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Remixing Images of Islam

The Creation of New Muslim Women Subjectivities on YouTube

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Abstract

This study provides a textual analysis of YouTube videos produced by two popular Western English-speaking vloggers, Amenakin and Nye Armstrong using Guo and Lee's hybrid vernacular discourse framework. Vernacular discourse is defined as speech and culture that includes music, art, and fashion, which resonates within a local community. The framework focuses on three components: content, agency, and subjectivity. I extend this framework by examining audience response to the new images through analyzing comments and response videos. Recognizing that the boundaries between vernacular and mainstream discourse are blurred, my research is guided by the following question: How are Muslim women rearticulating and renegotiating mainstream and vernacular discourses to introduce new and complex images of Muslim womanhood that challenge mainstream Western representations of Muslim women?

Keywords

Islam in the West, women, YouTube, vernacular discourse

1   Introduction

Marginalized people do not have the same level of social and financial capital required in mainstream Western cultures to get their voices heard (Ananda 2004, p. 494). As such, many have turned to the Web, where they have the opportunity to create a 'presence' that is often denied to them in the physical world, in order to provide alternative and fuller images of themselves. This has been especially true for Muslim women living in the West, who have to confront images created by mainstream Western society in which they are characterized as voiceless and oppressed others, as well as social norms among conservative Muslims that dictate women should remain silent in

public settings (Bullock & Jafri 2000, p. 35). YouTube, a video sharing social networking website, has become a place for such confrontations in which Muslim women are using the space to connect with each other and to form new subjectivities that challenge the images of Muslim womanhood created by mainstream Western society and conservative Muslim cultures.

Using Guo and Lee's hybrid vernacular discourse framework, I provide a textual analysis of six videos produced by two Muslim women YouTube video bloggers, or vloggers as they will be referred to. The first is Amena Khan, who goes by the username Amenakin, and is the most popular Muslim woman on YouTube. The second vlogger is Nye Armstrong, who has only reached a moderate level of success compared to Khan. By examining to women on opposite ends of the Islamic vlogging community in terms of popularity, I will show how Muslim women living in the West use YouTube are working together in order to construct new subjectivities. A secondary focus is on how their audience, made up largely of Muslim women and non-Muslim women interested in learning more about Islam, have responded to their identity constructions. My paper is guided by the following research questions. In what way are Muslim women challenging stereotypical representations of Muslim women while simultaneously creating new images and discourses? How do different agencies shape or constrain their discourse? How have their audiences responded to their discourse?

2   Snapshot of Muslims on YouTube

Founded in 2005, YouTube is the largest video-viewing website in the world. As a social networking website, people are able to interact with one another through posting comments, subscribing to a vlogger's channel, up or down voting a video, and posting response videos. Interaction on YouTube helps promote a dialogue between the programmer and viewer. The website's simple format allows anyone with access to a computer and an Internet connection to join the site and post videos, free of charge. However, since hosting a channel and posting videos requires time and money, one could argue that it is most accessible to middle and upper-class people.

Borrowing from Suad Abdul Khabeer (2007, p. 126), I argue that there are two types of vloggers who profess Islam as their religion: Muslim vloggers and Islamic vloggers. The former group places their religion as secondary in their videos. In some instances, it takes watching several videos before one can ascertain a vlogger's religious affiliation. For example, the creator of fouseyTUBE, Yousef Saleh Erakat, who is famous for his yoga pants prank videos, is one of the most popular Muslim vloggers with over 2 million subscribers and combined video views of over

205,000,000. He alludes to his faith in his early videos, such as "Middle Eastern Mistakes" and "Salaaam: The new WAZZUP!", but rarely addresses issues of religious identity. While their audience might include Muslims, Muslim vloggers target their videos to the YouTube community as a whole. Muslim vlogging is dominated by men.

The second category and the focus of this paper are Islamic vloggers, who place Islam at the center of their videos. Borrowing from Patricia Lange (2009, p. 71), Islamic vloggers mainly produce videos of affinity in which they seek to create communicative connections with other people. These videos can be directed to a small network of offline friends or to an imagined audience with an unlimited reach. Affinity videos seek to create a bond between the producer and the audience (Lange 2009, p. 73). Recorded in mundane settings and speaking directly into the camera, these vloggers seek to create a casual environment that promotes conversation. They tend to respond to their audience through the comment section and in future videos. It is this relationship rather than interesting content, although it helps, that keeps viewers coming back for more (Lange 2009, p. 71.) Islamic vloggers produce videos that focus on different aspects of Islam, which are directed towards Muslims, although many vloggers have a sizeable following of non-Muslims interested in the religion. Islamic vlogging can be broken into four main categories: fashion, lifestyle, advice, and religious instruction. This type of vlogging is dominated by women, who tend to focus mainly on fashion and lifestyle vlogging. For this paper, I am only interested in examining original user-generated content produced by people who are not a part of the ulama, or religious academic community. Many people upload lectures from famous Muslim scholars, Quranic recitations, and the call to prayer without providing their own commentary. These are perhaps the most popular and widely dispersed type of Islamic videos. However, there is no interaction between these channel owners and their audience, which is central to the formation of new images and subjectivities.

3   Literature review

3.1   Muslim Women in Mainstream Western Media

Islam and the role of Muslim women has been a topic of discussion in the Western world since Muslims first made contact with European in the late seventh century. In nearly fourteen centuries the rhetoric in the West has stayed the same; Muslims are antithesis to Western culture and seek to bring violence to it (Lewis 2001, p. 18). There are three main interconnected depictions of Muslim women that dominate mainstream Western media: foreigner, oppressed subject, and terrorist.

The notion of Muslims being seen as foreign in their own land is a major theme in Yvonne Haddad's (2011) book, *Becoming American?* Haddad (2011, p. 94) argues that the notion of Muslims, especially Arab Muslims as the Other has been inflamed by a number of events including the oil boycott of 1973, the Iranian Revolution, and 9/11. For many Westerners, Arab and Muslim go hand in hand. Thus, mainstream constructions of Muslimness are influenced by race. In their examination of Canadian newspaper articles on Islam, Bullock and Jafri (2000) argue that this is partly due to the fact that Islam and Muslims are usually discussed in the foreign affairs section, rather than in the national news. When they do appear in the national news, reporters emphasize their ethnic origins, which is usually defined as Arab or South Asian, who are fairly new inhabitants to the U.S. and Canada, erasing the large numbers of Black and white Muslims (Bullock & Jafri 2000, p. 36). This is troubling especially because Islam in North America, brought over by enslaved Africans, predates the signing of the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution Act.

Myra MacDonald (2006, p. 9) highlights the obsession that non-Muslim Westerners have with the veil, which is characterized as feminine, dangerous, and seductive. Most importantly, it is seen as a tool that Muslim men use to oppress Muslim women. These views of the veil have motivated liberal Westerners to try to help Muslim women 'unveil' themselves in an attempt to save them from what they deem to be a backwards and oppressive religion. Not only has this view of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman dominated mainstream media, it has also trickled over into politics. The need to liberate oppressed Muslim women was one of the supposed aims of the invasion of Afghanistan (MacDonald 2006, p. 10). In some countries, such as France, it has even led to a ban on niqabs in public spaces in the name of safety and assimilation.

Muslim women are often characterized as both victims of their religion and threats to the West. When mainstream Western media moves past the image of a cloistered, oppressed Muslim woman, it focuses on the potential danger of Muslim women entering the public sphere and becoming political active in extremist groups (Falah 2005, p. 313). Since 9/11 and 7/7, the biggest image of Muslims, both men and women have been as terrorists, whose presences poses a risk to domestic and international security. The image of angry Muslims willing to become suicide bombers in the name of jihad, a term that has been misappropriated, has been used in a number of popular television shows including *24*, *Homeland*, and *Sleeper Cell*. Muslim women are not seen as actively constructing the image of terrorist. As Falah (2005, p. 315) points out, Muslim women who engage in political violence are often seen to be misguided believers or brainwashed by Muslim men. Again, they are helpless victims that need to be saved from both oppression and extremism.

A common theme that emerges in these pieces is of Muslim women's voices being absent in these discussions; they is always spoken for instead of with. By not including Muslim women in the discussion of Muslim women, mainstream Western media is reinscribing them as passive and voiceless. Increasingly, young Muslims have become vocal in public spheres about the lopsided

representation of Islam in mainstream Western media. They have sought to combat the images of Islam as foreign, oppressive, and threatening by highlighting their Western-ness, hoping to provide a more balanced and accurate view of Muslims in the West. Muslim women have been on the frontline of this battle for new images of Muslims in the West, mainly because they possess the most powerful and visible symbol in Islam, the hijab (Mishra & Shirazi 2010, p. 204). These women have taken to the physical and virtual streets to show that they are not threats to society nor are they passive victims of their culture.

3.2   Muslim Women on YouTube

I have chosen YouTube as my site of inquiry to examine how Muslim women are providing alternative images because the audio and visual components, as well as the potential for immediate textual feedback available on the website provides a level of closeness between the producer and consumer that collapses traditional media boundaries. Viewers have a greater stake and say in how these new subjectivities are created and articulated on YouTube. Much of the work written on the role of YouTube in facilitating the construction of Muslim women identities has focused on reactionary videos, in which a large group of Muslim women respond to a major Islamophobic event. In these instances, the videos were posted by 'one hit wonders', people who had one or two videos with several thousand views, but did not have a consistent viewer base or much interaction with their audience. In essence, these posters had little social capital within the Islamic YouTube community, making it difficult to determine their impact on shifting discourse.

Farida Vis et al. (2011) examined how women responded to Geerts Wilder's video, *Fitna*, which depicted Islam as inherently violent and misogynistic. Using a qualitative and quantitative approach, the authors explored how Muslim women provided alternative discourses on gender and Islam through creating *Fitna* response videos. The authors argue that YouTube offers an alternative and important space for women to contest stereotypical images of Muslim women and to create new, liberated subjectivities. Vis et al. (2011) found that Muslim women users sought to create a new image of Muslim womanhood that separated her from modest clothing, was an insider to Western culture, opinionated, and capable of providing her own interpretations of Islam. This was accomplished by appearing in videos unveiled, filming in mundane settings, and reading Quranic verses in a public setting, which is often reserved for Muslim men. Van Zoonen et al. (2011, p. 1296) also examined the Geerts Wilder controversy and found that while the Fitna response videos might have disrupted Wilder's message, there was little communication between content creators and their audience. This raises important questions about how this momentum can be maintained in order to help permanently shift discourses.

In Bouclin's (2013) piece on YouTube response videos to *Major Canadian Airline Risks Your Safety, Pandering to Muslim Sensibilities* in which the Canadian government was accused of putting the religious choices of the Muslim minority over the national security interests of Canada. Again, we see Muslim women being characterized as the perpetual other and a violent threat to the West. The author uses a 'critical' legal pluralism to explore how Muslim women and their allies use YouTube to contest the victim/threat discourse and create new representations of veiled women. These new representations feature opinionated women actively engaging in Islamic legal scholarship to craft their own interpretations of the Qur'an.

I hope to add to this discussion by providing a close reading of two vloggers, instead of a large-scale study, in order to determine how YouTube enables Muslim women living in the West to form new subjectivities that challenge mainstream Western and conservative Muslim views of women. Here, I am interested not in specific moments of time, but movement by two particular people and their audience. I recognize that it is potentially problematic to focus attention away from the Middle East, where Islam was founded and plays a major role in politics, to the West, which is already privileged in discourses on religion. However, Muslim women living in the West, far away from traditional Muslim institutions of learning, face a unique challenge that their Arab counterparts do not, as they seek to balance their Muslim and Western identities.

4   Theory

Vernacular discourse is described as speech and culture that includes music, art, fashion, and dance, which resonates within a local community (Ono & Sloop 1995, 20). Focusing on how marginalized people use vernacular discourse in mediated spaces, such as YouTube, as a political tool in order to construct new subjectivities, Guo and Lee (2013) extend Ono and Sloop's (1995) framework of vernacular discourse in which they focused on analyzing content and agency. Guo and Lee (2013, p. 394) argue that new subjectivities for marginalized people, which often contest mainstream stereotypical images, are created through the use of hybrid vernacular discourse in which cultural references, humor, and identification are employed. Both Ono and Sloop (1995) and Guo and Lee (2013) argue for a hybrid analysis of vernacular discourse, which recognizes that the boundaries between vernacular and mainstream discourses are blurred. By recognizing this hybridity, scholars can avoid essentializing the vernacular and making it in complete opposition from the mainstream; the two discourses exchange and are constantly rearticulated and renegotiated. I would push further and argue that by using this framework, scholars are able to see how people simultaneously operate

in multiple hybrid communities, recognizing that experiences vary based on race, religion, class, sexuality, and country of origin.

4.1   Content

Central to hybrid vernacular discourse is cultural syncretism in which marginalized groups both challenge how they are represented by hegemonic powers and affirm identities constructed within the their local communities (Guo & Lee 2013, p. 396). In essence, they are simultaneously talking to their oppressors and with each other. A second component to this discourse is pastiche, in which people from marginalized communities borrow from popular culture without mimicking it (Ono & Sloop 1995, p. 23). They take pieces from popular culture and make it their own, similar to sampling in or remixing in hip hop music (Ono & Sloop 1995, p. 23).

4.2   Agency

For this paper I will be using Guo and Lee's (2013, p. 396) definition of agency, which they define as "the capacity of an agent (a person or an entity) to act in the world of YouTube". I recognize that I am limited in what I can say about agency because this piece focuses on content, rather than content production and producers. However, I believe that I can begin to ask questions. The authors argue that there are two forms of agency that both enable and constrain hybrid vernacular discourse on the website: YouTube as an institution and the individual producer. YouTube is a multi-billion dollar for-profit organization. They are in the business of making money. One such way they have ensured this is through establishing a YouTube partnership program in which users are paid by how popular the original content videos are (Guo & Lee 2013, 396). YouTube partnerships give vloggers a financial motivation to produce videos that will help them both gain and maintain their audience base. This might be accomplished by producing funny, entertaining videos and limiting the number of videos that discuss controversial topics within some Muslim communities, such as LGBT rights and polygamy. As such, the most popular Islamic vloggers, like Khan and Armstrong espouse a mainstream version of Sunni Islam. In instances in which serious issues are discussed, a common strategy to temper the situation is to use humor, often through skits, cartoons, and pictures (Guo & Lee 2013, 396).

When requested, Khan and Armstrong will provide their opinions on a specific issue, but they usually preface their videos by stating that they are not knowledgeable enough to provide a legal opinion and that concerned users should seek out a qualified scholar in order to get the proper guidance. They always refer their users to male scholars, following mainstream Sunni views in which men are seen as the main gatekeepers to Islamic knowledge. As a businesswoman with

successful online companies, this is a strategic move. By avoiding giving their opinion on highly contested issues, Khan and Armstrong ensure that they don't offend any of their potential customers. This does not mean, however, that the two vloggers never discuss sensitive issues, rather they highlight the fact that they speak as an individual, not a representative for Islam as a religious institution. YouTube should not be understood as a separate sphere with no connection to the "real" world. Social and cultural norms from the physical world are carried over into the virtual world and can constrain a vlogger. One such social constraint is gender. While they are seeking to educate Muslims and non-Muslims on Islam, they Khan and Armstrong have to operate in a specific framework through which gender roles are understood.

4.3   Subjectivity

YouTube provides Muslim women with the opportunity to use hybrid vernacular to deconstruct boundaries established by mainstream media and conservative Muslims. One such boundary is Muslim/Western, which implies that people must choose between these two identities. Focusing on hybrid vernacular allows scholars to observe how Muslim women are cutting across race, gender, and religion to create new discourses.

4.4   Audience

I hope to further the hybrid vernacular discourse framework by adding an additional point of analysis: audience response. Ono and Sloop (1995, p. 26) argue that vernacular discourse highlights possible realities for marginalized communities. The role of the audience is to approve of their potentiality. As YouTube is a space of interaction, it is important to see how viewers are responding to the subjectivities created by these vloggers. The audience plays a role in the flow of media (Jenkins 2013, p. 2). Since producers are paid by the number of video views, it would follow that they would pay attention to how their viewers respond to their content and make changes accordingly. By examining user feedback through comments, researchers can see how successful a speaker is with engaging in hybrid vernacular discourse.

5   Methodology

In what follows, I will provide a textual analysis of videos produced by two Islamic women vloggers, Amena Khan and Nye Armstrong who create advice, fashion tutorials, and lifestyle vlogs.

I examined videos that addressed issues surrounding gender, conversion, race, nationality, and stereotypes. I watched 30 videos from each vlogger, making a total of 60 videos viewed, some were as short as 31 seconds while others were close to 12 minutes long. From there, I chose three videos from each vlogger for a total of six to examine. These six videos are exemplars of the themes that will be discussed below. Using the Guo and Lee's framework of hybrid vernacular discourse I explored the ways in which Armstrong and Khan simultaneously challenge mainstream views of Islam as wholly other and incompatible with Western culture and Muslim women as passive and oppressed by their male counterparts, while creating new subjectivities. I will also explore ways in which their subjectivities are constrained by institutional and social norms.

5.1   Amena

Amena Khan, who goes by the username, Amenakin, is the most popular Islamic vlogger, with over 154,000 subscribers and nearly 26,000,000 combined video views. Khan is a Muslim-born British-Indian woman in her early thirties. She is married and has two young children, who never appear in her videos in order to protect their right to privacy. Her husband appears in a number of her humorous videos, such as the "Husband Tag" and "My Husband Does My Makeup Blindfolded". A former science teacher, Khan is the founder and owner of Pearl Daisy, an online Islamic clothing store. She started her business after a number of her viewers asked if they could buy one of her handmade scarfs, which she calls hoojabs, a combination of a scarf and a hood. The vlogger also writes for a number of Muslim websites including, *Aquila Style*. The majority of her videos involve fashion with hoojab, hijab, and makeup tutorials as well as featured outfit of the days.

Khan usually starts with "As 'salaam ailkum ladies," a common Muslim phrase, marking her imagined community constructed of Muslim women. However, she has a large following of non-Muslim women interested in dressing modestly and Islam. In fact Nye Armstrong, the second vlogger featured in this piece used Khan as a resource before she converted to Islam and continued watching after her conversion when she began to wear the hijab. Since Armstrong first subscribed to Khan's channel, the two have collaborated together on a number of videos and they have become offline friends. Collaboration is a common practice among popular vloggers as it allows for additional visibility and helps promote a strong sense of community (Burgess & Green 2009, p. 98).

5.2   Nye Armstrong

Nye Armstrong is a white Muslim convert in her late 20s. Her family is of English descent, but she was born and currently lives in Connecticut in the United States. She joined YouTube in 2010 shortly after converting to Islam in order to document her journey as well as provide helpful tips to

fellow new Muslims. The majority of her videos provide practical tips for navigating as a religious minority both within one's family and community, such as teaching users how to properly pray, where to find religious resources, and how to "come out" as Muslim to one's family members. As her relationship with Khan has grown, Armstrong has begun to post fashion videos such as makeup tips and hijab tutorials. She has a much smaller audience base than Khan. As she has abandoned her old YouTube channel and created a new channel, I am unable to ascertain how many subscribers she has. Combining both channels, she has over 2,000,000 total video views. Despite the low views, she is one of the most popular converts within the Islamic YouTube community. Armstrong holds a position within Khan's company as Marketing Manager and posts weekly to the company's blog. Additionally she owns and operates a graphic design, called Andirun Designs.

6   Findings

In their videos, Khan and Armstrong often use humor and remixing, to create new images of Muslim womanhood. Their very presence as hijab-wearing Muslim women in a semi-public setting is of note because it challenges assumptions that Muslim women are passive and voiceless subjects. The vloggers have established a hybrid vernacular subjectivity by crossing the borders between race, religion, and nationality. Neither woman is of Arab descent; Khan is a mixed race Indian and Armstrong is white. A common stereotype of Muslims is that they are all from the Middle East (Bullock & Jafri 2000, p. 35). The two vloggers highlight the racial and ethnic diversity within Islam and challenge the idea of what a Muslim is supposed to look like. Khan's British accent and Armstrong's American accent disrupt the notion that Muslim is synonymous with foreign. They both reference cultural artifacts familiar to their audience members, discussing current events in their country, using Islamic terms, and making pop culture references. Furthermore, while both vloggers dress modestly and wear a hijab, they wear colorful, fashionable, Western-inspired clothes with high heel shoes, makeup and jewelry, challenging the assumptions of what constitutes as modest dress and behavior for Muslim women.

7   Challenge and Reconstruction

Remixing: Fully Muslim and Western

Both women share a love of the *Star wars* series produced by George Lucas. Khan's username, Amenakin, is a play on her favorite character from the franchise, Anakin Skywalker. In her fourth

most popular video with over 525,000 views, *Amenakin trailer* (2013), Khan shows how she is able to seamlessly cross the boundaries between vernacular and mainstream discourse. The video acts as an advertisement for her YouTube channel and her online clothing business, as well as an introduction to her new audience members. *Amenakin trailer* (2013) is in a cartoon format, which was produced by Armstrong. It chronicles Khan's journey to becoming a successful vlogger as well as a more observant Muslim. The opening scene is a cartoon version of a hijab-clad Khan with a purple light saver, a tip of the hat to her user name and her favorite Star Wars character. Next, we see her as an uncovered science teacher with blue hair, which challenges the viewer to broaden their image of what a Muslim woman looks like. We hear her catchy jingle as the video progresses. Notable lyrics include, "The force was strong, so she carried on" and "Come take a twirl with an intergalactic girl," which mark her as a *Star wars* fan (*Amenakin trailer* 2013). These lyrics are accompanied by a quote from Rumi, one of her favorite Sufi mystics, marking her as a Muslim. The video continues as Khan meets her husband, gets married, and has her first child, the event that motivated her to post her first video to YouTube. It ends with carton Amenakin being transformed into a human image, smiling confidently into the camera. This short video highlights how Muslim women living in the West seek to find a middle ground between their two identities. Khan shows the varying levels of expression of faith; there is no one right way to be a Muslim. We see images of her with uncovered blue hair in tight skinny jeans, as well as her in a hijab and loose fitting clothes. Both versions are equally Muslim, just with different forms of personal expression. This challenges the notion that religiosity is dictated by clothing, rather than right belief and practice.

Most of the recent comments on the video are negative, as it has appeared as an advertisement on a number of other videos and channels. Disgruntled viewers commented on how annoying the tune was and how out-of-place the advertisement felt—they were not interested in hearing from Muslim women. However, earlier comments are more telling of audience reaction. One commenter left, "Star War references!! haha your husband is blessed with the coolest wife ever. mA [look at what Allah has blessed you with]" (*Amenakin trailer* 2013). Another user posted:

> Love the cartoon approach, so cute." An even more glowing post reads, "U really are an intergalactic woman and an awe inspiring one as well :) I love u, u made me more closer to my religion, its been 2 years of me doing my Hijab and u were also my inspiration :) keep moving forward and keep paying forward :) Love and Peace (*Amenakin trailer* 2013).

These comments show that Khan is picking up on an anxiety found among many Western Muslim women, who are seeking to find a space for themselves between identities that are often pitted against each other. They also highlight the importance for many women to find a community of likeminded people, which might be hard in areas where the Muslim population is small.

Princess Leia hijab tutorial (2011), by Armstrong, explains how to tie a *hijab* in a style similar Princess Leia's famous buns in the *Star wars* franchise. This is one of her most popular videos with over 66,000 views since its posting in 2011. In a sea of *hijab* tutorials on YouTube, the *Princess Leia hijab tutorial* (2011) stands out for its creativity and unique sense of humor. The vlogger writes in the video description box, "My love for Star Wars has inspired this hijab tutorial. I also have an obsession with Light Sabers. Yeah, I am a dork" (*Princess Leia hijab tutorial* 2011). Armstrong imagines that her hijab style could be worn at a wedding, but it would also fit in at a Comic Convention and at a Halloween party. She starts the video with the traditional Muslim greeting, "As 'salaam ailkum", signifying her status as a Muslim and marking her imagined audience as Muslims. In the background, we can say a verse from the Qur'an, hanging on the wall, further establishing herself as a Muslim. The dialogue in this video is limited, although Armstrong does leave room to quotes line from the popular American comedy series, *30 rock*. Typically, hijab tutorials do not feature much dialogue, so to lighten the mood of the video Armstrong added bloopers, including her mimicking Khan, and scenes with her using a pink light saver. Entertaining videos tend to get more views, but Armstrong's video was doing important work. The video is a perfect example of the desire of many American Muslims, especially converts, who seek to display their American and Muslim identity, creating a unique middle ground, or third space, where the two identities can meet and overlap. Armstrong shows that there is a permissible way to be both a Muslim who abides by rules of modesty and American; they are not competing identities. Her video contests hegemonic assumptions made by Muslims over what it means to dress modestly. Armstrong puts her own unique flair to covering, challenging the desire to mimic Arab styles of head wraps, such as the hijab. Through her tutorial she transforms the hijab from a religious requirement to a means of self-expression.

The vast majority of the audience response was positive, with 632 up votes and 53 down votes. One viewer wrote, "Sister Nye, you are amazing, such an inspiration and so entertaining. I feel like I already know you. Thank you for your videos" (*Princess Leia hijab tutorial* 2011). Another commenter left, "yaaay for muslim nerd girls ☺ we do exist [and] we are AWESOME. Seriously me her could be bff's" (*Princess Leia hijab tutorial* 2011). Like Khan, Armstrong is affirming the identities that are not represented in the mainstream. In this case, it is the nerdy Muslimah who likes to cos-play. These comments highlight Armstrong's ability to build affinity with her audience and points out that finding a middle ground between Islam and Western culture is also a concern of her viewers. The vlogger's appeal extends beyond Muslims. Her video has appeared on *Buzzfeed*, *Huffington Post*, and the *Daily Mail*. Armstrong shows non-Muslims that Muslims are not only fun, but capable of embracing their American culture. One non-Muslim viewer commented, "How did I get here? Anyway, I'm not really into religion but I thought this was really neat. [This is] definitely unique for a hijab, if I'm allowed to say that" (*Princess Leia hijab*

tutorial 2011). Another non-Muslim posted, "Best tutorial ever! You're such a cutie pie. Dorky girls unite! I'm not Muslim, but if I was, I would definitely use your tutorial" (*Princess Leia hijab tutorial* 2011). The vlogger's quirky personality helps her build her audience base both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. The video helps to break down assumptions of what it means to be Muslim and allows for a relatively safe place for dialogue and interaction.

7.1   Assertive and Independent

Muslim woman vloggers, like Khan and Armstrong, appear to be assertive and independent subjects, a far cry from the stereotypical submissive Muslim women that are often portrayed in the media. By presenting their views on Islam, even in instances in which they are affirming more conservative interpretations of Islam, in a semi-public space, Khan and Armstrong are showing both non-Muslims and conservative Muslims that women are capable of practicing their faith properly without losing their voice in the public sphere.

As the owner of a successful Islamic clothing store, many of Khan's video addresses concerns over dressing modestly. In these videos she is speaking to at least three different groups of people: Muslim women who cover out of personal choice, non-Muslims who think that Islam oppresses women, and conservative Muslims who do believe that women should not speak in the public sphere. In her video, *Niqab ban* (2013), Khan discusses the calls made by some members of the British Parliament to ban the niqab in the public setting in an attempt to promote security. Khan highlights their Britishness through using logical arguments and calling upon to recognize that the cornerstone of British culture is free choice. The vlogger begins the video by challenging the notion that Muslim women are oppressed by the men in their religion. Khan states that Muslim women are capable of making their own decisions as to how to dress and behave in public. She argues that banning the niqab will lead to a slippery slope, which will eventually lead the government to make the next logical step and ban all religious symbols, such as yarmulkes, turbans, and crosses. Khan points out that Muslims are reasonable; they know when wearing the niqab is inappropriate in certain situations, such as while testifying in court, teaching, and in airports. For British Muslims, civil duty trumps religious identity. Furthermore, she argues that the discourse on Muslim women must include their voices. She states, "Everybody will come and talk about how the Muslim woman feels what position she's in. What she's going through, her opinions, her thoughts. Everybody is consulted about the Muslim woman except for the Muslim woman" (*Niqab ban*, 2013). This provides a critique liberal Western politics that seeks to 'liberate' Muslim women while ignoring their opinions, especially when their views do not align. For Amenakin, wearing the hijab and its variants is viewed as an agentic choice and a matter of self-expression.

As this video is nearly three years old, much of the new commentary involves flaming from non-Muslims, who claim that all religions are false and Islam is the worst of the bunch. However, many users took a sympathetic approach. While disagreeing with a woman's decision to wear the niqab or hijab they recognized that it was an inherent right as a British citizen. One poster left:

> I think you explained this really well. I'm an atheist/antitheist so I obviously personally disagree with niqab, hijab etc but I absolutely think, as long as there are those comment sense things in place that you mentioned, everyone should be able to wear whatever they want and express their identity (*Niqab ban*, 2013).

Many believed that banning the niqab was a form of discrimination and actually oppressed Muslim women. Another user wrote:

> It's a form of oppression, we are stopping her from practicing her belief, she chooses to wear the veil and no one has forced it upon her…it's her Choice full stop end of, the Western Governments should stop being the Big brother and mind their own business, they didn't care a toss what Muslim women wore before 9/11 (*Niqab ban*, 2013).

The user argues that the focus on the hijab is out of fear of terrorism, rather than a desire to liberate Muslim women. Interestingly, in these early comments, even when the viewers disagreed with each other or openly criticized their home governments, the conversations remained civil. Furthermore, while most people did not support the niqab, they found the government's focus on Muslim women following 9/11 to be problematic and 'un-British'.

In Armstrong's video, *Feminism vs Islam* (2011), she seeks to show that these two concepts are not incompatible. Filming the video with fellow Muslim convert and featured guest, Rebecca, Armstrong establishes a casual and conversational tone with her audience about a weighty issue. She begins the video by stating, "Ever since I started wearing hijab, I've become more of a feminist…a more sort of on a crusade for women" (*Feminism vs Islam* 2011). Like the title of her video, one could easily argue that Armstrong began her video with this statement to draw her audience in. The use of the word crusade stands out in a post-9/11 setting, as it is often accompanied in conversations of violent jihad by Islamists. She reclaims the term crusade, giving it a positive connotation. Taken aback by her statement, Rebecca pushes Armstrong to expand her argument. To which Armstrong replies with her definition of a feminist, "A women being empowered to herself… to the root of her nature" (*Feminism vs Islam* 2011). Armstrong emphasizes that while wearing the hijab is a religious obligation, it is also a choice that each Muslim woman must make for herself. Furthermore for Armstrong, the hijab gives her the power to avert the male gaze, reserving her beauty and sexuality for her husband. She continues that by stating that feminism is concerned

about "Getting to the essence of what makes a woman a woman" (*Feminism vs Islam* 2011). Armstrong recognizes that some conservative interpretations of Islam produce strict gender roles or acceptable behavior of the genders, but she does not see these gender distinctions as an impediment to success in the public sphere, pointing out that many women have reached the top of their careers by wearing the hijab and highlight their feminine qualities. While the video focuses on the role of the hijab for Muslim women, Armstrong challenges her viewers to look beyond it, arguing that it provides a barrier for sexuality rather than a barrier to interacting with Muslim women.

This video was well received by both her Muslim and non-Muslim viewers. One commenter posted:

> I do not, agree with islam... nor any other religion, but I do like this video. I love that you consider yourself empowered by having the freedom to make a choice; by understanding that other women do use their sexuality as a tool or muscle against men; and that you choose to keep that only for intimate moments. feminism would be beautiful if it was implemented by your understanding of it (*Feminism vs Islam* 2011).

Even her non-Muslim viewers were able to find a middle ground, while not believing in Islam; they could respect her right to her beliefs and practices. Another commenter left, "Both of you beautiful woman have really open my mind and truly have expressed the meaning of being a feminist" (Feminism vs Islam 2011). Many people seemed to find her definition that focused on choice, but upheld mainstream gender norms appealing. Armstrong is speaking for and to a group that is often ignored in mainstream liberal feminist discourse. Just as there is more than one right way to be a Muslim, there are multiple ways to be a feminist. It would be too simplistic to paint wearing the hijab as empowering, any more than it would be to call it oppressive. Instead, we must draw our attention to the fact that people are making agentic choices, through a process of interpretation and dialogue.

7.2   Upholding the Mainstream

While Khan and Armstrong's goal might not be to entertain their viewers by filming pranks or food challenges, they still need to maintain their audience base. Many vloggers will employ YouTube's production of logic by periodically creating funny and entertaining videos instead of only posting videos that discuss serious social issues (Guo & Lee 2013, p. 402). As YouTube partners, they have to produce popular videos to attract advertisers and thus, revenue for themselves (Guo & Lee 2013, p. 402). This potentially constrains their agency and forces them to choose to uphold some stereotypes as a matter of financial survival. Yet without having interviewed Khan or Armstrong, we

cannot draw any firm conclusions. In her video, How to not touch men (2013), Khan provides practical tips to avoiding physical contact with men outside of one's family, which can be hard to maintain when living in a country that puts an emphasis on touch. According to her interpretation of Islamic texts, avoiding physical contact with the opposite gender is crucial to maintaining one's modesty. She gets her point across through a skit featuring her husband and one of her sisters. Khan runs through different scenarios that a Muslim woman might encounter and the absurd strategies some women might employ to prevent physical contact, such as sneezing, bowing, and permanently carrying objects in one's hands. In one scene she avoids a hug from a distant relative, an overly expressive 'uncle' with a thick North Indian accent and intricately shaped mustache. She then is then punished by her Urdu-speaking mother who grabs her ear and drags her out of the scene. The video ends with Amenakin exhorting women to stand up for their right to practice their religion freely, which includes avoiding contact with other people.

This was one of Khan's most contested videos, yet none of the commenters took issue with the skit itself, perhaps because the overly touchy uncle and the controlling mother seem familiar to her viewers, so they are less likely to be offended by it. However, by featuring these two caricatures, Khan is recasting South Asians as perpetual others. These stereotypes are also recognizable to many non-Muslims. Since Khan's audience is virtually unlimited, there is no way for her to predict who is watching the video and what they'll take from the video. This might give some non-South Asian people permission to perpetuate these stereotypes.

Many took issue with the notion that physical contact with people of the opposite gender outside of the family is haram, or forbidden. They argued a rather conservative view of Islam, one that many of the audience members did not agree with. Commenters pointed out their identity as Muslims, providing them with authority to speak on the topic, as well as challenging her right to speak on behalf of Islam, something that Khan tries to avoid. One commenter left, "iam moslim and i shake hands.. hallo there is nothing wrong with that" (How to not touch men 2013). Another Muslim challenged her interpretation of modesty, pointing out that the Qur'an does not specifically say that people of the opposite gender are not allowed to have physical contact with each other. They wrote:

> Well as a muslim I follow the quran not the culture of a prophet and things he did that were actually written 200 years after his death so.. something tells me tha might not be quite accurate and im preetty sure god would have included in the quran js and not say u speak on behalf of all muslims.. u don't (*How to not touch men* 2013).

This user places avoiding physical contact within in Muslim-dominant cultures, rather than in Islam, meaning Muslim should change how they relate to other people based on the setting. Another

commenter argues that avoiding shaking someone's hand is taboo in Western culture and would be seen as disrespectful, writing, "I'm muslima and i don't agree with you hun! if you don't shake hand with any body that would be so rude and it look like you don't respect others!" (How to not touch men 2013). From this comment we can see that for some Muslims, following the social norms of their home country in order to appear to be less different is more important than abiding by strict rules of Islamic conduct.

These exchanges highlight the angst among many Muslims living in the West as how to best 'fit in' as well as the diversity in approaches to achieving that goal. Because Khan prefaces her statements by saying that she is not a religious scholar and her views represent her own individual interpretation, she does not disclose the possibility that there are multiple correct ways to interact with people of a different gender. Since Khan and her audience are on equal footing in terms of authority, we are able to see the process of interpretation, articulation, and criticism that many Muslims engage in before making moral claims.

In a video called, What men want (2013) Armstrong describes what she learned after taking a marriage counseling class and then confirms these lessons based on her own experiences. Armstrong lists the top qualities that a man is looking for in a wife including being a good cook, having respect for a husband's family, being attentive, and dressing attractively. Because her audience is primarily comprised of Muslim women, she does not tell the viewers what women look for in a husband. "If you want to be a good wife know how to cook…men are just that simple apparently. And if you want to piss off a husband, don't cook. Trust me, I know" (What men want 2013). Armstrong essentializes biological sex differences, making it clear that women and men are inherently different. By doing so, she perpetuates patriarchal interpretations of Islam created by male scholars in which women are expected to maintain the household while the husband provides financially for both her and their family. These views can result in women being placed in a passive position.

Many of her viewers took issue with her views on marriage, pointing out these were unrealistic expectations to meet. One person wrote:

> [S]o, be a Barbie doll, prepare a banquet every night, and be nice and polite to the in laws and you are set for life! I'm average at all three.... But my husband loves me anyway mashallah, and inshallah I can improve in this and other aspects of my character that need some attention" (*What men want* 2013).

Another user left, "its funny that intellect was not on the top of that list!!!" (What men want 2013). Others were also troubled by the fact that she did not include an overview of what a perfect husband is. Since her audience is mainly made of converts, it is quite possible that Armstrong's video would

have been one of their few opportunities to learn about the rights that Islam affords to wives. Other viewers also used the space to exchange more tips to finding the right husband. While it would be easy to write this off as a simple regurgitation of patriarchal gender norms, it is important to note that Armstrong has opened up a space for the audience to debate over what it means to be a good Muslim wife. YouTube provides Armstrong and her audience with a safe space to speak on topics reserved for Muslim men. This is important, even if her audience is reaffirming traditional norms.

8   Conclusion

YouTube has provided a space for Muslim women to create new images of Muslim womanhood. In the place of images of passive victims of their religion that mainstream Western, Muslim Islamic vloggers have created new images of themselves as fully Western and Muslim, assertive, and opinionated. While they might not be pushing too far past conservative views of Muslim womanhood, their presence in a semi-public setting is important to de-othering Islam and helps ups begin to understand how YouTube can intersect at playful and political.

These vloggers are creating room for dialogue in which members of the local community affirm and contest the images and subjectivities that they create for themselves. Since very few of their videos are marked as private, Khan and Armstrong provide non-Muslims to 'confront the other' in a relatively safe and anonymous. While not addressed in this paper, the ability to remain anonymous could result in flaming, especially when discussing highly contested topics, such as gender relations. It appears that their audience, both Muslim and non-Muslim are generally accepting of their new subjectivities. However, many commenters seem to focus more on the vloggers' appearance, expressing how attractive they are, rather than providing feedback on their content. Resistance was only felt when the audience believed that the vloggers were crossing the boundary between personal opinion and religious advice. It is of note that much of the audience protest came when Khan and Armstrong aligned their views too closely to more conservative interpretations of gender and gender relations, which can be found in *How to not touch men* (2013) and *What men want* (2013). For many of their audience members the scale for Muslim and Western was uneven, with the vloggers favoring Muslimness while the audience hoped for more of a Western orientation. Interestingly, in these instances, their users established their own status as a Muslims and thus capable of criticizing the vloggers. These videos, coupled with their comments, highlight the diversity of thought and expression within Islam and play an important role in deconstructing the Muslim other. Furthermore, they show us that identities are in a constant process of negotiation and rearticulation that is dependent on one's positionality.

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