

“That’s Not Islam”: YouTube as a Site for Alternative Representations of Muslim Women
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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 politically active in extremist groups. At the center of these discussions of Muslim women is the “veil”, which through Orientalist tropes is described as hyper feminine, seductive, and dangerous. Most importantly, it is seen as a tool of Muslim women’s oppression and an example of Muslims’ refusal to assimilate. These views have led many mainstream media outlets, legislators, and even some feminist groups to try to determine how to best “unveil” Muslim women in order to “save” them from what they deem to be a backwards religion. Muslim women’s voices are absent in these discussions; they are always spoken for. By not including Muslim women in conversations about Muslim women, these groups are reinscribing them as passive and voiceless. Many young Muslims have taken to YouTube to challenge these lopsided representations. Muslim women have been at the forefront of this representation because they possess one of the most visible symbols of Islam, the hijab.

Through a textual analysis of four YouTube videos focused on gender and modest dress produced by Amena Khan based in Leicester, UK and Nye Armstrong from Connecticut, USA, I argue that Muslim women use YouTube to show the fluidity and hybridity in Muslim thought concerning gender and modesty, which is often ignored in mainstream depictions of Islam and Muslim women. These vloggers engage in their own readings of Islamic texts and deliberate with their audience, creating a counterpublic that centers Muslim women’s experiences and voices. My paper is guided by Guo and Lee’s hybrid vernacular discourse framework, which

explores how marginalized people deploy cultural references, humor, and identification to challenge mainstream depictions of their identities.¹ Key to this framework is exploring the ways in which vernacular, or local, discourse borrows from and remixes mainstream discourses. By recognizing this hybridity, scholars avoid essentializing the vernacular and making it in complete opposition to the mainstream; the two discourses exchange and are constantly rearticulated and renegotiated. The framework calls for examining content, subjectivity, and agency both of the individual and the media platform that is used. I extend the framework by examining audience response.

Khan is one of the most popular Muslim vloggers, with over 280,000 subscribers. Armstrong has only reached a moderate level of success with over 20,000 subscribers. The two often collaborate on projects together. By examining two women on the opposite ends of the Muslim vlogging community in terms of popularity, I show how presenting alternative views of Muslim women is both an individual and communal project that transcends geographical boundaries. Both vloggers cover and understand it to be a requirement in Islam. Their very presence as hijabis in a public setting is important because it challenges assumptions that Muslim women are voiceless subjects. The vloggers highlight the racial and ethnic diversity within Islam and challenge the idea of what a Muslim is supposed to look or sound like. Khan is Indian and Armstrong is white. A common stereotype is that all Muslims are from the Middle East. Khan's British accent and Armstrong's American accent also disrupt the notion in the West that Islam is synonymous with foreign. They both mark their videos as a space for Western Muslims through referencing pop culture such as Star Wars, discussing current events in their country, and using Islamic phrases.

¹ Lei Guo and Lorin Lee. "The Critique of YouTube-based Vernacular Discourse: A Case Study of YouTube's Asian Community", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2013), 30/5, 391-406.

Khan and Armstrong present a moderate view of Sunni Islam. Their messages aren't necessarily rocking the boat. As Peter Mandaville points out in his article, "Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge", the Internet has facilitated a "migration of traditional modes of knowledge into new spaces".² In essence, Muslims are largely being introduced to old, established ideas in new formats. However, these vloggers are still doing important work through challenging normative understandings of religious knowledge transmission.

YouTube allows Muslim women to take control of narratives surrounding modest dress, centering the experiences of hijabis and niqabis. In her video, *TAKE OFF YOUR HIJAB! #worldhijabday*, Khan provides a critique of liberal Western politics that seeks to 'liberate' Muslim women through banning niqabs. The video comes four months after debates in the UK surrounding head coverings in public spaces were renewed in response to a Birmingham college reversing an eight year ban on niqabs. The video is couched in the language of choice. Khan argues that most Muslim women in the UK are not forced to cover and that doing so is an exercise of freedom. She states:

Apparently a woman's freedom is only granted when her hair shows and her body is flaunted. I must have missed that memo....My freedom is in the way I choose to look. How ironic when the people who are supposedly pro-freedom incessantly insist that you take off your hijab, themselves dictating the garb that we should wear.³

Khan inverts the language used by the mainstream to justify banning head coverings. It is not covering practices that are anti-Western, signs of gendered oppression, or limiting for Muslim women. Rather, it is calls for Muslim women to uncover against their will that are in opposition to so-called "Western values". Here, Khan is alluding to the fact that for many Muslim women, covering is a means for them to enter the broader public sphere. Along with linking the covering

² Peter Mandaville. "Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge: Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World", *Theory, Culture, & Society* (2007), 24/2, pp. 101-115, p. 108.

³ Amena. *TAKE OFF YOUR HIJAB! #worldhijabday* (January 31, 2014). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3a7ftZZAew>

to narratives of choice and freedom, she also connects covering with other ethical practices in Islam including charity, gender equity, and peace.

Khan's comment section reveals that there are a number of reasons why a Muslim woman chooses to cover or not to cover. The most popular explanations for covering were to become closer to Allah and to express their piety. This follows Saba Mahmood's observations in *Politics of Piety*, in which she argued that women participating in Egyptian revival movements covered as a process of ethical cultivation.⁴ Others emphasized that their decision to not cover was due to fears of discrimination, rather than a belief that it was not a requirement. They hoped to one day begin to cover in less hostile environment. Many of these women stated that watching Khan's videos had encouraged them to start covering. Absent from the comment section were accounts of Muslim women being forced to cover by male family members. In fact, many recounted how they resisted social pressures to conform to community standards of covering, believing that it should be done for Allah alone. These comments stand in stark contrast with how covered women in mainstream media are presented as victims of Islam.

As Annelies Moors points out in her piece, "Discover the Beauty of Modesty", female vloggers often avoid making normative statements about what constitutes as a "proper" hijab.⁵ This is often done to avoid confrontation with their audience. The vloggers make it clear that they are speaking as experts on Islamic dress, not on Islam. Throughout my research on Armstrong and Khan, I found that they overemphasized the fact that they were not trained scholars of Islamic Studies and therefore according to them, incapable of providing a religious interpretation. I argue that this "I am a not a scholar, but here's what I think and maybe you

⁴ Saba Mahmood. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁵ Annelies Moors. "Discover the Beauty of Modest": Islamic Fashion Online, in *Modest Fashion: Styling Bodies, Mediating Faith* (ed.) Reina Lewis (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), pp. 17-40, p. 29.

could do it too” disclaimer is a gendered tactic that allows Muslim women to subvert more established modes of religious knowledge transmission and authority, while avoiding isolating audience members. These vloggers are still making religious statements because they are clearly marking some bodily practices as Islamic, but they don’t make claims of normativity, which makes room for dialogue and disagreement. In her video, *We Are More Than What We Wear*, Khan challenges her audience to stop judging Muslim women who don’t wear fashionable clothes, as well as Muslim women who choose not to cover. The video description box reads, “Hijab, no hijab, fashionable or not - underneath it all we are the same.”⁶ She criticizes two popular memes that celebrate covered women as inherently purer and more pious than their non-covered counterparts, stating that Muslim women must also be judged based on their actions. Khan argues that using one’s dress as a measure of their religiosity is a form of objectification that could potentially discourage women from covering. Not only does Khan challenge Orientalist images produced by non-Muslims, she also pushes back against patriarchal interpretations made by some Muslims.

Khan’s video highlights the fluidity of covering, which is often ignored by mainstream accounts of hijabis and niqabis. It is a process, rather than a singular act. Women who cover play with fabrics, folds, pins, makeup, and clothing as they determine what is acceptable. While she emphasizes the beauty in covering, Khan admits that for many women, including her, it is not an easy process and should not be taken lightly. She describes her own hijab story that began after she got married, without her husband’s knowledge. Khan emphasizes that she decided to cover for Allah, not for her husband. This piece is important because it shows that her covering is an agentic choice and apart of her individual ethical self-making. She explains that her

⁶ Amena. *We Are More than What We Wear*, (August 21, 2013). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3Qrgd-cfV4>.

understandings of hijab have evolved as she has become more disciplined, knowledgeable, and comfortable with covering. On her first attempt to wear a hijab, Khan explains that her neck, chest, and arms were exposed. As she recounts her past dress choices, Khan makes sure to refer to them as hijab, even though it is not a style she would wear today. Here, the focus is on the intentionality of the act, to discipline one's body for the sake of Allah, rather than the actual dress. Khan's video shows how definitions of covering change over time and space.

Hijab tutorials are one of the most popular types of videos produced by Muslim women and it is through these videos that audiences are often first introduced to their favorite vlogger. The tutorials highlight the diversity in understandings of what a hijab entails and pushes back against notions that covering is an inherently static, anti-fashion dress practice. *The Princess Leia Hijab Tutorial* by Nye Armstrong explains how to tie a hijab in a style similar to Princess Leia's famous buns in the *Star Wars* movies. The video shows how Muslim women take elements from popular culture and transform them into something Islamic. Here, fashion, pop culture, and Islam are compatible. The video pushes back against the hijab tutorial genre. Typically, the videos are highly polished and feature little dialogue. Armstrong's video stands out from other more popular tutorials for its use of comedy. She includes quotes from the American television show *30 Rock*, clips of her playing with a pink light saber, and bloopers, which include an imitation of Khan.

The Princess Leia buns push the boundaries of what constitutes modest dress. While the buns might be unusual, Armstrong's ears, chest, and hair are completely covered and she is wearing a robe that conceals her form. One interesting conversation emerged between two users over whether Armstrong had pushed too far. One user questioned whether the buns were decorative and therefore an improper hijab. The user cited an Arabic Wikipedia page, which

explained that a “proper” hijab should avoid drawing attention to the wearer. Another user replied, “It’s not loud or flashy or begs for attention. Just someone being creative, and doing what she loves to do. She kept her modesty, and put a smile on the faces of many people. Smiling is Sunnah.”⁷ The conversation continued with the users debating whether niqabs were the “best” hijab. This exchange highlights how many Muslim women consider not only the style or material they use to cover, but also the response that their clothes invoke from other people.

Unlike Khan, Armstrong’s target audience is reverts, as such, most of her videos focus on practical advice for Muslims living in the West. In her video, *Touching Men*, which features her friend, Rebecca Minor, Armstrong extends conversations about modesty beyond dress into physical contact with men. The video was inspired by a hadith that Minor had read earlier in the day, which recounted how the Prophet Muhammad never touched the hand of a woman who he was not married or related to. Armstrong and Minor explore strategies to avoid physical contact with non-mahram men, like giving an elbow bump instead of shaking someone’s hand. The women explain that the process is especially difficult for revert women in the West, who live in a culture that promotes physical contact as a means of building trust and strengthening relationships. However, they encourage women to maintain physical distance from unrelated men in order to discourage sin and to ensure that physical contact with their husbands is special.

The vloggers often reference Islamic texts in English and many of their audience members use translated texts to bolster their own arguments for or against a specific practice that the vloggers discuss. English is one of the primary languages of the Internet and the vloggers target English speaking Muslims. Using translations makes their videos more accessible to a broader audience and falls in line with the needs of their viewers. At the same, there is much

⁷ Nye Armstrong. *Princess Leia Hijab Tutorial* (July 26, 2011). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vhOGM2rdqKI>

that is lost in translation; there are some Arabic phrases that do not have English equivalents, as well as phrases whose meanings change over time and space. This raises questions about what is lost and what is gained from relying solely on English translations of Islamic texts. While comments were generally positive, a few Muslim viewers argued that the Armstrong and Minor had misinterpreted the hadith. Some stated that since the hadith does not explicitly state that people are prohibited from touching someone of the opposite gender, it should be left to the individual's discretion. Others argued that intentionality mattered; if a woman was not trying to provoke a lustful response, then it was acceptable to have contact with the opposite gender. The most common strategy was to try to separate culture from Islam. Many people argued that avoiding contact with non-mahram people derived from Arab culture and was not applicable to people living in the West, especially reverts. Posters argued that this could isolate them from their families and do damage to their professional life. As one person left,

[W]e no longer live in the tribal desert society where men and women have no social need whatsoever to touch or even talk. In today's western culture many of us work, I meet several clients who don't always know the rules of our religion....[S]o I do it and guilt free as I know what that hand shake represent [s].⁸

These comments show many Muslim women engage in their own readings of Islamic texts where they negotiate the boundaries between religion and culture, recognizing that they are always very messy.

While social networking sites like YouTube have certainly allowed for more and different voices to be heard, it is important to recognize the constraining factors inherent to the platform. YouTube is a for-profit organization that encourages people to transform their hobbies into businesses. This is most apparent through the YouTube partnership program, which allows creators to monetize their content. The partnership program promotes the professionalization of

⁸ Nye Armstrong. *Touching Men*. (December 27, 2011). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScTqJaAwIxY>

vloggers through engaging in greater levels of impression management, branding, and finding a niche audience, which affects not only how vloggers present themselves, but also their content. This professionalization is most readily apparent with Ame Khan whose success on YouTube led her to launch a boutique called, Pearl Daisy. First, we see this professionalization in her username change from Amenakin, a tip of the hat to her favorite *Star Wars* character, Anakin Skywalker, to her first name Amena. The professionalization can also be seen through her attempts at marketing and branding, most notably through creating trailers for her channels that link to her clothing store. The first was a cartoon in which she is dressed as a Jedi Knight. This trailer, which was created by Nye Armstrong, acts as an origin story, telling her religious journey as well as how she started her YouTube channel. It has a cheesy jingle with lines such as, “[T]he force is strong, so she carried on....She’ll make art from head coverings....[S]o come take a twirl with an intergalactic girl.”⁹ The trailer features clips from different videos, but we don’t actually hear her voice. Khan’s newest trailer is drastically different. It is much more glossy and polished. Looking directly into the camera, she provides a much more scripted rundown of her goals and services. Whereas the first video makes it clear that her target audience is Muslim women through her use of Rumi quotes and the description of her religious journey, the more recent trailer shows a slight shift toward the modest fashion community, which extends beyond Muslim women to include Christian and Jewish women. The video does not feature Islamic phrases, nor any mention of Islam. It is only Khan’s presence as a hijabi that conveys to viewers that her channel is geared towards Muslims.

Both women have been a target of Islamophobic trolls, but Khan has received much more attention. This is most likely due to her popularity. Since I began this paper, she has removed two of her earlier videos from public viewing that I had planned to analyze. One video, which

⁹ Amena. *Amenkin Trailer* (April 26, 2013), Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Im3LMp0mnoQ>.

gave tips on how to avoid touching men, was deleted. The second video, which was created in response to calls for a ban on niqabs in public spaces in the UK, was made private. It was in these two videos that Khan's comment sections had the liveliest debates. Many Muslim women found Khan's stance on physical contact to be too conservative. They argued that refusing to shake a non-Muslim man's hand could lead to discrimination, especially in the workplace. Earlier comments on the *Niqab Ban* were largely sympathetic to niqabis. However the comments section quickly escalated into flaming wars between Islamophobes who described Islam as inherently dangerous and misogynistic and some Muslim men who challenged Muslim women's place online. In addition, Khan deleted a video where she challenged the theory of evolution, which caused controversy outside of the Muslim vlogging community. The video attracted a number of trolls, some of whom created response videos that depicted Islam as anti-science. I argue that removing these videos was a form of impression management, in order to maintain a positive image of herself and Islam. As businesswomen Khan and Armstrong try to avoid alienating their customers and potential business partners. This might be accomplished by producing comedic videos, but it is usually achieved through avoiding controversial topics.

In this paper, I have shown how two vloggers, Amena Khan and Nye Armstrong, use YouTube to present a more balanced view of Muslim women, despite the constraints of the platform. In the future I am interested in exploring how this counterpublic comes into being and continues to thrive. While their use of humor, the topics that they discuss, and even their physical appearance might attract viewers, this does not fully explain their success. The vloggers depend on the affective, or immaterial, labor of their audience who help continue the dialogue in the comments section and circulate the videos across different platforms. What motivates Muslim women to engage in this unpaid labor? What moods, feelings, and emotions do these

videos evoke for Muslim women? What types of subjects are created through viewing and discussing these videos? These are questions that I hope to answer in my dissertation.