modesty. Many of these interpretations do not strictly conform to Muslim male scholarly interpretations of modesty, but instead align more with Islamic feminist interpretations of modesty. For example, non-hijabi Muslimah American influencer Subeena Zubairi shared her conception of modesty:

“My definition of modesty is where you can't necessarily see your entire shape of your body. There are times when you can be covered from head to toe, but you can still see everything [i.e., the body's silhouette] at the same time. So, my concept of modesty is not excessively showing the shape of your body, but also how you carry yourself as well.”

While Zubairi understands modesty in terms of how well one avoids accentuating the silhouette of their body, she also understands modesty as a practice of embodiment. In this practice, an individual performs modesty by watching how they carry and present themselves, i.e., avoiding attracting undue attention, and also how they interact with others. Besides for these two stipulations of modesty, Zubairi makes no assertions as to *how much* an individual must cover themselves in order to be modest, or whether they ought to be wearing a hijab in order to adhere to principles of modesty. Alternatively, other influencers shared their understandings of modesty as being less concerned with how much one covers, and more concerned with one's purity of intentions and deeper understanding of modesty's *meaning*. For example, in her interview,

Muslimah American influencer Noha Hamid articulated that her intentions for dressing fashionably but modestly are undergirded by her relationship with God:

“I love fashion. I think this is pretty obvious. But ultimately, my number one priority with fashion is to make sure that I do it to please Allah Subhan-a-wa-ta’ala before anyone else. I always want to make sure that I’m following the rulings of modesty that God has set. Islamically-speaking, a woman has to be modest in the way she dresses and the way she presents herself, so that is always what I have in the back of my mind before I pick anything for fashion. This is what this is the root of my relationship with modest fashion; I want to please Allah at the end of the day.”

For Hamid, dressing fashionably while within the parameters of Islamic modesty (as she personally interprets it) allows her to prioritize her relationship with God. By establishing her intentions of modest fashion dressing to be for God and not for anyone else, Hamid distances the attachment of meanings of modesty from the male gaze, and instead views modesty as being essential to maintaining her relationship with God. For Hamid, her relationship is shaped in the everyday practices of dressing modestly and fashionably, by not only actively deciding *how* she chooses to dress herself, but also by determining her intentions for *why* she chooses to dress herself with modest fashion.

Deeper meanings of modesty are also relevant for Sarah Rayan Al-As, who, in her interview, described how she felt modesty’s true essence was being disregarded in the modest fashion industry:

“There's also a lot of modest fashion brands that aren't really going for 'modesty.' They're just concerned with the trend of modesty. And I have such a big issue with that, because for us people that are actually *for* modesty, we're looking for the deep meaning of it, you know? There's such a deep meaning behind wearing modest clothing and being modest. For us, it's not just a trend. But modesty and modest fashion has been reduced to being just a trend that you see even within non-Muslims. And, although it's amazing to see people get interested in modest fashion, and see the modest fashion industry cater to the modest community... at the same time, it's like, you're covering the true meaning and definition of being modest. For me, it's more about the values and morals of being modest. I'm not doing it for anyone except God. So, when I do look at collaborating [with brands], knowing their values, and their morals is so important for me.”

Al-As's understandings of modesty emphasize less on sartorial choices, and focus more on one's intentions of modesty. As an influencer who is “*for*” the deeper meaning of modesty, Al-As understands modesty as embodied in her intentions of being modest – both sartorially and in the prioritizing of her relationship with God. Moreover, in Al-As's perception, the modest fashion industry lacks the proper understanding of the meaning of modesty for Muslim women, by treating it as a trend, rather than a religious and cultural value that ought to be respected in modest fashion. Thus, as a participant in the modest fashion industry, Al-As seeks to collaborate with only those brands who understand the deeper meaning that modesty has for Muslim women.

The varying interpretations of modesty evident in Muslimah influencers' understandings and practice of the concept are indicative of the pious critical agency that Muslim women exercise in terms of defining how *they* conceptualize modesty within the parameters of Islam. More importantly, by publicly demonstrating that there are varying ways in which Muslims can interpret modesty via *ijtihād*, Muslimah influencers offer Muslim women the opportunity to interpret modesty in ways different to those offered by male Muslim scholars.

### **Modesty as Dawah**

As a second key strategy, Muslimah influencers argue that the modesty that they perform through their aesthetic labor serves as a form of *dawah*, or proselytizing Islam. These women argue that their aesthetic labor and presentation of modesty is a way of encouraging others to observe religious morals and values like modesty. In particular, Muslimah influencers view their aesthetic labor and modest fashion as a way of encouraging Muslimah youth to adopt the hijab, albeit fashionably. For example, in her interview, Noha Hamid recounted several audience interactions she has had on her social media, in which her audience demonstrated the impact her aesthetic labor has had on their inclinations towards adopting the hijab and modest fashion:

“Honestly, the best part of my job is when girls message me, and tell me, ‘I didn't think I'd be wearing hijab anytime soon. But after seeing your page, now I want to wear the hijab.’ Or that, ‘I wear the hijab, and I wanted to take it off. But now after following you on socials, I don't want to.’ It's honestly amazing. I've had conversations with my followers where they tell me that I've helped make them feel confident with the hijab. They've said that I've shown them how they can be modest, but fashionable and beautiful

So, that's definitely something where I'm like, if I can share certain outfits or certain ways to style outfits that are modest, then I'm going to share that with people. Because when I was growing up, I would have loved to see that as well.”

The pressures of secular and western beauty standards impact most, if not all women. However, Muslim women in particular find it increasingly difficult to conform to such standards, while also conforming to Muslim expectations of modesty. What Hamid describes here, is her perspective on how she undertakes dawah, serving as a role model to other Muslim women, and offering them the confidence with which they might also don the hijab, observe modesty, and find ways in which to be fashionable while being modest. Hamid’s description also illustrates how fashionably modest Muslimah influencers serve as a statement for Muslim youth who are struggling to find ways in which they might reconcile their aspirations for fashion and their commitments to religious and cultural values and expectations. Hamid describes when she was younger, she would have loved to have someone guide her on how to curate modest fashion. Many other Muslimah influencers also acknowledge that they started their social media pages for the simple reason that they also wanted to guide others on how to blend modesty with fashion. For example, when asked why she chose to incorporate modest fashion in her digital work, my interviewee Muslim American influencer Summer Albarcha said:

“I hope to inspire Muslim women to feel more confident in representing themselves without making sacrifices to their values. I found confidence through expressing myself through modest fashion, and I want to make it mainstream in our society. [Modest fashion] is what comes most natural to my values. Just as women



are allowed to choose to wear less, this to me, is about the choice to wear what I am most comfortable in. I want to encourage other girls who want to make the decision to be creative in styling, and not let the idea of modesty deter them from expressing themselves or succeeding in their personal and professional lives.”

For Albarcha, reconciling the value of modesty with one’s creative expression through fashion is fundamental to her work as an influencer who engages in aesthetic labor in the modest fashion industry. In fact, the drive to curate fashionable looks that align with her interpretations of Islamic principles modesty was Albarcha’s motivation for initially participating in the modest fashion industry. Encouraging others, especially Muslim women, to embrace their religious identities and values through fashion actually offers Muslimah youth an effective sartorial strategy through which they can distance themselves from Islamophobic assumptions of Muslimah oppression and subjugation. The visible images of fashionable Muslim women, donning colorful headscarves and fashionable clothes, conflicts with mass mediated, orientalist and Islamophobic images of Muslim women that portray them as drab, faceless, and covered head to toe in – what is usually, a black abaya. The conspicuous visibility manifested through modesty, fashion, and aesthetic labor serves as a means to push back against Islamophobic assumptions of Muslim women and Islam while also giving Muslim women the confidence with which they might, as Albarcha says, succeed in their “personal and professional lives.” In her interview with me, Egyptian-Canadian influencer Hoda Moda illustrated the possibilities that this political sartorial strategy held for Muslim women, and how she viewed her work as being *dawah*:

“I think that being a hijabi in North America, there is this stereotypical image of who we are as Muslim hijabis. I feel that

we're looked at as oppressed or as weak or that we don't have a voice or that we are controlled. Sadly, that's because some people don't know *why* we cover the way we cover; they just assume that you're covering because you're forced to cover. We hijabis tend to attract a lot of attention in North America, because we're not the norm. And if we're going to attract attention either way, then I would rather have control over how we are perceived. I want to have a good impact in terms of how Muslim women come to be seen by other people. *That* is my motivation for modest fashion. I want to showcase that a Muslim hijabi woman can dress very fashionably while maintaining her modesty and still rock the look. If you're going to look at me anyway, then I want you to look at me and see that I'm dressed up, I look good, and I'm confident and proud in who I am as a Muslim woman. At the end of the day, how I dress is a form of dawah; it is in my opinion and intention. That is what I keep in mind whenever I go out and dress up.”

In her eloquent statement, Hoda brilliantly illustrates how her intentions to be modest while fashionable is a form of dawah that itself is informed by contexts of Islamophobia, and Islamophobic assumptions of Muslimah oppression and subjugation. Her dawah via modest fashion is for the benefit of those who may harbor such assumptions, and operates as a practice of resistance to these assumptions. Moreover, modest fashion as dawah offers Hoda a sense of control over how she is perceived by others in an Islamophobic context. By publicly – and perhaps proudly identifying as Muslim, Hoda’s modest fashion serves as a statement to Muslims, non-Muslims,

and Islamophobes that she identifies as Muslim – and a fashionable one at that. Much like Hoda, other Muslim women are reconciling modesty with fashion, interpreting it as dawah, and adopting modest fashion as a feminist strategy to counter Islamophobia. Fashion historian Shehnaz Sutterwalla notes that the prevalence of fashionable Muslim women is indicative of their motivations to “be very visible, and I think that’s an interesting sign of the times” (NN 2019: 130). Indeed, modesty and fashion are emerging as sartorial, ethical and resistive practices by which Muslim women are expressing their humanity, ability, agency, and creativity to those who seek to deny these to them.

In this section, I have illustrated how Muslimah influencers are negotiating the policing of their modesty through the lens and use of Islamic feminisms. Via *ijtihad*, influencers are able to publicly and critically share their conceptions of modesty and dawah, in ways that go beyond the traditionally male interpretations of these terms. Furthermore, using *ijtihad* and Islamic feminisms, Muslimah influencers are clearly challenging the notion that modesty and aesthetic labor are irreconcilable, and that their engagement with aesthetic labor makes them bad Muslimahs. Pushing against this, Muslimah influencers are undertaking significant ethical, political and egalitarian work by claiming that Islamic principles of modesty are open to interpretation, and that aesthetic labor and being hypervisible on social media as proud and identifiable modest Muslimahs in the face of Islamophobia is a form of dawah. It is thus that Muslimah influencers are redefining notions and performances of Muslim womanhood, are demonstrating the potentials for modest fashion as an ethical and political practice, and are encouraging other Muslim women to become their own agentic advocates in Islamophobic contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I have examined the nuanced and complex relationship that Islamic principles of modesty share with aesthetic labor in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry. This complex relationship informs the nature of policing of modesty that Muslim women face in their undertakings of aesthetic labor. However, in spite of the policing of the modesty, bodies, embodiment practices and aesthetic labor, Muslimah influencers continue to pursue their careers and passions in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry. Using Islamic feminist interpretations of modesty in Islamic scripture as workable alternatives to Muslim male interpretations of modesty, Muslimah influencer reconcile the supposed incompatibility of modesty with aesthetic labor by arguing that their aesthetic labor is in fact, modest, and a form of dawah that encourages others to perform modesty as well. Via these negotiations, Muslimah influencers are redefining their religious practices of, and meanings attributed to modesty, and are potentially challenging the Muslim community to reevaluate its conceptions of modesty and policing of Muslim women on the basis of their perceived (im)modesty.

With these in mind, this chapter has two implications in particular. First, it emphasizes the importance of examining modesty and its relationship with aesthetic labor in digitally mediated modest fashion industry. If this industry is interested in taking advantage of the purchasing power of Generation M (Janmohamed 2016), then it must rethink its approaches towards working with Muslim women. Future research projects might consider examining how modesty is understood and mobilized by Muslim women within the industry. This research would prove invaluable to cultural authorities in the modest fashion industry who could use this information to reevaluate their demands of aesthetic labor and practices of inclusion and diversity. In doing so, this industry can effectively collaborate with and incorporate Muslim women in its advertising and decision-making practices in ways that adequately cater to the needs and preferences of Muslim women.

By making these spaces inclusive for Muslim women, the modest fashion industry might be able to deter Islamophobia within and outside of these industries, and make an effective change in terms of diversity and inclusion, and a politics of representation.

Second, this chapter demonstrates the potentials of Islamic feminism and *ijtihād* in the lives of Muslim women. By interpreting modesty in the ways alternative to those proposed by male Muslim scholars, Muslim women inhabit, exercise, and embody pious critical agency and determine how they choose to embody their subjectivities and perform Muslim womanhood. Subverting Muslim male interpretations of modesty using pious critical agency opens the possibility for radical change in the lives of Muslim women, in terms of developing an egalitarian vision of gender equality, and defining the terms of Muslim women's relationship with their Muslim communities. By publicly sharing and performing these interpretations, Muslim women are generating important conversations within Muslim communities by forcing these communities to reevaluate its gendered policing of Muslim women, its notions of Muslim womanhood, and its gendered expectations of Muslim women's modesty, behavior, and embodiment practices. Consequently, this chapter underscores the potentials of Islamic feminism in the lives of Muslim women, and in terms of defining the practice and performativity of Muslim women's political subjectivities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: Summary and Future Directions for Research**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this project has been to examine how contemporary contexts of Islamophobia contribute to shaping notions and performances of Muslim womanhood. By focusing on Muslimah social media influencers and their digitally mediated performances of Muslim womanhood, I have examined how they and their performances are subject to certain kinds of racialized and gendered expectations that emerge from, and are shaped by contexts of Islamophobia. In this chapter, I provide a summary of this research, by including an overview of the theoretical foundations and context of this project. I then share the main findings of each of the three empirical chapters that make up this dissertation. Finally, I conclude this chapter by offering future directions for research.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXT**

There is abundant work that demonstrates the nature of Islamophobia, its relation to the global war on terror, and its impact on Muslim communities in the west. The U.S.'s war on terror in particular, has culminated in a racialized era of post-9/11 politics, which influence how publics conceive of, and perceive Muslims and Islam (Cainkar 2009; Beydoun 2018; Cainkar and Selod 2018). Notably, Islamophobia is gendered in nature, often mobilized and embodied in mass mediated portrayals of Muslim women clad in the hijab or its sister forms to symbolize Islam's misogynistic qualities. In the reproduction these portrayals, the hijab has arguably been made to seem synonymous with the image of the Muslim woman. Miriam cooke (2008) argues that the hijabi or burqa clad Muslim woman image that has emerged out of contexts of Islamophobia "overrides all other [identities] to constitute these women's primary identity" (131). Consequently, the hijab and its sister forms in relation to contexts of Islamophobia have come to define notions

of Muslim womanhood, and have undergirded the racialized and gendered experience of Muslim women (hijabi or not) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Islamophobia has also impacted Muslim communities in subversive and overt ways. For western Muslim communities after 9/11, experiences with racialization have meant a constant exposure to orientalist (mis)representations of Muslims and Islam in media discourse, microaggressions and hate crimes, and a constant questioning of their loyalty to the nation, their religion, and belonging as citizens of the west (Selod 2015). The assumed incompatibility of their religious identity with their ability to be American, British or ‘western’ increases their susceptibility to becoming racialized especially by the public (Mir 2011). While Muslim communities in the west and globally, continue to experience racialization and Islamophobia, a key focus of work that is missing from this scholarship is how Muslim communities have *reacted* to their racialization. While some literature examines individual and community level strategies undertaken by Muslims (Bakalian and Bozorghmehr 2009; Abdul-Khabeer 2016; Love 2017), there is still a dearth of scholarship that examines community-level reactions to the Islamophobia that Muslim communities continue to face. One of my arguments in this dissertation has been that Muslim communities have reacted to their racialization by burdening Muslim women with racialized and gendered responsibilities to represent the Muslim community and faith in ways that not only subvert Islamophobia, but also embody an ideal Muslim womanhood that aligns with Muslim male interpretations of the Islamic faith and Muslim femininity. In this manner, my study seeks to address a glaring gap in the literature.

Interestingly enough, despite the negative and Islamophobic mass mediated portrayals of Muslim women, we have seen a surge of Muslim women and positive Muslimah representations on social media, through the emergence of Muslimah social media influencers. Muslimah

influencers are using fashion, lifestyle, beauty, comedy, and other ways with which to dis-identify with orientalist and racialized stereotypes and perceptions of Muslims. In their professions as social media influencers, they are rearticulating alternative representations that align more with their self-perceptions (Peterson 2018; Islam 2019) while also connecting with others, participating in important conversations, offering one another with ideas on how to blend fashion and modesty through DIY tutorials, and more importantly, taking control over shaping discourses about Muslim women (Bouclin 2013; Lewis 2013; Woodhead 2013; Peterson 2016; Evolvi 2017). While social media offers significant cultural, economic, and political opportunities to Muslimah influencers, their (hyper)visibility on these platforms also subjects them to a variety of gazes (e.g., western, non-western, Islamophobic, and Muslim community gazes) all of which are surveilling and subjecting Muslim women to certain assumptions and expectations. Since they are rendered so visible in others' view on social media, Muslimah influencers – especially hijabi ones – tend to be generalized by their audiences and the broader public as a singular representation of Muslim women, and Muslim womanhood. Their self-presentations, words, messages, actions, embodied practices, sartorial choices, and life choices all become burdened with the responsibility of representing Muslim women, Muslim womanhood, and the Muslim community and faith. Consequently, the responsibility of their personal and public choices, and their gendered, racial, or religious performances renders Muslimah influencers subject to the surveillance and scrutiny of Muslim and non-Muslim communities, both of whose experiences and understandings of Muslims and Islam are inevitably shaped by discourses of Islamophobia and the global war on terror. So, while they are uniquely hypervisible Muslim women with public lives, examining the kinds of public scrutiny that Muslimah influencers experience is indicative of the racialized and gendered responsibilities placed on everyday Muslim women in Islamophobic contexts, primarily because



Muslim women in the west share something in common: they are racialized beings, and are constrained in their behavior as a result of the Islamophobic contexts in which they reside. Consequently, this study departs from a theoretical framework grounded in discourses and understandings of Islamophobia, racialization, feminist theory, and social media, in order to make an intellectual contribution to each area.

## **FINDINGS**

In this study, I made two key arguments. First, I argued that racialized and gendered expectations of Muslim womanhood emerge on the one hand, from the western non-Muslim community's racialized perceptions and understandings of Muslim women and Islam as informed by discourses of Islamophobia and the global war on terror. On the other, these racialized and gendered expectations emerge from the western Muslim community's reaction to its racialization in the global war on terror. This reaction takes on a gendered nature, resulting in the imposition of certain representational and moral responsibilities on Muslim women's shoulders, who are regarded as visible and public representatives of the Muslim community and of Islam as a faith.

Second, I argued that in response to the burden of these expectations, Muslim women exercise their agency to mobilize Islamic feminisms to their advantage in order to negotiate with, resist, and critique western Muslim and non-Muslim expectations of modesty, piety, empowerment, and the hijab, especially as these relate to conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood. In mobilizing Islamic feminisms to critique racialized and gendered expectations, Muslim women are forcing western Muslim and non-Muslim communities to reevaluate their expectations of who fits within the category the 'Muslim Woman', while also opening up a discursive space for the possibility of new formulations and conceptualizations of Muslim womanhood that are more aligned with egalitarian Islamic feminist interpretations of Muslimah

ways of living and being. In the following subsections, I describe each chapter's purpose and main findings, concluding with my suggestions for future directions for research.

## **Chapter Two: (Un)Veiling Expectations**

In this chapter, I contextualized online conversations surrounding dejab Muslimah influencers and their public acts to dejab within contexts and discourses of Islamophobia and liberal western and orientalist feminisms. I showed that there are three specific gendered and racialized expectations with which Muslim women must contend and navigate: the Good Muslimah, the Strong Muslimah and the Doubly Burdened Muslimah. The Good Muslimah expectation is grounded in the perception that only hijabi women are practicing Muslims. As public representatives, hijabi Muslim women are expected to behave as Good Muslims who closely observe their religious practice, publicly demonstrate their commitment to the faith, and seek to identify with the Muslim community via the hijab. Thus, those who do not wear the hijab, are thus not regarded as 'representatives' of the faith or Muslim community, and also not regarded as 'authentic Muslims.' As for the second expectation, hijabi Muslim women in particular are viewed as 'Strong Muslimahs' in that their visibility serves as a statement of resistance to Islamophobia and pressures of secularism. As Strong Muslimahs, Muslim women are often the source of pride for Muslim communities who are not only contending with Islamophobia collectively, but are looking to find ways to encourage Muslim youth to increase their religious affiliation and practice in the face of secularization. Muslim women are thus expected by their Muslim communities to guide young Muslims on how to navigate the difficult terrain of being a visible and practicing Muslim in spite of Islamophobia, and in spite of pressures of secularization. Finally, the third expectation, which is the Doubly Burdened Muslimah, is grounded in the assumption that Muslim women who wear the hijab or take off the hijab do so not out of their own choice, but because they

are forced to do so by others. Simultaneously, this same expectation also expects Muslim women to contradict the denial of agency, and to present their choices as *their* choices, even though their choices may be influenced by external factors, such as the Muslim community's gendered social surveillance of Muslim womanhood. These three expectations are evident in the analysis of the conversations and controversies surrounding the dejabbing of several Muslimah influencers in recent years.

This chapter also discusses the risk that Muslim women take when they criticize the Muslim community for its gendered social surveillance: the double bind. The double bind of 'gendered racism' and 'racialized sexism' is a phenomenon experienced by women of minority communities. Due to their marginalized positions in both the majority and minority communities in which they belong, women who speak out about "the oppressive practices in their own community, such as gendered violence, can result in being treated like a traitor by their own community, while also reinforcing negative stereotypes of the majority society of oppressive, backward cultures" (Ho 2007:296). For Muslimah influencers, critiquing Muslim communities risks the double bind in that they risk reinforcing Islamophobia and liberal western and orientalist feminist assumptions of Muslim oppression, Islamic misogyny, and gendered surveillance. At the same time however, I note that when Muslimah influencers dejab, share their motivations and experiences of having dejabbed, and critique Islamophobic and Muslim communities for their racialized and gendered expectations of Muslim women, they are calling for a reevaluation of an obsession over Muslimah bodies and chosen public expressions of faith.

### **Chapter Three: When Modesty Meets Aesthetic Labor**

This chapter examines the complex relationship that Islamic principles of modesty share with aesthetic labor in the intersections of the social media influencer and fashion industries in

order to argue that modesty remains a key tenet of conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood. In unpacking this relationship, I show how modesty, as it is understood by Muslim male interpreters of Islamic texts, and by cultural authorities in secular circles of fashion, is deemed to be antithetical to aesthetic labor within the influencer and fashion industries. I place Muslimah social media influencers at the center of this conflict, to show how Muslimah influencers involved in these industries face challenges that are unique to Muslim women in racialized contexts of western spaces. In particular, I show that Muslim women who reside in western spaces are simultaneously subject to multiple and sometimes contradictory heteronormative gendered, religious, and racialized norms and expectations that emerge from the social contexts in which they reside and form their subjectivities. For example, on the one hand, Muslim women are expected to modify their performances of modesty to align with secular expectations of fashion and aesthetic labor, but on the other, they are expected to observe modesty according to how Muslim male scholars interpret Islamic principles of modesty. I argue that this conflict illustrates that modesty – as a Muslim virtue, is deemed fundamental to contemporary conceptions and performances of Muslim womanhood, and plays a key role in shaping the kinds of racialized and gendered expectations that are held of Muslim women by western Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Treated as an attribute of the Muslim woman, modesty not only shapes the Muslimah lived experience, but also hinders or facilitates her social, cultural and economic opportunities by denying or enabling her aesthetic labor. I conclude this chapter by suggesting that due to the nature of Islamophobic discourses in current contexts of a post-9/11 era, and due to the proliferation of Muslim male scholarly interpretation of Islamic scripture in Muslim communities, modesty is pitted against the pursuit of any kind of aesthetic labor in the fashion and influencer industries,

thereby creating what may seem to be unsurmountable challenges in these industries, with which Muslim women must then contend.

#### **Chapter Four: You call that modest?**

In this chapter, I examine how Muslimah social media influencers are policed for, and negotiate with the policing of their modesty and aesthetic labor in the digitally mediated modest fashion industry. My findings show that influencers are policed on the basis of three critiques of their modesty and aesthetic labor: (1) They prioritize the *Dunya* (the worldly) over their *Deen* (their religion) by focusing on physical appearance rather than the personal and spiritual characteristics of the self; (2) Their hypervisibility on social media and in the modest fashion industry is in violation of Islamic principles of *awrah*, and (3) Their aesthetic labor in these industries invites their sexualization by others, which is inherently in contradiction to core principles of Islamic modesty. Consequently, in response to their policing, Muslimah influencers apply Islamic feminist interpretations of Quranic principles of modesty to critique their policing while also reconciling the perceived incompatibility of modesty with their aesthetic labor. They use Islamic feminist interpretations of modesty in two ways: First, they emphasize that modesty is and can be interpreted in a number of different ways. For example, for some influencers, modesty is understood as more than just whether one covers their body or conceals their *awrah*; it also involves a purity of intentions, and a priority of one's relationship with God. Second, they argue that the aesthetic labor that they undertake on social media and in the modest fashion industry is a form of *dawah* (proselytizing Islam), and is undertaken in the pursuit of encouraging others to observe religious morals and virtues, such as modesty.

Using these findings, I make two critical arguments in this chapter. First, I argue that in using Islamic feminist interpretations, Muslimah influencers operate as pious critical agents, who

redefine modesty through an Islamic feminist lens for the purpose of forcing the Muslim community to reevaluate its patriarchal conceptions of modesty and expectation of modesty as the sole responsibility of Muslim *women*. Second, I argue that by examining the policing of Muslimah influencers, and their negotiation of policing, we can glean a better understanding of the kinds of racialized and gendered expectations of Muslim women that shape contemporary notions of Muslim womanhood in current contexts of Islamophobia. Thus, this chapter underscores the potentials of Islamic feminism in the lives of Muslim women, and in terms of defining the practice and performativity of Muslim women's subjectivities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH**

Several opportunities for new critical research arise through this research project. Firstly, it is imperative that we gain a better understanding of how Muslim communities are reacting and responding to their racialization. A plethora of literature has critically elucidated the impact that racialization, the global war on terror, and the global phenomenon of Islamophobia have on Muslim communities. However, there is little to naught work on how Muslim communities are collectively strategizing, negotiating and responding to their racialized experiences. I have sought to address this gap by demonstrating that Muslim communities have reacted to their experiences by imposing a gendered burden on Muslim women to represent the community and Islamic faith. However, there is more that can be said, especially in terms of the expectations held of Muslim men, of those in the Muslim community (regardless of gender), and other social or political strategies that offer Muslim communities with a way in which they can respond and react to Islamophobia.

Secondly, since the focus of this study has been Muslim women, it would be invaluable for future researchers to examine the expectations being held of Muslim men, by the broader western

public, and by Muslim communities in the west. Conceptualizing notions or performances of Muslim masculinity within these spaces, especially as contextualized in relation to Islamophobia would not only add depth to the findings of this study, but also offer valuable insight into how the Muslim community is responding to its racialization. Furthermore, Muslim masculinities or ‘manhood’ have not been well documented in social science research, save for the few studies that examine orientalist Muslim male representations in film and mass media (Said 1979; Kerboua 2016; Haider 2020).

Thirdly, this study highlights the dire need for more studies that center Muslim women in analyses of politics of representation. I have argued that as visible representatives, Muslim women are not only experiencing Islamophobia, but are expected to resist and critique it as well. While my focus has been on the realm of social media, it is important to also account for how Muslim women in offline spaces, remain on the front line of action against Islamophobia (e.g., Dalia Mogahed, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib). Their hypervisibility as Muslim women in the public eye and within the political realm makes them particularly vulnerable to Islamophobia and demonization, as a result of their Muslim and gendered identities. However, at the same time, much like the influencers in this study, they are also criticized by their Muslim communities for speaking out about social and political issues, and for being hypervisible in what have traditionally been regarded as heteronormatively masculine spaces (i.e., politics and the public sphere). Understanding the nature of why Muslim women are given the responsibility to speak out against Islamophobia, in social media and in offline spaces is increasingly important, given that Muslim women continue to be given the brunt of responsibility in terms of representing the faith, and Muslim community.

Finally, as chapters three and four have argued, we desperately need a better understanding of the role that Muslim women are playing in the booming modest fashion industry. Their roles, and the challenges that they face as a result of their intersectional and marginalized identities inform us a great deal about the latent (and not so latent) Islamophobia and barriers to diversity and inclusion that exist within this industry. Moreover, studies on Muslim women in the modest fashion industry might also prove insightful to authorities within this industry, who are looking to make this space, and their demands for aesthetic labor more inclusive, and sensitive to the diversity that they wish to incorporate and represent.



## REFERENCES

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 783-90.
- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2013. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Harvard University Press.
- Adelman, Madelaine, Edna Erez, and Nareda Shalhoub-Kevorkian. 2003. "Policing violence against minority women in multicultural societies: 'Community' and the politics of exclusion." *Police and Society*, 7:105–133.
- Ahmed, Afia. 2018. "How the Turban Hijab Became a Symbol of the Modern Muslim Woman." Blog Post on Amaliah.com. July 2, 2018. Web.  
<https://www.amaliah.com/post/40756/turban-hijab-became-symbol-modern-muslim-woman>
- Ahmed, Leila. 1992. *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*. Yale University Press.
- Ahmed, Leila. 2005. "The Discourse of the Veil." *Post Colonialisms: an Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Al-Fartousi, May, and Mogadime, Dolana. 2012. "Media Representations of Muslim Women Wearing the Burka." In Mitchell R.C., Moore S.A. (eds.), *Politics, Participation & Power Relations. Critical Issues in The Future of Learning and Teaching*. Sense Publishers: Rotterdam, pp. 169-181.

- Ali, Saba R. Torricia Yamada, and Armina Mahmood. 2015. "Relationships of the practice of hijab, workplace discrimination, social class, job stress, and job satisfaction among Muslim American women." *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 52: 146-157.
- Abdul-Khabeer, Su'ad. 2016. *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*. New York Press.
- Alsaffar, Naba. 2020. "The Dark Truth about Ex-Hijabi Influencers." Kalima Institute. June 26, 2020 URL: [The Dark Truth about Ex-Hijabi Influencers - Kalima Institute](#)
- Alsech, Eli. 2007. "Out of Sight and Therefore Out of Mind: Early Sunni Islamic Modesty Regulations and the Creation of Spheres of Privacy." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 66(4):267-290
- Al-Qaradawi, Yusuf, 1992. *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam (Al Halal Wal-Haram Fil Islam)*. Translators Kamal El-Helbawy, M. Moinuddin Siddiqui, Syed Shukry. Kuwait: Al Faisal Press.
- Afshar, Haleh. 2008. "Can I see your hair? Choice, agency and attitudes: the dilemma of faith and feminism for Muslim women who cover." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 31(2): 411-427.
- A Muslimah's Blog. 2013. "Open letter to Hijabi Fashionistas." *A Muslim's Thoughts* (Wordpress). November 26, 2013. URL: <https://amuslimsthoughts.wordpress.com/2013/11/26/open-letter-to-hijabi-fashionistas/>
- Anthias, Floya and Yuval-Davis, Nira. 1992. *Racialized boundaries*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Anwar, Etin. 2018. *A Genealogy of Islamic Feminism: Pattern and Change in Indonesia*. New York: Routledge.

- Ash-Sharawy, Mohammed, 1991. *The Explanation of Ash-Sharawy (Tafsir Ash-Sharawy)*, Vols .4 and 19. Egypt: Dar Akbar Aliom.
- Aslan, Reza. 2005. *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam*. Random House Publishing.
- Baulch, Emma and Alila Pramiyanti. 2018. "Hijabers on Instagram: Using Visual Social Media to Construct the Ideal Muslim Woman." *Social Media + Society*, October-December 2018: 1-15.
- BBC. 2021. "Supermodel Halima Aden: 'Why I Quit.'" *BBC News*, 14 January 2021. URL: [Supermodel Halima Aden: 'Why I quit' - BBC News](#)
- Belgatti, Pavan. 2017. "The Importance and Impact of Influencer Marketing in 2017". Influencive. July 13, 2017. Retrieved from Influencive: <https://www.influencive.com/the-importance-and-impact-of-influencer-marketing/>
- Bergkvist, Lars and Zhou, Kris Qiang. 2016. "Celebrity Endorsements: A Literature Review and Research Agenda." *International Journal of Advertising*. 35(4), 642-663.
- Beydoun, Khaled. A. 2018. *American Islamophobia*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Boubekour, Amel. 2016. "Islamic business and Muslim Entrepreneurs networks in Europe: performing transnational modernity and overcoming marginalization." *Contemporary Islam*. 10, 421-432.
- Bouclin, Suzanne. 2013. 'YouTube and Muslim Women's Legal Subjectivities', *Oñati Socio-Legal Series*. 3(7), 1158-1183.

- Bakalian, Anny and Medhi Bozorghmehr. 2009. *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Boulanouar, Aisha Wood. 2006. "The Notion of Modesty in Muslim Women's Clothing: An Islamic Point of View." *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 8(2): 134–156.
- Bowen, J. 2007. *Why the French Don't like Headscarves: Islam, the State and Public Space*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press
- Bucar, Elizabeth M. 2015. "Secular Fashion, Religious Dress and Modest Ambiguity: The Visual Ethics of Indonesian Fashion Veiling." *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 44(1): 68-90
- Bucar, Elizabeth. 2017. *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Bulut, Elif, and Helen Rose Ebaugh. 2014. Religion and Assimilation Among Turkish Muslim Immigrants: Comparing Practicing and Non-Practicing Muslims. *Int. Migration & Integration* 15, 487–507. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/10.1007/s12134-013-0301-9>
- Caffyn, Grace. 2016. "Brands tap Muslim influencers to access a giant demographic." *Digiday*. September 14, 2016. URL: <https://digiday.com/marketing/generation-m-brands-tap-muslim-influencers-access-giant-demographic/>
- Cainkar, Louise. A. 2009. *Homeland insecurity*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation
- Cainkar, Louise and Selod, Saher. Review of Race Scholarship and the War on Terror. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 4(2), 165-177.
- Carens, Joseph H. 2000. *Culture, Citizenship and Community: A Contextual Exploration of Justice as Evenhandedness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Caron, Christina, and Salam, Maya. 2018. "Macy's Courts Muslims With New Hijab Brand." *New York Times*, February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/08/business/macys-hijabs.html>
- Casaló, Luis V., Flavián, Carlos and Ibáñez-Sánchez, Sergio. (In Press). "Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership." *Journal of Business Research*.
- Chaffey, D. 2018. "Global social media research summary 2018". Smart Insights [Online], retrieved at <https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/>.
- Collins, Patricia H. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, NY
- cooke, miriam. 2000. "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies." *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1(1): 91-110
- cooke, miriam. 2008. "Religion, Gender, and the Muslimwoman" Roundtable Discussion, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 24(1), 91-119.
- Drenten, Jenna, Lauren Gurrieri and Meagan Tyler. 2020. "Sexualized labor in digital culture: Instagram influencers, porn chic and the monetization of attention" *Gender, Work and Organizations*. 27" 41-66
- El-Guindi, Fadwa. 1999. *Veil. Modesty, Privacy and Resistance*. London: Berg Publishers.
- Esposito, Elena. 2020. "Is Modest Fashion Modest?" *ZoneModa Journal*, 10(15):115-119

- Evolvi, Giulia. 2017. "Hybrid Muslim identities in digital space: The Italian blog *Yalla*." *Social Compass*. 64(2), 220-232.
- Eyadat, Zaid. 2013. "Islamic Feminism: Roots, Development and Policies." *Global Policy*, 4(4):359-368.
- Fadil, Nadia. 2011. "Not-/unveiling as an ethical practice." *Feminist Review*, 98: 83-109
- Falah, Ghazi-Walid. 2005. "The Visual Representation of Muslim/Arab women in Daily Newspapers in the United States" in G. Falah and C. Nagel, *Geographies of Muslim women: Gender, Religion, and Space*. New York & London: The Guildford Press, pp. 300-329.
- Freberg, Karen, Graham, Kristin, McGaughey, Karen and Freberg, Laura A. 2011. "Who are the social media influencers? A study of public perceptions of personality." *Public Relations Review*. 37(1), 90-92.
- Garner, Steve and Selod, Saher. 2015. "The Racialization of Muslims: Empirical Studies of Islamophobia." *Critical Sociology*. 41(1), 9-19.
- Gauthier, Francois, and Thomas Martikainen. 2020. *The Marketization of Religion*. London: Routledge.
- Glapka, Ewa. 2018. "Lost in Translation: The Male Gaze and The (In)Visible Bodies of Muslim Women—A Response Article." *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 19(2). Online.
- Gökariksel, Banu. 2009. "Beyond the officially sacred: religion, secularism, and the body in the production of subjectivity." *Social & Cultural Geography*. 10(6): 657-674.

- Gökarkırsel, Banu and Secor, Anna. 2012. "Even I Was Tempted: The Moral Ambivalence and Ethical Practice of Veiling-Fashion in Turkey" *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. 102(4), 847-862.
- Gregory, Sophie. 2020. "The Muslim influencer who removed her hijab: a publicity stunt or a personal struggle?" Religion Media Centre. June 25, 2020. URL: [The Muslim influencer who removed her hijab: a publicity stunt or a personal struggle? - Religion Media Centre](#)
- Grosfoguel, Ramón and Eric Mielants. 2006. "The Long-Durée Entanglement Between Islamophobia and Racism in the Modern/ Colonial Capitalist/Patriarchal World-System: An Introduction." *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, 5(1): 1-13
- Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck and Jane I. Smith. 1994. *Muslim Communities in North America*. NY, Albany: State University of New York Press
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*. 14(3), 575-599.
- Haris, Ruqaiya. 2018. "Exploring Modest Fashion Blogger Dina Tokio's Hijab Controversy." *Dazed Beauty*. December 11, 2018. URL: [Exploring modest fashion blogger Dina Tokio's hijab controversy | Dazed Beauty \(dazeddigital.com\)](#)
- Hasan, Mahmudul M. 2012. "Feminism as Islamophobia: A review of misogyny charges against Islam." *Intellectual Discourse*. 20(1), 55-78.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Routledge.

- Hesse-Biber, Sharlene N. 2014. *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hjelm, Titus. E. 2015. *Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hirji, Faiza. 2011. "Through the Looking Glass: Muslim Women on Television – an Analysis of *24, Lost and Little Mosque on the Prairie*." *Global Media Journal – Canadian Edition*. 4(2), 33-47.
- Ho, Christina. 2007. "Muslim women's new defenders: Women's rights, nationalism and Islamophobia in contemporary Australia." *Women's Studies International Forum*. 30, 290-298.
- Ho, Christina. 2010. "Responding to Orientalist Feminism: Women's Rights and the War on Terror." *Australian Feminist Studies*, 25(66): 433-439.
- Hussein, Shakira. 2007. "The Limits of Force/Choice Discourses in Discussing Muslim Women's Dress Codes." *Transforming Cultures eJournal*, 2(1): 1-15.
- Islam, Inaash. 2017. *Racialization of Muslim-American Women in Public and Private Spaces: An Analysis of their Racialized Identity and Strategies of Resistance*. Master's Thesis in the Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech.
- Islam, Inaash. 2019. "Redefining #YourAverageMuslim woman: Muslim female digital activism on social media." *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 12(2): 213–233.
- Islam, Inaash. 2020. "Muslim American Double Consciousness." *Du Bois Review*, Online. 00(00): 1-20.



Izharuddin, Alicia. 2018. “‘Free Hair’: Narratives of Unveiling and the Reconstruction of the Self.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(1): 155-176.

Janmohamed, Shelina. 2016. *Generation M: Young Muslims Changing the World*. I.B. Tauris.

Jiwani, Yasmin. 2005. “Orientalizing ‘War Talk’: Representations of the Gendered Muslim Body Post-9/11 in the Montreal Gazette.” In Lee J. and Lutz J.S. *Situating “Race” and Racisms in Time, Space, and Theory: Critical Essays for Activists and Scholars*. Montreal and Kingston, ON: McGill Queen’s University Press, pp. 178-203.

Kádeková, Zdenka and Holienčinová, Mária. 2018. “Influencer Marketing as a Modern Phenomenon Creating a New Frontier of Virtual Opportunities.” *Communication Today*, 9(2), 91-105

Kassam, Ashifa. 2008. “The Weak, the Powerless, the Oppressed: Muslim Women in Toronto Media.” *Canadian Journal of Media Studies*, 4(1), 71–88.

Kerboua, Salim. 2016. “From Orientalism to neo-Orientalism: Early and contemporary constructions of Islam and the Muslim world.” *Intellectual Discourse*. 24(1), 7-34.

Kishi, Katayoun. 2017. “Assaults Against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level.”  
<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/>

Kozinets, Robert V. 2010. *Netnography: Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. Sage, London.

La Fornara, Lisa M. 2018. “Islam’s (In)compatibility with the West?: Dress Code Restrictions in the Age of Feminism.” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*. 25(1), 463-494.

- Lather, Patti. 1986. "Issues of Validity in Openly Ideological Research: Between a Rock and a Soft Place." *Interchange*. 17(4), 63-84.
- Lazreg, Marnia. 2009. *Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009
- Lewis, Reina. 2013. *Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith*. I.B. Tauris Publishing.
- Lewis, Reina. 2015. *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures*. Duke University Press.
- Lodi, Hafsa. 2020. *Modesty A Fashion Paradox: Uncovering the Causes, Controversies and Key Players Behind the Global Trend to Conceal, Rather than Reveal*. London: Neem Tree Press.
- Love, Erik. 2017. *Islamophobia and Racism in America*. New York Press.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton University Press.
- Maira, Sunaina. 2009. "Good and Bad Muslim Citizens: Feminists, Terrorists and U.S. Orientalisms." *Feminist Studies*. 35(3): 631-656.
- Mantel, Susan P. Cronley, Maria L. Cohen, Jeffrey L. and Frank R. Kardes. 2016. "Resistance to Electronic Word of Mouth as a Function of the Message Source and Context" in *Consumer Psychology in a Social Media World*. Edited by Claudiu V. Dimofte, Curtis P. Haugtvedt and Richard F. Yalch. Routledge. New York, NY.
- Maruoka-Donnelly, Etsuko. 2018. *Islamic Sisterhood: The Meaning of Veiling in Post-9/11 New York*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

- Maxfield, Michael. G., and Babbie, Earl. R. (2009) *Basics of Research Methods for Criminal Justice and Criminology* (3rd edition), Belmont: Thompson.
- Mears, Ashley. 2014. "Aesthetic Labor for the Sociologies of Work, Gender, and Beauty." *Sociology Compass*, 8(12): 1330-1343.
- MediaKix. 2018. "Why the influencer marketing industry will be a \$5–\$10 billion dollar market in the next 5 years." Retrieved from <http://mediakix.com/2018/03/influencermarketing-industry-ad-spend-chart/#gs.eTfr73kI>
- Medina, Jameelah. 2014. "This Battlefield Called My Body: Warring over the Muslim Female." *Religions*. 5, 876-885.
- Miller, Daniel, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, Shriram Venkatraman, and Xinyuan Wang. 2016. "What Is Social Media?" In *How the World Changed Social Media*, 1-8. London: UCL Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1g69z35.8>.
- Mir, Shabana. 2011. "Just to make sure people know I was born here: Muslim women constructing American selves." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. 32(4), 547-563.
- Moosavi, Leon. 2015. "The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and Their Experiences of Islamophobia." *Critical Sociology*. 41(1), 41-56.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Nagra, Baljit. 2011. “‘Our Faith Was Also Hijacked by Those People’: Reclaiming Muslim Identity in Canada in a Post-9/11 Era.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(3): 425-441.
- Nandagiri, Vaibhavi and Philip, Leena. 2018. “Impact of Influencers from Instagram and Youtube on their Followers”, *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Modern Education*, 4(1), 61-65.
- NN. 2019. “Wrapped in meaning”. *Icon*, Online.
- Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005. “Policy and Guidelines on Racism and Racial Discrimination”, (Toronto: OHRC), online: and the definition adopted by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation and the definition adopted by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation as seen in the “Islamophobia” (14 July 2015), online: Canadian Race Relations Foundation
- Peterson, Kristin M. 2016. “Post a Comment Below: Aesthetics and Authenticity in the YouTube Hijabi Community.” Thesis. Department of Religious Studies, University of Colorado.
- Peterson, Kristin M. 2018. “Voiceless Icons No More: The Self-Representations of Muslim American Lives in Digital Media.” Ph.D. Dissertation in the Department of Media Studies, University of Colorado Boulder.
- Rinaldo, Rachel. 2014. “Pious and Critical: Muslim Women Activists and the Question of Agency.” *Gender and Society*. 28(6), 824-846.
- Runnymede Trust. 1997. *Islamophobia: A challenge for us all*. London: Author.
- Said, Edward. W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.

- Salam, Muhammad T, Nazlida Binti Muhamad, and Vai Shiem Leong. 2020. "Modesty in Islamic fashion marketing communications in ASEAN." In *Muslim Piety as Economy: Markets, Meaning and Morality in Southeast Asia*. Johan Fisher and Jeremy Jammes (eds). NY: Routledge Publishing. Pp. 169-191
- Selod, Saher. 2015. "Citizenship Denied: Racialization of Muslim American Men and Women Post 9/11," *Critical Sociology*, 41, 77-95.
- Selod, Saher. 2018a. *Forever Suspect: Muslim Americans and Racialized Surveillance in the War on Terror*. Rutgers University Press.
- Selod, Saher. 2018b. "Gendered racialization: Muslim American men and women's encounters with racialized surveillance." *Journal of Ethnic and Racial Studies: Special Issue: The Mechanisms of Racialization beyond the Black/White Binary*. Online.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1445870>
- Selod, Saher and Embrick, David. 2013. "Racialization and Muslims: Situating the Muslim Experience in Race Scholarship." *Sociology Compass*. 7(8), 644-655.
- Shaheen, Jack G. 2001. *Reel bad Arabs: how Hollywood vilifies a people*. Northampton: Olive Branch Press.
- Sharkey, Linda. 2016. "Fashion Retailers Target Muslim Women With Hijab Lines After Uniqlo Launch." Independent UK. March 17, 2016. URL: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/features/hijab-uniqlo-fashion-muslim-consumers-dolce-gabbana-bloggers-hijarbie-a6935091.html>

- Singh, Balbir. 2017. "The Commodity Fetish of Modest Fashion." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, 4(3): 161-164
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1994. "Can the Subaltern Speak." In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Hartfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Syahrivar, Jhanghiz. 2020. "Hijab No More: A Phenomenological Study." *Journal of Religion and Health*, Online.
- Tariq, Memoona, and Jawad Syed. 2018. "An intersectional perspective on Muslim women's issues and experiences in employment." *Gender, Work, and Organizations*, 25: 495-513.
- Tarlo, Emma. 2009. *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith*. London: Berg.
- Tarlo, Emma and Moors, Annelies. 2013. *Islamic Fashion and Anti-fashion: New Perspectives From Europe and North America*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Terman, Rochelle. 2016. "Islamophobia, Feminism and the Politics of Critique". *Theory, Culture & Society*. 33(2): 77-102.
- The National. 2018. "Influencer Dina Torkia says online hijabi community is becoming like a toxic cult." November 5, 2018. URL: [Influencer Dina Torkia says online hijabi community is becoming like a toxic cult | The National \(thenationalnews.com\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/influencer-dina-torkia-says-online-hijabi-community-is-becoming-like-a-toxic-cult/2018/11/05)
- Warhurst, Chris and Dennis Nickson. 2009. "Who's Got the Look? Emotional, Aesthetic and Sexualized Labor in Interactive Services" *Gender, Work and Organization*, 16(3): 385-404.

- Warren, Saskia. 2018. "Placing faith in creative labour: Muslim women and digital media work in Britain." *Geoforum*, 97:1-9.
- Washington Post. 2001. "Text: Laura Bush on Taliban Oppression of Women." *Washington Post Online*. 17 November, URL: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext\\_111701.html?noredirect=on](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext_111701.html?noredirect=on)  
Accessed 27 October, 2018.
- Watt, Diane. 2012. "The Urgency of Visual Media Literacy in Our Post-9/11 world: Reading Images of Muslim Women in the Print News Media." *The National Association for Media Literacy Education's Journal of Media Literacy Education*. 4(1), 32-43.
- Weedon, Chris. 2004. *Identity and Culture*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Williams, J Patrick, and Kamaludeen, Mohammed N. 2017. "Muslim girl culture and social control in Southeast Asia: Exploring the hijabista and hijabster phenomena." *Crime, Media, Culture*. 13(2), 199-216.
- Woodhead, Linda. 2013. *Foreword*. In *Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith (Dress Cultures)* Reina Lewis and Elizabeth Wilson (eds). I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. New York NY.
- Wolcott, Harry F. *Transforming Qualitative Data: Description, Analysis and Interpretation*. Sage Publications.
- Zempi, Eirini-Chrysovalantou. 2014. "Unveiling Islamophobia: The Victimization of Veiled Muslim Women." Ph.D. Dissertation at the Department of Criminology, University of Leicester.

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: Sample of Muslimah Influencers

Name	Ethnicity	Nationality (if known)	Hijabi/Non-Hijabi/Dejabi	Interviewed	Instagram Handle
Jana Al-Akhras	Palestinian	American	Hijabi	Yes	@thealakhras
Zahraa Berro	Egyptian	American	Hijabi	Yes	@zahraa_hberro
Hoda Moda	Egyptian	Canadian	Hijabi	Yes	@byhodamoda
Manal Sharif	Somalian	British	Hijabi and Abaya wearer	Yes	@manalmiaa
Subeena Zubairi	Pakistani and Indian	American	Not hijabi, (Dejabi in the past)	Yes	@subeenaz
Summer Albarcha	Syrian	British/American	Hijabi	Yes	@summeralbarcha
Zainab Hassan	Nigerian	British	Hijabi	Yes	@zainabhassanxo



Mirna Othman	Lebanese	Canadian (Lebanese)	Hijabi	Yes	@mirnaothman
Zainab Ismail	Hispanic American	American	Hijabi	Yes	@zainab_fitforal lah
Maryam Deanna	Lebanese/ Bolivian	American	Hijabi	Yes	@maryamdeanna
Sarah Rayan Al- As	Indonesian, Algerian, & Yemini.	Canadian	Hijabi	Yes	@sxxraah
Yusra Siddiqui	Pakistani	American	Hijabi	Yes	@thatgirlyusra
Nadirah Pierre	African American	American	Hijabi	Yes	@nadirah.p
Noha Hamid	Egyptian, Turkish, Lebanese, Moroccan	American	Hijabi	Yes	@nohahamid
Dina Torkia/ Dina Tokio	Egyptian/ British	British	Dejabi	No	@dinatokio
Amena Khan	Indian	British	Dejabi	No	@amenakhan

Nabiilabee	Russian/ Algerian	British	Hijabi	No	@nabiilabee
Halima Aden	Somali	American	Hijabi	No	@halima
Noor Tagouri	Libyan	American	Hijabi	No	@noor
Saufeeya Goodson	Moroccan/ American	American/United Arab Emirates	Dejabi	No	@saufeeya
Maria Alia	Palestinian/ Puerto Rican	American	Hijabi	No	@mariaalia
Yasmin Kenar	Turkish/ Cuban	American	Hijabi	No	@yazthespaz89
Yasmeena Sabry	Egyptian	American	Hijabi	No	@y.asmeena
Zaheera Mohammed	Trinidadian	Canadian	Hijabi	No	@zaheee22
Shahd Batal	Sudanese American	American	Hijabi	No	@shahdbatal
Ascia Akf	Kuwaiti	American/United Arab Emirates	Dejabi	No	@ascia
Aysha Harun	Ethiopian	Canadian	Hijabi	No	@ayshaharun

Aaliyah JM	Pakistani	British	Dejabi, then rewore hijab	No	@aaliyah.jm
Salma Hindy	Egyptian	Canadian	Hijabi	No	@salma.hindy
Hanan Tehaili	Lebanese	Canadian	Dejabi	No	@hanantehaili

## APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

1. What is it that you hope that people will get from your creative work online?
2. Could you describe how you came to become a social media influencer?
3. Have you faced any difficulties throughout your career, perhaps in regards to your relationship with your audience, or perhaps brand advertising or association?
4. Could you explain your relationship with modest fashion?
  - a. Why have you chosen to curate and perform modest fashion?
  - b. Why do you think other Muslimah influencers are also incorporating modest fashion on their platforms? (Why is this becoming a trend)
5. Do you think the increased presence of Muslimah influencers on social media such as yourself, affects how people in the west, like the US or the UK understand Muslim women, or Islam?
6. Do you view your work as political in any way? Do you prefer to discuss or align yourself with any social or political issues on your platform? If so, why, and if not, why not?
7. Do you see yourself as a representative of Muslim women? Are you coopted as a representative of Islam or Muslim women? Does this create any complications for you in your work or in your personal life?
8. Could you describe how your racial, religious, ethnic, or national identity play a part in your creative work online?
9. Do you think your hijab/lack of hijab plays a role in your career or success as a Muslimah influencer? Does this complicate your relationship with brands or your audience in any way?

10. Why do you use Instagram and YouTube? Do you have a preference for a particular platform?

## APPENDIX C: Qualitative Survey Protocol for ‘Audience’

SURVEY TITLE: Following Muslimah Influencers and Modest Fashion (IRB #20-273)

Q1

Please select your gender.

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary
- Trans
- Other

Q2

What is your religious affiliation?

- Islam
- Christianity
- Judaism
- Buddhism
- Hinduism
- Agnostic
- Atheist
- Other

Q3

Name 3 Muslim female influencers whom you follow?

Q4

Which social media platform(s) do you use to follow Muslim female influencers? Select all that apply.

- Instagram
- YouTube
- TikTok
- Snapchat
- Pinterest
- Facebook
- Others

Q5

Why do you follow Muslim female influencers?

Q6

Do you see Muslim female influencers as being representatives of Muslim women?

- Yes
- No
- Depends

Q7

Have you ever bought a product that was advertised by a Muslim female influencer?

- Yes
- Maybe

- No
- Can't remember

Q8

How do you define modest fashion?

Q9

Have Muslim female influencers inspired you to wear or curate modest fashion?

- Yes
- No
- Other

Q10

What are your thoughts and feelings on hijabi Muslim influencers taking off their hijab?

Q11

Should audiences hold influencers accountable for making their personal choices public? (e.g. interfaith marriage, taking off the hijab, getting tattoos, etc.) Please explain.

Q12

Do you see the increased visibility of Muslim female influencers as a positive or negative thing?

- Positive
- Negative



Other

Q13

Have you ever personally reached out to an influencer for questions on marriage, kids, jobs, balancing cultures, life decisions, etc.?

Yes

Maybe

No

Q14

Do you think that having a public platform means that influencers have a duty to raise awareness on social issues such as the BLM movement, Uighar Muslims, the Israel-Palestine conflict, etc.?

Yes

No

It depends

Q15

If you had any thoughts regarding Muslim female influencers that you wanted to add, please add these thoughts below!

## **APPENDIX D: Recruitment Materials**

### **Interview Participant Recruitment Script:**

EMAIL SUBJECT LINE: Research Participation Requested

EMAIL CONTENT:

Dear XXX,

I hope you are doing well!

My name is Inaash Islam (pronouns she/her), and I am a PhD student in Sociology at the university of Virginia Tech.

I am currently conducting my dissertation research on Muslimah social media influencers such as yourself, and the amazing work that you are all doing on your platforms (IRB#20-273). I have been a BIG fan of your work, and because of your standing as part of this community, I was hoping that you would be willing to talk to me about your work!

Here is some information about the study, and about what I would need from you if you were interested in being a part of my research:

- I am looking at the kinds of creative content that Muslimah social media influencers are producing on Instagram and YouTube.
- Your participation would entail one interview with myself, that can either be done over Zoom, or over email – whichever you prefer!
- Because I am looking at your creative content, I would need your permission to include some of your work (e.g. photos, captions, video transcripts) in my research as well.

- Unfortunately, as this project is unfunded, I cannot offer you any monetary compensation; however, I can offer some exposure of your (user)name and work in my research, in future articles, and potentially a future book! However, if you would like to participate but remain anonymous, that can be arranged too!

There are also a few documents attached to this email that you can look over as you make your decision:

1. Consent form: needs to be signed if you agree to participate in the study.
  - If you prefer the Zoom interview, you don't need to sign the consent form; I can record your verbal consent to participate during our Zoom interview.
  - If you prefer to write your answers to the interview questions in a Word document, then please sign the attached consent form, and send it back to me along with your answers.
2. Interview: the 10 questions that I would be asking you about your work.
3. And, my CV, just to show you I am actually a PhD student and researcher at Virginia Tech, who is currently researching Muslimah social media influencers.

If you would at all be interested in participating, or have any questions regarding the study or myself, please contact me at [inaashi1@vt.edu](mailto:inaashi1@vt.edu). I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

Your participation in this study would be absolutely amazing, and would offer valuable insight to the public regarding the important work Muslimah influencers are doing online!

Thank you!

**Audience Recruitment Script:**

Do you follow Muslim female influencers for fashion inspiration?

If so, take this short, 10 minute survey to be part of a research project that studies Muslim female influencers, their audiences, and the industry of modest fashion.

Your responses are completely anonymous. No identifying information is collected. Only those above the age of 18 should take this survey. Your participation is voluntary; you may end this survey or skip a question at any point. Taking this survey indicates your consent to participate.

**About me:**

I am a PhD student at a university in Virginia who is conducting this research for my dissertation (IRB #20-273). This research project is supervised by \_\_\_\_\_, who is also the principal investigator. He can be reached at \_\_\_\_\_. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me \_\_\_\_\_.

## APPENDIX E: Codebook

### Theme: Islamophobia Context

- Media
- Representation
- Politics
- Immigrant
- Religion
- Ability
- Career
- Clothing
- Hijabi
- Islam vs. West
- Visibility
- Culture

### Theme: Muslim Communities

- Burden
- Good impressions
- Haram Police
- Navigating expectations
- Racism
- Secularization
- Expectations

- Responsibility
- Moral/ Morality
- Critiques
- Platforms equal power
- Religion
- Cultural expectations

### Theme: Social Media

- Attention Economy
- Beauty
- Body
- Building Community
- Business Entrepreneurship
- Creative Outlet
- Followings
- Influencer industry
- Interfaith alliances
- Journey
- Mental Health
- Opportunity
- Platforms
  - YouTube

- Instagram

- Pressures to live up to image
- Social Justice
- Surveillance

**Theme: Modesty**

- East West – Islam West
- Fashion
- Interpretations
- Islamic Capitalism
- Modest Fashion Industry
- Modest Fashion
- Modesty
- Problems of Modest Fashion
- Religiosity
- Resistance
- Sexual Objectification
- Hypervisibility

**Theme: Hijab/Dejab**

- Agency
- Emotional for followers
- Empowerment
- Feminism
- Hijab as Choice
- Hijab as Fard
- Impact
- Islamophobia
- Meaning of Hijab
- Men/Women Criticisms
  - Men
  - Women
- Pressures Career
- Religiosity
- Dejab
- Responsibility