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Samah Haydar Badawi Sadig April 8, 2019

Triple Threat: An Exploration of Black Muslim Hijabi YouTubers

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Abstract

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Through the lens of Black Muslims women YouTubers, I explore racial and religious representations of identities and audience reception by investigating three research questions: (1) How does the intersectionality of the identities of Black Muslim women YouTubers get articulated in the content of their videos? (2) What role does creating content for YouTube play in identity formation of Black Muslim YouTubers? (3) How does the consumption of the videos of Black Muslim YouTubers impact their viewers' sense of self? Research has illustrated the role the consumption of media plays in forming values, attitudes and behaviors. However, I uniquely consider how creating media can impact the formation of identity for content creators. I argue that not only do the ways in which Black Muslim YouTubers understand and express their identity inform their content but it also impacts how audiences use YouTube to understand their identities. By creating videos, Black Muslim women YouTubers create a unique representational online space in which blackness and Islam coexist. The videos of Black Muslim YouTubers contest the marginalization that Black Muslims face in both predominantly Arab and South-Asian Muslim communities and, more broadly, a predominantly White societal and mass media context.

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INTRODUCTION

Through the lens of Black Muslim women YouTubers, I explore racial and religious representations of identities and audience reception by investigating three research questions: (1) How does the intersectionality of the identities of Black Muslim women YouTubers get articulated in the content of their videos? (2) What role does creating content for YouTube play in identity formation of Black Muslim YouTubers? (3) How does the consumption of the videos of Black Muslim YouTubers impact their viewers' sense of self? Research has illustrated the role the consumption of media plays in forming values, attitudes and behaviors. However, I uniquely consider how creating media can impact the formation of identity for content creators. I argue that not only do the ways in which Black Muslim YouTubers understand and express their identity inform their content but it also impacts how audiences use YouTube to understand their identities. By creating videos, Black Muslim women YouTubers create a unique representational online space in which blackness and Islam coexist. The videos of Black Muslim YouTubers contest the marginalization that Black Muslims face in both predominantly Arab and South-Asian Muslim communities and, more broadly, a predominantly White societal and mass media context.

THE RISE OF YOUTUBE

In a post-television era in which the act of sitting down to watch cable television is significantly declining (Strangelove 5), the scope of mainstream media is constantly shifting with new films and TV series being produced and consumed at a faster pace than ever before. With a surplus of mainstream media content in film and television, consumers have turned to other media platforms for entertainment and to find their online communities. The rise of social media

platforms such as Myspace, Facebook, and Twitter has resulted in the development of practices and norms that encourage the sharing of their lives with other users. Many of these new media practices emphasize the importance of representation of the self. The ability to share a moment via status, photo or video urges users to give others this glimpse into their lives.

The standards of media creation and consumption have transformed with the rise of the video sharing platform YouTube (created in 2005), where users can uniquely create their own content. The success of YouTube and its proliferation among other social media sites (i.e. embedding videos on Facebook) lends itself to the rise of a "clip culture." Such a culture involves ordinary people who become creators, distributers and consumers who value moving-images that are shorter than a standard television show. According to Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (2009), clip culture "outpaces cinema and television" (11). The process by which any individual can film a clip, upload it onto YouTube and share the link is drastically quicker than the tedious production process of a film or TV series. Consequently, the consumption of clips has outpaced the consumption of film and television.

The success of YouTube was foreseeable after Google acquired it for $1.6 billion in 2006. Its success lies in its convenience and user accessibility (Burgess & Green 4). Moreover, access to a camera and the internet allows for virtually anyone to participate. YouTube's appeal lies in its simple features which uniquely allow users to visually produce and be the creators of the content their communities want to consume. YouTube has had a major impact on the social media world we live in now, a participatory culture in which consumers are encouraged to actively engage in the creation and circulation of new content" (Jenkins et al. 3). YouTube allows for more aspects of "daily life, more hidden areas of home life, and more trivial and mundane aspects of the everyday [to] now regularly [be] caught on camera and posted on

YouTube" (Strangelove 62). Because the film and television industry only tells the stories of some, users were interested in creating "'personally expressive media' which includes any mediated artifact or set of media that enables a creator to communicate aspects of the self" (Lange 16). Moreover, YouTube provides users the opportunity to participate in a "form of representational power—the power to tell their own stories" (Strangelove 8). Comparable to other social media platforms, YouTube highlights representations of the self; users utilize the platform to showcase the different facets of themselves. Furthermore, "YouTube is…a space in which individuals can represent their identities and perspectives, engage with the self-representations of others, and encounter cultural difference" (Burgess & Green 81). Essentially, YouTube reflects broader society.

YouTube empowers creators to redefine a broader pop-culture. As Kevin Allocca articulates in his work, popular culture has shifted to being driven by individuals and the major voices of this generation are these individuals who create things on the internet, as opposed to actors and celebrities (42). Because people turned to YouTube for non-commercial content, YouTube has become the amalgamation of the "extreme diversity of human behavior" (Strangelove 34). Participation in any online group leads to a sense of community. However, because of the scale at which YouTube operates, many niche audiences have developed, thus creating fragmented, separate communities on YouTube. As a result, YouTube has no one audience. This similarly reflects the way television audiences have been increasingly divided. Moreover, many "cultural patterns" can be observed on YouTube, and there is an apparent "cultural fragmentation within online video" communities (Strangelove 26).

YouTube's advancement of new algorithms has been attributed to this increase in the fragmentation of online communities by incorporating systems that allow YouTube to analyze

viewing habits and behaviors in order to individualize and personalize viewing sessions (Alloca 107). This is apparent with the development and incorporation of features such as the Autoplay feature which claims to make it easier to decide what to watch next, but really, it automatically plays a video that has similar tags and content to the one a viewer just watched 5 seconds after it ends. Similarly, the "Recommended For You" page determines a set of related videos that a viewer is likely to watch after viewing a given video. It does so by tracking videos watched and favorited by the user and thus personalizes the viewing experience for users. This individualized viewing experience encourages viewers to perpetuate the viewing of similar types of videos which subsequently creates a community of viewers who watch similar kinds of videos.

Like many other social media platforms, the users of YouTube negotiate and ultimately shape the "social norms of the network" (Burgess & Green 96). YouTube distinguishes itself from film and television with less emphasis on aesthetic value; meaning, a popular video that is deemed worthy of viewers does not necessarily need to be shot or edited in a manner that is considered professional. A lot of critics "lament the poor aesthetic quality and moral shiftiness of many of the self-made clips on YouTube" (Muller 126). However, YouTube's users have established YouTube as a space welcome to content that does not adhere to the aesthetic norms of film and television. Moreover, "YouTube is first and foremost a culture space of community building and shared experiences" (Muller 126).

YOUTUBERS, "LIKE, COMMENT, SUBSCRIBE!"

The rise of YouTube lends itself to the growing popularity of individuals who consistently create content for other users of YouTube. For the purpose of this study, I define a "YouTuber" as an individual who has gained popularity by creating videos and sharing them on

YouTube's platform. Furthermore, YouTubers today have an influential power over many people as both sources of information and entertainment. Impacting the way people think and choose to spend their money, the central role YouTubers play in the internet economy and popular culture sphere is evident.

The professionalization of YouTube as a career is a growing phenomenon. Many YouTubers abandon their day jobs to "do" YouTube full-time, creating and broadcasting videos to loyal audiences. This professionalization of YouTube is feasible because advertising companies have infiltrated the video sharing site. At YouTube's start, advertising companies were uncertain of how to use YouTube's popularity to their benefit, worried that "brands [might] appear next to questionable content" (Strangelove 6). By forcing viewers to watch ads at the beginning of videos (without the option to skip the ad), advertisers consequently simply discouraged viewers from continuing to watch videos. Because "online audiences tend to be fragmented…advertisers have been forced to rethink traditional ways of reaching their target groups" (Wasko and Erickson 282). Advertisers and brands began sponsoring popular YouTubers to take advantage of the influence these internet celebrities had over viewers. By encouraging audiences to purchase certain items from certain brands, YouTubers make money by creating and sharing their content. YouTubers also make money by linking their channels to Google AdSense which is a program that allows YouTubers to profit per view by allowing ads to play at the beginning (and sometimes the middle) of their videos. This commercialization of YouTube has made it a realistic career for many as it has become a source of income. Subsequent brand deals and other sources of income have made these YouTubers into social media influencers and more broadly vehicles of popular culture.

Popularity on YouTube is measured through the number of views, likes, comments and subscribers a YouTuber achieves. Thus, in order to gain popularity on YouTube, YouTubers have to solicit feedback and this, in turn, has established a common practice among YouTubers of incorporating these suggestions to "like, comment, and subscribe" in their videos. The monetization of views highly influences the way views are valued. However, understanding video popularity through views alone can be very deceiving (Alloca 104). Because YouTube is a participatory culture and YouTubers act as cultural resources for other YouTube users, "numbers of subscribers and video responses are so important in understanding how popularity works on YouTube" (Burgess & Green 100). By soliciting feedback, however, YouTubers face the harsh reality of potentially receiving hateful commentary. A "hater" on YouTube is "a person who posts rude and often racist, sexist, homophobic, or obscene messages" in the comments of a video (Strangelove 118). Haters are an unfortunate inevitable reality of becoming popular on YouTube.

YOUTUBE GENRES

The fragmentation of online communities on YouTube has given rise to many YouTube genres. Today, among the most popular are product review videos, how-to videos, and "vlogs". Vlogs (video blogs) developed alongside the rise of YouTube and are "typically structured primarily around a monologue delivered directly to a camera" (Burgess & Green 94). Easy to produce, vlogs "generally [require] little more than a webcam and basic camera skills…it is a form whose persistent direct address to the viewer inherently invites feedback" (Burgess & Green 54). This popular form of video allows viewers to get a look into the lives of YouTubers. Very similar to home videos, vlogs emphasize the value of informality and authenticity on

YouTube. By giving viewers a glimpse into their lives, vloggers (YouTubers who consistently vlog) create a sense of closeness between their viewers and themselves that reassures viewers of the community in which they are becoming a part. Moreover, vlogs blur the boundaries between "perceived public and private lives" as the informality and "every day feel" of their videos provide viewers with a perceived authenticity to the content they are consuming (Sobande 661). Vloggers reinforce online communities by calling their subscribers "family" and by encouraging others to subscribe to become "a part of the family." Many YouTubers are not exclusively vloggers. In order to gain popularity, YouTubers have to expand their content beyond one form of video. Thus, many YouTubers vlog how-to videos, instructing viewers on how to do something they may be particularly good at, and they film Q&A (Question & Answer) videos where they answer questions that their subscribers have for them.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS (SPONSORSHIPS)

With the rise of social media platforms, such as YouTube, individuals who gain significant following are deemed social media influencers as they have the power to impact the way their followers live their lives. Not only have brands noticed the ways social networks can be used to better "understand consumer behavior," but they also recognize the unique relationship social media influencers have with their following (Zeljko et al. 42). The trust between YouTubers and their followers allows them to impact "public decisions regarding the products they buy, the services they use, and the initiatives they are supporting" (Zeljko et al. 43). Many YouTubers solely utilize their channels to review products and give advice on how to use certain products.

Not any and every YouTuber can be sponsored by brands. In the past, CEOs and other in-house individuals have served the role of the face of a brand or product. YouTubers and other social media influencers, however, have replaced them as key promotors of certain products. Companies evaluate how suitable an influencer is to be sponsored by their brand. The relevance of the product to the influencers' brand along with the personality of the influencer impacts whether a company will sponsor an influencer (Freberg et. al). The prototype of a social media influencer, according to Freberg's study is "verbal, smart, ambitious, productive, and poised." The subjectivity of many of these traits, however, allows brands to decide who they see as a fit. A lack of diversity on YouTube promotes a lack of diversity of influencers who are sponsored.

DIVERSITY ON YOUTUBE

Because of its accessibility and its wide reach, diversity among viewers on YouTube has been indubitable since its start. However, the same cannot be said of the diversity among YouTubers. As Micheal Strangelove discusses in his book about ordinary people making videos on YouTube, "diversity is something that usually takes a while to develop in new Internet spaces and YouTube has been no exception" (186). In 2006, towards YouTube's start, John McMurria comments on the lack of diversity on YouTube: "a glance at the top 100 rated, viewed, and discussed videos, and most subscribed channels reveals far less racial diversity than broadcast network television." YouTube's uniqueness lies in its ability to allow anyone to tell their stories. Yet, those stories that were being heard and applauded are similar to those that are found in mainstream media.

In more recent years, there has been a push for more mainstream content to be created by and for people of color demonstrated by the success of shows produced by people of color such

as *Master of None* and *Chewing Gum* on Netflix. From its start, YouTube was meant to provide a space for those who are "under-represented in the commercial mainstream… [to] get their stories out and have their voices heard" (Burgess & Green 125). Thus, minorities who did not find themselves being represented even on YouTube began to take matters into their own hands and create content for themselves. However, as McMurria suggests, minority content does not go beyond the scope of the audiences they serve: "minority content certainly circulates on YouTube, traveling through a range of social networks to reach niche publics, but there's little or no chance that such content will reach a larger viewership because of the scale on which YouTube operates" (Burgess & Green 124).

YOUTUBE & IDENTITY FORMATION

YouTube, like many other social media sites, encourages users to present aspects of the self to others. Social networks such as YouTube provide spaces for the construction of an online identity. Different online communities form by users' identification with other users. This can happen as a result of shared interests or shared racial or religious identities. For the purpose of this study, identity is defined as having "a psycho-social nature; built on the intersection of individual personality, self-concept, inter-personal relations and the broadest possible context of a person's surroundings" (Trimble, Root, & Helms). Social networks promote associations with other users in such a way that allows users to pick aspects of their identity with which they ultimately form these associations. For example, I, as a curly-headed young girl, turned to other curly-headed girls on YouTube to find what hairstyles I liked and subsequently identify with those curly-headed YouTubers.

As a site that promotes creative and artistic expression, YouTube allows users to tell their stories the way they want. Many YouTubers actually explicitly tell their life stories in their vlogs. Vanessa Pérez-Torres, Yolanda Pastor-Ruiz, and Sara Abarrou-Ben-Boubaker's study, *YouTuber Videos and the Construction of Adolescent Identity*, a content analysis of 22 videos and the comments on those videos, examines the ways identity is discussed in the most popular videos in Spain at the time. Pérez-Torres et al. found that YouTubers who talked about the discovery of their homosexuality and bisexuality typically had followers who had questions to ask and stories to tell in the comments section which illustrates the way YouTubers play a "major role by talking about issues that adolescents may not dare to talk about with other people and their personal experiences may heavily influence the decisions of followers" (Pérez-Torres et al. 68). Thus, it seems YouTubers are influential in the process of identity formation for many viewers. While not much research has touched on the topic of identity construction for viewers of YouTube, Pérez-Torres et al.'s study demonstrates the impact YouTubers have on their subscribers and other viewers.

MAINSTREAM REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK AND MUSLIM IDENTITIES

Viewers turn to YouTube to search for what they cannot find in mainstream media. It is important to examine the representations of Black and Muslim women in mainstream western media in order to understand what Black Muslim YouTubers are reacting to by establishing an online space via their videos. The marginalization of these two minority groups are reinforced by their negative portrayals in the media. Historically, stereotypes which display subordinate positions dominate the narrative of Black women in the west. For instance, in American media, "mammies" and "tragic mulattos" became staple depictions of Black women in film and

television in the 20th century (Adams-Bass 368). While in recent years efforts have been made by mainstream media outlets to dismantle these stereotypes, their remnants reinforce the systematic racism many Black people face in the US. The lack of positive images in mainstream media causes many Black creators to turn to YouTube in an attempt to rectify these negative portrayals.

Muslim women similarly lack representation in mainstream media and when they are represented, stereotypes dominate their narrative. Historically, news outlets have perpetuated the western world's understanding of Islam as violent by accentuating violence and negative images coming from the Middle East (Al-Zahrani). Moreover, stereotypes of Muslim women in western film and television can be categorized into three personas: the oppressed, the sexualized, and the militant (Bullock 14). Such stereotypes align with the "general Western 'cultural consensus' of Islam as a static, backward, exotic and barbaric religion—a discourse on Islam better known as 'Orientalism'" (Bullock 36). Again, while strides to negate these stereotypes are being made by mainstream media outlets, realistic representations of Muslim women are scarce.

Richard Allen and Michael Thornton point to non-Black people who have the control of media to "present stereotypical characterizations" as the reason behind the lack of positive black representations in television. I similarly argue that the Muslim narrative is dominated by outdated stereotypes because of a lack of understanding of the Muslim experience. Thus, in order to combat these misrepresentations, Black and Muslim creators need to be able to control their own narrative. Attempts to rectify the misconceptions people hold about Black people and Muslims in the west are evident. For example, filmmaker Nijla Mu'min created *Jinn (2018),* a film about a teenage Black Muslim girl, and Qasim Basir created *Mooz-lum (2010),* a film about a young, American Black Muslim who is forced to come to terms with his identity. By creating

videos, Black and Muslim YouTubers similarly use their platforms to reframe the western world's understanding of their lived experience.

BLACK WOMEN ON YOUTUBE & MUSLIM WOMEN ON YOUTUBE

While there is a lack of analysis of Black Muslims on YouTube specifically, research about Black women on YouTube and Muslim women on YouTube exists. In Francesca Sobande's exploration of the consumption of YouTube videos by Black women in Britain, she examines the way young Black women "challenge the dearth of diverse images of Black women in mainstream media while nurturing themselves and each other in the process" (656). Moreover, Sobande emphasizes the value of black women watching videos of people who look like them and that in doing so, many of these women learn about themselves (657). Many of the women in the study suggested they turn to YouTube to see someone who looks like them represented in the media, and this makes them relate to these YouTubers (Sobande 658).

YouTube provides a "socio-cultural source of knowledge shared among Black women" where viewers can learn about others and consequently learn about themselves (Sobande 659). Relating with Black women YouTubers, the construction of the identities of these Black women viewers is impacted by the consumption of these videos and the collaborative nature of YouTube. For instance, videos about hair are common among the videos of Black Women on YouTube: "Natural hair journeys proved to be a nexus to issues concerning identity, authenticity, community and a sense of belonging" (Sobande 655-656).

Sobande's research demonstrates the importance of digital media in identity and community formation for Black women. The study's relevance to my topic on the exploration of Black Muslims is evident. While Sobande's study touches on the importance of creating content

on YouTube for Black women as an "act of agency…[for those] who strive for visibility in predominantly White societal settings," I further examine the way creating content for Black Muslim women influences their journey of self-construction.

In Kristin Peterson's scholarship, two of the most successful Muslim women on YouTube, Amena Khan (Amenakin) and Dina Torkia (Din Tokio) are studied. Not only are their YouTube channels a way to share modest fashion tips and discuss religious topics, but they are also a means to challenge preconceptions of Muslim women. The study presents an important aspect of the Muslim world, the modest fashion industry. The Islamic fashion industry includes a variety of Muslim designers, models, and consumers who create, showcase and wear modest clothes. Modesty, through physical appearance (i.e. the hijab) is claimed to be a major aspect of Islam. The use of the term modest, or Islamic, fashion Industry, however, "is contested among Muslims, with some claiming that Islam does not support fashion's hyper focus on external appearances and others arguing that beautiful fashion might portray Islam in a much needed positive light" (Peterson 2). Peterson's study implies that these Muslim women YouTubers represent the position of the latter. Through their exploration of the aesthetic elements of fashion, these women demonstrate the ways in which a Muslim woman can be both physically demonstrating modesty and fashionable which are typically assumed to be mutually exclusive (Peterson 5).

According to Peterson's study, Khan and Torkia's videos "legitimate political potential to shift misconceptions" as there are not many positive representations of Muslim women in informal settings that shed light on how Muslim women actually navigate through the world (Peterson 8). Their religion is not only expressed in their videos through wearing the hijab but it is also incorporated through common Muslim verbal phrases such as *Alhamdulillah* (thank God)

or *Insha'Allah* (God willing). What distinguishes the lifestyle channels of these Muslim YouTubers from other YouTubers are their discussions of religious topics such as "advice for fasting and praying during Ramadan," the holy month during which Muslims around the world fast daily (Peterson 1). Peterson's study concludes that through both their fashion videos and their religious discussion videos, these Muslim Women YouTubers "contradict the stereotypes that Muslim women are oppressed, lack individuality, and are covered in outdated black gowns from head to toe" (14).

The research I conduct not only similarly searches for common features of the videos of Muslim women such as verbal religious expressions and fashion tips but also looks for indications of racial identity and how discussion surrounding race are articulated in the videos of Black Muslim Women on YouTube. Muslim women through their YouTube channels combat the stereotypes with which they are typically situated, and I argue that this applies to Black Muslim YouTubers who not only face marginalization because of their religious identity but also their racial identity.

THE BLACK AND MUSLIM EXPERIENCE

Historically, both Blacks and Muslims have faced implicit and explicit discrimination as a result of the systemic racism and the Islamophobia that persist on both a national level, in the context of the U.S., and an international level. Black Muslims (particularly women) lie at a unique intersection of marginalized identities that are often ignored and discriminated against even within their respective communities. Although Black Muslims make up about "35–42 percent of all American Muslims," they are consistently forgotten in religious discourse and discussions about race (Mauleon 1332). Ubiquitous representations of Muslims from the Arab

and South Asian countries have perpetuated this lack of discussion surrounding the Black Muslim experience.

Within Muslim communities, Black Muslims are often excluded and thus become isolated. In their examination of the intersectionality of Black Muslims, Keon McGuire, Saskias Casanova, and Charles H. F. Davis II describe and analyze the experiences of an immigrant Black Muslim woman who upon reaching the U.S., faced a lot of "intense questioning and scrutiny…because of her religious identification" and found that as she went to college at a predominantly white institution, she grew to identify herself more with her Blackness. "Being one of few active and visible Black Muslims on campus meant Yasmine was often the only Muslim person in many settings" (McGuire et al. 323). McGuire et al. deconstruct the way Black Muslims a lot of the time are "considered inauthentic by many Black Americans and Middle Eastern Muslims." As Yasmine describes "your black skin is not the only thing that's going to get you in the door" (McGuire et al. 324). This illustrates one way Black Muslims face adversity within Black communities and Muslim communities.

Non-black Muslims have faced similar experiences of racial profiling and discrimination as Blacks in America with infiltration of privacy including unwarranted surveillance, particularly after The Patriot Act of 2001 was enacted. Black Muslims, however, have faced, and continue to face, such invasive and dehumanizing experiences because their race is a visible identifier of an imagined threat in America. In "Black Twice," an essay about Black Muslim identities, Emannuel Mauleon describes the difficulty of being Black and Muslim in America and trying to circumvent policing. As they "diminish Muslim identity performance" by, for example, choosing to not wear hijab, this could actually make "them more vulnerable to policing that captures blacks" (1380). Moreover, "throughout American history, their Muslim identity, like their black

identity, has been categorized as antithetical to whiteness and therefore outside the bounds of national belonging" (Mauleon 1332). Mauleon's comparison of the ways violence is associated with both Blacks and Muslims in America articulates the distinctiveness of the Black Muslim experience and the effects of holding both those identities. These examinations of this unique set of identities underscores the importance of studying the intersectionality of identities.

Chapter 1: Hijabis & Modest Fashion: Presentation of Religious and Racial Identities in the Videos of Black Muslim Women YouTubers

This chapter is centered on Black Muslim women YouTubers' presentation of religion and race through their dress, particularly, the hijab. The videos of Black Muslim YouTubers exude Su'ad Khabeer's concept of 'Muslim Cool' as these individuals draw on their blackness in order to articulate their identities as Muslims in such a way that makes their videos an act of agency.

METHODOLOGY

In order to discern meaning from their videos, I chose to examine the channels of five Black Muslim women on YouTube who have more than 50,000 subscribers by watching their videos and reading the comments that accompany those videos. The number of subscribers a given YouTuber has suggests their level of influence. Subscribing to a YouTuber provides a user with notifications when a YouTuber posts videos. Thus, subscribers are those who choose to follow these YouTubers consistently, implying a level of dedication to the consumption of that YouTuber's content. Therefore, I chose to limit my study to individuals who have a significant following and established channels (all of the oldest videos on their channels had been uploaded over a year ago). By understanding the level of following these YouTubers have, I can assume their level of influence and discern meaning from the messages they send to their viewers via their presentation of self.

Because it is extremely difficult to identify Muslim women YouTubers who do not wear the hijab, I have also limited my study to Black Muslim *Hijabi* (women who chose to wear the

hijab) women. The hijab is a major identifier of religion and will later be discussed as it is not only a presentation of religion but I, along with Khabeer, argue can be a presentation of racial identity. I recognize that by limiting this study to only Hijabi women I am narrowing the scope of this study. Yet by choosing to wear the hijab, Muslim women become clear representations of the religion. These women are identifiably Muslim and choose to be so, thus, it is important to focus on the ways in which these women specifically choose to represent their identities through their videos. Their visibility in public spaces speaks to their choice to represent their religion, but this group of women is not homogenous. As Huma Mohibullah and Christi Kramer discuss in their exploration of the "Practical Considerations in Hijab Practice," the meanings and intentions behind the practice of wearing the hijab "are as diverse as the women who wear them" (102).

I also want to acknowledge that while the race and religion of these YouTubers are important facets of their identities and are significant in the way they present themselves, their channels are more than just expressions of their race and religion. In her examination of beauty YouTubers' performance of identities on their channels, Samara Anarbaeva finds that there is significantly more of a demand from viewers to know both the ethnicity and race of women of color than of White women (Anarbaeva 12). Four of five of the YouTubers I examine are children of immigrants living in the West (U.S., U.K. and Canada). Their identities as children of immigrants adds a layer of uniqueness to the intersectionality of being Black and Muslim in the west which impacts the way they present themselves on their channels. Their race and ethnicity is a feature that draws in viewers who share those identities. However, while this emphasis on racial and ethnic identity might pressure Black Muslim women to address topics that relate to these identities, in most of their videos, they are actually not overtly discussing their racial and religious identity. Rather, in their videos they showcase their interests and other aspects of their

being. However, there are a few instances in which blackness and Muslim-ness are articulated explicitly, and I will be examining such videos along with others in which their race and/or religion are relevant to the topic at hand.

"WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING A BLACK/HIJABI YOUTUBER"

Shahd Batal (237K Subscribers) is a Sudanese-American vlogger whose channel highlights many facets of her lifestyle. Her videos range from *My Morning Routine* videos, in which she demonstrates and explains what she does every morning through a step-by-step montage to *Get Ready With Me* videos. *Get Ready With Me (GRWM)* videos are common among many lifestyle YouTubers' channels. In these videos, YouTubers generally get ready to go somewhere by doing their makeup or getting dressed while also chatting in front of the camera about how they are getting ready. For instance, Batal discusses various topics such as her plans for the day while occasionally describing the make-up products she uses. She also answers questions from her subscribers occasionally which is also a common practice among vloggers.

Collaborations in which YouTubers create videos with one another and promote one another's channels are common. This not only results in more viewership of such videos, as each YouTuber brings their following to the others' channel, but it also upholds the value of community that YouTube encourages. In one of her GRWM videos titled *What It's Like Being a Black/Hijabi YouTuber*, Batal features a fellow Black Muslim YouTuber, Aysha Harun (258K Subscribers), an Ethiopian-Canadian vlogger whose channel is similarly a lifestyle/beauty channel. In this 30-minute video, Batal and Harun, who have become friends through YouTube, answer questions from viewers while applying their makeup. The title of the video is a bit misleading as only a small portion of the thirty-minute video focuses on the topic the title

implies. YouTubers tend to extract the most intriguing aspect of their videos and place that in the title of their videos in order to attract audiences to watch.

The video, nonetheless, features them answering a question from a viewer that asks "Do you feel a sense of responsibility/pressure for representing a whole group on YouTube, Muslim/Black, and how does it feel in general?" Batal and Harun's answers highlight an important point that I made earlier in this chapter in that they do not think of themselves as solely Black and Muslim individuals. As Batal puts it "I still have other interests, I'm still a totally normal person…like I wouldn't be like, when someone asks me about myself I am not like 'I am a Black Muslim Hijabi,' that's just something you see but that's not how I would describe myself, because I am my personality. These are things that are out of my control besides hijab." They continue to mention that they do find it important that they represent these identities, recognizing that they are opening doors for other Black Muslims. Later in the video, Batal discusses the way Halima Aden, a Somali-American supermodel, opened doors by being a Black Muslim woman who succeeded in her industry in the western world. Understanding that their holistic identities are beyond their racial and religious identities is critical. Yet, their racial and religious identities are also important because of the influence it has on those watching. Seeing the success of someone who looks like them is what has made Batal and Harun confident in being on YouTube. In the same video, Harun articulates that she did not understand her potential to influence others until viewers began to message her about their "confidence in wearing the hijab," as a result of watching her videos. Because of the way those who can relate to them engage with their content, Batal and Harun recognize that they have the ability to influence others by being successful at what they do, and this encourages them to continue creating videos and sharing them on YouTube.

THE HIJAB

As mentioned, all the Black Muslim YouTubers I am examining choose to wear the hijab. In order to further understand this representation of identity for these women, the meaning behind the concept of the hijab must be discussed. The hijab is "a headscarf or similar form of covering used by Muslim women" (Mohibullah and Kramer 103). In Huma Mohibullah and Christi Kramer's study of the "Practical Considerations in Hijab Practice," they explore "the heterogeneity [which] exists within Islamic belief and practice" by interviewing women who wear the hijab (103). The hijab's origin and meaning are highly contested within Islamic discourse. A vital underlying value that the hijab embodies is the Muslim ideal of modesty which is also ambiguously understood among many Muslim scholars and Muslim societies. As Mohibullah and Kramer summarize, "dominant schools of Islamic thought consider modesty a principle that goes beyond clothing and cover, requiring the moderation of demeanor in general: speech, thought, and other actions" (106). That being said, many prominent Muslim figures argue that while the principle of modesty is important, the hijab itself "is not a concrete concept that correlates to an absolute practice" (Mohibullah and Kramer 107).

In other words, the hijab *represents* a modesty that is considered a requirement in Islam. This modesty can be physically exhibited via covering, but it can also be represented beyond physical manifestation via demeanor. The hijab, to many, also symbolizes a relationship to Allah, or God. It should be noted that although not all Muslim women wear the hijab on a regular basis, when Muslim women are preparing to pray, which is ideally five times a day, they must cover their hair and cover their figures with loose clothing in order to conceal their body shape. This illustrates the ways in which Islam requires physical modesty when engaging with Allah through prayer, which is a deeply personal act. Moreover, women who do choose to wear the

hijab are technically required to cover in front of all men besides their direct male relatives. However, many women negotiate the rules of coverage as a means of personalizing the hijab to make it practical for them by, for instance, choosing to not wear the hijab around in-laws or men who they consider brothers (Mohibullah and Kramer 109).

Many Muslim scholars assert that a clash exists between modesty versus modernity. This implies that women who choose to wear the hijab in a conservative manner (covering hair and neck, fully) are modest (and presumably, antiquated). According to this mindset, modernity and modesty are mutually exclusive, meaning one cannot wear the hijab in a modern fashion. This attitude stems from the influence of the historical practices of the women who were married to the Prophet Muhammad. However, the extent of "proper" coverage has been disputed throughout history and between cultures. Thus, the hijab has become a subjective interpretation of expressing spirituality. For the purpose of this study, the hijab is defined as a form of head covering that represents a relationship to Allah and a manifestation of modesty. This chapter examines the way this head covering can be a representation of both religion and race for Black Muslim Hijabi YouTubers.

"MY HIJAB STORY"

The decision to wear the hijab is one that can be influenced by many complicated factors. Many girls put the hijab on because of pressures from family members or cultural expectations. Some even put the hijab on and later take it off after realizing they were not ready to wear it or that the hijab was not how they wanted to express their modesty. Some women decide to put it back on later in life. Somali-British YouTuber Halima aka Love halssa (252K Subscribers), who does not share her personal information such as her last name on her channel, posts about her

hijab journey on her channel. Halima's channel began as a haircare channel and evolved into a lifestyle/beauty channel. She describes in her 10-minute long *I deleted all my videos & decided to wear my hijab again!* video how she decided to put the hijab back on after taking it off for a year. She had been wearing the hijab since she was 10 and she took it off because she felt she "wasn't wearing it for the right reasons." Halima later admits she was initially wearing it because family members told her it was what she had to do and "when you are forced to do something, you are going to hate it eventually." So, essentially she grew resentful towards the hijab and took it off because she did not "feel like [she] was connected to God." When she started wanting to wear it again and she felt personally ready to do so, she was hesitant because she thought about the practicality of wearing the hijab when her YouTube channel was primarily a haircare channel, where she shared tips and tutorials for curly hair. It took her seven months to actually wear it after contemplating her readiness to re-wear it. A month and a half after putting it back on, Halima took her hijab off and created a 4-minute video titled *I Can't Do This Anymore!!* in which she attempts to explain the difficulty of her decision. She says "a lot of us go through this really hard time, living in the West," and that she always feels like she is obligated to explain herself because of the platform of which she chooses to be a part. She says "but right now I don't feel like the hijab is for me in this moment." Halima's struggle with the hijab reflects a common struggle among many Muslim women and the challenges of the complex journey to wearing a hijab.

This "readiness" to wear the hijab is something many Muslim women contemplate in their choice to wear it. Wearing the hijab means outwardly identifying with being a practicing Muslim which, in a western context, means facing the hardships which accompanies that (i.e. being the victim of Islamophobia). One of the interviewees in Mohibullah and Kramer's study is

a Bangledeshi-American who initially decided to wear the hijab as she grew closer to God and to challenge preconceptions of Muslims as "violent fanatics" (110). She removed her hijab as her ideas of modesty shifted in discussions with other Muslims but was anxious about the judgement she would face from women who covered. She eventually put it back on and "expressed that, ultimately, wearing it simply 'felt right' for numerous reasons" (Mohibullah & Kramer 111). Such fluctuation in covering practices demonstrates the complexity and multiplicity of the reasons for wearing the hijab.

Many Muslim YouTubers share their journey to deciding to wear the hijab in a *My Hijab Story* video in which they sit in front of a camera and tell their viewers the story behind their hijab. These videos are typically framed as medium close-ups with the YouTuber directly talking to the camera. In Shahd Batal's 12-minute *My Hijab Story*, she explains how she has been wearing the hijab, but she does not quite consider herself a Hijabi quite yet "just because there is so much more to hijab then just covering your head and just wearing a scarf." She says it had been on her mind for a year before she decided to wear it. Her transition to wearing the hijab represents a challenge Black Muslim YouTubers face when they choose to wear the hijab. Because hair care is typically a big part of many of their channels, the choice to wear the hijab results in the abandonment of such videos as they can no longer show their hair. Batal acknowledges in the video that the shift in her channel would result in a loss of subscribers as those who were watching her videos solely for hair care would no longer find what they were looking for on her channel. In Sobande's examination of the consumption of YouTube videos by Black women in Britain, almost all of her interviewees mentioned "natural hair journeys" as a reason they turn to YouTube (657). Natural hair care vlogs of Black women not only affirm viewers' decisions to wear their hair naturally but also serve as a form of "collective self-

education" (Sobande 661). Such findings demonstrate the sacrifice Black Muslim YouTubers make when they choose to wear the hijab as they are not only jeopardizing the size of their following but also the communities that form as a result of the hair care videos from their past. Black Muslim YouTubers face this uniquely, as they fall at the intersection of both racial and religious communities. They subsequently find themselves creating a space that is distinctively Black and Muslim while also attempting to continue to attract audiences who are neither Black nor Muslim.

HIJABI HAIRCARE VIDEOS

There is a preconceived notion that because Hijabi women choose to cover their hair they do not need to care for or maintain it. However, Black Muslim YouTubers such as Shahd Batal, Aysha Harun, Halima aka Love halssa, and Manal Chinutay (363K Subscribers), an Ethiopian-Canadian beauty YouTuber, have created videos in which they describe to their viewers how they take care of their hair as Hijabi women. Chinutay introduces her 23-minute video with the acknowledgement that "this is going to be interesting because I'm talking to you guys about something that you can't even see."

Hair care is a big part of Black women's identities. Moreover, in Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharp's investigation of the history behind Black hair care in America, they outline the roots of the significance of hair for those of African descent. Historically, in certain African ethnic groups, doing hair (e.g. braiding) was a valued skill and "girls who showed mastery level potential in this craft were encouraged to continue to hone their skills with the eventual responsibility of becoming the community's hairstylist" (Byrd and Tharps 160). However, when colonizers invaded Africa and stole its people for slavery, hair texture classification was used as

a way to dehumanize African people in the Americas; for instance, Black hair was often compared to sheep's wool (160). As a result of this dehumanization, Black women living in the West in the 1900s internalized this and (if they had the ability to do so) would alter their natural hair to demonstrate a proximity to Eurocentric standards of beauty by straightening it via chemicals or applying heat to the hair (Byrd and Tharps 160). However, the hair care movement of the 1960s signified a shift in these notions. Rooted in the movement of the 60s, the natural hair movement of the 2000s emerged and "encouraged Black women to discontinue the use of toxic chemical hair straighteners, to curate healthier lifestyles, to disrupt Eurocentric standards of wearing straightened hair, and facilitated self-definition of beauty ideals from the ground work laid in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s" (Byrd &Tharps 157). This movement, accompanied by the rise of YouTube, has resulted in a flood of natural hair videos which support the hair care practices of Black women's natural hair (Neil and Mbilishaka 157).

Black hair care on YouTube is a genre of videos that creates community for Black women as can be seen by Sobande's exploration of the consumption of YouTube videos by Black women in Britain. Thus, by continuing to showcase that aspect of their lives, Black Muslim women YouTubers stay in touch with their blackness in a distinctive way. This is particularly noteworthy for Batal and Halima because they chose to put the hijab on after establishing a hair care community on their channels. *Hijabi Hair Care* videos are similar to *My Hijab Story* videos as the YouTuber sits in front of a camera at a medium close-up distance and discusses their routine. Both Batal and Halima basically walked through their routine by showcasing the different products they use and how they use them, step-by-step, while also giving tips along the way. From cleansing to styling under the scarf, they give detailed accounts of how they go through the process since they cannot show their hair.

One thing to note about these routines is that they are very similar to their hair care routines before they put on the hijab. Throughout her 12-minute *Hijab hair care routine & products!* video, Halima remarks "you guys already know if you guys were already on my channel before." The only aspect that changes is the style they actually wear because it has to be tucked under the hijab. However, many of the styles they describe are protective styles that many other prominent Black hair care YouTubers also encourage their viewers to do such as cornrows. Halima goes beyond just the product she puts on, she also describes what fabric of hijab she wears in order to protect her curly hair. I argue that such videos reassure Black Muslim women that they can partake in the hijab while still maintaining a connection to and appreciation for their hair. A comment on Chinutay's *WHY I WENT BALD / HIJAB HAIR CARE ROUTINE...* video from a user named Sumaya Omar read "Yes! Needed this video. I neglect the hell out of my hair just cause no one really sees it BUT sis 2019 we hopping on a healthy hair care routine. This video was super helpful thanks!!" (Chinutay A.) A presumably Black Muslim (based on her photo), this user confirms that this content is helpful for Black women to be able to healthily partake in their blackness and Muslim-ness. Similar affirmations fill the comments sections of Harun, Batal and Halima's Hijabi hair care videos. It is apparent that by creating these videos, Black Muslim Hijabi YouTubers utilize their channels to provide a space for the intersectionality of being Black and Muslim while creatively participating in YouTube trends in the hair care community.

MUSLIM COOL AND THE "HOODJAB"

In her book, *Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer defines "Muslim Cool" as the expression of young American Muslims through

their dress, social activism, and interests in hip hop which is rooted in blackness. “Muslim Cool is a way of being Muslim that draws on blackness to contest two overlapping systems of racial norms: the hegemonic ethnoreligious norms of Arab and South Asian U.S. American Muslim communities on the one hand, and White American normativity on the other” (Khabeer 2). The history of Muslims in America goes far beyond the arrival of Muslims from the Middle East and South Asians in the 1960s; it actually begins with the arrival of enslaved African Muslims (Khabeer 13). Thus, the common assumption of the mutual exclusivity of blackness and Islam is unsubstantiated. Yet, living in America, Black (and non-Black) Muslims face daily hardship because of their race and religion. Khabeer’s book features some of these experiences and through an ethnographic study, she emphasizes the ways from which many young Muslims draw on blackness and Black popular culture to construct their identities as Muslims.

The notion of Muslim Cool implies that there is a way to be Muslim and “still be cool” (Khabeer 39). Khabeer discusses the understanding that among many American Muslim institutions there is an “ambivalence toward popular culture” and consequently a juxtaposition between being Muslim and being cool (91). Moreover, there is a common practice of deeming “Black music as inherently un-Islamic” among many Muslim communities (Khabeer 100). Muslim Cool, however, emphasizes that many Black (and non-Black) Muslims manage to both hold their religious values and still engage in activities that are deemed “un-Islamic” by many such as hip hop and other forms of expression. One often disputed form of expression in Muslim communities is the way Muslim women “should” wear the hijab.

The different styles by which Muslim women choose to wear the hijab have many implications in Muslim communities. There is a conservative, more traditional way of wearing it that covers all the hair and the chest, which only exposes the face, and is more widely accepted

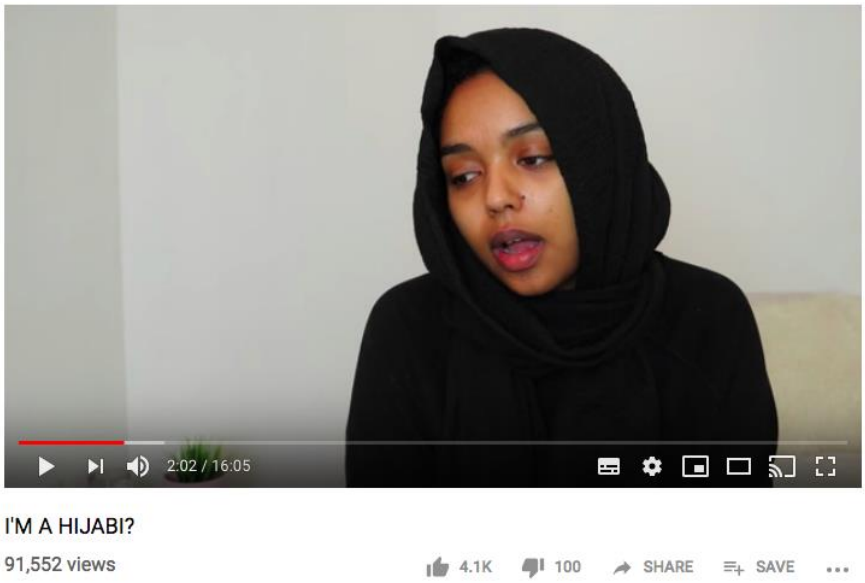
as the "most" modest. On the other hand, many Muslim women choose to wear their scarves in the turban style. Khabeer labels this style as the *hoodjab.* The *hoodjab* according to Khabeer is "a headscarf tied at the nape of the neck with the scarf's ends wrapped in a bun…[it is] reflective of a head wrapping style that comes from the broader Afrodiasporic tradition" (113). Khabeer's rare term articulates how the *hoodjab* is "emblematic of the convergence of religion, race, femininity and hip hop in the United States" (115). In discussion with a young Pakistani woman who describes how she chooses to wear the hijab, Khabeer concludes that the terms "Black", "hood", and "cool" are conflated. She argues that this conflation is where Muslim Cool lies as this unique intersection of both blackness and Islam.

While Khabeer's exploration of Muslim Cool is within the context of hip hop in the US, Black Muslim YouTubers also represent Muslim Cool. The turban style of hijab is featured among many Black Muslim YouTubers' channels. Not only do these women wear the turban regularly, but they show their viewers how they style them in unique ways through tutorials. For instance, Manal Chinutay features more than 12 Hijab Tutorials on her channel, five of which are videos which demonstrate different ways to do the turban style that Khabeer would call the *hoodjab*. Yasmine Simone (75K Subscribers), an African-American beauty YouTuber, similarly creates videos in which she shows her viewers how to wear a myriad of styles of the hijab. All four of her hijab tutorial videos feature at least one turban style. Such videos demonstrate the ways in which these YouTubers engage with their blackness. Neither Simone nor Chinutay explicitly discuss race and religion on their channels. Yet, by wearing the turban and creating tutorials which teach others how to wear the turban, their blackness is apparent beyond their skin tone. As mentioned before, because these Black Muslim YouTubers have a significant following,

such videos encourage even non-Black Muslims to wear their hijab in this style, as this style of hijab is considered "cool" which is conflated with blackness.

"I'M A HIJABI!?"

Figure 1*: I'M A HIJABI!?*
Published on 9 Nov 2016 (Pictured: Shahd Batal)



Shahd Batal's journey to wearing the hijab was quite unique and noteworthy in this exploration of the identities of Black Muslims on YouTube. The decision seemed very abrupt for her viewers. The day after Donald Trump was elected into office, on November 9th of 2016, she posted a video titled *I'm a Hijabi!?* (see Figure 1). Batal fills the frame as the sole object in the frame of the shot, wearing all black including a black hijab, which was a new look for her subscribers. This was not a typical *My Hijab Story* video as she was very somber and she struggled to get out her thoughts. Essentially, the video was her reaction to the election of Donald Trump who she clearly, we can assume from the tone of the video, opposed. This was the first time on her channel that she explicitly stated her religious identity: "Yes, my head is

covered. I am Muslim if you guys didn't know that, but my channel is for everyone. This is a place right now for everyone who is fearful...for everyone who is scared, hopeless even maybe."

In her video, Batal described her deep-rooted fear as a Black Muslim woman living in America: "It's not like America hasn't always been racist and sexist and Islamophobic, it's that Trump came out and showed the true colors of the United States…I don't feel safe." Her concerns demonstrate the way the intersectionality of her multiple marginalized identities results in a compounded fear of her safety living in a country with a history of systematically discriminating against the people who hold those identities. Her creation of this video was an act of agency to combat the hatred she felt the election indicated. As she cries in front of the camera, she reassures her viewers:

> I don't want this to be a place where anyone feels excluded…you know I am not changing the law, I am not a lawmaker, but I want this to be a place where people can come and feel comfortable and feel safe and even forget what's going on for even a little bit, because that is the only way to be sane. It's the only way to get through this.

Batal allows her fear to drive her to create content that makes her viewers forget about the hardships they might face because of their identities. Moreover, she also comforts her viewers in this video:

> Everybody has a way of making the world a better place, and I truly believe that. This is why, this is why I preach so much about self-love and self-discovery. In order for us to move on and get through this at least, you have to know yourself and you have to know what you have to offer this world, because everybody has something to offer.

Not only does this video illustrate the way Black Muslim YouTubers attempt to create a community that acknowledges the diversity of identities on YouTube and invites all of those

identities, but it also encourages individuals to find themselves in order to find their purpose in the world.

For Batal, finding herself and her purpose meant wearing the hijab, and the video touched on her decision to wear the hijab for the first time. She explains that the reason she chose to wear it that day is that the election brought her "closer to God." She also describes how she did not like being unidentifiably Muslim, she says "I am sick of going places and people being like 'oh I didn't know you were Muslim.' I want to be with my people, I need us to unite." She later in the video describes how during this time of hardship, if she was "going to bleed, [she] want[s] to bleed with [her] people." Her emphasis on unity and faith during times of adversity were reiterated: "I felt like my way to get through this is through my religion."

Batal's decision to put the hijab on represents the struggle Black Muslim YouTubers face in putting on the hijab. She recognized this in her video: "I know that companies are hesitant to work with hijabis because this is a sign of religion. This is an external sign of my religion, I know things will be harder, but at the end of the day it's like what are your values, what do you see as something that is important to you?" This emotional video highlights the many hardships Black Muslim women face as YouTubers. And while many YouTubers choose not to showcase tough times, Batal's candidness demonstrates the difficulty and complexity of the unique intersectionality of being Black, Muslim, and a woman living in the west. This video humanizes her marginalized identities as many of those minority identities are criminalized and stereotyped in mainstream media.

The comments of this video were filled with supportive affirmations and messages of encouragement. Fellow Black Muslim YouTuber Halima commented: "Sending You all love! Stay strong boo! Praying for you all inshallah, remember Allah got you!💕💕" While some

commenters simply wished Batal well, others, like one user named Fatima Khalifa, commented to thank Batal for using her platform to speak up:

> You are so so beautiful inside and out, and your vulnerability and fear is valid. Your worries are valid, your feelings are valid, and you are not alone. I'm tired, you're tired. I stand with you, Shahd, and I stand with all of our minority brothers and sisters. The hijab is beautiful on you and I'm so proud of you for using your platform to speak out. I love you so much and I pray to Allah swt [*Subhanahu wa ta'ala* meaning May He Be Glorified and Exalted] that everyone is as strong as you to speak out against bigotry, hatred, racism, and oppression. Keep your head high, we got this. Stay safe, beautiful.

Many other comments had similar messages of gratefulness and religious affirmations. These comments demonstrate the way her audience appreciated Batal's outspokenness and in turn felt a connection to her.

The emotional nature of the video and the responses to it confirm Silke Jandl's finding in her exploration of emotionality in YouTube videos: "the overt expression of emotions, i.e. emotionality that suggests to viewers that the expression of emotion is an outburst of authentic feelings, is a precondition for the intricate relationships viewers develop with YouTubers" (Jandl 175). Moreover, while Jandl specifically investigated the *Coming Out* videos of non-heterosexual YouTubers, I would argue that there are parallels between her findings and my investigation of this video in which Batal displays a great deal of emotion. Jandl emphasizes that because "potential repercussions of coming out remain problematic [and] the stakes of doing so publicly are high" this makes coming out to their audience on camera extremely emotional with "an array of emotions being overtly shown on screen" (Jandl 179). Moreover, Batal, in a way, is coming out as a Hijabi in this video. I draw this parallel considering revealing herself as Hijabi

definitely has repercussions: not only might she face Islamophobia as result of doing so but also her audience could potentially change. Because of these high stakes and her strong distaste for current affairs in the US, Batal displays a wide array of emotions on camera, which she had never done before. This, in turn, authenticated her videos as it "suggests intimacy, immediacy and honesty" (Jandl 190) to her viewers and fosters a loyal fan base who are "keen on consuming [her] content as well as building communities" (Jandl 175). This display of emotion and its effects is apparent in the comments as Black Muslim viewers express their support for Batal's decision. This was a turning point in Batal's channel and audience as her channel shifted from being primarily concerned with haircare to being more beauty and lifestyle oriented. Her channel began to feature more content that showcased her interests and style.

MODEST FASHION INDUSTRY

YouTube has become a space for individuals to develop their sense of style. Viewers can find inspiration through *Lookbooks* or *Outfit Idea* videos which are montage videos that display full looks (from head-to-toe) with links to individual items in the description box. They can also study a YouTuber's sense of style through "Hauls" which are lengthier vlogs in which YouTubers go through the items they recently purchased from different stores and discuss how they feel about the items they have bought and sometimes even try on the items. In Laura Jeffries' article, "YouTube 'Hauls' and the Voice of Young Female Consumers," she examines the most popular hauls that exist on YouTube and finds that the majority of them are White middle class teenage girls. She points to the "disparities between the true diversity of young American women and the limited array represented through hauls" as a result of the "values sustained by popular media and its consumer champions: expensive, light-skinned, and thin"

(73). A new community, however, has formed on the video sharing platform in order to provide Muslim women with style advice: the modest fashion community. No singular style defines modest fashion, thus, many Black Muslim YouTubers have developed their channels to showcase their take on modest fashion. While this is not a practice exclusive to Black Muslim YouTubers, I argue that their take on this practice is unique and highly influential for viewers as they exemplify a way of being Muslim while still upholding their distinctive styles through fashion.

For Batal, she showcases her style through her *5 Hijabi Friendly Streetwear/Athleisure Outfits!* and her *Making Basic Outfits/Trends More Modest & Hijabi Friends* videos. A lot of conventional trends tend to cater towards mainstream audiences who do not adhere to the modesty that Hijabis do. Thus, these videos creatively showcase how Hijabis can participate in such trends while maintaining their modesty. YouTubers like Batal actually modify those looks and trends and make them more modest. For instance, she illustrates how she can wear a dress that has slits and no sleeves by wearing leggings and a turtleneck under so that her legs and arms are still concealed. Batal's drive to remain in her personal style while still adhering to what she believes are modest standards is powerful as she encourages others to be themselves while still upholding their Muslim values. One commenter named Alisha applauds Batal's efforts:

> this makes me so so happy bc i LOVE seeing representation in social media and i just LOVE how u can incorporate some faith and modesty from the past to newer more modern styles for girls who are from this generation and want to be able to blend and be proud of their religion but still be able to show their style and feel as proud and comfortable as possible xx

The comment demonstrates the constant struggle Muslim women face because of the false dichotomy of modesty vs. modernity. However, these Muslim vloggers are actively breaking down this misconception. In Kristin Peterson's scholarship, she argues that the way Muslim women on YouTube display their fashion sense "serves as a political declaration that…Muslim women can be fashionable and beautiful subjects while still foregrounding their religious belief" (Peterson 6). I similarly argue that the way Black Muslims women showcase their style is a political act that gives Muslim women agency in choosing what to wear and how to wear it.

Many of these fashion videos, however, receive pushback from Muslim viewers as they claim these videos encourage *haram* behaviors. In one of her Q&A (Question & Answer) videos, Batal discusses how she deals with the "Haram Police." For something to be *haram* is for that thing to be forbidden or proscribed by Allah. The term "Haram Police" is a modern term that describes Muslim individuals who feel the need to call out those who they believe are participating in practices that are *haram*. Many Muslim women on YouTube are confronted with the words of the "Haram Police" in comments on their videos, direct messages and even face-to-face at meet-ups. This is something that they face because they choose to showcase their lives so publicly. Purely subjective, the interpretation of modesty is a point of contention between many in the online Muslim community, particularly on YouTube. Black Muslim Hijabis who choose to showcase their unique style typically deal with the "Haram Police" more often as their individuality is sometimes taken up as a breach of the modesty that Islam requires of an individual. In her Q&A video, Batal says that the way she chooses to deal with the "Haram Police" is to "ignore any [blatant] hate" that she receives. However, when she gets "very thoughtful, well-worded, thought out comments that are coming from a place of love" she will take those into serious consideration because she ultimately does want to better herself as a

Muslim. She urges people to steer away from sending hurtful messages because while she might have "thick skin," someone else receiving it could really be "spiritually push[ed] away from Islam."

The modest fashion industry is reflective of the broader Muslim community in that its leaders and most applauded individuals are mostly Arab and South Asian. As Black Muslims are commonly underrepresented in many Muslim spheres, the modest fashion community is no exception. In a 12-minute video titled *The Tea on The Modest Fashion Community*, Batal touches on the topic of exclusion within the industry while doing her makeup. She comments on the lack of diversity at the Dubai 2017 Modest Fashion Week, particularly the lack of representation of Black women. Batal explicitly states that, more broadly, the industry is "a racist community, you can't deny that." This strong statement is followed by an indication that "Black Muslim women have to work ten times harder" and that she does not want to be included in the modest fashion industry if the industry does not want to include her. She says "if you don't want Black Muslimahs [i.e. Muslim women] at your event, that is fine, just don't steal our styles, because we bring something new to the table." Batal's rant demonstrates the way Black Muslims are frustrated with being excluded in the modest fashion community. The underlying frustration is that within Muslim communities certain aspects of blackness are taken up when advantageous for the community but the Black Muslims who bring the uniqueness are, more often than not, unrecognized for what they bring. In this specific context, Black Muslim influencers, such as YouTubers, offer their unique styles and ideas when it comes to fashion to the modest fashion industry, and yet their contributions are ignored. Batal's frustrations are echoed by viewers in the comments section who feel this conversation is long overdue. For instance, one user named

ruunmina comments “FINALLY SOMEONE SAID IT THANK YOU BLACK MUSLIM WOMEN DESERVE BETTER.” Another user named Fefe Flowers describes her experiences:

> If you’re an African American Black Muslimah such as myself. I feel like we’re more used to racism especially because we can’t trace back our roots as easy as a Muslimah whose family is straight from West/East Africa. We all face our struggles and people need to realize everything isn’t so “peachy” in our ummah [i.e. Muslim community]. Even though religiously we’re taught to be open minded. We all just need to uplift each other and be understanding of each other’s struggles. I started wearing a hijab at 8 and I grew up around a predominantly Iraqi/Lebanese community. I know what it’s like to struggle to find acceptance from my community and educate others. I didn’t see many others that looked like me growing up. So when I discovered Black Muslimah bloggers that inspired me so much. Thankfully I grew up in a household that taught me to be proud of who I am.

Batal’s videos and its comments demonstrate a broader pattern of Black Muslims being disregarded and mistreated because representations of Muslims are assumed mostly by Arab and South East Asians who perpetuate the lack of discussion surrounding the Black Muslim experience. Thus, by creating videos that showcase the Black Muslim experience, Black Muslim women YouTubers are creating a narrative that, according to the comments, is needed in order to encourage the embracement of Black and Muslim identities.

This chapter illustrates the ways in which Black Muslim women create videos on YouTube to portray the different aspects of their racial and religious identities. Through their choice to wear the hijab (and take it off), these women demonstrate the complexity of the

modesty that the hijab is ideally meant to embody. Their choice to wear turbans, showcase their haircare routines and their fashion senses through their videos are all acts of agency that contest the marginalization that Black Muslims face in both predominantly Arab and South-Asian Muslim communities and, more broadly, a predominantly White societal and mass media context. By creating these videos, Black Muslim women YouTubers are creating a unique representational online space in which blackness and Islam coexist.

Chapter 2: Racial and Religious Identities in the Videos of Black Muslim Women YouTubers

While the first chapter focuses on the different ways religion and race are implicitly presented in the videos of Black Muslim YouTubers, this chapter will highlight some of the more overt references and discussions regarding their racial and religious identities. Whether it be through vlogs, showcasing Ramadan traditions, or through discussions with other Hijabi women, these YouTubers create an online representational space that rejects victimhood. Black Muslim women face an unmatched marginalization that is compounded as a result of the unique intersections of their racial, gendered and religious identities. Yet, these YouTubers create videos to share their experience which is rarely understood because of a predominantly Arab and South-Asian Muslim narrative perpetuated in the broader white societal and mass media contexts. These YouTubers also explore and validate the diversity of ideas and opinions within the online Black Muslim community which they are not afforded in the broader societal context.

HIJABI TALKS

Aysha Harun decided to start a series on her beauty and lifestyle channel called *Hijabi Talks*. The series includes three approximately 40 minute episodes in which she and four of her cousins, all of whom choose to wear the hijab, explore different topics that Harun's viewers ask them to discuss. The series' first episode examined the pressures of marriage and social media relationships. The second episode highlights their experiences as Black Muslim women and in the third episode, they talk about double standards they face as first-generation Ethiopian-Canadian women. Throughout these videos, Harun and her cousins give advice to viewers while

presenting some of the differences in their experiences as Black Hijabi women. These videos also display some of the shared experiences of Black Muslim women living in the West.

Figure 2: *Hijabi Talks Ep. 2 | Being Black & Muslim, Hijab Confidence & Self Love Published on 15 May 2017* (Pictured from left to right: Nabat, Sara, Hanan, Eman, Aysha)

Race and religion are rarely discussed in the videos of beauty and lifestyle YouTubers. Yet as a Black Muslim woman, Harun sees her platform as a way to talk about the Black Muslim experience and share it with her diverse audience. In the second episode of *Hijabi Talks*, she discusses these topics with her cousins by sitting them down in front of a camera and asking them to share their experience of being both Black and Muslim. "Being both Black and Muslim, you're the first group to be talked about but the last group to be asked about that topic" says Harun's cousin Sara (second from the left in Figure 2). The first person to speak once the topic is introduced, Sara refers to the way that in discussions that pertain to them, Black Muslim women are often excluded. Notably, Shahd Batal's video in which she ranted about the modest fashion community and their exclusion of Black women articulates the frustration of this shared experience. Batal also highlights how when Black women are included in the discussions pertaining to Muslim women they are often disregarded or ignored, simply invited to these discussions in order to claim inclusion in these predominantly Arab and South Asian Muslim

spaces. The discussion of this experience is integral to understanding the way Black Muslims must create their own spaces in order to be heard and validated. Through such videos, these YouTubers utilize their channels to validate the experiences of other Black Muslims.

Moreover, Harun and her cousins explore the way their blackness and Islam is perceived. Hanan (wearing glasses in Figure 2) says "when people think of Muslims they don't really think of someone from Ethiopia for example, Africans, or Black people in general. They think of the typical Arab...and there are so many more different types of Muslims in the world...plus you know we're also women, so you know I feel like we're a triple minority." Hanan's comment is supported by head nods, and she continues to tell a story about when she was young, in the locker room at school and one of her friends wanted to see her hair, so she showed it to her: "So, she saw the texture of my hair and was like hold up, I thought you were brown, like why are you wearing the scarf? She was also Black, right so she was like confused. I explained to her that I was Muslim and she was like wait how can you be Black and Muslim?" The story was followed up by Eman (second from the right in Figure 2) adding that "people think they're mutually exclusive" referring to being Black and being Muslim.

Black Muslims are deprived of representation in western mass media. Rarely do you see Black Muslims depicted as characters in television shows or films, and when you do, they are typically representative of the Nation of Islam. In American mass media and scholarly explorations of Black Muslim identities, the Nation of Islam dominates the narrative of Black Muslims in a way that ignores the stories of converts to Sunni Islam, immigrant Muslims and other Black Muslims (Curtis IV 667). Just as political as it is religious, the Nation overshadows the Black Muslim experience outside of its confines. Because there lacks a more representative narrative of Black Muslims in western mainstream media, being a part of the two identities of

Black and Muslim has been questioned in many western societal contexts. According to the experiences described in Harun's *Hijabi Talks* video, when people do encounter Black Muslims, in Canadian society, they are unsure of how to navigate interactions with them. This emphasizes the significance of the representation of minorities in media and the importance of the channels of Black Muslim women YouTubers. By succeeding on YouTube, they are not only sharing their beauty and lifestyle videos but they also demonstrate the existence, diversity, and necessity of Black Muslim voices.

Harun and her cousins also discuss the ways people cope with the racism that accompanies identifying as Black in western contexts. They talk about how some immigrants and children of immigrants attempt to distance themselves from Blackness and identify more with their ethnicity or claim another race in order to evade racism. Of course, this is a privilege only certain Black Muslims can afford as their skin color might suggest racial ambiguity. For example, Eman talks about how in elementary school she identified as brown: "Yeah, because there was so much hate towards Ethiopian people...you would see the ads in the commercials and stuff, you would see starving 'Africans' and so I would try to like distance myself from the title of being Ethiopian so I would literally just say I'm brown." Her perception of being Ethiopian and black was influenced by the way society was representing these identities in the mass media. Such distancing demonstrates the grave impact images in the media have on the racial self-identification of children. Valerie Adams-Bass, Howard C. Stevenson, and Diana Slaughter Kotzin's investigation of the relationship between negative stereotypes of Black people in mainstream media and the racial identification and socialization of Black youth asserts that the negative imaging of Black people in film and television influences "adolescent perspectives about Black people." This happens because of the constant appearance of these negative images

"on prime-time television shows targeted toward Black audiences" (Adams-Bass et al. 369-383). Thus, the internalization of these attitudes towards people of their race could result in a self-hatred that would incline youth to disassociate if they can, as Eman did.

Moreover, in the discussion, Harun goes on to add:

> There are also Ethiopians who are like 'No, we're not Black'… Mainly parents, so it does tie into culture… I'm just like, what? You're Black...at the end of the day, like white people are going to call you Black. You're going to be treated as a Black person. Police are going to see you as a Black person if you know what I'm talking about.

Harun implies that while rejecting blackness might seem that simple, the way one is publicly perceived supersedes one's self-identification. She also suggests that this distancing from blackness would not matter when there are consequences to the way society will perceive you based on your skin color. Adams-Bass et al. emphasize the role parents and family members play in the socialization of youth: "They model for youth how to consider, manage, and resolve racial and ethnic dynamics through verbal and nonverbal interactions and communications" (Adams-Bass et al. 371). Thus, based on Harun's statement, children of immigrants might be distancing from Blackness to negotiate the tension between how their parents racially identify and how society treats them regardless of their self-identification.

Sara resonates with Harun's comments and goes on to tell a story about how her brother was arrested in Bahrain, a Muslim majority country. She says "you can't say he got detained because he has a Muslim name, no we were in a Muslim country. He got detained because he was Black. That was literally it." This demonstrates the way even within Muslim societies, Blackness is a justification for discriminatory behavior. Harun encourages her non-Black Muslim viewers to refrain from discriminating against Black Muslims because "in our religion, you know

we learn about different races and we're all the same. We just have different levels of melanin in our skin." Addressing the big part of her audience who are non-Black Muslims, Harun strategically uses her platform to condemn racist behavior within the Muslim community and to validate Black Muslim experiences and voices.

This *Hijabi Talks* episode not only touched on the struggles these women face because of their race but also on the challenges of staying confident in the hijab in a western world. Hanan even disclosed that she wanted to take it off in high school, "as much as I wanted to take it off back then, I was way too scared because I was so comfortable in it. It became my security blanket." The hijab for Hanan was something that she felt safer while wearing which is interesting because one would assume that the Islamophobia a lot of Hijabi women face in the western world would discourage women who live in the west from wearing the hijab. Mohibullah and Kramer's exploration of the meaning of the hijab for different women living in the US revealed that women who wear the hijab are "engaged in a dynamic practice with the possibility of change and that their commitments to cover could take on different forms over time, even be remade time and time again" (105). This constant negotiation of the practicality of wearing the hijab in a western society is evident in the *Hijabi Talks* discussion. In the video, Hanan goes on to say that "the word hijab is more than what I wear on my head, it's how we carry ourselves. It's how you are in your everyday life, how you act, how you speak all that stuff." Thus, for her, the scarf represents something much deeper than simply an outward expression of her religion. Harun echoes that being confident in wearing the hijab in a western world is difficult: "It is hard to stay confident in the hijab when school and friends who aren't Muslim are mixed into it only because you know you hear them talk about their hair and playing with their hair and doing all these nice styles and you're just sort of sitting there with your scarf."

By sharing their doubts of the hijab's role in their early lives, Hanan and Harun illustrate that it is normal to have hesitations and encourage those who might be going through the same thing to evaluate the hijab's meaning beyond the physical representation of religious identity. Furthermore, this discussion normalizes the challenges Hijabis face living in the west and may even educate some of Harun's non-Muslim viewers of the different meanings the hijab can hold for different women.

Moreover, Nabat (far left in Figure 2) similarly expresses the significance the hijab has for her identity as a Muslim woman:

> I started wearing the hijab when I was six. I was in first grade, and I only wore it because I did everything my mom did...but for me it's like I've worn my hijab for so long... I find beauty in my hijab. That's how I feel. I look better because that's how I have always identified myself, it's part of my identity. I've worn it so long; I don't know any other way...My confidence just comes out the hijab. I've worn it so long, it's like you can't tell me nothing. If you're targeting my hijab you're targeting me. It's not just clothes, it's like who I am, this is what represents me and that's how I've always seen it.

For Nabat, the hijab embodies her whole identity, so an attack on her hijab is an attack on her identity. Thus, the hijab provides her with the confidence she has to do certain things. Similarly, Harun talks about how the hijab empowers her: "you wearing a hijab should not stop you from going to live your life, that is the last thing you should think about when you're putting on the hijab. If anything, it should empower you." Harun goes on to explain the way many of her friends and family had expressed their concerns of her studying abroad in France as a Hijabi. Their concerns refer to the secularism much of France's public policies suggest. For instance, the banning of religious symbols in educational spaces in 2004 sparked the rise of Islamophobic

attitudes in France and a number of protests by French Muslim women who opposed this law which they saw as an infringement on their right to religious expression. This made the hijab not only a religious symbol but a political statement of resistance in France (Keaton). Yet, for Harun, she saw no reason for the hijab to hold her back from studying abroad in France. That being said, she recognizes that her confidence in her blackness and her hijab is something she had to grow into:

> I feel like it's just something that while you grow up you just become more comfortable in your skin. You become a more confident person and you come to terms with who you are and you're going to become unapologetically yourself. There's no way to tell you like I'm going to be Black until I die and so you just kind of live with it.

Harun and her cousins' candidness about their experiences as Black Muslim women not only provide viewers with useful advice but also with support that the challenges they might be similarly facing as Black Muslims are valid and surmountable. Carolyn Moxley Rouse's book *Televised Redemption: Black Religious Media and Racial Empowerment* highlights the way Black American Muslim media acknowledges racism, Islamophobia and "American exceptionalism," and rejects them while striving for post-racialism (Rouse 142). I contend that Black Muslim Hijabi YouTubers are actively engaging in these conversations in order to acknowledge the social position they are in while trying to alleviate the challenges that come along with holding these identities. They create content that celebrates these identities and validates the experiences of Black Muslim women like them. Their videos emphasize the importance of creating an online community to not only validate one another's experiences but also to offer advice and share knowledge with one another.

HOW TO GET INTO THE MARKETING/PR WORLD AS A WOC (Shahd Batal)

Figure 3: *How To Get Into The Marketing/PR World As A WOC | Shahd Batal*
Published on 27 Mar 2018 (Pictured from left to right: Aysha, Shahd, and Isra)

Black Muslim YouTubers not only share beauty and lifestyle tips on their channels but also advice on how to navigate the world as women of color (WOC), particularly Black Muslim women. In Shahd Batal's video, *How to Get into the Marketing/PR World As a WOC*, she invites Aysha Harun (left in Figure 3), fellow Black Muslim YouTuber, and Isra (right in Figure 3), a fellow Sudanese-American to discuss their experiences and advice for working in the marketing and public relations industry. The video focuses on the branding and marketing of YouTube channels and the corporate side of the marketing and public relations world. Harun brings a unique perspective to this topic as she has gotten to experience both sides of the influencer/brand relationship because she worked at a company that managed YouTube channels before actually establishing herself on YouTube. Isra, on the other hand, has experienced different aspects of just the marketing and PR world by having worked both in a corporate marketing agency and in-house at a beauty company that seeks YouTubers with whom to collaborate. Batal starts the video by introducing the two guests who were visiting her in Los Angeles. She tells her viewers

that they had a conversation the night before about this topic, and she paused it and told them to keep all those thoughts for a video that they could film the next day. The video's panel-style conversation offers viewers an idea of what it is like to be a Black Muslim woman and advice on how to succeed as a WOC in the marketing and PR world.

Batal (middle in Figure 3) starts the on-camera conversation by asking "How has it been trying to get a job as a Black Muslim Hijabi?" Isra's answer demonstrates the way the unique intersectionality of her identities actually provided her with more opportunities in finding a job:

> I am not your office setting girl. Like I go into work with my hoops, I am like very myself and I think that's very daunting [for employers]. What I was most fearful of, which was my personality, and my perspective and my agenda to kind of push women of color, that's what people often find most intriguing about me. So even though I subconsciously thought like this might block me, it actually opened up so many doors for me. The minute I became comfortable with just being who I am and talking about what I'm passionate about is when doors started opening for me.

The lack of representation of successful Black Muslim women in the mainstream media makes Isra's expression of her experience with embracing her identities as a Black Muslim woman very powerful. Thus, for Batal's viewers, this online representational space provides them with a unique chance to take up this unparalleled narrative of a successful Black Muslim that they might not have otherwise considered was in their capacity to pursue.

Batal's next question touches on how being the only Black Hijabi in the room impacts their interactions professionally: "Do you feel like you are taken seriously, or you have to try harder, or if anything [it has] set you apart in a good way? Because I've felt all of those." Harun answers and explains how at the beginning of her YouTube career, at events, being the only

Black Hijabi only made it harder for her: “It kind of sucks that I always feel like I have to prove myself, now it's different....100% I can tell you at the beginning because I was a Black Hijabi or because I didn't look like the typical blogger or everyone else in Toronto, no one was really taking me seriously.” Moreover, Harun’s experience of being unheard and disregarded in the context of a Western media sphere aligns with Batal’s frustrations with the predominantly South Asian and Arab Muslim community in regards to the modest fashion industry. According to Katherine Bullock and Gul Joya Jafri, Canadian mainstream media displays and reinforces the narrative of Muslim women as the foreign, ‘exotic,’ oppressed, or threatening ‘others’ which is a reflection of general attitudes towards Muslim women in Canada (37). This subsequently impacts the way people interact or choose not to interact with Muslim women living in these contexts, as is apparent in Harun’s experience. Moreover, as Sara brought up in Harun’s *Hijabi Talks* video, Black Muslim women are often excluded in conversations that concern them and their work. Batal emphasizes the importance of the representation of WOC, like Isra, on the brand and marketing side. “It's so important to have someone who looks like you on the other side because first of all, that's where a lot of things go wrong on the brand side.” She eludes to marketing mishaps that occur as a result of lack of representation; “If you're all white, blonde, blue eyes,” there is no one to call out implicit biases and prevent the creation of marketing materials that could be deemed problematic.

Harun and Isra also inform Muslim viewers who are thinking about pursuing marketing to consider how generally, there is a lack of diversity within many marketing companies. Harun clarifies that an unawareness of the lack of diversity in a company can result in a unique culture shock:

> You're also going to feel like you have to do certain things you're not comfortable with like especially in the corporate world, like drinking and alcohol. That's part of the culture like going out for drinks after work or like any time there's a party, there's going to be alcohol... It is kind of awkward to bring it up especially if you're new in the industry or you don't want to seem difficult. It is hard to stay true to your roots and what you believe in, but you kind of have to from the get go.

By sharing these experiences, Isra and Harun give viewers advice to prepare them for potential challenges they might face as Muslims in the marketing field. This specific challenge affects practicing Muslims because of the religious prohibition of the consumption of alcohol. By warning viewers of this, Harun and Isra prepare others to deal with being a part of a field of work where they will be the minority. Moreover, Isra ensures viewers that while it might be a little awkward at first, after explaining why one may not be participating in that aspect of the culture, most people will respect the decision. Isra shares another tip when interviewing for a job in the marketing world:

> I would ask about how they feel about inclusion and diversity because I think their answer will say a lot, and if their answer includes the word diversity a lot, that's a problem. Their answer needs to talk about inclusion more. The perfect way to explain it is diversity is getting invited to the party and inclusion is being asked to dance at the party. It doesn't matter if you're all just sitting there, do they want you to contribute? How often are they going to ask you to contribute?

The invaluable advice that Isra shares with the viewers is uniquely presented on this online representational space that Batal and Harun created as YouTubers. Their racial and religious identities present them with a unique opportunity to not only post videos in which they can have

these discussions about their social positions and but also more conventional YouTube content such as tutorials and vlogs.

VLOGMADAN/THE RAMADAN DAILY

As Muslim women showcasing their lives, both Harun and Batal choose to make videos during the Muslim Holy Month of Ramadan. During this month, practicing Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset every day. Batal's Ramadan series is a collection of vlogs she uniquely calls *Vlogmadan*. These videos consist of informal walk-throughs of her days during Ramadan. She directly addresses her viewers and tells them where she is and what she is doing. On the other hand, Harun's Ramadan series is a variety of video types including makeup tutorials for Eid and vlogs similar to Batal's in which she films her day for viewers. Harun calls her series *The Ramadan Daily* because she commits to uploading a video every day during the month of Ramadan.

Harun begins her first *Ramadan Daily* video with the Muslim holiday greeting, "Ramadan Mubarak, Ramadan Kareem to all my Muslim brothers and sisters!" By addressing her Muslim viewers and wishing them a blessed and happy Ramadan, Harun is actively offering a distinctively Muslim space. By creating videos in which she showcases the positive aspects of her life during Ramadan, she contests the predominantly victimized portrayals of Muslim women in mainstream media. Harun provides this series as an encouraging space for all Muslims, including those living in the west, who are fasting alone, without other Muslims to support them: "It can be difficult, especially if you're doing it alone. So, to all of my Muslims who are fasting alone today and for the rest of the month, I'm really sorry and at least you can come every day to my channel...and enjoy my videos." Harun continues by sharing her personal goals for the month

which include improving in her prayers and giving to charity. She even gets emotional talking about how grateful she is to be at a point in her life to be able to give money to those who need it. This deeply vulnerable and personal moment demonstrates the way some YouTubers see their platforms and their connection with their viewers as something more than just an entertainment outlet. Rather, it seems for Harun, this place is somewhere she can go and share her religious goals and ask her viewers to share theirs so that they can support one another in achieving those goals. Harun's channel is an online space in which she can provide fellow Muslims with a place that fosters community and personal growth.

Batal's *Vlogmadan* series similarly allows her to showcase her experiences during Ramadan. For her, the series is an opportunity to share her culture with her viewers. Living with her parents, who are Sudanese immigrants, like for many children of immigrants living in the West, Ramadan is a family-oriented time of the year during which they carry out cultural traditions. Acknowledging the fact that much of her audience is not Muslim nor Sudanese, Batal uses her platform as an outlet to showcase her Muslim culture and her Sudanese culture to her viewers. In her first *Vlogmadan* video, Batal discloses that she is not fasting during that vlog: "It's weird sharing this…when mother nature hits you, you don't pray or fast. But that's okay this is still going to be a fun vlog." She takes that opportunity to educate her viewers who might not know while also recognizing that it is "weird" to be sharing this aspect of her life. This demonstrates the certain level of openness she decides to have with her viewers because she chooses to share her life online via YouTube. This vlog and many others in the series feature her *Iftar*, or meal during which Muslims break their fast, with her family. She explains some of the traditional Sudanese dishes they eat and the types of juice they drink which she says is "super

important during Ramadan." This unique glimpse into her life during Ramadan allows viewers to get a sense of what this Holy month entails for many Muslims.

It is important to note that while a genre of Islamic preaching on YouTube does exist (Naggar), this is not what these Black Muslim women's channels serve to do. Religious preaching on YouTube appears in many forms from recordings of sermons to performance videos which display religious lessons. Iranian-American YouTuber Ali Ardekani aka Baba Ali (80K Subscribers) chooses to do the latter (Naggar). Such videos serve a specifically religious purpose. On the other hand, Harun and Batal choose to share some of their religious experiences on YouTube which include the Holy Month of Ramadan because they are lifestyle vloggers and a major aspect of their lifestyles is their religion. They do not attempt to claim any sort of religious authority, however by constructing this affective space online they provide viewers with role models who claim their religiosity through their day to day. By creating videos on YouTube, Harun and Batal are in control of their narrative as Black Muslims. For Batal, the *Vlogmadan* series is a way to educate and showcase her culture while for Harun, *The Ramadan Daily* is a way to actively work towards her goals alongside her viewers.

By addressing topics regarding their religious and racial identities, Black Muslim women YouTubers validate and reveal some of the shared experiences Black Muslims face living in the West. Harun's *Hijabi Talks* videos not only uncover some of the opinions she and her cousins have on certain topics, but they also illustrate that while they have shared experiences, they do not all hold the same feelings and attitudes towards certain things regarding their race and religion. Batal's video about being a woman of color in the PR/Marketing field gives viewers invaluable advice which demonstrates the power of having such a representational platform.

Moreover, both Batal and Harun choose to vlog different aspects of Ramadan to provide viewers with a glimpse into their lives and goals as Black Muslim women. These Black Muslim YouTubers produce these videos and control their narratives.

Chapter 3: Influence of Black Muslim Hijabi YouTubers

This chapter examines the responsibilities of being a Black Muslim influencer and the unique way in which Black Muslim women YouTubers influence their viewers by promoting the embracement of their marginalized identities. I argue that the unique intersection of the identities of Black Muslim women YouTubers forces them to not only bear the responsibility of representing this group for those viewers who share those identities but also those viewers whose only understanding of Black Muslims is through the videos of Black Muslim YouTubers.

AYSHA HARUN

I use Aysha Harun as a case study of the way Black Muslim women YouTubers view their responsibility as influencers. In email correspondence, I asked Harun questions to get an understanding of her audience and her role as an influencer. She describes her viewers as predominantly "young Muslim women from ages 18-34" who are "Black/African." Harun emphasizes the loyalty of many of her subscribers: "many of them have been following me for over 3/4 years and are constantly engaging with my content through comments." This demonstrates the way Harun, over years, has fostered an online representational space in which many of her subscribers, who are Black and Muslim women, find solace.

This fostering of community and the validation of the experiences of Black Muslims is apparent in the comments section of Harun's *HIJABI TALKS EP. 2 | Being Black & Muslim, Hijab Confidence & Self Love* video in which she and her cousins discuss their experiences as Black Muslim women. The video touches on topics such as colorism and exclusion in the Muslim community and confidence in wearing the hijab as a Black Muslim woman. One viewer

with the username ODISFUNKCHANELL comments: “I had this one person be so shocked I was Muslim that they started to throw Islamic questions at me to test me as if I was lying. I was so mad and shocked I couldn't believe it! I know I may not look like a typical Muslim but if someone tells you they are Muslim. THATS IT.” This presumably Black Muslim viewer’s experience resonates with Harun and her cousins’ experiences as Black Muslims and shares an experience in which they had to prove their religious identity.

In a post-9/11 era, Muslims in western contexts are often questioned because of their religious identification. Moreover, Black Muslims face another level of this scrutiny not only having to pass “authenticity tests” in Black communities (McGuire et al. 321), but also, as Harun’s viewer highlights, in Muslim communities. Black Muslims are at a unique intersection in predominantly white societies that deems both their religious and racial identities as “antithetical to whiteness.” Thus, decreasing proximity to either identity through identity performances, such as choosing to not wear the hijab, only accentuates the other, still subjecting the individual to marginalization (Mauleón 1380). Similarly, increasing proximity to one identity calls into question the authenticity of the other.

The comment on the *Hijabi Talks* video reveals the way this video provides an online space in which Black Muslims can share their experiences, validate one another and give non-Black Muslims and non-Muslims an understanding of the Black Muslim experience in western contexts. In Patterson’s examination of biracial YouTubers, she finds that community is established “through imaginations of audience” (Patterson 110). In other words, YouTubers imagined their audiences to be like them and subsequently encouraged those who hold their identities to engage with the content, through likes and comments, if they can relate to the experiences the YouTuber describes. The videos of Black Muslim YouTubers similarly

encourage engagement with content in order to validate the experiences of those who hold their identities and this, in turn, establishes an online representational community.

The *Hijabi Talks* video also touches on Harun's own journey towards embracing her religious and racial identities. Moreover, Harun reiterates this in one of her answers to my questions, expanding on the role being on YouTube has played in her journey:

> I was only 16 years old when I started my YouTube channel so I have definitely grown into the woman I am because of it. I didn't fully embrace my skin tone growing up because I was always told lighter skin was more beautiful. So even just matching my foundation, I would always go for something lighter. Also, when I started there were no other Black Muslim hijabis on YouTube so I didn't really feel like there was a place for me online…My growth on YouTube helped me realize that embracing and loving my identity is what drew people into my content.

Harun's answer demonstrates the way a lack of online representation hinders people's journeys towards embracing their identities. By sharing her experiences and her successes, Harun willingly bears the responsibility of being a representation of this group that she did not have while growing up. Thus, by creating these videos and gaining recognition, Black Muslim YouTubers provide their Black Muslim viewers with a representation of their identities that showcases the tremendous accomplishments of Black Muslim women. Harun elaborates on the impact and influence she has on her viewers:

> I get messages from my followers all the time saying how special it is for them to see someone who looks like them be successful online and receive recognition from huge companies [such as Clinique and Bobbi Brown] and media outlets. I know that for me growing up, I was never able to see a Black Muslim Hijabi in a magazine or going to

> huge conferences like Vidcon or similar ones. So as special as it is to me, I hope that other women see this and believe that it's achievable for them as well in any industry. In the end, I make content to entertain, educate and inspire and I feel that I've been able to successfully accomplish all three.

Moreover, Harun understands that being a representative of Black Muslim women online plays a role in her goal to inspire through her videos. By being representatives, Black Muslim YouTubers guide viewers towards consuming certain products that they think Black Muslim viewers can benefit from using. Some even create their own products and use their channels as online entrepreneurial spaces. Batal, for example, created merchandise such as hoodies and phone cases and by doing so not only established a brand for herself but also allowed her viewers to see a Black Muslim woman venture into such entrepreneurial endeavors. Many of Harun's viewers affirm the importance of representation through comments. One user named Sian Aşkım comments: "As a fellow Hijabi i absolutely love these videos Aysha. These conversations need to be had. We Black muslim women also need to have a voice." This emphasizes the powerful role Black Muslim women YouTubers have in affirming their viewers' identities and encouraging them to embrace them. In Samara Anarbaeva's examination of beauty YouTubers' performance of identities on their channels, she asserts that underrepresented marginalized groups turn to YouTube as an outlet "to speak up about their experiences with racism and with being the 'Other'" (9). Not only do these videos validate their experiences, but they also provide viewers with ways to cope with the racism they face as minorities.

While she does not want it to define her channel, Harun also recognizes that as a Black and Muslim YouTuber, she bears the responsibility of educating those who might now know about the Black and Muslim experience:

> At first I was apprehensive about sharing my culture, my religious views (other than wearing hijab), and religious practices online because I didn't want that to define me…However as I grew (both in age and subscribers), I realized that my differences was what made me unique. I didn't want to be just another "beauty guru", so I started sharing hijab tutorials, Eid-focused content, Ramadan, and much more and found joy in it…I love sharing religious events like Ramadan and Eid on my channel because it is an exciting celebration for all Muslims. I am not shy about explaining why I wear the hijab, or what certain words like InshaAllah or Alhamdulillah mean. However, I do not want to alienate my audience who is not Muslim so I keep things very baseline. I am proud to be a Muslim and even more proud to wear my hijab, but I do not let it define my YouTube channel.

Harun showcasing her identities and culture through her videos educates non-Muslims. She explains Muslim phrases such as *InshaAllah* (God Willing) and *Alhamdulilah* (Thank God) as a way of educating her non-Muslim viewers. This use of Muslim phrases in videos is not unique to Black Muslim YouTubers, many non-Black Muslim YouTubers use such phrases as well such as British beauty vlogger Amena Khan (409K Subscribers) who "often mentions God or elements of her faith in her videos" (Peterson 9). Similarly, Iranian-American YouTuber, Ali Ardekani aka Baba Ali uses Arabic expressions "to establish his credibility to speak on Muslim matters and suggests that he is primarily aiming at a Muslim audience" (Naggar 308). While Ardekani intentionally uses such phrases to indicate the religious purpose of his channel, Harun, on the other hand, deliberately uses her channel to inform her non-Muslim viewers of her lifestyle which includes such religious language.

Harun also posts videos every day during the Holy Month of Ramadan and calls the series *The Ramadan Daily.* Many of her non-Muslim viewers comment in support of the religious month. One viewer named Lulu comments: "I am not Muslim but your Ramadan vlogs are my favorite because they teach me so much and I love learning about what other people believe in! So thank you for sharing!" One non-Muslim viewer even expresses her interest in Islam in the comments of Aysha's video: "Ramadan Mubarak! [Blessed Ramadan!]I am not Muslim. However, I am considering making the change to become one. I'm hoping that your Ramadan vlog along with others, will help me learn more about the religion ☺" By showcasing aspects of her religious identity in her videos, Aysha cultivates an online learning space where some of her non-Muslim viewers feel they can grow more knowledgeable about the religion. While Black Muslim women YouTubers might not want their channels to be defined by their identities, they still inadvertently bear a responsibility of representing their religious, gendered and racial identities and educating those who might not have any knowledge about the way people experience the intersection of those identities.

BEARING THE RESPONSIBILITY

In a Question and Answer video titled *Love Languages, The Muslim Community & What I'm Reading,* Batal touches on the responsibility influencers like herself have to uphold certain values of Islam. She refers to this in response to a question from a viewer: "I don't want to but I feel like I have to, what is going on in the Hijabi Insta/Youtube world?" The question alludes to the concerns that have arisen in the Muslim online community on the photo sharing platform Instagram and YouTube, as a result of the decisions of many Hijabi influencers to take off their hijabs.

One of the most prominent influencers who decided to take off her hijab is Dina Torkia (aka Dina Tokio, 812K Subscribers), a non-Black Egyptian-British YouTuber. When Torkia started her lifestyle and beauty channel, her channel almost entirely revolved around her identity as a woman who wears the hijab. However, after seven years of establishing her brand as a Hijabi YouTuber, Torkia decided to post her first vlog without her hijab in November of 2018. She received much backlash from Muslim viewers who argued she made a wrong decision. Some even accused her of using the Hijabi community to build a following and abandoning her Muslim ideals once she was successful. She addresses some of the hurtful comments she received in a 47-minute-long video titled *The Bad, the Worse and the Ugly* (Dina Tokio). Torkia's situation demonstrates one of the great burdens of bearing the responsibility of being an influencer who represents a religious group of people.

Batal addresses the concern many people have and this responsibility in her question and answer video:

> Everybody has the freedom to do what you want. I think that if you are given a platform, it is a gift and you need to be morally responsible with your platform. That being said, there is an unrealistic expectation of people and you can't expect anyone else to be perfect when we ourselves are not perfect and we can't judge anyone….I have friends that don't think that there is really a moral responsibility…I think that if you have a platform and you are profiting off your platform and you are benefiting at all from this platform, then I'm sorry that's just something that comes with the territory. You have to be responsible and when I say responsible I don't mean keep your hijab on because you can take it off in a responsible way. I think there are much bigger problems in the Muslim community besides women taking their hijabs off.

In this response, Batal touches on the unrealistic standards to which many influencers and YouTubers are held by their viewers and the communities they represent. As Muslim women sharing their lives online, these YouTubers bear the responsibility of not only representing the religion to non-Muslims but also upholding religious values that much of the online Muslim community expects of them. Not only do Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab struggle with the oppression and other stereotypical narratives that Western media typically represents them through, but they also bear the responsibility of representing their religion in a positive light in their choice to outwardly express their religion (Peterson 3). The subjective nature of modesty, which is one of the major tenets of the Muslim faith, translates into an unclear understanding of what is morally obligated for those who are choosing to represent the religion online. In the same Questions and Answers video, Batal emphasizes the moral responsibility influencers have, but for her, that does not necessarily mean continuing to wear the hijab. Rather, it is to recognize that people are influenced by YouTubers' actions, thus, they hold the responsibility of understanding that their actions have repercussions.

In this video, Batal shares an anecdote of an interaction at a *Teen Vogue* summit between her friend, Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first Black Hijabi member of the United States fencing team, and a young Muslim girl. The young girl asked Muhammad "who are your role models growing up? Because…it's hard to find a role model right now. It's hard to find someone to look up to." YouTubers bear the responsibility of becoming potential role models, particularly for those who share their identities. The influence Black Muslims women YouTubers have can be extremely powerful and this bears weight on the way they choose to carry themselves in their videos. These women have to negotiate the ethical considerations of the representational power they hold as visibly Muslim women online. Thus, by creating videos, Black Muslim women YouTubers

influence in a unique way because of the intersection of their identities. Being social media influencers, as the first Black Muslims to do so successfully, entails setting a precedent. As Batal states in a video filled with advice for women of color interested in working in the marketing industry: "if you mess up, that's going to make it so much harder for the next girl." This suggests there is a pressure to establish a positive precedent for Black Muslims in the YouTube world for the next generation of Black Muslims who might want to follow in their footsteps. Doing so involves shaping a Muslim presence in Black spaces and a Black presence in Muslim spaces.

YOUTUBE BLACK

In 2017, Harun was invited to the #YouTubeBlack event as the first, and only, Black Hijabi to be invited. Created in 2016, #YouTubeBlack is an annual event that YouTube created in reaction to an article written by Akilah Hughes, an African-American YouTuber, titled *YouTube rarely promotes black YouTube stars, even during Black History Month*. The article detailed the lack of representation of Black and other people of color who are successful YouTubers in the advertisement of YouTube (Hughes). She points to tweets and billboards that were part of YouTube's advertising campaigns which primarily featured white YouTubers. Subsequently, #YouTubeBlack was created in an effort to address some of the challenges Black creators face while fostering a space of support in which Black YouTubers could network and learn from one another. Moreover, Hughes recognizes and appreciates YouTube's efforts in an article where she says "#YouTubeBLACK marks the first time a major social platform has directly, in person, addressed the plight of being black online—and sought out ways to support this dynamic and growing demographic" (Hughes).

In a video titled *THE MOST LIT YOUTUBE EVENT EVER! | YouTube Black 2017 VLOG,* Harun showcases some of the speeches, conversations, and social events at the

convention. Harun ends the vlog with a closing remark: “I just had such a great time...it was amazing and the fact that they're actually investing in people who don't really get the time of day half the time, is really special” (Aysha Harun). Moreover, being both Black and Muslim, Harun represents an online group that is underrepresented even further. However, by being at that event, she establishes a unique space for Muslims who are Black. In one of her responses to my questions, Harun reiterates the challenges of being a YouTuber who holds marginalized identities:

> Getting over the fact that no matter how amazing, high quality or inspiring my content is, there will always be an Arab or white-passing Muslim woman who will get more views or subscribers. Being a Black Muslim Woman in hijab on YouTube unfortunately puts a bit of a cap on your growth and as much as other people will deny that, it is the realistic truth…It's how the world works and as long as you come to terms with it, you do not let the unchangeable hinder your success.

By acknowledging the structural obstacles one faces as a Black Muslim online, Harun accepts the challenges while allowing them to be a part of her personal growth and successes. In 2018, Harun returned to the #YouTubeBlack Creator Summit and posted about her experience in a vlog. In that video, she stresses the importance of this event:

> Non-people of color get so many more opportunities than people of color and especially on YouTube, it just kind of mimics what happens in the world. So, I think it's really important that YouTube has actually invested in the Black community because we are so strong and we have such an important voice to share with the world.

One of her viewers named Manal Hamad comments “aahhh!! it made my heart so happy to see you representing the black muslim community. 💖 💖” This support of her presence at the event

demonstrates the impact of representation of this online community. By creating videos and representing Black Muslims at YouTube events, Harun and other Black Muslim YouTubers contest the marginalization that they face because of their racial and religious identities while allowing the challenges that come along with holding those identities to contribute to their personal growth. Moreover, by representing the Muslim faith at this predominantly Black event, Harun is reframing the western public perceptions of Islam to include a more representative Black Muslim narrative. Moxley Rouse stresses the importance of the way the Muslim faith is represented in media and how it "has the potential to change perceptions of the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of the ummah [i.e. Muslim community]" (Rouse 150). Thus, by creating videos and representing Islam in predominantly non-Muslim spaces, Black Muslim YouTubers actively establish a space for not only Black Muslims but also other Muslims to be seen and heard.

COLLABORATIONS

Black Muslim women YouTubers foster community not only by creating videos but also by engaging in one another's content through comments and collaborations. By creating content and encouraging other Black Muslim women to create content, these YouTubers reinforce the Black Muslim online representational community. Lifestyle video collaborations not only gather viewers as each YouTuber encourages their subscribers to watch the other's videos, but they also authenticate the sincerity of the vloggers as they "allow the viewers to more easily place themselves within these intimate conversations" (Peterson 14). This is evident in a Questions and Answer video posted by Batal (*Shooting Your Shot, Marriage & Pregnancy Ft. Chinutay | Shahd Batal*). The almost an hour-long video features Manal Chinutay. Sitting comfortably on a couch, the two Black Muslim women answer questions from viewers while sipping on tea and

addressing topics such as pregnancy and insecurities. This informal, generally unstructured conversation gives viewers a sense of authenticity and closeness which further reinforces a sense of community online.

In response to a question on how they met, Batal says "a lot of us meet online," referring to her friendships with other Black Muslim YouTubers such as Aysha Harun. This demonstrates the way YouTube provides a space for those who share identities and interests to meet and engage with one another in a way that encourages the embracement of those identities. Batal says

> I knew Manal long before I knew Manal. I would always watch your videos, I remembered watching your videos with Amar, so when you would say the stories I'm like I already know these stories because I watched your videos... I remember when I first started wearing hijab, I was actually looking at her videos for turban tutorials and so there was one that I really liked, and then I did a video of like three turban styles.

Not only does this illustrate the way watching Chinutay's videos influenced Batal's content creation, but it also demonstrates YouTube's ability to foster an online community of Black Muslims. Chinutay responds "It makes me so happy because I consider my viewers a community, like a family, so when you watch a video and you follow up on me…some people get a little creeped out by it, [but] I'm like honored that like you've like shared that experience with me." This expression of a feeling of kinship or closeness to viewers further exemplifies the unique online space these Black Muslim women foster as YouTubers. By creating videos, they are promoting the creation of Black Muslim spaces and forming relationships with one another even outside of the scope of YouTube.

Furthermore, Black Muslim women YouTubers engage with one another's content through comments. For instance, in response to Batal's video *How To Get Into The*

Marketing/PR World As A WOC, Chinutay comments: "Love this and how you all have come together to share your thoughts on issues most of us relate to or struggle with. Found this really helpful. Keep Shinning and inspiring MashaAllah.<3 Love, big sis ..ChiChi :) (just made that up)" This encouragement of content creation and collaboration through comments further reinforces notions of community and connection. Such comments also display the support and encouragement this online community emboldens to remain grounded by religious ideals. Moreover, Patterson argues that "YouTube serves as a space of interaction within which biracial individuals engage with online peers who are understanding, generally accepting and literate in a shared discourse around the biracial experience in the US" (113). This understanding of the biracial YouTube community closely aligns with my understanding of the Black Muslim community established by Black Muslim women YouTubers. YouTube serves as a space in which those who have a shared understanding of the Black and Muslim experience in the west can engage in conversation and encourage one another. By engaging with one another's content, these Black Muslim women YouTubers are not only empowering their viewers but also their fellow YouTubers in order to further establish this Black Muslim community.

This chapter examined the ways in which the identities of Black Muslim YouTubers create unique responsibilities for these influencers. Not only do they bear the responsibility of educating non-Muslims and non-Blacks about their experiences, but they are also held to a standard to uphold certain values of the Black and Muslim communities of which they are a part. By collaborating and engaging with one another's content, Black Muslim women YouTubers also foster a space which promotes the embracement of their identities. By creating videos and representing Black Muslims in spaces in which they are the minority, these YouTubers set a

precedent and push for Black Muslims to have their voices heard in predominantly non-Black and non-Muslim spaces. Thus, YouTube provides them with an online space to directly contest the marginalization that they face in broader societal contexts because of their racial and religious identities.

CONCLUSION: Impact of Black Muslim Hijabi YouTubers

Through my examination of Black Muslim women YouTubers, I have concluded that the creation of their videos not only provides them with an outlet to express themselves through their interests but also to present the unique intersection of their racial and religious identities. The Black and Muslim experience is rarely explored in western mainstream media. It is important to recognize that while efforts are being made by some filmmakers and media organizations to provide viewers with Black Muslim representation, there still lacks a representative Black Muslim narrative in the dominant mainstream media. Thus, through their videos, Black Muslim YouTubers offer and control their narrative. This not only fosters community for those who share their identities but it also educates those who might not know about the Black Muslim experience, creating an online representational and educational space. Through their videos, Black Muslim women YouTubers actively combat the stereotypes and prejudices they face in predominantly Arab and South-Asian Muslim communities and the predominantly white western societal and mass media context.

Black Muslim YouTubers present their religious and racial identities through their hijab, hair care and fashion videos. Their My Hijab Story videos demonstrate the complexity behind the choice of wearing the hijab which informs both Muslim and non-Muslim viewers. Their Hijabi Hair care videos emphasize the importance hair care has for Black women, which illustrates the fusing of the presentation of their racial and religious identities. Similarly, wearing turban style hijabs and showcasing their fashion sense through modest clothing demonstrate the way they negotiate modesty, blackness and self-presentation. Through such implicit expressions of religious and racial identity, Black Muslim Hijabi YouTubers actively demonstrate to viewers their blackness and their Muslim-ness which are often questioned.

Explicit discussions about their racial and religious identities also appear on the channels of Black Muslim YouTubers. Aysha Harun's *Hijabi Talks* videos specifically demonstrate the impact the videos of Black Muslim YouTubers have on their viewers. The comment sections of those videos emphasize the importance of validation and discussion of topics surrounding race, gender and religion for Black Muslim viewers. These videos also give non-Muslims and non-Black Muslims an understanding of what it means to navigate the western world as a Black Muslim woman. Black Muslim viewers gain advice given through videos such as Shahd Batal's *How to Get into the Marketing PR World as WOC* video. Moreover, Black Muslim YouTubers are able to showcase their lifestyles and cultures in vlogs such as *The Ramadan Daily/Vlogmadan* videos. By addressing topics regarding their religious and racial identities, Black Muslim women YouTubers reveal some of the shared experiences Black Muslims face living in the West, taking control of a narrative that has been underrepresented.

As people who choose to share their lives online, these Black Muslim YouTubers bear certain responsibilities because of their racial and religious identities. Not only are they held to certain standards because of their choice to be representations of their religion, like other hijabi YouTubers, but they also have to set a precedent as the first of their kind to succeed in their field. While this responsibility can be cumbersome, it also means that they create a space in which they can both be a channel of support for other Black Muslims and be supported through collaborations and engagement with one another's content. Such an establishment of online community and camaraderie encourages viewers to promote the creation of Black Muslim spaces beyond YouTube.

Through this exploration, I have found that the intersectionality of the identities of Black Muslim women YouTubers gets articulated through physical presentations such as hijabs, verbal

use of religious terms and explicit discussions about their identities. Moreover, creating content informs their own journey towards embracement of their identities as these Black Muslim YouTubers come to understand those religious and racial identities better by fostering a community in which they gain a support system of fellow Black Muslims living in the west. This also impacts viewers' sense of self as they validate one another's experiences and learn from one another. In an attempt to control media representations of their racial and religious identities, these YouTubers, who have non-Muslim and non-Black subscribers, are reframing general understandings of Islam and blackness to include their narrative as Black Muslims. Their videos are an act of agency which contest the discrimination they face as marginalized groups in the west.

This study could only focus on YouTubers who wear the hijab which limited the scope of the research. Further research should examine non-hijabi Muslims on YouTube including Black Muslim men in order to understand gender differences and how that could impact the expression of religious and racial identities. Moreover, this study focuses on those who have a certain number of followers which coincidentally was predominantly children of immigrants living in the West. Further investigation of the reasons behind the success of children of immigrants on YouTube could serve to be useful in understanding the way online representational groups function. A deeper exploration of the cultural differences and similarities expressed in the videos of these YouTubers would also enhance such considerations. The majority of the most prominent Black Muslim YouTubers were non-US based Muslims. Thus, limiting the scope of a study to strictly US-based Black Muslims places these expressions of religious and racial identities in a particular geography with historical and possibly political implications.

As a Black Muslim woman myself, I have experienced first-hand how the videos of Black Muslim women and their presence in a broader media context has impacted viewers' personal understandings of racial and religious identities. This investigation of their videos has transformed my comprehension of the influence they have on viewers. Not only have some of my experiences living as a Black Muslim woman in the west been echoed, thus validating them, but I am able to recognize that my voice and other Black Muslim voices matter and are being heard. Furthermore, this research demonstrates the way these social media influencers are influencing beyond the scope of consumer behavior, they influence behaviors and attitudes as well. Black Muslim YouTubers are rebranding what it means to be exemplars of Islam and in doing so, they recognize the societal position in which they have been placed while striving for more.

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