

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to present an understanding of how Hijab wearing women perform their identities online and the resulting social advocacy facilitated via virtual communities. It will focus on the use of the Hijab (garment used to cover hair) as a symbol used to advocate for Muslim women who utilise it in the content they broadcast online. Networked individualism along with influencer culture allows these symbols to be propagated to a wider audience and the mainstream success of some Hijab wearing women indicates a possible shift in public perception.

## **Introduction**

Muslim women have been somewhat marginalised in Western society due to their appearance and perceived lifestyle not aligning with that of the majority. In Western online spaces that are predominantly English speaking on platforms predominantly owned by US companies, they have integrated into networked publics to become visible on their own terms through their own labour to perform everyday activism. Female Hijab wearing Muslims have formed a networked virtual community spanning Instagram, Youtube, and Facebook with a shared aesthetic identity performed through donning the Hijab. Hijab, while referring to the article of clothing, also “encompasses a comprehensive system of proscribed behaviors that involve restricting bodily space, restricting bodily practice, and performing aesthetic labor” (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017); it functions as a symbol contributing to Muslim identity performance online.

This paper views identity through a post-Marxist lens, in which it is developed within and defined against “social, cultural, economic, or political realities” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 304). The identities discussed are developed on social network sites which are defined by Papacharissi (2010) as websites that provide multimedia “props” (p. 304) for self-presentation and that facilitate the formation of ‘friend’ networks. The networking nature of these platforms is afforded by the overlapping of spaces both within the platform as well as convergence with other platforms (Papacharissi, 2010). The “converg[ing] of social spheres” (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 306) is what facilitates the discovery of Muslim online presences by those with weak ties to it, thus contributing to advocacy efforts for improving Muslim Hijab-wearing women's social standing in Western society. Historically the veil has been viewed as an oppressive practice (Rahbari, 2021) and Muslim women portrayed as “backward” and “unfamiliar with technology” (Piela, 2017, p. 71). Veiled Muslim females' online presences become a site of struggle in the context of identity politics engaging culture and politics (Pemberton & Takhar, 2020). Downey and Fenton (2002, p. 194 cited in Piela, 2017, p. 76) describe counter-publics as offering mediated “solidarity and reciprocity that are grounded in a collective experience of marginalization and expropriation”. This paper argues that through the construction of their online identities by using a visual symbol within a larger network, female Hijab-wearing Muslims effect wider societal change by increasing their visibility and therefore acceptability within wider society.

## **Online identity construction and audience building of Hijab wearing women**

The identities of covering Muslim women are developed and broadcasted through the use of the Hijab as a symbol. Self-categorisation theory provides a framework for understanding how a group member's actions are a result of their understanding of group norms in order to be considered a part of it (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell cited in Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). In this context, Muslim women may attempt to subvert stereotypes of their group by performing parts of their identity or de-emphasizing other aspects to appease either the 'outgroup' or other groups they may be members of (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). The performing self does so for various audiences and must do so in a way that accounts for these differences in perspective "without sacrificing coherence and continuity" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 307). The blending of social spheres facilitated by the affordances of online networks can also blur the boundary between public and private that is more concrete in the physical world (Papacharissi, 2010). Opportunities for exploration and navigating the public/ private dichotomy is made possible with the tools that constitute what is termed Web 2.0, which falls under what Delanty refers to as 'new technologies' that are fastpaced, capitalism driven and so embedded into social life that its capacity to change human nature is inevitable (2018) as will be discussed later. Rocamora (cited in Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017) uses the phrase 'technologies of the self' to refer to the convergence of various technologies to facilitate identity building online. For its wearer, Hijab preserves one's identity in a globalised world being symbolic and "an extension of the hijabi self" (El-Bassiouny, 2017, p. 299). Photography, a technology of the self, enables the formation of identities alongside fashion and social media and is greatly utilised in performing the veiled Muslim female self online. Self portraits (selfies) allow for the self-actualisation of an Islamically modest identity for the Muslim female 'prosumer' contributing to Instagram, while videos serve the same function on Youtube. Since the "hijab is heavily infused with cultural meaning" (Pemberton & Takhar, 2020, p. 3), it follows that a virtual community will form surrounding it. The labour of self-actualisation also contributes financial gain for digital influencers (Abidin, 2016). As to how the audience is built, "including hashtags in a post signifies that the user is willing to be visible to, and participate in, a larger group of others using (or searching) for similar hashtags" (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020, p. 676) thus expanding the virtual community. This demonstrates the utilisation of Web 2.0 affordances to perform the self and situate it within networks for social and economic advantage.

Virtual communities constitute networked individualism without affecting physical social relations; they only serve to supplement them (Delanty, 2018). In this age of individualism, Manuel Castells description of individual-centred 'personalised communities' residing within "thin networks of highly personalized individuals who do not otherwise have much in common" (Delanty, 2018, p. 212) seems plausible. However, networked individualism does not necessitate the label of 'egocentric networks' which visualises networks as centring on a single essential individual. Individuals, whether existing at the core or periphery can benefit from the covered Muslim female community, whether financially as an influencer or in terms of "sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity" (Wellman, 2001, p. 227; quoted in Castells, 2001, p. 127) as the audience. Thus an online life can supplement and enhance offline life, facilitating connections and increasing the visibility of identity groups.

### **The 'Hijabista' and the role of consumer culture in advocacy**

Delanty refers to virtual communication as “an extension of capitalism” (2018, p. 218) and highlights that the markets are an undeniably strong driver of social change. Hijab wearers producing content not necessarily aimed at other Hijab wearers contribute to positive visibility within their networks and different communities; examples include gamers, artists, sportswomen, comedians, and ‘mum vloggers’ who happen to be wearing a scarf but who produce content that is not aimed to a Muslim audience. However a discussion of social advocacy, whether or not intentional, through visibility cannot undermine the significant labour of Hijab fashion influencers, henceforth referred to as ‘Hijabistas’. Digital influencers are a form of micro celebrity who financially benefit from social capital characterised by large followings on social media sites (Abidin, 2016), and cultivate intimacy and emotional attachment with commercial intention (Abidin, 2021). Fashion and beauty knowledge are integral to the role Hijabistas play in providing value to their followers. For their audiences, common consumption interests can forge feelings of social solidarity and contribute to their sense of identity and cultural belonging (El-Bassiouny, 2017, p. 300), strengthening community ties.

Hijabistas utilise their faith as a driving force for both their own benefit as well as positive social change whether they openly act on this latter purpose or not. The Hijab features prominently in a booming modest fashion industry (Singh, Lewis cited in Pemberton & Takhar, 2020); symbiotically, Muslim dress has evolved into a ‘hybrid’ form that is heavily influenced by modern consumer culture and the fashion industry (Lewis, 2015 cited in Pemberton & Takhar, 2020) further contributing to its acceptability in a capitalistic Western society. The ‘Islamic culture industry’ where faith and fashion combine in the digital realm (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017) is based on a “series of images, practices, knowledges and commodities [that] are marketed specifically to Muslim women” according to Gokariksel and McLarney (cited in Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017, p. 852). The Hijabistas that facilitate this “...and their concurrence with the rise of an emergent middle class...mobilises the market and consumption to build a new social order that is more amenable to Islam and Muslims” (Sandikci & Ger, 2010 cited in Pemberton & Takhar, 2020, p. 6). Pemberton & Takhar’s (2020) study on French Muslim female bloggers shows that their consumptive practices shown online even amid a hostile media environment has managed to somewhat shift public discourse by opposing an Orientalist popular narrative in France. Social media has also helped ‘elevate’ Hijabistas to the mainstream, as evidenced by Dina Torkia who rose to fame on Youtube being featured in Elle and Vogue magazine and collaborating with major brands (Boudreaux, 2021) or Leah Vernon publishing a book with Penguin Publishers (Vernon, n.d.).

The architecture of platforms plays a significant role in the visibility and social reach of Hijab wearers. In the context of networked publics (boyd, 2010), taking into account Abidin’s more modern description of internet culture as having hyper competitive attention economies due to content saturation and a gamified metric culture (2020), the Hijab community takes on some features of refracted publics by weaponizing contexts and intentionally collapsing “distinct socio-cultural contexts...to generate potential for reappropriation” (Abidin, 2021, p. 4). For instance, participating in Tiktok trends which relies heavily on remixing increases the chances of one’s visibility outside of their ‘strong ties’ on the platform; an example would be the ‘Don’t rush challenge’ (Torkia, 2020). The same can be said for Youtube where creators can take advantage of ‘clickbait’ and various challenges

and 'tags' that if timed well can allow their content to become 'trending' or suggested to a larger audience due to the algorithm. On Instagram, Leah Vernon is an example of a Black female Hijab wearing Muslim woman who is also highly visible within the #bodypositive community. While individuals can exercise some agency in situating themselves within networks, the outcomes are unpredictable due to the role of algorithms.

Algorithms constitute a less visible aspect of online platforms and control the visibility of content on social networking sites. They can "serve as disciplinary apparatuses that prescribe participatory norms" (Bucher, 2012 cited in Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020) which can undermine Castell's view of personalised communities' connective power between 'thinly connected' individuals. Hence the potential for advocacy by identity groups is undermined and largely controlled by a hidden entity. Additionally, Craig Calhoun's position that online networks as extensions of offline cultural communities have a "weak capacity to enhance democratization" (Delanty, 2018, p. 214) due to their 'thinness' may have some bearing in the instance that the Hijab symbol remains a barrier to engagement with others outside the existing community due to the affirmation of prejudice spread by the proliferation of 'pernicious communities' (Parsell, 2008 cited in Delanty, 2018). Papacharissi (2020) also warns that issues of fragmentation in online networks can overemphasize differences. However, these points do not take into account the power of a capitalistic society as well as the unpredictability of website algorithms that can cause unexpected shifts in audience attention.

### **Social advocacy via networked counter-publics to shift public opinion**

Simply affirming one's citizenship by creating a public self can be a form of activism, and veiled Muslim women do so largely by relying on video, photographs or cartoon avatars of themselves wearing the Hijab while participating in various communities. Also notable is the use of hashtags on Twitter and Instagram such as #Forgotobeoppressed, #unapologeticallyMuslim and #FIBAAllowHijab, the latter having contributed to overturning the Hijab ban in the International Basketball Federation in 2017 (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020), and Mona Haydar's hip-hop music videos making social commentary as a Hijab wearing woman (Eltantawy & Isaksen, 2020). This visual and textual data discursively connecting public spheres (Piela, 2017, p. 76) creates an identity based counterpublic, a concept that opposes the view that audiences hold a passive and content attitude towards mass media narratives. Counterpublics, whose in-group discourse is viewable by outsiders (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault, 2018) form in response to an oppressive or dominant public and can bring attention to issues affecting its members by the successful levying of online networks to affect mainstream change. On the other hand, attempts to 'debunk' Western stereotypes about Muslim women have been criticised from within the Muslim community as in the case of the #Mipsterz (Muslim hipsters) music video published on Youtube which portrayed Hijab wearing women dancing to a Jay Z song, and Dina Torkia's removal of her headscarf; critics had qualms about whether the media aligned with Islamic core tenets, particularly modesty (Kavacsi & Kraeplin, 2017; Boudreaux, 2021). This brings to question whether social capital is sufficient to persuade a wider public or whether people will remain in their 'algorithmic enclaves' of likeminded individuals (Lim, 2017 cited in Peterson, 2020) due to coveillance and over-policing by individuals within communities.

## **Conclusion**

Muslim female influencers on Instagram, Tiktok and Youtube play a role in countering misconceptions about Muslim women to a wider public. They do this by resisting dominant discourse on their passivity, otherness or even hostility by exercising their agency in identity performance online and utilising the Hijab as a symbol. Self-definition by the networked counterpublic of Hijab-wearing Muslim women combats misrepresentation and marginalisation that is prevalent in mainstream mass media. It is recognised however that the nature of fragmented online communities and the thin nature of most communities online can limit the potential for social advocacy, and more research is needed to determine the effectiveness of the everyday activism discussed in this paper in shifting public perception.

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