UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

From Marginal to Mainstream: An Ethnographic Exploration of Faith, Fashion, and Female Muslim Entrepreneurship in the United States

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Religious Studies

by

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September 2023

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank Allah SWT for getting me to this point in my professional and personal journey. This achievement would not have been possible without His decree. Thank you for holding my hand from the very beginning to the very last day.

Secondly, to my father, the late Dr. Hassan El-Yacoubi, and my beloved mother, Dr. Jane Biddle Merritt El-Yacoubi, thank you for setting the bar so high and giving me the opportunity to reach for it. You both paved the way in striving for excellence, and I am certain that I would not have embarked on this journey had it not been for the precedent that you set.

Dr. Jane, all I have wanted my entire life was to be you in every way. Your legacy is that of tenacity, triumph, perseverance, piety, patience, confidence, and certitude in God's plan. I am so happy that I can now check Ph.D. off the list! It is no coincidence it took us both 8 years to complete it, and we finished at age 33. I hope God keeps me in your tracks :) While this has definitely been the toughest task, I now know more than ever why there is nothing you cannot do. You are a legend!

To my advisor Dr. Sherine Hafez, thank you for being such an incredible guide all throughout my doctoral journey. You kept me laser focused since day one and ensured I stayed true to my research goals and aspirations along the way. Thank you for believing in me the way that you do and for ensuring I always reach my highest potential. It has been a pleasure to work with you.

To my mentor Dr. Mariam Saadeh, thank you for dedicating so much of your time to helping me navigate graduate school applications and for reminding me that the most important part of anything is intention. That framing has served as a guiding light for me throughout my life.

To my greatest blessing and best life partner I could have ever asked for, Abboud, my sweet love, your support, and guidance have carried me through the ebbs and swells of this program. Thank you for your unwavering support and wisdom; your advice has always elevated me and my practices. After all, you are the Juris Doctor!

To my loving children, thank you for your patience and support throughout this long process; I did it for you. Mama's done with her dissertation!

To my beloved family and friends -- your support, and especially your prayers, have truly carried and lifted me over the years. Thank you for being patient with my never-ending deadlines over the past eight years and for reminding me of the light at the end of each tunnel. Incredibly grateful to you all.

Dedication

To my children Bassam and Maryam Jane (and future children), I hope this achievement will remind you that the sky is not the limit when there are footprints on the moon. There is nothing you cannot do and with God's will the impossible is always possible.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Religious Studies
University of California, Riverside, September 2023
Prof. Sherine Hafez

The Modest Fashion Phenomenon has created new ways of understanding the complexities of Muslim womanhood through Islamic corporeality and entrepreneurial engagement within the United States. By moving beyond the veil as a mere marker of a collective religious identity and instead as an expression of hyper-individualized female Muslim subjectivity, new regimes of visibility and entrepreneurial activity are recognized. Female Muslim entrepreneurship has created a space of empowerment fostered through the neoliberal marketplace, catapulting female Muslims and their enterprises into the mainstream like never before altering Islam's cultural footprint with the west.

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INTRODUCTION

Setting the Stage

"Muslim New York Fashion Week"

Figure 1. Picture of 5th Annual PFH Convention in Irvine California (August 5th, 2018)

Lights, camera, and tears—the stage was set, the audience in awe. The PFH Modest Fashion Convention for Muslim women came alive for the fifth year in a row in Irvine, California. The largest of its kind in the United States it was as always, an experience to be remembered. Models were runway- ready, all clad in various sartorial styles ranging from a myriad of modest activewear, swimwear, casual and formalwear, and even bridal wear. Sunny hues, stylish silhouettes, statement gowns and flowy fabrics—all adorned the Muslim models. The beautifully styled figures milled around the convention in their flawless makeup and their hijab-done ensembles. Each unique in her outfit, yet all

converging on one main element: pride in being a woman of Muslim faith. Attendees came from all over the country to witness and participate. The crowds were bustling with excitement as the seats gradually filled with grandmothers, mothers, and daughters. I had the pleasure of meeting three generations of women from daughters to their mothers and their grandmothers, all sharing one common goal of supporting their community of Muslim sisters.

It was a sight to see but more so a moment to be cherished and remembered for the mark it would leave on the hearts and minds of hundreds of attendees that left some in tears. Tears of joy, as it was not merely the fashion that awed the audience, nor the glamorous runway, theatrical stage lights, or even the aesthetics of the show, but rather the symbolic meaning its presentation conveyed and embodied. Finally, female Muslims being portrayed in a positive light, in control of their narrative, in a setting that has historically been exclusionary to them and their religious values. It was a nationally recognized fashion show and convention with a twist: it was dedicated solely to female Muslim entrepreneurial enterprises.

Research Objectives

The 5th Annual PFH Modest Fashion Convention, held on August 5, 2018, in Irvine, California, was one of the largest modest fashion expositions in the country (Kandil 2017). It gathered nearly a thousand women from around the nation for a day's worth of connection and collaboration through networking, shopping, entrepreneurship, and fellowship among over fifty local and national Muslim brands, influencers, and women seeking support and a sense of community. Attendees explained to me that for a community that is often silenced and scrutinized, witnessing their Muslim sisters being represented in a way that reflected their uniqueness and diversity was momentous. Modest Fashion serves as a means of mediation between female Muslim subjectivities

and non-Muslim western assumptions. Euro-American images of veiled women, which are "strangely confined to a very limited set of tropes and themes" (Abu-Lughod 2016), often deemed Muslim women as drab and old-fashioned. Such characterizations were quickly put to rest as the vibrant Modest Fashion Phenomenon traverses fashion scenes around the globe, with Muslim-majority countries at the helm of it. The annual PFH Conventions are an extension of this movement. It was a production female Muslims, particularly Muslim fashion enthusiasts, have only dreamed of seeing. Something had forever been changed. Not only were these women giving new meaning to Muslim embodiment through sartorial practices, but their subjectivities were shaped by their roles as entrepreneurs catering to various aspects of the Muslim lifestyle.

Since 9/11, the Muslim subject has been marked as a potential threat, where heightened levels of suspicion follow Muslims throughout U.S. North American western society. It ushered in unprecedented levels of violence toward Muslims in the U.S. and specifically Muslim women who wore the hijab. This research is situated within a larger debate surrounding the performativity of modern Muslim subjectivities through the advent of the Muslim Modest Fashion Phenomenon (MFP). How can we articulate this "transitional" moment in western mainstream culture whereby female Muslims are experiencing heightened levels of visibility and representation? I argue that female Muslim participation within the MFP has shifted Islam's cultural impact within the U.S. through sartorial expression and entrepreneurial engagement.

By moving beyond the veil as a mere marker of collective religious identity and instead as an expression of hyper-individualized Muslim womanhood, this dissertation provides new insights into the ways contemporary Muslim fashion has served as a medium for female Muslim creative expression in the U.S. My research explores the socioeconomic, cultural, and political impact of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon (MFP) on female Muslim subjectivities within a U.S. American context. I argue that female participants of the MFP embody nuanced ways of being and thinking about Muslim womanhood through *new* regimes of visibility and entrepreneurial activity. In doing so, they alter and enhance Islam's cultural footprint within the United States. The goal of this scholarship is four-fold: to recognize the primacy and viability of the MFP within the United States and how it challenges reductive neo-colonial notions of Muslim womanhood and Islam, to highlight a robust wave of female Muslim entrepreneurship born through the prevalence of the MFP; to explore how these women's enterprises have shaped Islamic entrepreneurship as it intersects with the culture of neoliberalism within a U.S. non-Islamic marketplace, and, to critically examine this new prominence through an analysis on gendered Islamophobia, an un-veiling phenomenon, and neoliberal capitalist logics.

Religious Studies Scholar Reza Aslan, who frequently appeared on cable news shows debunking myths about Islam, decided it was no longer worth the effort as it was not effective in changing the minds of the general public, "bigotry is not a result of ignorance, it's a result of fear. Fear is impervious to data, fear is impervious to information" he argues (The Secret Life of Muslims Team 2017). He believes the more

effective way to combat Islamophobia is by "normalizing" Muslims through pop culture, specifically through entertainment such as film and television, "stories have the power to break through the walls that separate us into different ethnicities, different cultures, nationalities, races, and religions. They hit us at the human level" (Ibid.). Muslims are typically portrayed as villains or perpetrators of violence across movies and television series, which has furthered the fear of Muslims and cemented their status as "other" within the American imagination. Aslan believes that "normal" portrayals of Muslims throughout the media will "humanize" the Muslim community (Haaretz 2017)." While I agree with these views, I also want to assert the importance of scholarship that relies on material data. This project contributes to the wealth of scholarship that pushes the critical envelope on Muslim womanhood and Islamic Entrepreneurship. My research shows that the Modest Fashion Phenomenon, led by female Muslim entrepreneurs, is one of the highest articulations of a humanizing moment for Muslims globally, particularly in the United States amidst a climate of anti-Muslim prejudice. The advent of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon serves as a historical moment whereby women of the Muslim faith assert themselves into the public fold through positions and portrayals that move beyond contrite ideological and political discourses and instead position female Muslims in a new light that departs from normative portrayals rendering their subjectivities as familiar and not feared, fashionable and modern not archaic or anachronistic. Instead of the mute silent objects of oppression that they are represented to be by the mainstream, the women of the MFP are trendsetters and style innovators. Female Muslims and, by extension, a more contemporary Muslim lifestyle engage in conversation with the public sphere. As

consumers and producers within a neoliberal marketplace, the MFP also awakens the world to the extent of Muslim spending power.

The modest fashion industry has been thriving worldwide in places like Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf. Only recently, this thriving industry has made its way to the United States (Sharma 2019). There has been an increasing amount of academic attention given to various aspects of this topic through ethnographic data on the modest fashion phenomenon as a global manifestation with an emphasis on Islamic consumption practices and the viability of this consumer segment (Moors 2007; Sandikci and Ger 2007; Gokariksel and Secor 2009; Tarlo 2010; Jones 2010; Lewis 2013; Bucar 2017) but little research focused on the role female Muslim entrepreneurs have played in spearheading this phenomenon through production practices that have shaped the cultural narrative on Muslim womanhood within the United States, which is the foundation of this project.

This study is about the intersectionality of the fields of faith, fashion, and entrepreneurship, and as such, I present 19 case studies of entrepreneurs such as Palestinian American Fatmah Muhammad of "Knafeh Queens", Syrian American social activist Isra Chaker of "Isra Speaks", Guinean American professional basketball player Batouly Camara, Pakistani American designer Noor Molvi of "NOORNOIR", Nigerian American designer Idayat Sambo of "CoverMeCutee", Black American modest fashion stylist Hakeemah Cummings of "HakeemahCMB", Afghan/Palestinian American influencer Ascia Sahar of "I am Ascia", Russian American Muslim influencer Daria Alasmar of "Veil with Me", Lebanese American entrepreneur Zahraa Berro of "Zahra

The Label", Libyan American comedian and attorney Yasmin Elhady, and Iraqi American start-up co-founder Layla Shaikley et. al (El-Yacoubi, 2023) whose narratives foreground an understanding of the various ways women incorporate their understandings of Islamic values through entrepreneurial enterprises by exploring the religious, racial, and political implications that drive their work. To understand how these women navigate the terrains of entrepreneurship while maintaining Islamic ethics, I offer the following questions:

- In what ways does religion inspire their entrepreneurial endeavors?
- How important is profitability and return on investment (ROI) for religious female entrepreneurs, and how do they define individual and collective success?
- How do Muslim entrepreneurs negotiate the exploitative whims of the U.S. marketplace while upholding their ethical commitments?
- How do their motivations distinguish their enterprises from non-Muslim businesses?
- What type of challenges do they face as they traverse the world of small business ownership within Muslim and non-Muslim marketplaces?
- To what extent have social media platforms impacted their worldview and desires to maintain their Muslim identity?

The answers to these questions are useful for theorizing the impact these experiences have had in shaping the discourse on female Muslim subjectivities in the U.S. and on Islamic entrepreneurship (IE). I find IE a useful concept to explore how these women integrate religion into their entrepreneurial processes.

An Islamic approach to entrepreneurship, or Islamic entrepreneurship, offers a framework to better understand the intersections of religion and entrepreneurship amongst Muslim business owners and offers insight into the ethical negotiations, processes, and practices behind many of the small businesses discussed in the following chapters (Davis 2013). Islamic law promotes the concept of "Islamic finance," which focuses on sharia-compliant financing, and "Islamic economics," which emphasizes specific Islamic behaviors and protocols, yet "Islamic entrepreneurship" (Gümsüay 2014) offers a global perspective on the complexities of faith based entrepreneurship from an Islamic viewpoint but largely neglects female entrepreneurial contributions to this category. As such, women entrepreneurs are dually disadvantaged as they are perceived to be absent or non-participants in a male dominated business milieu. Hence, the term Islamic Entrepreneurship is only partially sufficient as it lacks specificity and contextuality with regard to female contributors to this sector. According to Tahir Mirza, co-founder of the Muslim Lifestyle Expo 2016, women represent 50% of the Muslim start-up community (BBC News 2016)**.** By highlighting these women's work, one gains insight into a rarely focused yet increasingly growing sector for female Muslims. Looking into women's entrepreneurial endeavors in MFP, we can also understand how they shape not only Islamic entrepreneurship but how their work offers a counter hegemonic view of Islam in America today. The Modest Fashion Phenomenon has as it paved the way for various entrepreneurial opportunities that catapulted various modes of Muslim womanhood and Islam into the U.S. American mainstream.

Additionally, I examine why women of the Muslim faith have attracted international media attention over the past few years as a result of their robust engagement with modest fashion. I identify the cultural, socioeconomic, and political elements that have contributed to the heightened visibility experienced by female Muslims on a mainstream level. It articulates the cultural shift to which veiled women are now portrayed across the front pages of national publications, window storefronts, and within mainstream media. It also examines the troubling aspect of this new prominence. This new visibility is not without peril through its enmeshment with exploitative commercial opportunities that have ironically served as a point of entry for many female entrepreneurs.

The following section details how modest fashion has gained popularity within the non-Muslim western mainstream over the past decade and the opportunities it created both within and beyond the Muslim community.

Background

The Rise of the Muslim "Modest Fashion Phenomenon": Opportunities and Challenges

This project reveals how the Modest Fashion Phenomenon has created new ways of understanding Muslim womanhood through Muslim corporeality and entrepreneurial engagement. In turn, the cumulative outcomes of the MFP have positively positioned Islam within the American mainstream. But what is meant by "modest fashion," and is it possible for one to be both Muslim and fashionably modest? Modest fashion, characterized by hyper-stylish garments across various levels of bodily coverage (D'alessandro 2018), is a recent phenomenon picking up steam over the past two decades

but especially since 2015 despite its long history of Islamic fashion that varied across communities and geographies (El Guindi 1999). While scholarly interpretations of the specific requirements for modest dress may vary between traditionalists and modernists, the hijab, which serves as the source of modesty in Islam, is typically understood to be the covering of the entire body with the exception of the hands and face. This translates into a dress code that embraces hijabs and various forms of head coverings, high necklines, long sleeves, flowy silhouettes, and to the floor hems. Through understanding the veil as an alive and adaptable practice, female Muslim subjectivities can thrive and equally exist in a space that encourages the complexity and creativity of subject formation through sartorial practices instead of inhibiting and limiting it to the confines of inevitably varying textual interpretations. Yet, there is something different about how modest fashion, or "the new modesty" as one curator called it, is understood nationally and globally in the twenty-first century. The MFP is spearheaded by female Muslim millennials seeking to carve an individuated identity instead of allowing gendered orientalist and neoliberal representations of Muslim womanhood to prevail within U.S. American mainstream culture. With the rise of Muslim modest fashion influencers who refused to accept the mainstream marketplace's exclusionary habits, they began showcasing their renditions of modest fashion to help other women struggling with being both modest and fashionable. Only once the female Muslim consumer proved to be an economically viable target did global mainstream brands begin recognizing the value of this underserved consumer segment by catering to the specific needs of Muslim sartorial practices.

The U.S. and European western marketplaces could no longer afford to cast modest fashion to the sidelines, and instead, major retailers now seek to claim their piece of the pie. American fashion brand DKNY was one of the first fashion brands that released a Ramadan collection full of *abayas* (full length outer garments) and headscarves catering to this market segment in 2014 (ibid). European fashion brand MANGO followed suit in 2015 and has been releasing a Ramadan collection ever since full of long sleeve flowy maxi dresses, tops, and wide leg pants. In fact, MANGO is considered a leading retailer responding to the needs of Muslim fashion (El Khattabi 2015). Japanese brand Uniqlo has continually partnered up with Hana Tajima, a British Muslim designer, since 2015, releasing an array of modest wear and headscarves. Not only are global brands catering to this segment, but great opportunities have risen for Muslim modest designers to showcase their designs on the world's most coveted runways, such as New York Fashion week, where Annisa Hasibuan and Dian Pelang, amongst other Muslim designers, presented their collections in 2016. As a result, modest fashion weeks have become extremely popular across high fashion scenes in Jakarta, Dubai, London, and Istanbul. Additionally, aspiring Muslim models who wear headscarves suddenly appear in national and global fashion campaigns.

In 2015 H&M featured UK based Muslim model Mariah Idrissi in their viral campaign ad. In 2017, Somali American Muslim beauty pageant participant Halima Aden made headline news at New York Fashion week as she modeled for Max Mara and Kanye West's collections in her hijab. In 2019 both Halima and Mariah were chosen by Rihanna to participate in her racially inclusive cosmetic campaign ad for her beauty

brand Fenty Beauty (Tribune 2019). While one of the main goals of the MFP functions as a campaign for visible religious and ethnic diversity within the global Muslim community, it also sparked a cornucopia of entrepreneurial opportunities for not just non-Muslim mainstream markets but for many female Muslim entrepreneurs seeking to be top influencers within this movement in various capacities.

The Modest Fashion Phenomenon has impacted markets beyond the fashion industry as well. Cosmetic companies such as Sephora and CoverGirl have also awakened to the industry's lack of racial and religious diversity. In January 2017, CoverGirl made an obvious attempt to diversify their usual choice of candidates by appointing Nura Afia, a hijabi beauty blogger, as their ambassador. Sephora chose immigrant Arab Muslim employee Chaimae Boulayad in what was touted as their most diverse campaign yet. Only ten out of 1,000 Sephora employees who applied to participate in the campaign were chosen, and Boulayad fit the bill. Her veiled face was magnified on store windowfronts across the country. As three critical categories of race, religion, and gender strategically intersect on some of the world's most visible and visual platforms, many female Muslims are running with the visual and entrepreneurial momentum the modest fashion phenomenon has afforded them.

Much of the literature and dialogue surrounding the modest fashion phenomenon is laden with analyses on the extent to which mainstream brands have caught on to the underserved yet lucrative modest Muslim sector without enough emphasis on the grassroots aspect of female entrepreneurship that has developed within the global Muslim community, and specifically within the United States. Local U.S. American Muslim

brands compete with mainstream global brands in the race to cater to the modest fashion sector. It has repeatedly been reported that the modest fashion purchases by Muslim women are estimated to be $44 billion dollars in 2016 and 2017, which amounts to almost 18 percent of the total estimated $243 billion dollars spent by Muslims on apparel (Gateway 2018). Hence, it is no surprise why both U.S. non-Muslim marketplace and Muslim brands are tapping into this viable consumer market.

With the rise of Muslim Modest Fashion Weeks[1], conventions dedicated to female Muslim empowerment and entrepreneurship, trade shows, and the like, the competition within the modest fashion marketplace is higher than it has ever been. Instead of over emphasizing the involvement of global brands within this market segment, this scholarship purposely places particular emphasis on the many women on the grounds who are deeply involved in championing this cultural shift toward mainstreaming modest fashion, and by extension, Muslim lifestyle, in hopes that the global market players do not eclipse their efforts and fervor. As such, three full chapters are dedicated to highlighting these women's entrepreneurial enterprises and the motives that drive their businesses. The women who already receive ample media coverage, such as Ibtihaj Mohammad, Nura Afia, and the many "firsts" who have made a splash within this cultural moment, have become trailblazers in their own right, but the slew of women breaking boundaries that do not make it into the top media cover stories are equally deserving of scholarly attention. This project seeks to disaggregate the monolithic

[1] Modest Fashion weeks have been organized across the globe in cities such as Istanbul, London, Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, and Dubai.

"Muslimwoman" (Cooke 2007) cemented within the non-Muslim white imaginary and emphasize the lived realities that distinguish the lives of this vast group of women.

Modest Fashion Phenomenon in U.S. American Context

This vibrant fast growing modest market has taken the Muslim and non-Muslim world by storm. While non-Arab Muslim majority countries such as Indonesia and Turkey have been touted as the modest fashion capitals, this scholarship is distinguished by its focus on the United States specifically, an arena in which the modest fashion phenomenon has yet to be thoroughly explored with the academic and ethnographic rigor that other countries such as Iran, Turkey, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom have been given. The dominant Euro-American view toward veiling as a repressive and frumpish act has typically been met with a rejection of Muslim practices, which is rooted in the presumption that Muslim life and religion are antithetical to modernity (Lewis, 2015). The modest fashion phenomenon undermines this assumption by offering new ways of perceiving female Muslim embodiment through varied Muslim dress and entrepreneurial practices. Perhaps the most powerful aspects of the MFP are the unintended consequences of focusing on Muslim women's dress, which has led to what some scholars have called a "turning point" in mainstream western culture (Bucar 2017). This phenomenon cannot be mistaken for being merely consumed with Muslim sartorial practices. Instead, it serves multiple purposes; of them is the powerful medium through which visible religious diversity within Muslim communities is achieved and articulated within the instrumental prism of female Muslim entrepreneurship. This research conveys the cultural oscillation of Muslim women from marginal to mainstream modes of

embodiment through an analysis of the contemporary modest fashion phenomenon and its enmeshment within neoliberalism. It examines the extent of increased representation and inclusion touted by participants of the MFP through the forces of neoliberal capitalism that have attempted to monopolize the modest fashion market. The link to the economic exploitation of the Muslim lifestyle is important because it presents a false projection of Islam as becoming more "mainstream" amidst an uptick in Islamophobia within the United States. As Lewis (2015) points out, it is not that mainstream global brands, such as Nike, American Eagle, D&G, etc., are necessarily becoming more accepting of Muslims or Islam as a religion but are instead motivated by the numbers that point to the profitability of the market. In that regard, the commodification of Islam is emphasized through the Muslim market value. It was "search engine optimization rather than religious ideology" that drove fashion houses to cater to this underserved segment (Lewis 2019). Thus, the emphasis is on capital value versus religious virtue. However, in my findings, many female entrepreneurs do not resist the forces of western neoliberal culture within the MFP nor view themselves as "victims" (Atia 2012) of this economic ideology, and instead are active participants contributing to the category of "pious neoliberalism" that employs God-conscious entrepreneurship as a strategy of empowerment.

In an era where "the language of modesty is now fully monetized," given the billion dollar valuations of the modest market and the entrepreneurial opportunities it presents, how can we articulate the ways in which women of Muslim faith are defining themselves through sartorial and entrepreneurial practices? This distinction is important in gauging

the extent to which Islam thrives within mainstream American culture due to the modest fashion phenomenon. In 2016 FBI reports revealed that anti-Muslim hate crimes have been at an all-time high since 9/11. Women have been rapidly removing their headscarves for many reasons, including the violence experienced by anti-Muslim prejudice, and Muslim communities have been fragmented. Therein lies one of the perplexing aspects of the MFP, which on the one hand, has allotted many female Muslims heightened levels of inclusivity and visibility through the projection of cultural inclusion, and on the other, it operates in tandem with Muslim bans, xenophobic political ethos, and an unveiling phenomenon.

This research explores the opportunities *and* challenges that the modest fashion phenomenon represents to female Muslim subjects and Islam as an "American religion" by examining how female Muslim entrepreneurship has created a space of empowerment fostered through the neoliberal marketplace, catapulting female Muslims and their enterprises into the mainstream like never before. An analysis of the functional and operational aspects of the MFP provides insight into the overall implications of Islam's shifting cultural footprint within a U.S. American context.

Contemporary Female Muslim Sartorial Practices: a Literature Review

This scholarship examines how contemporary Muslim sartorial practices, specifically modest fashion, have catalyzed new identities, selves, and dispositions through corporeal practices that present many American women of the Muslim faith as fashionable and entrepreneurial. In doing so, it examines how such modern-day expressions of female Muslim subjectivity have intervened in U.S. American mainstream culture. While this

project recognizes normative Islamic prescriptions for modest comportment, it does *not* seek to pit one version of the modest dress against another, nor does it favor one type of Muslim woman. Instead, it explores how Muslim women practice and perform modest dress. The literature review engages with three main themes that aided in articulating the importance of this research. It places a particular emphasis on Islamic ritualistic (bodily) practices, modest fashion and entrepreneurship as a means of cultural convergence, and neoliberalism operating as a political ideology that grounds market economies capitalizing on Muslim identity.

Lewis (2015) is one of the leading scholarly voices in the academy, drawing attention to the Muslim modest fashion phenomenon through a sociological lens. Her research examines the nuances of everyday practices of modest fashion as a valid expression of religious identity. It mainly focuses on European Muslim fashion, particularly British hijabi fashion. In her book *Muslim Fashions* (2015), she argues that the neoliberal recruitment of minority identities into its formulation of consumer citizenship has yet to be discerned within the realms of religion and fashion, except for a few market participants. My work builds upon Lewis's in that a significant portion of my project examines how women interact and articulate a neoliberal rationale through their involvement with modest fashion, either as participants or pioneers via entrepreneurial enterprises. Through an ethnographic analysis of female Muslim entrepreneurship, I explore the extent to which American women of Muslim faith are adopting, and sometimes rejecting, neoliberal capitalization of Muslim womanhood and modest fashion

by asserting themselves as authorities on Islamic lifestyle within a non-Muslim western marketplace.

In general, global mainstream fashion brands have historically lacked in catering to ethnic and religious minorities and have not viewed Muslims in particular as a viable niche market. With the rise of ethnic marketing, Lewis predicts that Muslim marketing will gain popularity amongst global retail brands, "with the international increase in hijab wearing as part of a fashion ensemble, the embodied aesthetic knowledge of cool young hijabis could become a form of desirable economic and cultural capital for brands wanting to break into newly discernible markets" (Lewis 2015, 236). The prediction of Lewis (2015) in terms of heightened interest in Muslim markets by global retailers is precisely what has happened since the publication of her book.

In her book *Muslim Cool* (Khabeer 2016), scholar, activist, and artist Khabeer (2016) demonstrates how the histories, cultures, and traditions of Black people are an integral part of the American Muslim experience, specifically as it relates to the history of American Muslim fashion. Khabeer's (2016) work foregrounds American Muslim fashion within an African American historical precedent instead of the misperception of Islamic fashion being a *new* phenomenon within contemporary western mainstream culture. Her description of hijab as a "cultural artifact" where each distinct style of hijab is ultimately intertwined within a larger web of American Muslim culture combines race, gender, and religion in unique forms. She describes this process as "self-making through style," where the body becomes symbolic in challenging the hegemonic racial and ethnic elements embedded within contemporary American culture (Khabeer 2016, 115). Female

Muslim corporeality is a means through which Muslim women negotiate something much larger than their sense of style but instead notions of selfhood through expressions of modest fashion. Participants of the MFP are not merely styling their headscarves but are communicating and asserting their racial, ethnic, and religious identities. Thus, modest fashion has effectively offered U.S. American Muslim women performative possibilities demonstrating the diversity and complexities of their subjectivities.

Like Lewis (2015), Carla Jones's (2003) scholarship focuses on consumption, whereby she views women's bodies and dress through economic and cultural work. This "cultural production" is the process by which women of the Muslim faith, and in her case Indonesian women specifically, distinguish their subjectivities through consumption (2003, 185). Her analysis focuses on the regimes that impose certain dress codes by way of asserting a collective national identity. Such is the case with traditional dress styles for many postcolonial nation states (Egypt, Indonesia, etc.). Consumption in this regard is part of a larger web related to notions of citizenship and performances of normative femininity. Women engaging in such neo-traditional or western style clothing saw their performances as pivotal to constructing their own progress within the public domain instead of the domestic sphere. The shift in the study of consumption from the domestic to the public underscores an important assumption overlooked within the understanding of consumption as an expression of personal choice to an emphasis on the possibilities of such choices being the locale for "collective negotiation" as Jones (2003, 189) calls it. My work uses a similar theoretical framework, but instead of focusing on consumption practices, it focuses on the production process of brands and businesses founded by

female Muslims who view themselves as changing the cultural narrative on Muslim womanhood. Many of the women understudies employ entrepreneurship as a means to combat anti-Muslim stereotypes and fill the gap in a mainstream marketplace that has neglected the Muslim consumer.

Unlike the majority of authors on this topic, Secor and Gokariksel's (2014) work explores the cultivation of selfhood through veiled surfaces and, in doing so, examines how veiled women negotiate their presence against the gaze by providing a deeper theoretical and psychoanalytical analysis to the visibility and subjectivities of veiled women. Gokariksel and Secor (2014) provide a compelling analysis of how the veil plays a crucial role in cultivating subjectivities. Is the veil primarily a marker of piety? Fashionable veiling practices disrupt that notion and pose an ethical paradox where on the one hand, one seeks to cultivate a pious self yet, on the other, becomes inevitably intertwined with the commodification of the veil through the politics of market economies. I address this conundrum at great lengths when analyzing the ways in which female Muslim influencers capitalize on their social media platforms by promoting veiling practices while also being influenced by the commodification of hijab. The hesitation between maintaining modest comportment on social media while also living up to the contractual terms of collaborations with other non-Muslim brands presents a moral predicament that many influencers contend with and, as a result, face added levels of scrutiny.

The possibility of being fashionable and "Islamic" is taken up by Scholar Emma Tarlo in the anthology entitled *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion (2013)*, where she

presents the compatibility of fashion and Islam as operating in tandem with one another instead of being a mutually incompatible phenomenon of the twenty first century. This is an important distinction to make as female Muslims have had a history of dressing fashionably, but for the *hijab* or *abaya* to be perceived as solely a fashion statement instead of a religious proclamation connoting Islamist ideology *is* a recent phenomenon as a result of the efforts of young Muslim millennials or "Generation M" as Shelina Janmohamed (2016) calls them. In her book *Generation M: Young Muslims Changing the World,* Janmohamed (2016) examines how young Muslims assert their presence and place in society by cultivating new identities where faith and modernity are complementary instead of mutually exclusive. Generation M comprises spiritual young Millennials who are "educated, worldly and tech savvy; they want the finest that life can offer without compromising any of their Islamic ideals" (Janmohamed 2016, 11). She argues that within the context of the global Muslim population, "Generation M" is the most influential. It is important to recognize the social and cultural makeup of Generation M to put into context the group of Muslims implicated in this research. What distinguishes them most is their aggressive engagement with all aspects of modernity but through the purview of their faith. Much of the research points to the fact that the younger generation is fed up with the false representations of their faith as portrayed by the media and other outlets. They want to be able to tell their own stories keeping in mind that they do not embrace a "clash of civilization" worldview with regard to their faith. In fact, Islam as a religion, informs all aspects of their lives and has resulted in a Muslim marketplace that produces the type of products their lifestyle requires. The modest

fashion phenomenon burgeons from this willpower, which has enabled Muslim purchasing power to be counted for within the global consumer community.

Generation M has successfully ruptured the stereotypical impressions that have contributed to misrepresenting Muslim life as monolithic, serious, conservative, reclusive, secluded, old-fashioned, etc. (Karakavak and Özbölük 2021; Moors 2007; Grine and Saeed 2017). The modest fashion phenomenon is a testament to the multiplicity of Muslim identity and visibility. It is a visual expression of the multitude of Muslim subjectivity. Generation M "are using fashion and visual identity to position themselves as faithful modernists and make themselves more open to a world they are worried about embracing them" (2016, p. 153). In doing so, they chip away at hackneyed neo-colonial depictions of hijab practices and Muslim womanhood. Modest fashion, then, becomes an expression of faith that serves as the mode of mutuality and convergence among Generation M, the non-Muslim public, the global consumer community, and even within the intra-Muslim community.

By merging religion and modernity throughout every aspect of their lives, they have forced the world to wake up to the power of Muslims as subjects and viable consumers and producers, which has led to the catering of their needs within the global categories of fashion, food, travel, and cosmetics. This research intimately explores the wave of female Muslim entrepreneurship inspired by the modest fashion phenomenon and the importance of catering to a minority community more generally. While the greater public has recognized the extent to which Muslim interests, behaviors, and sartorial preferences continue to have viable consumer potentiality, it is important to highlight small

businesses owned by female entrepreneurs catering to this segment and not to let western mainstream market players eclipse this moment. A seismic part of this project is dedicated to highlighting these women's entrepreneurial enterprises and their contribution to the notion of Islamic entrepreneurship within the U.S. marketplace.

Similar to other scholars on modest fashion and veiling practices such as Lewis (2015), Khabeer (2016), and Wheeler (2017), scholar of Islam and Gender, Bucar (2017) analyzed female Muslim dress through an ethnographic survey of women living in Iran, Turkey, and Indonesia. Instead of viewing the veil as a religious identity marker, she emphasizes aesthetics and stylistic interventions. In doing so, Bucar (2017) is able to demonstrate the complexities surrounding the choices women make about their bodies through what she calls "pious fashion." In this regard, clothing is viewed as a cultural practice reflective of local constructions of Muslim identity. My research borrows from Bucar's (2017) methodological approach of centering the subjects and not the text through ethnographic data, which places emphasis on Muslim sartorial choices that are very much informed by local and individual interpretations of aesthetics and moral codes instead of the dictates of Islamic scripture. It also emphasizes, despite Euro-American western misconceptions, the heterogeneity of Muslim practices and, by extension, Muslim interests, opinions, and orientations. Scholar of race and ethnicity Sylvia Chan-Malik focuses on the history of Islam in America, emphasizing how U.S. Muslim women of color are in a constant state of negotiating their Muslim subjectivity through the intersections of race, religion, and gender. One of the most significant contributions that her work calls for is the epistemological shift toward understanding the lives of female

Muslims, whereby addressing them as *subjects* and not *objects* of study, as commonly portrayed throughout the field. This is done by centering the women and not the text. This strategic methodological intervention focuses on lived experiences to which I employ a similar methodological framework in understanding how adherents to the Muslim modest fashion phenomenon view themselves as actively reversing the hegemonic narratives that have defined their bodies and subjectivities within the Eurocentric western imagination. While this project includes the scriptural injunctions enjoining modesty as a universal dress code upon adherents of the Islamic faith and establishes a "normative" dress code for veiling, it does not posit any form of modest comportment as better than another. Instead, it recognizes distinctions and diversity within such practices as a reality embodied by the global female Muslim community. In following the analysis that Chan-Malik puts forth as she describes U.S. female Muslim subjectivities as engaging in a constant state of the *process* and *becoming*, to which they are never free of the historical and cultural forces that seek to define them, I examine her work in efforts to disaggregate the static notion of Muslim women by introducing new ways of understanding Muslim subjectivity through various modes of corporeality and entrepreneurship. By centering the women and understanding their individual sartorial and entrepreneurial practices, a clearer vision of the realities of these women is brought to light. Thus, constructing a more meaningful discourse about U.S. Muslim women and the ways in which they negotiate their own subjectivities through lived Islam.

In the same vein, Chan-Malik poses a critical question about the extent to which it is or is not possible to construct a collective narrative about being a Muslim woman in

America. I argue it is unnecessary to take on such a task because to do so would almost inevitably result in an essentialist narrative that could capture partial aspects of U.S. American Muslim life but, as with anything, not all. This project produces material data regarding the lives of women of the Muslim faith, and it is especially dedicated to demonstrating the multivalence of Muslim life as a heterogeneous experience reflected in multiple realities that converge, intersect, and diverge. I recognize the synergy between Chan-Malik's (2018) analysis and Miriam Cooke's (2007) concept of "Muslimwoman," to which Cooke observes the extent to which veiled Muslim women have become the linchpin of the otherized Muslim subject throughout the non-Muslim west void of any individuality or agency. "Muslimwoman," therefore, alludes to the erasure of the complexity and diversity of female Muslim subjectivities. In the same vein, Abu-Lughod (2016) proposed a complete rethinking of the notion of "women in Islam" or "Muslim Women's Rights" as a result of imperial and political projects that ultimately did more harm than good to the lives of these women.[2] Hence, I propose an inversion of the "Muslim woman" phraseology to read "women of Muslim faith" instead when speaking more broadly about this diverse group of women. Given the colonial and neocolonial taint of the monolithic "muslimwoman" which implicitly alludes to "the oppression of women in Islam," the term *Muslim women* inevitably conjures an imagined universal and singular female that neglects the multiplicity and heterogeneity of such identities. The racial, ethnic, cultural, and national makeup of such a complex group of women is

[2] As quoted by Leila Ahmed in A Quiet Revolution, p 229

carelessly overlooked when referencing “Muslim women” and projects an image of implicit totality onto this vast group of women.

On the other hand, “women of Muslim faith” paves the way for a multitude of identities to co-exist individually yet harmoniously. It carves fresh and distinct space in the imagination for trailblazing women like Syrian American dietitian and home organizing expert Dania Amaira, Ethiopian American entrepreneur Sara Sheikh, or Libyan American influencer Sarah Qsaibat instead of lumping them altogether through a term that has been long used and abused. The term “women of Muslim faith” discursively introduces new energy and embodiment to this vast group of women, and as such, it is no longer tolerable to refer to these women as solely “Muslim women.” Instead, such a phrase should be inverted and qualified by the various typologies to avoid perpetual misrepresentation and reductionism.

I build on the aforementioned studies to demonstrate how women of Muslim faith yield to modest fashion and entrepreneurship as a strategy of empowerment to reclaim the narrative of Muslim womanhood. Moving beyond the veil and modest attire as a religious requirement and instead as an expression of modern Muslim subjectivity has impacted Islam’s cultural presence throughout the United States. I demonstrate how the Modest Fashion Phenomenon attempts to restore the complexities of Muslim womanhood lost in a post 9/11 context through manifestations of new visibility in twenty first century North America. Through an engagement with the MFP, many women of the Muslim faith have challenged mainstream notions that view the hijab as a monolithic practice. While the veil remains a signifier of difference, such difference has come to serve as a viable

vehicle for socioeconomic and religious mobility even within intra-Muslim communities. Thus, the modest fashion phenomenon has served as a point of entry into what Lewis (2015) calls the "Muslim-minority western Europe and North America" mainstream by enabling many women to challenge normativity in two main spheres: the intra-Muslim community and the normative hegemonic narratives prevalent within the non-Muslim western spheres. In both cases, outside forces sought to define and confine female corporeality, and I approach this process of cultural negotiation as an insider seeking insights from within. What distinguishes my work from other scholarly undertakings on this subject is that this research is situated within a U.S. American Muslim context, emphasizing female Muslim entrepreneurship. This arena has been neglected by most scholars contributing to this topic. Understanding the inner workings of female Muslim entrepreneurship as an exercise of what some have called "pluri-empowerment" (Ainley and Fiona, 2017) reveals the complexities of their lives through their entrepreneurial enterprises.

Scholar of women in Islam Ahmed (2011) focuses on the veil's resurgence in America. She argues the "veiling trend" is in full throttle as a result of the global rise of Islamism, in addition to the fact that veiled women and female activists are directly involved in producing the multiple meanings of hijab, which has enabled new meanings to thrive in the public purview. She identifies the various meanings the veil takes on within societies that are dedicated to gender equality which range from fulfilling a divine command, to an individuated expression of spirituality to challenging the inherent sexism embedded within western rules of dress. She briefly recognizes hijab as a fashion

statement and proposes it to be a viable way in which hijab is given meaning and suggests it should be further explored, but she does not take it up with the same intellectual rigor as it was out of the scope of her research. As such, that is where my work picks up where Ahmed left off, providing an in-depth analysis of the rise of modest fashion within the United States and the sociocultural and political implications as a result of this phenomenon.

Ultimately, no parallel effort has been undertaken to unravel the implications of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon within a U.S. American Muslim context through female Muslim entrepreneurial engagement. Some scholars have effectively attempted this, such as Khabeer (2016) and Wheeler (2017); however, their emphasis is specifically on African American sartorial practices. That is to say; though other scholarly work has been produced on the advent of the MFP in its various historical stages throughout different geographical contexts around the world, the contemporary U.S. North American context has yet to be thoroughly explored. To that end, this research fills that gap.

Methodology

The Modest Fashion Phenomenon (MFP) operates across a transnational space of influencers, consumers, producers, and entrepreneurs. Thus, my research site is complex because it expands beyond the confines of local borders and populations. However, since my project is situated within a U.S. American context, the singular "field" for me exists across multiple locales and spaces. The *fields* I explored in the capacity of participant observation are modest fashion events, Muslim entrepreneurial workshops and conventions, and online influencers operating within this space as producers of Muslim

fashion and lifestyle. Thus, the field site for this project is a multi-sited ethnography and netnography set within the United States and specifically throughout Muslim populated cities such as Los Angeles, Orange County, Northern Virginia, and Chicago.

The duration of this study took place between 2019-2021; where during that time, I interviewed over 50 female Muslim entrepreneurs ranging between ages 24-45 across various beats such as modest fashion, fitness, health and wellness, lifestyle, beauty, cosmetics, social activism, and cuisine uniquely seeking to mainstream aspects of Muslim lifestyle throughout the United States. The style of the interviews was semi-structured, with questions prepared beforehand, but also alternative questions were asked as the interviews progressed. The interviews took place over the phone or via Zoom for a duration of sixty minutes and did not exceed an hour and a half. Most of the women in this study have given permission to use their real names, except a few. If they are not referred to by their names, or a name at all, throughout this chapter, then that is intentional. Interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed via an online software called Otter.

This project employs an understanding of ethnography that privileges closeness and involvement, which is what distinguishes it from other methodologies that favor distance and objectivity. While there is no such thing as a neutral data collector, I recognize that being an insider within the communities I conducted my fieldwork and interviews further complicates that calculus. However, such close proximity to the field has provided me with valuable access and insights often undiscernible to scholars approaching the field as outsiders. I have been involved in enhancing the narrative of women of the Muslim faith

through the intersections of faith and fashion since 2009, when I attended college at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. At the time, I was part of a relatively small group of Muslim women who donned the hijab despite the college's national reputation for its campus diversity. My hijab style was always one that was fashion forward and in tune with the latest trends despite the fact that fashionable modest options lacked sorely within mainstream markets. Many of my unveiled female Muslim friends would often express how much they appreciated the way I incorporated hijab into my everyday style but always felt that they were not capable of adopting it in a similar fashion. The context in which this was happening was against a post 9/11 ethos riddled with amplified anti-Muslim hate and prejudice, and as such, many women did not feel comfortable taking on the responsibility of being visibly Muslim. Some were raised in a more secular environment where hijab did not play a key role in shaping their Muslim identity, and others longed to adopt the practice but lacked social support. Thus, my involvement in the burgeoning Muslim modest fashion phenomenon has been formative for my own identity and experience as a Muslim American woman.

Many women of the Muslim faith desired to do away with orientalist depictions of veiled embodiment and Muslim femininity that were oversexualized and grossly inaccurate. By bridging the gap between Muslim ethics and aesthetics, I could demonstrate how dressing modestly not only empowered me to be confident in my religious identity but also provided me with a unique sartorial style that I could claim my own. Just a few years later, the Muslim modest fashion phenomenon would leave its mark across global marketplaces and platforms, and through the course of my work, I

became a leading influencer within this space. I recognize the theoretical and methodological challenges of being an insider, but whether the researcher approaches scholarship as an insider or outsider, employing a critical distance between positionality and the research is essential in both instances. This self-reflexivity, or level of "self-awareness," as Hamdan (2009), an Arab Muslim woman researching Arab Muslim Canadian women, calls it, provided me with the ability to step back from my own social normativity and apply an informed critical lens to the modest fashion phenomenon and its overall implications. By reflecting on my own normative beliefs during the research I conducted, I realized the extent to which my personal thinking had evolved and transformed throughout the course of this project in ways that enabled me to pinpoint elements of partiality that I had not noticed before. Hamdan (2009) calls this process a "reflexivity of discomfort," whereby engaging in the process of reflexivity can often push the researcher beyond their comfort zone, revealing aspects of their identity that were made known throughout the research (Hamdan 2009, 378). Recognizing such tensions within myself has only further enriched my research and enabled me to think critically about the complexities of my own positionality as an Arab American woman of the Muslim faith. Additionally, it revealed to me the problematic nature and level of neglect with which Muslim scholarly voices are given within western academic spaces through a cacophony of white non-Muslim voices that have taken center stage on the topics of Muslim womanhood and female Muslim corporeality. As such, I seek to center female Muslim voices through their entrepreneurial enterprises to " unmute" their subjectivities and highlight their lived experiences as religious entrepreneurs.

Language

This project recognizes the power of language, especially with regard to the value of honoring female identities. For the purposes of this project, and as part of my commitment to center the women I interviewed for this study, I refer to them by their first names, as many of them have male names as their last names (e.g., Fatmah Muhammad). Using their first names not only distinguishes their unique subjectivities but also disaggregates the perception of female Muslims as a monolith. Additionally, I intentionally include the ethnic and racial backgrounds of the women under study using terminologies they preferred to be identified by, e.g., "Palestinian American, Ethiopian American," etc. Emphasizing the racial and ethnic makeup of these women disarticulates the essentialist notion of a homogenized group as being non-white and non-black and moves beyond the "brown women being saved by brown men" trope to include varied representations of female Muslims that encompass the diversity of Islam.

As mentioned above, I introduce the phrase "women of the Muslim faith" as a replacement for "Muslim women" in an effort to provide fresh phraseology that is void of historical stigmas and associations. This new wording offers an elevated theoretical lens that enjoins an epistemological shift toward Muslim identity formation that is anti-essentialist by expanding the scope of womanhood, irrespective of the strictures of language, and posits women as active subjects and not the objects of study. It is a point of reference that pushes back against grand narratives prevalent throughout the media and within the white-centric western academy to include new horizons that successfully

capture and reclaim the distinct ethos of female Muslims in all its states of flux and fluidity.

Lastly, in keeping with Liddell's (2018) argument that "capitalization matters and denotes power and legitimacy," I intentionally do not capitalize the racial category of "white" nor "western" so as to decenter them and not discursively reproduce the superiority of these social constructs. However, I do capitalize "Black" to emphasize the importance of Black voices and center Black experiences. Capitalization can also signify solidarity and representation of group identities (ibid); as such, I capitalize the terms "Modest Fashion Phenomenon" and "Female Muslim Entrepreneurship" when necessary.

Dissertation Overview

Chapter one lays the historical groundwork for veiling practices within Islam. It tells the story of how modest fashion went from being a non-desirable and intentionally neglected style reflective of a perceived oppressive religion that is believed to restrict women's bodily comportment to becoming a mainstay throughout many big fashion house's collections across the western mainstream marketplace due to the valuation of Muslim spending power. The fashion industry has always been hesitant about aligning itself with Muslims, especially after the attacks on September 11th, 2001, but once it woke up to the economic potentiality of Muslim consumers, modest fashion went from being an "aversion" to an "asset" (Lewis 2018). Big fashion houses began creating capsule collections inspired by modest fashion in line with on-trend styles and luxe fabrics. Instead of female Muslim consumers clamoring over the very few perceived-to-be modest pieces produced by mainstream department stores, they now have a plethora of

options and styles intentionally designed with them in mind. Through a market analysis of the viability of the modest fashion apparel industry, I explore the opportunities engendered by the MFP for female Muslims in a burgeoning sector seeking their expertise, creativity, and collaborations with Muslim owned companies. The MFP provides a powerful platform demonstrating the heterogeneity of female Muslim subjectivities that has diversified hijab practices across the United States and led to a shift in perception toward female Muslims while carving a viable path for entrepreneurial opportunities. Through modest fashion and entrepreneurship, new diverse modes of Muslim womanhood have come to the fore, thereby rendering Islam more legible within the U.S. American cultural fabric.

Chapter two is the first of three chapters that draw upon the ethnography and netnography I conducted to help better understand a thriving new tide of Female Muslim Entrepreneurship (FME) in the U.S. resulting from the momentum generated by the Modest Fashion Phenomenon. It explores the intersections of religion, gender, and entrepreneurship through the first of three main classifications: Social and Cultural Entrepreneurs, Strategic Entrepreneurs, and Influencer Entrepreneurs. I categorized the entrepreneurs based on recurring themes that became clear throughout my ethnographic work. Chapter two focuses on the Social and Cultural Entrepreneurs through various modalities of gendered Muslim conceptions of Islamic entrepreneurship within the U.S. I begin by establishing an understanding of Islamic entrepreneurship (IE) as a conceptual framework in order to analyze the ways it informs the ethical and socioeconomic value systems of the entrepreneurs under study. This chapter draws upon my interviews with

seven entrepreneurs, specifically those who have demonstrated their own ways of thinking and who incorporate religion and entrepreneurship into their lives. I put forth new ways of understanding entrepreneurship from a religious and gendered perspective that showcases complementarity instead of contradiction between neoliberalism and Islamic Entrepreneurship in ways that cultivate an empowered sense of self and religious identity. Therefore, my goal is to broaden the epistemologies of Islamic entrepreneurship by analyzing the various forms of entrepreneurship exemplified by women of Muslim faith throughout the U.S. by unpacking the rich layers of what constitutes having religious goals as an entrepreneur and examining the intersections that shape their experiences and enterprises.

Chapter three focuses on Strategic Entrepreneurs and demonstrates how the women understudy runs successful, profitable businesses that challenge stereotypes held about women of the Muslim faith and Islam. I analyze the methods and micropolitics of female Muslim entrepreneurship and provide fresh considerations for how these women's enterprises have brought new prominence to the cultural discourse on religious entrepreneurs and Muslim lifestyles within the United States.

Chapter four draws upon the interviews and netnography conducted throughout this ethnographic project. It focuses on "Influencer Entrepreneurs," which is a new generation of female Muslims who use their social media platforms as a way to showcase the Muslim lifestyle and also generate revenue from the content they create. A detailed analysis of the inner workings of the brands they have built is brought forth. They have created viable monetizable platforms over social media yet have been overlooked within

the discourses surrounding Islamic Entrepreneurship. Additionally, I examine the politics of representation entangled within their experiences as Muslim influencers through the concept of "embodied intersectionality," emphasizing the interplay between their online actions and offline consequences and how the former impacts the latter. I end the chapter with an analysis of contemporary trends relating to the shifts in hijab practices and a de-veiling phenomenon throughout the Euro-American west to gain a more comprehensive understanding of veiling practices' cultural footing within a contemporary context.

Chapter five illuminates the intrinsic connection between religion, gender, and politics in the U.S. by underscoring some of the MFP's greatest consequences, such as its concurrence with heightened anti-Muslim sentiment as well as its enmeshment within the neoliberal marketplace. It also recognizes the great progress made in enhancing Islam's cultural presence. This chapter contends that irrespective of the negative consequences, the MFP engendered an epistemological shift in understanding Islam's cultural impact in the United States. It operates as a powerful counter-hegemonic force that provides fresh understandings of Muslims and Muslim lifestyles in ways that challenge anti-Muslim narratives and visual stereotypes.

Collectively**,** the chapters thematically explore the quad-angulate nexus between religion, race, fashion, and entrepreneurship by re-characterizing the symbolic and behavioral ethos of Muslim womanhood as expressed within a U.S. American Muslim context. It employs an interdisciplinary approach by applying a sociological and anthropological ethnographic lens to developments in women's lived experiences of Islam in the USA today. This research centers on the women and not the text in a way

that is not dismissive of the authority of Islamic scripture but rather through a transparent account of Muslim realities that are reflective of individual identity as well as differences. This is achieved by offering a fresh conceptualization of "Islam" that challenges the notion that Islam is practiced and performed singularly, thereby invoking the works of Abu-Lughod (2016), El Guindi (1999), and Ahmed (1992), amongst many others. I expound upon the extant qualitative research mentioned in the above literature review while making new interventions in the field by engaging with relevant scholars, designers, entrepreneurs, activists, sartorialists, aesthetic authorities, change-makers, and influencers within the field.

CHAPTER 1: THE MAKING OF THE MODEST FASHION PHENOMENON IN THE UNITED STATES

In order to understand how Muslim sartorial and entrepreneurial practices have cultivated new ways of perceiving Muslim womanhood and Islam within the United States, it is important first to establish a foundation for hijab practices, which serves as the basis for the burgeoning phenomenon that is modest fashion. This chapter lays the groundwork for this wave of visibility that reinforces the richness of veiling practices, which has always operated on a continuum of cultural changes throughout history, specifically within this contemporary moment. This chapter illuminates the ways by which the year 2015 marked a historical moment where the Muslim modest sector went from "aversion to asset" (Lewis 2018) by proving to be a highly lucrative yet underserved market where big fashion brands began to cater to Muslim sartorial needs. As such, new understandings of veiling practices were brought to light. This chapter demonstrates how the Modest Fashion Phenomenon transformed the popular perception of veiling within the United States by restoring the heterogeneity, complexity, and historicity of such practices and creating new entrepreneurial opportunities for women of the Muslim faith. I explore the motivations and prospects behind this phenomenon and examine how outcomes of the MFP rendered Islam more legible within the western cultural fabric.

Following the attacks of 9/11, the US American Muslim community has actively demanded new social and political possibilities to fight for equal space within religious and public establishments. This was particularly true for women of the Muslim faith as it relates to conflicts surrounding women and gender, which led to a growing presence of

the veil in the United States. The hijab began to reemerge during what Ahmed (2011, 213) called a "new cycle of history" due to the growing presence of Islamism within the United States and worldwide. The veil took on new cultural meanings within the post 9/11 era, eventually paving the way for new prominence within mainstream North America. There are plenty of other ways to understand the reasons for veiling, as Ahmed suggests, such as the hijab as a form of identity formation as well as a fashion statement, which is the focal point of this chapter. It is within this cultural context that the MFP bourgeoned. I provide a fresh conceptual framework for understanding female Muslims in a way that portrays their subjectivities as mobile, stylish, and boundless.

I should note that while the focus of this chapter is on veiled women and veiling practices in the United States, it should be noted that despite the MFP's attempt at an inclusive representation of Muslim womanhood, this new visibility has the propensity to highlight predominantly racially white passing women who wear hijab despite the fact that 40 percent of US Muslim women do not wear the hijab, which presents a false equivalency of modest attire with hijab-wearing women (PEW 2017). Muslim womanhood is manifested through multiple modes, and modest fashion is a very powerful one, and the one I am a participant in, but it is not the only avenue. By moving beyond the veil as a mere marker of religious identity and, instead, as an expression of individualized Muslim personhood, this chapter highlights the diversity of not only Muslim sartorial practices but also Muslim lifestyles.

What is Hijab? Understanding the Scriptural Basis for Veiling in Islam

- What is a hijab?
- What does it represent?
- How did it become symbolic of the Muslim faith?
- Which verses in the Quran prescribe this concept?

Answering these questions aids in gaining an intimate understanding of the significance of the hijab in Islam. It will allow the reader to recognize the cultural shifts it has undergone between various historical moments, including this contemporary one.

I offer the two main Quranic verses that prescribe and invoke veiling from Chapter 33 a Chapter 24, employing the translation of Yusuf Ali:

In Chapter 33 (al-Ahzab), verse 59, Allah gives the following command to Prophet Muhammad:

> ***59.*** *O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft- Forgiving, Most Merciful.*

In Chapter 24 (an-Nur (the Light), in verse 31, Allah commands Prophet Muhammad as follows:

> ***31.*** *And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments (or adornments (zinah)) except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their* ***veils*** *over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss.*

To clarify the meaning of "veil" or "hijab," I turn to Mernissi (1991, 93), who states that the word hijab can be seen as three-dimensional. The first dimension is considered to be a visual one, which means to hide something from sight. The second dimension refers to space to establish a demarcation and threshold. The third dimension is moral, belonging to the realm of the sacred and forbidden. Thus, there are material elements to "hijab" as well as immaterial elements. With regard to the material manifestations of the veil, different terminologies need clarification. The concepts of veiling for non-Muslims within the modern Euro-American perception are pervaded with images of the *chador*, the black cloak that covers Muslim women entirely from the top down (Amer 2014, 10). The veil also suggests the *burqa*, which is a veiling of the head, face, and body. There is also the hijab, which can refer to either a head cover or a body cover. Hijab can also refer to a spatial marker between the private and public domains, which is commonly known as the *purdah*. Let us now examine the traditional understanding of the veil implemented as the established guidelines throughout Muslim dress practices.

According to Hajjaji-Jarrah's (2003) understanding of ninth-century Muslim historian and prominent Qur'anic exegete, Muhammad ibn Jarir Al-Tabari's interpretation of the Q. verse 24:31 with regard to "and that they should draw/throw (*yadribna*) their veils (*khumur*) over their bosoms/necklines (*juyub*)" as affirmation that God has commanded the believing woman to cover her hair, neck, and ears with the *hijab* (headscarf). He believes that even though the Quranic verse refers to the covering of the bosom area, it actually refers to the area right above the bosom and neckline (Jarrah 189). However, his interpretation of headscarf and bosom does not hold the same meaning as they do in the

standard Arabic language dictionaries. The Arabic word *khimar* (headscarf) refers to a woman's headscarf, not the kind worn by a man. Also, in exploring the word *yadribna,* which means to throw. The divine injunction, in Hajjaji-Jarrah's (2003, 189) opinion, "should be taken to mean that the Quran is instructing the believing women to throw their already existing headscarves over their bosoms/necklines when they appear to have been overly exposed." Thus, in her view, the Quran is not introducing an entirely new style of dress code to be worn by the believing women during the time of the Prophet; instead, the Quran calls for an adjustment of the existing dress style.

The scriptural understanding of veiling requirements mentioned above is the interpretation this project suggests as the "normative" standard and is included solely as a point of reference and as a baseline to grasp how hijab practices have morphed and evolved across space and time. Defining a proper form of Muslim womanhood and visibility has been the task of Muslims, both traditionalists and progressivists, fundamentalists, western feminists, Muslim countries, and non-Muslim states. As such, I find it analytically unproductive to make any pronouncements as to which types of modesty are considered "correct" or in line with the scriptural interpretations and instead employ an understanding of modest fashion that is reflective of an ever-evolving and shifting form of female Muslim subjectivities, all the while recognizing the norms and practices that bind this group together. However, in the spirit of clarity and for the purpose of analysis, I do find it productive to make clear the dominant interpretations of what constitutes normative veiling requirements throughout this project to develop an understanding of how veiling practices are shifting in this current cultural moment in

twenty first century U.S. North America.

Diversifying Islamic Veiling Practices

Donning the hijab manifests through a multitude of headdresses, from scarves to turbans, and even hats were worn with various sartorial styles rendered with individuated and personal meaning. El Guindi (1999: xii) posits the veil as a "complex cultural phenomenon" that is deeply rich and nuanced, which at its core is "a language that communicates social and cultural messages." Such a definition allows for the emphasis to be placed on the cultural forms veiling takes on across different regions, such as the Middle East and the UK, or even subregions like the Levant and West Africa. The hijab specifically takes on various forms across the globe, especially within non-Muslim countries like the United States (a country that has seen its longest wars situated in Iraq and Afghanistan). Instead of fixating on a specific version of hijab practices that merely meets the Islamic dress code based on the Quranic interpretations of modern scholars of religion and Islamic studies, it also allows the individual import imbued within such performances to flourish.

The primary symbol of women of the Muslim faith has been and continues to be the hijab, or headcover, which has also been deemed as an "oppressive" and static Islamic practice through the European colonial encounter, despite the fact that historically veiling has never meant one thing nor has it been performed uni-dimensionally. In fact, as Hajjaji-Jarrah (2003) argues above, it is important to establish that Islam did not invent the practice of veiling; instead, it modified an already existing custom that was prevalent

during seventh-century Arabia and prior to dating back to ancient near Eastern communities from Greeks to Romans, Jews, and Assyrians (El Guindi 1999, 3). Hijab practices have adapted across time and place according to each unique cultural interpretation. It was not solely a female practice either, as male veiling, though different, was quite common in pre- and post-Islamic Arabia and takes on various cultural forms throughout the Middle East until today. Hence, it is unsurprising that veiling practices take on new meanings and cultural permutations within a contemporary US context.

The exhausted emphasis on veiling as a gendered female practice is part of the Orientalist discourse on female Muslim subjectivities created to justify colonialism and colonial rule over Muslim societies. Muslim women, and more generally the, Oriental woman, were depicted in a way where "she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. *He* spoke for and represented her" (Said 1978, 6). Orientalism's greatest feat, as Edward Said argues, was not merely engendering a successful campaign geared toward a collective discourse on the Orient but rather is manifested in its demonstration of Eurocentric power over the Orient that is deeply embedded across academic and cultural formations to this very day. As such, the Muslim subject, particularly women, has been in a constant state of dismantling deep-seated Orientalist systems of power that have shaped Muslim identity and culture for generations. Many women are attempting to distinguish themselves beyond the confines of a "secular" or "traditional" dialectic and, in so doing, have creatively fashioned an identity through sartorial practices that seek to disrupt the western trope of the "oppressed Muslim woman" (Abu-Lughod 2013). The fixation on the supposed oppression of

women is a hyper focused aspect of colonialist discourse to further undermine Islamic culture and posits Muslims as barbaric and backward. Images of faceless female Muslims entirely covered up and oppressed by fundamentalist regimes such as the Taliban pervade the western imaginary and have had, in Abu-Lughod's (2016) words, a "deadening effect" on the general public's ability to recognize the depth of diversity within Muslim womanhood. As such, the Modest Fashion Phenomenon's potential to shatter such stereotypes has been especially effective in creating new imagery depicting the human aspect of the lives of Muslim women through dress and entrepreneurial engagement.

Historically, the western gaze was exhibited through dress and the body, as it was for European colonialists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The emphasis on dress and female bodily comportment has always been a fixation point where cultural value systems and social principles were manifested through clothing and corporeal appearance (Foster 2004, 11). To dress in a way that marked a visible difference between the locals and the natives was the basis for the "us" and "them" dichotomy, them being the veiled Muslim other, which still holds true in western societies today. Diverse groups of women of the Muslim faith who reclaim Islam as a cultural and social identity through individuated expressions of contemporary Muslim womanhood are directly affected by such biased depictions. It is against this historical backdrop that Muslim women, within this modern moment and throughout history, have sought to push back against the grossly inaccurate depictions of Muslim womanhood prevalent within western consciousness. Paradoxically, what has once been deemed a symbol of oppression is now taking on new symbolic meaning in the quest for cultural identity, as new deployments of the hijab

become reflective of the individual realities experienced by women of the Muslim faith.

Modest Fashion Phenomenon (MFP)

Prior to 2015, modest fashion was deemed unattractive and traditional throughout European and American consumer markets. Now modest fashion is considered a way of dress that is fashionable and desirable by women who are not only Muslim but from other faith groups as well. I propose the term "Modest Fashion Phenomenon" to articulate this "transitional moment," as Bucar (2017) calls it, whereby women of the Muslim faith are experiencing heightened levels of representation and visibility within western culture. In 2017 modest fashion became one of the most prominent fashion styles worldwide, evidenced across coveted runways, international magazines and malls, and numerous fashion media outlets proclaiming that "modesty has gone mainstream" (Gonzalez 2019). This phenomenon has been referred to as a "trend" across many publications, but such typology connotes ephemerality which does an injustice to this historical occurrence as modest fashion is here to stay. The potential of this visibility was recognized through a myriad of media coverage of not only the fashions but the women involved in this movement in the capacity of consumers, entrepreneurs, influencers, designers, models, and stylists. I refer to it as a phenomenon because many women worldwide, whether activists or non-activists, participate in various forms of intervention, acts of individual agency, and creativity loosely related but not necessarily tied to an organized collective. As one of the PFH Convention's influencers Syrian-American activist Chaker (2018), put it, "This is not just a movement, this is setting the Muslim women narrative straight with what its true intention should always be: love love and more love." The MFP has no

formal organization, nor does it advocate for one specific goal, and instead represents very distinct personal initiatives as well as an imagined collective that simultaneously crosses and contradicts.

My understanding of the modest fashion phenomenon employs a definition of modesty that is "polysemic," as Lewis (2013) describes it, which enables adherents of that aesthetic to embody multiple manifestations of modest fashion according to their own interpretation. Certainly, many women dress that way out of religious conviction, but it is important to note that motivations for modest wear are not solely based on religiosity. For some women, dressing modestly is more about being a part of a community and indicative of cultural norms that are subject to change. For others, it is more of a personal preference for bodily comportment; for some, it is a creative way to gain social mobility. Thus, I intend to broaden the scope of modest dress in a way that reflects how modest dressers perceive themselves to be operating within a cultural context. D'alessandro's (2018, 48) characterization of modest fashion in western Muslim circles as a preference for hyper-stylish garments across various levels of bodily coverage is helpful. This variety extends to diverse concerns for cultural aesthetic expression and how clothing reveals or conceals the shape of the body.

Social media has been a powerful mode of networking and an outlet for movement makers seeking to showcase their version of modest fashion, with Instagram being the preferred platform for up-and-coming and established fashion influencers. A quick search on Instagram for "modest fashion" garners nearly five million posts, not to mention the

thousands of profiles dedicated to modest fashion inspiration. Many Muslim fashionistas or "Muslim style arbiters," as associate curator of costume and textiles arts at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Laura Camerlengo describes, turn to Instagram to foster fresh dialogue and visibility surrounding Muslim fashion and faith in twenty- first-century America. This is done through a plethora of styles that coincide and or conflict with normative understandings of veiling practices. For example, many US American Muslim women have adopted a turban-style head covering, such as rapper and modest fashion influencer Neelam Hakeem of @neelam_, who wears various styles of turbans and hoodies instead of a headscarf. This type of style leaves the neck bear, which is considered questionable within more conservative Muslim circles. This style of head garb is a popular type of headdress among Black and Sikh women and has been adopted by many Arab women. I should note that turbans are not worn solely by women and are a common head wrap for men throughout the Arab region (El Guindi 1999, 105). Modest fashion influencer Mona Shams of @garbsandcarbs usually wears hats instead of a traditional scarf to cover her hair, which is always paired with turtle necks to ensure her neck is covered. Influencer and cofounder of Wise Systems Layla Shaikley of @laylool wears a hijab loosely wrapped around her head, revealing a visible amount of her hair uncovered. Modest fashion influencer and content creator Zahraa Berro of @ zahraa_hberro also likes to wear her hijab loosely but pairs it with an under-piece that provides full coverage of her hair and neck. All four of these women express a unique yet similar style of headdress manifested through hijab practices which are rooted in their own personal convictions of how hijab should be perceived and performed.

As the number and popularity of these influencers reveal, modest fashion now permeates mainstream fashion media and markets in the United States. Where not long ago modest dressers struggled to simply find apparel companies that cater to their religious requirements of long sleeves, high necklines, and maxi length silhouettes, this niche market segment has now opened a window of opportunities for Muslims in the capacity of designers, stylists, spokeswomen, models, and beauty experts. In 2015 H&M featured UK-based Muslim model Mariah Idrissi in their international campaign ad that went viral for its push toward inclusivity and diversity (Matera 2017). American Eagle, an American lifestyle brand, became one of the first brands to release a hijab collection featuring a Muslim model named Halima Aden, who shortly thereafter became the first hijab-donning model to be signed to IMG, a coveted global management agency. Not only has modest dress become a viable market segment, but Muslim lifestyle needs are now being taken seriously. Journalists, scholars, and bloggers have repeatedly recognized the "big business" of the modest fashion market. Modest fashion purchases by Muslim women are estimated to be $44 billion in 2016 and 2017, which amounts to almost 18 percent of the estimated $243 billion spent by Muslims on apparel (Loveluck 2018). While most modest fashion buyers are based in the Middle East, there has been a growing demand for modest wear in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The next section dissects the notion of visibility and inclusion through neoliberal market analysis to interrogate the extent of heightened levels of representation touted by mainstream brands and experienced by women of the Muslim faith.

Neoliberalism and MFP

I find it analytically productive to investigate the discursive circumstances undergirding this new wave of visibility, viability, and representation experienced by women of the Muslim faith to be able to gauge the extent of inclusion and integration within U.S. American sociocultural and political systems. The lens toward women of the Muslim faith is shifting, but it also confirms that there is indeed still a lens that remains hyper focused on this vast group of women, be it by way of scrutinizing, exploiting, or excluding. It is important to recognize that the Modest Fashion Phenomenon is a turning point and not the starting point within the historical narratives on women of the Muslim faith seeking visibility and inclusion within an industry that has excluded them for decades. It marks a point of departure from previous representations embedded within western forms of mainstream media, such as the exotic oriental Other, onto new representations of modern, stylish women whose subjectivities break from images of frumpy style to fashionable comportment that shifted the viewpoint toward female Muslims as objects of vulnerability onto an ethos of economic viability.

Muslim model Halima Aden is arguably considered the figurehead of the MFM for being one of the first and few Muslim models to take center stage on runways of major fashion labels during New York Fashion week shows and coveted magazine covers such as Sports Illustrated and British Vogue. The Muslim community lauded her achievements for rising through the ranks of an exclusivist fashion industry as a Somali-American Muslim woman who wears a hijab. However, it was not without cost that Halima was able to achieve the success she experienced. In 2020 she announced that she was quitting

the fashion industry because her work compromised her religious beliefs.[3] She became so consumed with her success and brand partnerships that she began missing her daily prayers and allowed brands to style her in obscure head coverings like hats, accessories, and even a pair of jeans in place of an actual hijab, "I can only blame myself for caring more about opportunity than what was actually at stake," she admitted via a series of Instagram story posts (Dewan 2020). What she blames the industry for is the lack of female Muslim stylists who possess a deeper understanding of how to incorporate fashion within hijab practices and not the other way around.

Unsurprisingly, in its quest to dominate the Muslim market, American capitalist consumer culture wants to claim its stake in the multibillion-dollar potential of modest fashion. Being the most highly-profiled modest fashion model rendered Halima susceptible to the whims of lucrative brand deals and exploitative contracts that compromised her Muslim values and altered her visual representation of hijab. Women like Halima and other Muslim models and influencers actively participate in the commodification of modesty and hijab, not recognizing the capacity of consumer culture's ability to modify and alter representations of female Muslim embodiment. Consequently, their participation in the proliferation of Muslim lifestyle throughout consumer markets also plays a role in various modes of Muslim lifestyle where in theory, as Gökariksel and McLarney (2010, 8) explain, "the 'aura' of Islam is supposed to impart authenticity and legitimacy," but their religious and spiritual objectives are not always

[3] Halima Aden is discussed in various capacities throughout this dissertation for her claim to fame as the first Black Muslim model to make it onto mainstream fashion runways. Her renunciation of the fashion industry was a recent development and does not change her past accomplishments.

actualized. Halima is one of the many Muslim models that felt the terms of collaboration compromised her religious identity. Neo-liberal values and consumerism have penetrated all religions, and Islam is no exception to that. As female Muslim bodies proliferate the consumer market economy, they are rendered as "commodities" themselves (Gökariksel and McLarney 2010, 3). A political economic reading of the MFP suggests a neoliberal restructuring of the self and marketplace. Examining the rhetoric underpinning the celebratory tenor of this modest moment is central to the emergence of the MFP in the United States and understanding the inclusion process. Since women who wear hijab have often been portrayed as downtrodden and dowdy, the appeal to modify one's own style to fit that of a commercial norm becomes a tantalizing option for up and coming female influencers or even onlookers seeking to enhance their modest comportment. Such framing is reflective of the challenges and upsides of consumer capitalism.

The pressure to conform to a more mainstream look, and thus, a non-Muslim western aesthetic, to dilute historical associations with hijab being confined and constricted is also a reality many modest fashion seekers contend with, which hinges on neoliberal logic. In neoliberalism, the state "seeks to create an individual that is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur" (Olssen and Peters 2005, 315). That is why every time an analysis of the modest fashion industry is offered via news outlets or academic works, including this one, it is without a doubt inextricably linked to its billion dollar valuations and projections produced by a Dinar Standard Report (Limam and Berjikian 2021). The state functions as an economically driven enterprise instilling laws, regulations, and market forces that regard the individual as a consumer. Competition becomes encouraged, and

the individual's personal interests trump that of the collective (Fernández-Herrería and Martínez-Rodríguez 2016). The neoliberal reading of the MFP posits female Muslim bodies as desirable and lucrative enterprises. Comparable to what Mayanthi Fernando (2014) calls the "exceptional citizen," where the unveiled body is representative of a universalizing potential for the French Republican mission to dilute any visible signs of difference in its quest to create a more secular society, but the inverse of that, where veiled fashionable bodies embrace their religious, racial, and cultural differences and yield to sartorial creativity to cement their presence as viable women in an attempt for inclusion and integration in an otherwise hostile environment towards Islam and Muslims. In this regard, female Muslim embodiment, or what Mahmood (2001) calls the "performance of gendered Islamic virtues," through modest fashion operates as a vehicle of empowerment through corporeal creativity that reflects a subordinate self who believes in a transcendent. The juxtaposition of the sacred and the secular through the female Muslim body reveals the quest for inclusion and increased representation, which in and of itself becomes a consequence of subject-alteration underscored by the lack of acceptance towards female Muslims embedded within western society. The possibility for inclusion only becomes achievable when women of the Muslim faith are posited as fashionable and commodifiable to fit a norm that perpetuates an exploitative neoliberal worldview of Muslim womanhood as self-enterprising and desiring.

In other words, there is little opportunity for inclusion and representation for female Muslims in their unadulterated states because no matter how fashionable or profit-making their subjectivities are, they will always remain Muslim and, thus, Other. As such, the

extent of their experiences of inclusion, visibility, acceptance, and empowerment hinges on the economic viability of their subjectivities, thus, entangling them within a cyclical web of inclusion and exclusion. That is not to say that the power of these representations is not effective, as this project argues the MFP serves as one of the most effective articulations of a counter-hegemonic demonstration of Muslim womanhood, but it does not neglect the reality of the inherent bias of representation experienced by this group of women. In this instance, heightened visibility disguised as exploitation reflects what bell hooks calls "positive exploitation," where in this particular instance, female Muslim bodies are chiefly attributed to the spending power of Muslim consumers and the commodification of their religious identity. Hooks further explains that "commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers … that world of business and money-making has no color" (LaSha 2016). However, the celebration of consumer culture is part of the "postfeminist imaginary" that "celebrates the empowerment of product choice, self-fashioning through commodities, representation in the market of images and ideas, the realization of consumer desires, and participation in the structures of economic power (Gökariksel and McLarney 2010, 4). As such, these are the contradictory imperatives that limit the extent of representation and inclusion where, on the one hand, capitalist circuits of exploitation prey on female Muslim subjectivities, and on the other, increased visibility, representation, and opportunities are also the outcome. Thus, in my view, the outcome of the MFP reveals that women of the Muslim faith exist within a pendulum oscillating between "in" and "out" modes of inclusion and exploitation, which has ultimately

contributed to a more positive than negative outcome within the social and cultural experiences of female Muslims living in the United States. The next section examines how the Modest Fashion Phenomenon created new regimes of visibility for women of the Muslim faith through sartorial creativity.

The Making of a New Visibility

Modest fashion as a trend has been presented as a recent phenomenon over the past two decades, despite the fact that it is tied to a long history of Islamic dress that varies across communities and geographies. In fact, historically, clothing has always served as a powerful medium between the East and West, dating back to the Ottoman period during the late nineteenth century (El Guindi 1999). Yet, there is something different about how modest fashion, or "the new modesty," as a founder of popular luxury fashion e-commerce site the Modist Ghizlan Guenez called it (D'Alessandro 2018, 51), is being perceived in the twenty-first century throughout the Middle East, United States, and Europe. While modest fashion is generally understood to be dominated by Muslim women, clothing is worn by women of Jewish, Sikh, and Christian faiths has also been characterized as modest fashion (Singh 2017).

Modest styles are not solely for Muslim desires, nor do Muslims have a monopoly on modesty, but it certainly has served as a catalyst in altering the perception of the veil in the United States. It stands in contradistinction to the "imaginary veil" conjured in the non-Muslim western imaginary as an "awkward black cloak that covers the whole body including the face and is designed to prevent women's mobility" (Hoodfar 2001, 424). In

many ways, the MFP allows women to destabilize the western gaze by asserting individuated sartorial expressions of modest fashion that render their positioned selves impervious to the western onlooker, both male and female, and to the American Muslim observer. It also creates an avenue for women of the Muslim faith to assert their consumer power and creative intervention within the mainstream marketplace. This has positioned them as both competitors and participants in the exploitative nature of capitalist market economies that prey on commercializing Muslim identities, but what distinguishes Muslim entrepreneurs from neoliberal consumer culture is intentionality.

Many Muslim companies, such as special events company Crown Your Occasions and modern Muslim baby gear company Jasmine and Marigold, have expressed their desire to elevate the Muslim experience within the United States by catering to Muslim needs. For them, social mission far outweighs profitability. Yet capitalist domination continues to manifest through the commodification of modest fashion in its various forms across a neoliberal global marketplace. This is the "double face" of fashion that, on the one hand, has long been viewed as a method of subordination and exploitation within feminist theorization and, on the other, offers liberating possibilities. Wilson (2003, 13) argues that to view fashion through the lens of oppression toward women solely is to "miss the richness of its cultural and political meaning." Through modest fashion, a counter-hegemonic visualization is offered of an empowered self that deliberately emphasizes the boundaries of difference, instead of diluting it, in ways that destabilize the authority of Western feminist scholarship and cultural practices. The goal for many participants is to visibly assert pride in their religious identity (Janmohamed 2016).

The MFP was spearheaded by female Muslim millennials seeking to carve an individuated identity for themselves instead of allowing gendered Orientalist representations of Muslim womanhood, such as the oppressed and silenced Muslim woman who needs saving trope, to prevail within Muslim minority mainstream western culture (Janmohamed 2016, 96-100). The rise of Muslim modest fashion has engendered a new "cultural cool" that birthed a wave of modest influencers who refused to accept the exclusionary tendencies of the mainstream marketplace. Many Muslim curators of style began showcasing their own renditions of modest fashion that are colorful, creative, and daring to help other women struggling with being both modest and fashionable.

To be clear, this "new visibility" does not imply that it is only in this contemporary moment that women of the Muslim faith are talking back through modest sartorial expression. Instead, it is the opportunity of them being catered to, particularly by western mainstream markets, that is emphasized as novel. For instance, some mainstream brands such as Nike have seriously engaged female Muslim athletes to understand the specificity of their wardrobe needs to ensure the appropriate fabrics and fits are accounted for. While there are clear capitalist gains for Nike since the Muslim market has proven to be lucrative, this type of public exchange and acknowledgment has created new opportunities for not just non-Muslim western markets but many Muslim entrepreneurs as well. What is new is the fact that their corporeal and stylistic needs have been augmented to the point of breaking through exclusive marketplaces and spaces that have rarely, if ever, accounted for them.

The efficacy of this varied visibility is manifested through the fact that the sartorial needs of Muslim women have finally penetrated the U.S. American mainstream marketplace through consumer engagement, inclusive marketing campaigns, and an overall amiability toward veiling practices irrespective of the presumed market value. This "new visibility" manifested through the MFP has created a net positive toward female Muslim subjectivities in the United States. It has afforded women new prominence that challenges Orientalist and neo-Orientalist depictions of Muslim womanhood by denaturalizing the male and female gaze that deemed their subjectivities historically invisible in non-Muslim western and Muslim consciousness. But the question remains to what extent does the increased visibility purge nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary, linguistic, and cultural misrepresentations?

Khoja-Moolji (2017) argues that heightened visibility does not necessarily materialize through "emancipatory possibilities." She contends that this new visibility is "limiting and oppressive" because it presents a bifurcated notion of female Muslim subjectivity where on one front, they are viewed as "savvy consumers and empowered fashionistas" and on another as "suspect, jihadi, and threatening." In her view, such representations are instead "simply new modalities through which state and capitalist forces can advance the surveillance of Muslim women or make profits off of them." But such framing of this new prominence is in and of itself limiting and laden with presumptions of Muslim womanhood that further perpetuate the neo-colonialist framework that binds female Muslims to the shackles of the western gaze. What Khoja-Moolji fails to account for is the interconnectedness between the dichotomous representations. The notion of Muslim

women as suspect that she invokes is precisely what the MFP works to dismantle by carving a new type of Muslim visibility into public consciousness. It is one that embodies the complexities of their religion and culture while simultaneously blurring the lines between theology and praxis (Janmohamed 2016: 37). Many scholars who theorize about the veil (Hoodfar 2011; Ahmed 1992; Abu-Lughod 2002) rightfully call for working against reductive interpretations of veiling that render Muslim women as subordinate, but when can we actually start to implement this practice discursively *outside* of our own scholarship? When can we start to instinctively conceive of this group of women without invoking the "oppression" or "backwardness" that haunts their subjectivities? When can we speak about female Muslim subjectivities without alluding to an already constituted group of women embedded within our consciousness? When can we randomly stumble upon a cable news show and not see headlines asking if Islam oppresses women? Such assumptions were evident when former U.S. president Donald Trump criticized Gold Star mother Ghazala Khan's silence during her husband Khizr Khan's speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2016 regarding their fallen son soldier Army Caption Humayun Khan. Commenting on Ghazala's silence, Trump said that she might not have been allowed to speak, alluding to the fact that she is controlled by her husband, thereby furthering stereotypes of the oppressed Muslim woman by Muslim men (BBC News 2016). Trump's remarks reflect the growing level of Islamophobia that is rampant within the United States. When experts are invited to news outlets to defend Islam and clarify misconceptions, they are almost always asked if Islam oppresses women. The framing of that question assumes women's oppression before their liberation, which is at the root of

anti-Muslim sentiment. When will representations of Muslim women across mass media outlets reflect a point of departure from hackneyed and essentialist constructions of this gendered group of people and highlight the immense progress being made toward creating an understanding that reflects the actual realities of these women? I argue that the MFP profoundly articulates this departure from marginal subjecthood into mainstream Muslim modes of being. It demonstrates new ways of conceptualizing Muslim womanhood through sartorial creativity that shatters the monolithic images of Muslim women as clad in all black, faceless, and draped in cloak-like garments, further promoting their invisibility as portrayed across media outlets (Goldman 2016). It is an effective way of incorporating female Muslim subjects into U.S. mainstream culture through various corporeal renditions that reflect the realities of these women.

Intersectional Trends in the U.S. American MFP

As I mentioned earlier, social media influencers and entrepreneurs are key creators of the MFP, and many American Muslim influencers offer important intersectional perspectives to this new visibility and empowerment for women of the Muslim faith. Los Angeles-based beauty guru of Ethiopian descent Aysha Harun reaches an audience of nearly 400k subscribers on YouTube and 227k followers on Instagram, where she shares beauty tips, home décor, vlogs, and more. In the wake of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and many other Black people who were killed by police in 2020, she released a video titled “Life update + why I stopped supporting a certain brand,” uploaded to YouTube on June 10, 2020, describing what it is like to be a Black Muslim influencer and content creator in North America. She admitted that she has

to work "ten times harder than non-Black women; it's a hard pill to swallow, but it is the facts." As a businesswoman and influencer, Harun has repeatedly been put in situations where she has had to prove that her "blackness isn't going to bring down this corporation." Harun outed luxury French skin-care company Caudalie for their lack of representation across their campaign ads and for not compensating her for all the content she created for their brand. After multiple attempts with Caudalie's representatives to prove that she is worth the investment, especially since the content she created for them generated nearly $20,000 in converted sales, they still would not pay her, using the excuse that they simply did not have the budget to do so when in fact white influencers had paid partnerships with them. In Harun's view, this is how Black women are constantly "manipulated" in the industry, which has led to stark racial disparities within the world of influencers and content creators. Surely, Harun is one of many Black influencers who are not given the level of gravitas that white or white-passing influencers receive across multiple industries but particularly within the fashion and beauty sectors.

In an Instagram-Live discussion entitled "White Supremacy in Modest Fashion," stylist Hakeemah Cummings (2020) pointed out that many of the mainstream fashion media outlets such as *Harper's Bazaar*, *POPSUGAR*, *Vogue*, *WhoWhatWear*, and *Allure* all published articles between 2017 and 2020 ranking the top modest fashion and hijab influencers featuring an overwhelming majority of white influencers and barely any Black influencers. The lack of racial representation within the modest fashion industry is viewed as a form of "silencing," to quote Cummings, to nonwhite influencers who usually have to work even harder for less return on their investment. It is a slap in the

face of sorts, thereby sending the message that Black bodies are less desirable and thus less appealing for big brands to work with. The MFP, in conjunction with the Black Lives Matter Movement, has encouraged multiple brands to be more inclusive toward people of color by ensuring their campaign ads are more visually diverse across races and religions, as well as implementing more structural changes such as diversifying company leadership, despite the fact that many other companies are still being taken to task for perpetuating practices that underrepresent minority communities. As three critical categories of race, religion, and gender strategically intersect on some of the world's most visual and powerful platforms, a shifting display of Muslim womanhood from nonnormative marginal embodiment to a mainstream articulation of normativity is challenging biased Euro-American constructions of Muslim lifestyle and Islamic practices.

It is clear that one of the main functions of the MFP is a need for visible religious and ethnic diversity within the global Muslim community that shatters stereotypes surrounding what it means to be and look like a female Muslim. The MFP marks the birth of a robust wave of female Muslim entrepreneurship where women on the grounds have started businesses offering consumer goods unique to various aspects of the Muslim lifestyle, from clothing to specialty cuisines, jewelry, skincare, services, and more. It is imperative that these women's efforts are not eclipsed by mainstream neoliberal market players seeking to claim their piece of the multibillion-dollar Muslim fashion market. Take, for example, the modest womenswear brand Veiled Collection which has nearly 200k followers on Instagram. Founded by young Syrian-American Muslim entrepreneur

Nora Chamaa, with a motto of "quality you can see and feel at prices you can't believe," the Veiled Collection quickly stood out among other modest brands for its clear dedication to high-quality modest styles that are affordable. A bird's-eye view of their Instagram page portrays a diverse array of modern modest formations, including plus-size models, hijab-donning women, and models with beautifully styled manes, turban-wearing women, loose silhouettes, and more fitted styles, Black women, brown women, multiracial women, all with one thing in common: a desire to mainstream various modes of modesty and reclaim female Muslim corporeality from neocolonial perceptions of Muslim subjectivities.

Infinite Abaya is another modest brand founded by Palestinian American Muslim entrepreneur Dr. Anwar Hijaz, who launched her brand by designing elegant and modern abayas[3] that are suitable for all body types and quickly began offering scarves, long-sleeve maxi dresses, kimonos, accessories, and more. Both Veiled Collection and Infinite Abaya have become among the go-to brands in the United States for the American Muslim community seeking modest attire. The "explosion of creativity" inspired by the constraints of Muslim modest requirements is now a global multibillion-dollar industry with many non-Muslim and even more Muslim brands claiming their stake in the game. Participants of the MFP, be it through consumers or producers of this niche market, are reclaiming and reorienting the terms of the veil through their own feminist renditions of veiling practices. The MFP sparked a cornucopia of entrepreneurial opportunities for not just western markets but many female Muslim entrepreneurs seeking to be top influencers within this movement in various capacities, which refutes the notion that women of the

Muslim faith are being exploited and dominated by market calculations since these women are at the forefront of this movement.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrated how modest fashion has diversified hijab practices throughout the United States and created an inclusive cultural shift toward Muslim women. The MFP, in particular, has altered the social institution of veiling within the United States and serves as a powerful disaggregation of the monolithic and Orientalist impressions imposed onto women of the Muslim faith by visually showcasing multiple ways of performing Muslim womanhood even when some representations, arguably, are antithetical to the textual basis for modest dress in Islam, which stipulates the female body to be entirely covered with the exception of the face and hands. In many ways, the MFP offers an epistemological corrective that challenges Orientalist and neocolonial depictions of Muslim womanhood as "oppressed and or mute victim" (Webb 2000) and instead depicts women as active agents of change through new corporeal visibility. Participants of the MFM reclaim the hijab through localized expressions of modesty that express a deeply individuated Muslim identity with a shared adherence to multiple manifestations of modesty, relocating Muslim corporeal expression from the margins of western culture into the mainstream. This chapter offered a detailed account of how the advent of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon burgeoned and opened up a myriad of opportunities for female Muslims. The following three chapters detail the robust wave of Female Muslim Entrepreneurship that flourished as a result of the momentum the Modest Fashion Phenomenon created.

CHAPTER 2: (PART I) FEMALE MUSLIM ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN THE U.S.: A POINT OF ENTRY FOR RELIGIOUS ENTREPRENEURS INTO THE AMERICAN MAINSTREAM

Since the advent of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon within the U.S., mainstream brands have attempted to cater to a Muslim community they know very little about. Yet, the MFP created many entrepreneurial opportunities for women of the Muslim faith who have started their own companies catering to various aspects of the Muslim lifestyle. Much of the media coverage regarding this topic is dominated by how big brands have entered the fold of the modest market, and little attention is given to Muslim owned business founders who have spearheaded this movement or to those who have just joined this new market and are contributing to this historical moment. To recognize how these women's entrepreneurial engagements have shifted Islam's cultural footprint in the United States, the goal of this chapter is to highlight various female Muslim entrepreneurs to establish an analytical framework to help better understand the intersections of entrepreneurship, religion, and gender in these women's lives and the ways it informs their faith and business practices.

The women featured in this chapter live and breathe the realities of being Muslim in America and are pioneers in paving the way for the Muslim lifestyle in the United States. They have succeeded in their own right and understand the social, cultural, and religious needs specific to the Muslim conscious consumer. It is imperative that the entrepreneurial efforts of these women are not eclipsed by mainstream market players seeking to capitalize on and monopolize Muslim spending power. Instead, it is important to recognize how neoliberal capitalism is an exploitative power at play. Even more

important is emphasizing how female Muslim entrepreneurs have strategically negotiated this exploitative space for their own gain. To recognize their contributions to Islamic Entrepreneurship (IE), I analyze women's entrepreneurial endeavors and illustrate the complexities of their lives, thereby contributing to the disaggregation of the monolithic and archetypal "Muslim woman" (Abu-Lughod 2006; Cooke 2008). Their personal narratives and lived experiences are worthy of critical scholarly attention.

Conventional discourses surrounding Islamic entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship more broadly reveal how these fields are unwittingly portrayed as a uniquely male enterprise within the Islamic context and reflective of an imagined archetypal "white male" (Ogbor 2000) entrepreneur within the western context, both non-inclusive of female entrepreneurial undertakings (Mehtap, Caputo, and Pellegrini 2017). To redress this imbalance, this chapter will solely focus on the roles of female entrepreneurs. It will highlight the gendered dimension of Islamic entrepreneurship in U.S. North America through a more contextualized lens focusing entirely on what I call "Female Muslim Entrepreneurship" (FME), which is gender based and geographically specific. I analyze the experiences of the female entrepreneurs in this study across three main typographies, which I classify as: "Social and Cultural Entrepreneurs," whose businesses are not profit driven and are rooted in a deep desire to create cultural change, "Strategic Entrepreneurs" whose enterprises demonstrate the complexities of the inner workings of Muslim owned businesses and the challenges they face as female entrepreneurs, and "Influencer Entrepreneurs" whose brands on social media demonstrate various aspects of Muslim womanhood and have gained mainstream popularity in doing so. This chapter will

specifically deal with Social and Cultural Entrepreneurs. By centering their experiences, a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the Modest fashion movement as well as Islamic entrepreneurship can be best understood. Exploring the successes, struggles, and negotiations of this diverse group of visionaries, designers, heritage keepers, influencers, and activists enriches the discourse on Muslim womanhood in the U.S. through craft, community, and collaboration.

Scholars of Islam have addressed the importance of "Islamic Capitalism,"[4] consumerism, and Islamic financing/commerce as a growing global phenomenon with barely any recognition given to the momentum it has gained within the United States. In addition, the academic landscape on this topic is negligible regarding women engaging in the American Muslim marketplace and shaping its outcome within Islamic entrepreneurial discourses. As such, I analyze how the fields of faith and fashion intersect on an entrepreneurial level by presenting 19 case studies of women analyzed over the next three chapters whose narratives foreground the ways by which Islamic values operate throughout their entrepreneurial enterprises.

Engaging the Field

This chapter and the following two chapters focus on interviews as well as participant observation and present a great example of ethnographic inquiry into the category of female Muslim entrepreneurship within a U.S. American context. As previously mentioned in the introduction, the field sites for this project are set across a

[4] In reference to Banu Gokariksel's (2010) notion of an "Islamic culture industry."

multi-sited ethnography, including participant observation, netnography, and in-depth interviews. I have been engaged with the Modest Fashion Phenomenon since 2009, when I started curating modest fashion styles on social media and a few years later began hosting trunk shows for women seeking modest apparel, which eventually became one of the largest modest fashion conventions in the U.S. (Kandil 2017). As the MFP picked up steam in the U.S., so did the PFH (Perfect for Her) Modest Fashion Conventions, which progressively became a global hub for female entrepreneurs. Clearly, a newly articulated and contextually different wave of female religious entrepreneurs was in full swing and deserving scholarly attention.

I conducted over 50 virtual interviews that took place between 2019-2021 with female Muslims, specifically across various spaces. The inclusion criteria for interviews were women who are actively participating in the modest fashion phenomenon in the capacity of a designer, influencer, social activist, scholar, or entrepreneur. This chapter focuses specifically on 7 of the 50 women I interviewed, many of whom I already knew from previously working with at various PFH Conventions, such as Fatmah Muhammad from Knafeh Queens and Lubna Saadeh from Rustik Homes, and others I have only interacted with via social media such hijab brand Headed Somewear.

It is important to note the class dynamics of the women under study. Most of the entrepreneurs featured in this project come from middle class families that rely on their spouses for financial security and stability, which has afforded them the ability to start businesses without the pressure of needing to support their families financially. Thus, their entrepreneurial endeavors in this particular context result from willpower and not a

necessity, and as such, they focus on the social impact their businesses bring to the Muslim community, all the while enjoying the fruits of their financial gains. Class dynamics are especially important in understanding how the entrepreneurs in this study are able to run unprofitable businesses in exchange for social and spiritual fulfillment.

Islamic Entrepreneurship (IE)

Young Muslim startups dominate the "Muslim market," which currently comprises a global Muslim population of 1.8 billion people. It is clear that brand name companies are waking up to the potential of their spending power and their business influence (Janmohamed 2016). However, the discourses surrounding western entrepreneurship have overlooked how religious practices inform these entrepreneurs and their business practices. This influence is evident in both the global Muslim community and amongst Muslims in America. Gümüsay (2015) broadly defined IE as encompassing three main elements: the pursuit of opportunities, the incorporation of ethics and values, and the "religio-spiritual" aspect, which centers the divine throughout all undertakings and seeks to perform and produce in a way that is pleasing to God. This differs from western or secular entrepreneurship, which gauges success through financial gains and acquisitions across business ventures in that Muslim entrepreneurs adhering to an Islamic entrepreneurial ethos are not only driven by the possibility of material gain but also the extent to which religious goals are achieved throughout the inner workings of the business. There is also a consideration for the level of reward and benefit such undertakings can provide for the entrepreneur's afterlife (Ramadani et al. 2017). When compared to western social and cultural entrepreneurship, such ventures are typically

devoid of religious intention driving a specific opportunity. While secular entrepreneurship may contain ethical practices as well, Islamic entrepreneurship is predicated upon a set of principles and ethics that are scripturally based. Many of the protocols informing Islamic entrepreneurial business practices, such as avoiding usury and gambling, are derived from the Holy Quran and the Hadith (narrations of the teachings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). In addition, IE enjoins a perspective that often privileges and prefers the interests of the community over the individual.

Islam And Neoliberal Capitalism

The advent of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon has positioned producers and consumers of this sector alongside the questionable imperatives of neoliberal capitalism (Gokariksel and Secor 2019). Noam Chomsky (1999, 7) characterizes neoliberalism as a class ideology that privileges the private interests of the elite to maximize their personal profits and take advantage of the poor. In his view, neoliberalism operates as the dominant economic and political system of our time that promotes "free market policies that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice, rewards personal responsibility and entrepreneurial initiatives" (ibid.). Neoliberal imperatives promote policies that serve the interest of the wealthy and capitalize off of lower-income and minority communities with minimal government interference or regulation. Such exploitive regimes have the ability to monopolize and dominate markets without much regulation. The MFP is a product of neoliberalism as it is of Islam, of which it is not immune, and hinges on the magnitude of Muslim spending power through corporate marketing of and catering to the

needs of female Muslims. As such, the MFP has inspired many women of the Muslim faith to enter the world of fashion and entrepreneurship in various capacities, two industries fueled by neoliberal stratagems. What was once considered a "paradox" (Gokariksel and Secor, 2014) or antithetical to Islamic principles for its hyper consumerist nature and display of women's bodies -- is not only becoming mainstreamed amongst the global Muslim community but also has popularized a profitable niche market within western liberal marketplaces as well. This research assumes a framework that distinguishes the contradictions between neoliberalism and Islamic Entrepreneurship but also recognizes the ways in which neoliberal imperatives are reliant upon other political projects and movements, such as the MFP. I argue that instead of rejecting the western neoliberal culture of capitalist consumption, these women insert themselves into entrepreneurial spaces as a practice of agency and as a strategy of empowerment to exercise their authority, identity, and Islamic values. Thus, the neoliberal marketplace offers a space to foster women's agency within social, cultural, and religious spheres. Similar to Lewis's (2015, 18) argument with regard to how women in the United Kingdom employ modest fashion and online commerce as an agential practice "in the making of new forms of Muslim habitus," so too are they through the fields of female Muslim entrepreneurship within U.S. North America and beyond.

Muslim business owners straddle their commitment to faith, community, and religious responsibility to uphold Islamic ethics and morality while simultaneously navigating the terrains of a western economy governed by competitiveness, interest-based transactions, and profit making, formulating a "highly contested Islamic neoliberal

capitalism" (Gokariksel and Secor 2014) or what Mona Atia (2012) calls "pious neoliberalism."[5] Atia posits "pious neoliberalism" as two concepts commonly understood to be working in contradistinction to each other, now as two coinciding forces within the lives of religious entrepreneurs. In this view, the merging of religion and neoliberalism offers a counterview to modernity which states that "the market economy, secularism, and democracy necessarily go hand in hand" while destabilizing the claim that conceives the rise in religiosity as an alternative to neoliberalism (ibid.). As such, the female entrepreneurs under study demonstrate their commitment to their Muslim values, all the while navigating the inequities of the neoliberal marketplace. Thinking about issues of ethics and overconsumption was on the mind of many of the women I interviewed. Take Sana Mahmood, for example, founder of Veiled Beaut, an affordable hijab company founded in 2015 when she was in college at George Mason University in Northern Virginia. As a consumer and producer within the Muslim entrepreneurial circles, some of her main ethical concerns involve "the never ending cycles of overconsumption and overspending." With incessant marketing campaigns like Black Friday deals etc., – "I think if you don't have $60 to spend on jewelry or clothing, then it is not okay to take out loans for instant gratification, which goes back to the Islamic perspective on finances. As a business owner, you should ensure that your customer is not going into debt buying a piece of jewelry from you." While many Muslim businesswomen navigate the complexities of this ethical and economic terrain, they also strategically participate in it

[5] Atia introduces the term "pious neoliberalism" to describe the merger between religion and economic rationale which encourages individuals to be entrepreneurial in the pursuit of enhancing their relationship with God. I employ the term in a similar fashion to demonstrate how women yield to entrepreneurship as an individual opportunity to enhance the cultural footprint of Islam in various shapes and forms.

in ways. I argue that while this process entails an accommodation of neoliberal capitalism, it also acts as an agent of expediency and empowerment for female Muslim entrepreneurs to enter a marketplace, thereby redefining/transforming the terms of Islamic Entrepreneurship and Muslim womanhood. The female entrepreneurs surveyed in this study promote Islamic ethics and an ethos of communal solidarity and support. In doing so, these women actively engage and co-create a transitional global Islamic marketplace that contributes to cultivating a "Muslim rebirth" in the United States.

Instead of viewing the MFP's enmeshment with neoliberal capitalism as problematic, I posit it as an advantageous means of access for female Muslim entrepreneurs into a marketplace that has historically neglected and ignored them. The culmination of these women's efforts challenges the dualist approach to Islamic entrepreneurship and neoliberal capitalism as two forces that are ethically antithetical to each other and instead mark a merger between them within the context of Female Muslim Entrepreneurship.

Female Muslim Entrepreneurship

This segment draws upon the ethnographic work I conducted to examine the importance of this newly emergent group to analyze how entrepreneurship functions in the lives of women of the Muslim faith through the categories of Social and Cultural entrepreneurs. I explore how these women seek to be players in and empowered within western markets while using an ethos of "Islamic neoliberal capitalism" as a way to define Muslim womanhood and defy beauty standards established by western metrics. A close look into the religious, economic, social, and cultural motives evident throughout

their work reveals an opposition to the "essentialized Muslimness" (Gokariksel and McLarney 2010) that dominates representations of Muslim subjectivities, thereby demonstrating how diversity within their experiences and daily negotiations as female religious entrepreneurs.

Social and Cultural Entrepreneurs

Social entrepreneurs are typically understood to be individuals, institutions, or organizations that start business ventures to solve problems afflicting minority or disadvantaged communities (Saebi, Foss, and Linder 2019). This section highlights the heterogeneity, dynamism, and challenges of social & cultural entrepreneurs within the Muslim entrepreneurial community through five main case studies that demonstrate a dedication to crafting their own narratives of empowerment through entrepreneurship as a "strategy of intervention"[6] across distinct fields such as modest fashion and fitness, professional sports, food, and social activism. These female entrepreneurs act as cultural change agents by disrupting stereotypes about women of the Muslim faith and are dedicated to shifting beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes toward Muslims. Fatmah Muhammad is a prime example of how she uses her business to not only dismantle negative stereotypes surrounding Islam but also to create cross-cultural understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims.

[6] I borrow this term from Kenneth McLaughlin's (2016) book "Empowerment: A Critique," where he analyzes how empowerment operates as a strategy of intervention within social work and political discourses. I use the phrase "strategy of intervention" in the context of female Muslim entrepreneurs enabling themselves, their narratives, and their religion through entrepreneurial enterprises that operate alongside exploitive neoliberal capitalist frameworks while also staying true to their Muslim values and identities.

Fatmah Muhammad of “Knafeh Queens”

Figure 2: Photo of Fatmah Muhammad of “Knafeh Queens” taken from her Instagram page on April 27th, 2022.

Palestinian Muslim American Co-founder of Knafeh Queens Fatmah Muhammad, is a great example of a social entrepreneur whose work reaches far beyond the Muslim community. In 2019 she launched a mother-daughter duo business making a traditional Middle Eastern sweet cheese pastry called *knafeh* based out of southern California. While their business is a profitable business, “getting mega rich is not the intention,” says Fatmah. The purpose is what drove her to start the company, and between former President Donald Trump’s Muslim ban in 2017 and following rampant anti-Muslim sentiments, her main goal behind starting Knafeh Queens was to take reclaim the American Muslim narrative from the forces that have misrepresented it for so long, “I did not want Trump to tell our narrative I wanted to do it through our knafeh.” That is why the company’s slogan is “serving royal unity in every bite,” enjoining the Islamic beliefs

of unity, kindness, and equality are at the helm of her business practices. She recounts how some of her customers have reported "falling in love with the Muslim religion through Knafeh."

What is particularly interesting about Knafeh Queens is their ability to constantly attract attention from mainstream media outlets for their unique efforts in combating racism and Islamophobia through knafeh, which caught the attention of many mainstream news outlets, including Forbes and the LA Times. In an article entitled *Supporting the #BlackLivesMatters Movement Through Knafeh,* Fatmah, who is a mother of four black children, explains how coming from a Palestinian background who has experienced oppression and racism firsthand allows her to understand the struggles of the Black community in unique ways, which is why giving back is a vital part of her business. Knafeh Queens has reportedly donated nearly $2,000 to the human rights education organization Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative as well as Sahabah Initiative's anti-racism efforts (Khan 2020). Their diverse clientele speaks to how far their reach is even beyond the Muslim community. While most of their clients are Muslim many are not, and range religiously as well as racially "our customers are Jews to Asians, White, Hispanic, you name it," explains Fatmah. Some of their non-Muslim customers have expressed positive feelings towards Muslims, "I fell in love with the Muslim religion through Knafeh Queens." Knafeh Queens serves high profile celebrities such as DJ Khaled, Justin Beiber, Dua Lipa, Anwar Hadid, R&B pop artist Massari, Linda Sarsour, and Netflix, to name a few. Yet, despite her success and notable clientele, her greatest challenges are from female Muslim customers who harp on her for the coveted recipe. Other knafeh

businesses have expressed intimidation by the competition as well. Fatmah explains how one customer claimed to have had food allergies and needed to know the ingredients only to use that information to start her own knafeh company shortly thereafter. This type of "betrayal" has been disheartening, but since profit is not what drives the business, Fatmah does not let it bring her down nor dilute her mission. Competition is a common theme that manifested across my fieldwork that presents itself as a consistent challenge for many of the entrepreneurs I interviewed and also spoke to neoliberal notions of competitive entrepreneurialism that are particularly evident within micro-niche sectors such as Middle Eastern Cuisine. Despite such setbacks, Knafeh Queens remains one of the most popular Muslim companies in the United States, using their product and platforms to create cross cultural and religious understanding amongst its diverse customer base within and beyond the Muslim community. While Knafeh Queens deals with culinary, Headed Somewear, as the name implies, is a hijab brand distinguished by its ethics, process, and mission.

Headed Somewear

Since the advent of the MFM, there have been dozens of hijab companies emerging, offering a variety of hijabs and, at times, duplicates of the same patterns, fabrics, and styles, which has provided a plethora of options for the modest Muslim shopper. In an oversaturated industry, it can be hard to stand out, but that has not been the case for hijab brand Headed Somewear, a sister duo of Pakistani descent based in New Jersey, which officially launched in 2018. With an intention to "empower women everywhere," the name was inspired to encourage people to see beyond just the scarf and

also consider the woman wearing it who may or may not don a hijab and may even be of another faith, “the woman can do anything she wants to if she sets her mind to it. And she can head anywhere, a scarf on her head, scarf around her neck, you know, no scarf at all, she could do what she wants.” Nonetheless, as inclusive as the company may be, its targeted market is heavily Muslim. Their collections include unique and custom hijab designs, such as an outline of various countries printed onto the scarf so as to represent the ethnicity of the wearer. As part of their social mission to give back, a portion of sales is always donated to nonprofit organizations like UNICEF’s education program for Nigeria.

At the core of this company is a dedication to female empowerment that is rooted in a belief that hijab practices operate as a means to protest western standards of beauty. “You don't need to see my hair or my physical beauty to see what I'm worth,” explains the co-founder, which is a central theme that translates all throughout their collections. During photoshoots, models are given full autonomy to style the scarf in a way that stays true to their own aesthetic. Headed Somewear is also one of the first hijab brands to include non-abled-bodied models in their campaign ads. Since representation and diversity are prioritized, they intentionally choose models based on personality and values instead of physical attributes, which is very atypical for a fashion brand, let alone a company trying to sell headscarves. One of their models has vitiligo, a skin disease that causes the loss of color, another is in a wheelchair, and there is a model with alopecia totalis, which is hairlessness of the face and scalp. Headed Somewear’s collections provide a powerful visual into the realities of these women’s lives in ways that challenge western beauty

norms and embrace the differences and disparities that women experience, and if that affects the success of their collections, it is a non-issue for the founders since they are committed to cultural change. When the founders first started their business, they were advised to use "light skinned, skinny models who are very beautiful," but that outlook never resonated with them as they believed the product should stand on its own and not have to rely on sexist mainstream tactics to sell their items.

When asked if the founders themselves feel represented within the MFP, they explained that they feel much more represented now than prior to the advent of the phenomenon, but overall, they believe it is embracing a "westernized version of modesty" where only a certain type of body type and style are highlighted, "I haven't really seen a dark Pakistani [woman]. . . it seems as though they want more lighter skinned skinnier bodied . . . I would love to see a curvy hijabi woman in an H&M ad." That is why, throughout Headed Somewear's business practices, a careful and intentional ethic is dedicated to cultural change that ultimately empowers women in ways that defy western ways of being by highlighting the diversity of Muslim womanhood.

A dedication to increasing representation throughout the MFP is a major theme throughout many female Muslim owned businesses, especially for those who do not see themselves reflected within the movement and, thus, become weary of stereotypical portrayals of Muslim womanhood. Such desires are rooted in a negative representation of hijab practices throughout popular western perceptions (Bullock 2002). Euro-American discursive depictions of veiled women are filled with historical and cultural misconceptions colored with an ethos of otherness, pity, fear, exoticism, and desires to

define veiled women's roles within society (Ahmed 1992; Kandiyoti 1991; Moghadam 1994). As a result, it is evident that many western modest fashion campaigns have compromised modest normative standards of Muslim dress for commercial purposes, making the capitalist drive for profit clear and creating skepticism amongst Muslim consumers, producers, and influencers within the modest fashion space. This speaks to a larger issue within the mainstream marketplace trying to tap into the Muslim modest fashion industry, a market segment they know very little about. Some brands have missed the mark regarding understanding what Muslim modesty means and the heterogenic ways it manifests across different communities. This form of exploitation or tokenization of female Muslim corporeality speaks to the neoliberal consumer capitalist project that tokenizes Muslim womanhood while neglecting the particularities of Muslim choices and lifestyles. As such, this group of religious entrepreneurs enters this consumer space to cultivate a more authentic representation of the Islamic lifestyle and Muslim needs.

How can one gauge the level of authentic intentions exhibited by mainstream brands catering to modesty throughout their collections? Is this "new" inclusion a sincere and organic attempt at diversity, or is it a tokenization of a trending industry embracing neoliberal logic to profit off of Muslim modesty under the guise of diversity? Clothing Retailer Banana Republic launched a collection of hijabs featuring a Black Muslim model dressed in short sleeves and a slit dress, which alters the prescriptive dress requirements of hijab but was in the name of "inclusivity" (Ifteqar 2019). Fashion retailer Pretty Little Thing's modest line called "EveryBodyinPLT," which dropped in October 2020, features flowy maxi dresses that are long sleeves but offer more revealing items with slits to the

knees, exposing body parts. The model chosen for the campaign advertisement is Black plus-size Muslim model Billy Marsal, but she is styled in short sleeves while wearing hijab, yet another example of a big fashion house missing the mark on Muslim modesty (Dokubo 2020). Since the clothing items are styled on a hijab donning model, they are perceived and marketed as modest. Do misrepresentations of Muslim modesty count as a step toward "inclusivity" for women of Muslim faith, or does it reify the inherent discord between the west and Islam? These questions illuminate the moral predicament Muslim community members ponder upon as modest fashion is heralded across billboards and campaign ads nationwide. It also serves as the fuel and force behind this wave of female Muslim entrepreneurs who ventured into the modest industry as a feminist intervention in hopes of taking matters of representation into their own hands (Rosenberg 2019). Interestingly enough, the majority of the women highlighted throughout this research do not have any formal training in business and instead have developed the proper skills through real-world experiences, which is a testament to the level of commitment and dedication that characterizes this group of entrepreneurs. This was especially the case for Lubna Saadeh, who founded one of the largest Muslim markets for female entrepreneurs in Southern California.

Lubna Saadeh of "Quad M"

Figure 3: Picture of Co-founders Lubna Saadeh (left) and Shazia Rahman (right) taken from the Quad M Shops Instagram page on March 20, 2022.

Palestinian American Muslim woman Lubna Saadeh is the co-founder of "Quad M," which stands for The Modern Market for Muslimah Makers based in Southern California. Their mission statement on their website makes it clear what this business is all about, "A women-led, women-run market where hearts connect, and dreams are nourished" (Quad M, 2023). With the growing number of Muslim creatives and small business owners, she co-founded Quad M with Shazia Rahman in 2017 to provide more opportunities for Muslim entrepreneurs. Serving the community is at the heart of what Quad M does; in that regard, their dedication to social entrepreneurship far outweighs profitability. Their annual events operate as an international marketplace with a comprehensive shopping experience full of female Muslim vendors, workshops, and children's activities. The event attracts hundreds of Muslim families, and for the past three years, the event has been free for attendees so as to make the market affordable and accessible to all, especially low income families, but it is not without a cost that they are able to do that.

The amount of hours and months it takes planning an event of that magnitude coupled with the out-of-pocket expenses does not lay the groundwork for a scalable business, and that is why each year they aspire to be "a little bit more smart," says Lubna. Due to COVID-19, they had to cancel their annual event in April of 2020 amidst widespread Coronavirus lockdowns, which left her devastated, but a year later, they hosted a truncated version of the marketplace that was in line with pandemic protocols and brought together over 30 female vendors. While this was the first year they began charging an entry fee of $5 to increase revenue, Quad M is still not considered a profitable business. However, being a profitable enterprise is not what drives this company, "if it was for money, I think we would've quit a long time ago," says Lubna. The co-founders also started another business shortly after launching Quad M called The Rustik Home, which offers Islamic pieces with modern and traditional twists with the vision of being "a Pottery Barn for Muslim homes" with a goal to scale to profitability.

Quad M is dedicated to empowering women of the Muslim faith in a way that makes them "financially independent," says Lubna. The co-founder earned her college degree but has intentionally avoided the corporate culture because being fully present in her children's upbringing is imperative to her vision of parenthood. However, Lubna recognizes the perils of counting on a partner for financial security, which characterizes the household composition for many of the women understudy. This is a conundrum that is not unique to women of the Muslim faith but is a serious challenge many of them contend with while simultaneously using it to their advantage. "I'm trying to teach my daughter that, yes, education is important, but you also need to think that God forbid you

are in a situation where you need to take care of yourself. You need to be financially responsible, you need to be financially aware of your surroundings and you need to have a standing," explains Lubna. Many women like Lubna have started businesses out of their homes where they are not the main breadwinners, nor are they responsible for their family's standard of living, and many have not had to manage the finances of the home for years. To that end, through social entrepreneurship, Quad M serves as a means to support financial independence and literacy amongst women seeking to start side businesses with the hope of attaining financial self-sufficiency.

Quad M was one of the first competitors to launch in the same space as the PFH Conventions, with nearly identical missions of female Muslim empowerment and in the same location of Southern California. Right before the official launch of Quad M in 2017, Lubna shared with me and a small group of friends about her forthcoming business venture at a private gathering. I initially felt strange since the concept was so close to what I did. Others had also casually mentioned that the concept of the Quad M Marketplace seemed conceptually close to that of the PFH Conventions, which left me a bit dismayed initially and speaks to how real the fear of competition is in an underserved niche market. I quickly reminded myself of the purpose and mission behind PFH Conventions, which is committed to serving, highlighting, and championing female Muslim entrepreneurs and mainstreaming the Muslim lifestyle. As religious entrepreneurs, Lubna and I both believe in the Islamic concept of *rizq* (sustenance or wealth), which at its core is a belief that all forms of sustenance are granted by Allah's will. Thus, no matter how looming the fear of competition becomes in the mind of the

business owner, the Muslim entrepreneur ideally exhibits a level of *tawakkul* (trust in God's will) throughout their business practices which diminishes such fears and is contrary to western entrepreneurship that teaches to eliminate competition (Gümüsay 2014). With that ethos in mind, my interview with Lubna, where she disclosed the inner workings of her business model and earnings to a potential competitor such as myself, became not only possible but was a pleasurable exchange.

Amber Fofana of "Veiled in Color"

Figure 4: Picture of Amber Fofana of "Veiled in Color" taken from Instagram on February 10, 2020.

In 2016 after attending the 4th annual PFH Modest Fashion Convention in California, African American Muslim woman Amber Fofana left feeling so inspired that she needed to start a business of her own. She began designing bridal veils and launched Veiled in Color, a Black Muslim bridal business, shortly thereafter. Her customers consist primarily of Muslim African American women who marry Muslim men and seek to honor the faith by covering their hair on their wedding day. Her bridal veils and hijabs have intricate crystal and jewel detailing. When COVID-19 hit and weddings came to a halt or were postponed indefinitely, she had to think out of the box on how to keep her

business alive. She began offering crystal bridal masks that matched the veils. While in-person weddings quickly switched to virtual experiences via Zoom, there was not necessarily a demand for the mask, but it demonstrated a new level of creativity in the bridal industry. While Veiled in Color is not a profitable business yet, that does not matter to Amber because it brings value to her life in other ways, "it's profitable in terms of an emotional currency; I am emotionally invested in my business so it's profitable in that way. It allows my creativity to flourish . . . I just want them to have a beautiful wedding experience."

For Amber, veils and, by extension, hijab symbolizes modesty and reverence, which hold a special place in her heart. Growing up, her mother and the women within the African American Muslim community set an example by wearing the hijab with such pride and were held to a much higher standard because of it. As the MFP picks up steam in the United States, she finds that it has not been racially diverse up until recently, "Black women, we usually tend to struggle a little bit more to get noticed. We struggle a little bit more to get our ideas out there. So many people actually depend on our ideas . . . I see fashions from when I was younger being propagated on social media by influencers who don't quite look like me." To that end, Veiled in Color is distinguished not only as an outlet that provides bridal veils for modest brides but also as an avenue for highlighting Black Muslim talent by bringing her work into the fold of the modest fashion world. African American contributions to the fashion industry have been immense but particularly in the modest fashion sector within the United States, which is rooted in a history of Black Muslim fashion dating back to the 1930s with the Nation of Islam and is

often neglected and overlooked throughout the MFP (Wheeler 2017). As such, highlighting the history of black Muslim contributions to this sector is important to Amber, "social media became mainstream media, especially during the coronavirus, so it shines a spotlight, and I sometimes see talents from African Americans that get overlooked, but no one talks about the appropriation of black talent." Thus, Veiled in Color not only fills a gap in the fashion industry by catering to modest bridal wear, but it also operates as an opportunity to re-direct Black Muslim designers to the center of the MFP.

Isra Chaker of "Isra Speaks"

Figure 5: Picture of Isra Chaker of "Isra Speaks" taken from her Instagram on November 9th, 2022.

As previously noted, the modest fashion scene on Instagram has created an entire subculture within itself for women to express themselves through various avenues, and of them are influencers sharing modest fashion inspiration as well as women highlighting various aspects of Muslim womanhood. Many of these influencers inspired Isra Chaker, Syrian American social activist, but fashion was not her space. Instead, she wanted to use

her platform to elevate her voice and the voices of vulnerable communities. One of her goals is to change the narrative surrounding what it means to be a woman and a Muslim in today's society. With over 235k followers on Instagram, her message deeply resonates with women from around the globe as she speaks about issues that relate to Muslims, U.S. political events, and global humanitarian crises. Many of her followers are Muslim, and her platform speaks specifically to overcome the social and cultural barriers that stifle women within this community by empowering them to use their voice and faith to make a difference:

> We live in these misconceptions and stereotypes where on one end we're deemed oppressed and we have no voice and we have no rights and freedom, and on the other end, even within our own community it's almost like women shouldn't be speaking out on all these issues and shouldn't be so visible or public so it was this challenge I held in constant tension, where you are having to deal with these notions. And even this cultural mindset that has been conditioned in you by society, just because of your faith. I felt like Muslim women needed a platform where they could recognize that.

Isra speaks to a very real contention that many female Muslims contend with in combating misconceptions held about women and women's comportment not only within Western discourses but equally, if not more, within the Muslim community as well. This dual dilemma positions female Muslims in a constant state of criticism, scrutiny, and restriction, inhibiting their ability to express their creativity comfortably. As such, empowering female Muslims to use their voices as a source of social impact and cultural change is at the helm of Isra's mission as an activist. While she has a strong Muslim following, her platform supports women of all faiths, including White Christian women seeking to understand their privilege and ways to become advocates for minority

communities. Being an advocate for positive change, Isra is extremely intentional about how she engages with her audience on Instagram. While she may have a large following and could be charging thousands of dollars per post in paid partnerships, which is the industry standard for someone with that large of a following, she intentionally limits her collaborations so as not to compromise the integrity of her platform by growing it inauthentically for the sake of playing the "Instagram game" to attain more followers or brand deals. Instead, she takes her position of influence very seriously and only posts when necessary, "I post when there is something meaningful for me to say, when there is space for me to say it when I'm not taking up space from other communities and other people who are impacted."

That is not to say that she has not collaborated successfully with brands. Since she's a savvy woman, she knows how to create opportunities for herself and monetize her platform without compromising her values. Occasionally she will work with companies that align with her social mission of giving back, such as her jewelry collection in collaboration with Nominal, a popular Muslim owned jewelry brand. Yet, the main way she has been able to monetize her platform is through paid speaking engagements. She has been invited to speak at multiple universities and organizations across the country who are able to compensate her for her time and expertise, but ultimately financial gain is not her motive.

Staying true to her commitment to social justice anchors Isra in a way that enables her not to be influenced by the whims of social media platforms. While it is evident that the platform has influenced many Muslim influencers on social media by way of dress,

speech, actions, or religious outlook, Isra believes she has not been impacted by it due to her deep sense of self, which is rooted in serving her Creator, “I'm here to serve Allah SWT first and foremost, I'm here to serve my family, who I value more than anything. I'm here to serve my community and the ideals and the values I hopefully aspire to be as the Prophet [Muhammad] peace and blessings be upon him.” Despite her popularity, she has been faced with negativity on her platform, especially in the wake of heightened levels of anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia fueled by the former Trump Administration, which has made her concerned for her safety. As someone who is committed to her faith, is visibly Muslim, politically outspoken, and gives speeches to crowds of over 40,000 people, she has experienced vile comments fueled by misinformation and hatred toward her faith. Over the past four years, people have confronted her both on social media and in real life with comments such as “she should be stoned to death,” and “send her back to where she belongs,” or “take that rag off her head!” These experiences led her to realize the extent of hatred toward Islam prevalent within the United States today, “people’s perception of my faith has been scary and seeing how people have been emboldened by Trump’s agenda, rhetoric, and violence scares me . . . being a visibly Muslim woman in society today is much more challenging than it was four or five years ago.” Nonetheless, Isra’s dedication to her faith is what anchors her reactions to such vitriol by centering her intentions to serve her creator and then her community through social and entrepreneurial efforts. Her commitment to her faith and community is what has enabled her to stand out as a social activist and create

real cultural change within discourses pertaining to women of the Muslim faith, Islam, and minority communities.

The next segment demonstrates a burgeoning category within the Modest Fashion Phenomenon dedicated to modest athletic wear, which has picked up steam not only in the apparel industry but as a culture in and of itself amongst female Muslims around the world but especially within the United States.

Modest Fitness Week

With the popularity of modest activewear from small and large corporations and the advent of Modest Fashion Weeks around the world, it was only a matter of time before a modest fitness week would enter the mix. British Muslim entrepreneur Abdiya Iman Meddings is one of the early pioneers in this space and is the co-founder of Modest Fitness Week, which is the first of its kind, "We're a community of Muslim women, a community of modest women, and we're creating a platform to advance others on their health journeys." (Lodi 2020). In December 2020, they organized a virtual interactive conference that uniquely merged the importance of faith and fitness across the global Muslim community. It featured U.S. based female Muslim personal trainers such as Kifah Muhammad of "Get Fit With Kifah" and Fatema of "FSKs Healthy Way," amongst many others offering virtual fitness sessions that registrants could tune into live.

As Modest Fashion Week joins the growing marketplace of Muslim fashion, it operates as a catalyst for cultural change within the global Muslim community by highlighting modest activewear brands, offering multiple virtual sessions with brand presentations, workshops, and panels with health experts discussing taboo topics within

the Muslim community such as pelvic and sexual health. This is an arena that has historically been overlooked within this community. As a result, participants are eager to get into shape and to be recognized as women seeking to be fit in a faith-conscious way. In the many past, women of the Muslim faith have struggled to find comfort in their fitness regimen due to uncomfortable workout environments or a lack of workout clothing that meets their modest needs, but that has definitely changed with modest activewear brands on the rise over the past few years such as Asiya Sport who offers various sports hijab alternatives to Nike's Pro Hijab and Veiled Garments who offers long and loose silhouettes for extra coverage while working out. Nike's release of the Pro Hijab made it seem as if they were the first to ever invent a "performance-oriented hijab," which was not the case as hijabi women have been competing in the Olympics since 2004 (Weiner 2017). While small Muslim businesses may not have the same reach as large mainstream fashion houses, there is certainly an effort within the community of wanting to support brands within the intra-Muslim community over others in order to see them succeed instead of allowing mainstream monopolization of the growing industry of modest fitness. As modest fitness is on the rise, so too are Muslim athletes making a name for themselves as they take center stage in their hijab.

Batouly Camara

Figure 6: Picture of Batouly Camara taken from her Instagram page on July 27, 2022.

First generation Guinean Batouly Camara is the first visibly Muslim woman in professional basketball. She participated in three Final Four appearances with the University of Connecticut and currently plays professional basketball as a hijab wearing woman in Spain. She began wearing hijab in 2020 and says initially it was difficult for her to deal with the extra stares and looks she would get, but as time progressed, she became more and more confident in her new identity as a "Muslim covered woman." Batouly went from blending in with her teammates to standing out in her hijab as one of the first female Muslim athletes to perform in hijab, "going into arenas, I'm the first, but leaving not feeling like I'm going to be the last." The basketball court became an opportunity to disrupt misconceptions about the hijab and her Muslim faith. As she pursued basketball professionally, she received a lot of pushback from booking agents who told her she could not play if she covered her hair. Even people who were near and dear to her discouraged her from wearing it, but despite that, she has found her true self

in her hijab, and the confidence she exudes has gained her a lot of respect from players on and off the court. The basketball court became an opportunity to disrupt misconceptions about the hijab and debunk the notion that faith hinders participation in sports. As she pursued basketball professionally, she received a lot of pushback from booking agents who told her she could not play if she covered her hair. Recently, Batouly was named in Forbes' 30 Under 30 sports list for her work with the non-profit organization she founded called (W.A.K.E) Women and Kids Empowerment in 2017, dedicated to empowering young Muslim girls both in the U.S. and in West Africa through education, sports, and social entrepreneurship (Connolly 2020). The intersections of Batouly's life through race, religion, and gender have afforded her both disadvantages and tremendous influence as a visibly Muslim professional basketball player, which has certainly placed much unwanted pressure upon her, but she uses her platform on the court and on social media to make a positive impact in the world rooted in her core values of Islamic faith, African heritage, and passion for empowerment.

With the advent of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon and now Modest Fitness Week, it is no surprise that female Muslim experts in the fields of professional sports, modest athletic apparel, and fitness are making a name for themselves as empowered entrepreneurs. With global fitness campaigns dominated by skin tight leggings and sports bras, veiled women continue to carve space for themselves within the neoliberal western marketplace in the capacity of athletes and fitness experts in ways that do not compromise their values, thereby altering the cultural landscape for female athletes both on and off the courts.

The cumulative efforts of the aforementioned entrepreneurs have created a social and cultural impact across their communities in ways that demystify Muslim stereotypes and disrupt discourses on women in Islam within the United States. Fatmah sells knafeh as a way to preserve her Palestinian heritage and as an opportunity to debunk myths held about Muslims simultaneously. The sister duo who founded the headscarf company "Headed Somewear" created their brand as a means to defy Eurocentric beauty standards and create a more inclusive representation of women. Lubna and Shazia created the Quad M marketplace to create more spaces for female Muslim entrepreneurs to thrive in a male-dominated environment. Amber sells bridal veils to highlight Black Muslim contribution within a white-dominated fashion industry. Isra uses her social media platform as a voice to empower other female Muslims and minority communities to hone their strengths, talents, and purpose in spite of the forces that have attempted to silence and control them. Batouly uses her position as a visibly Muslim professional athlete to empower young American and African girls through sports and educational initiatives. The next segment shows how female Muslim business owners yield to entrepreneurship as a form of empowerment, contributing to the shifting narrative on Muslim womanhood within the United States.

Female Muslim Entrepreneurship - As Strategy of Empowerment

This study provides empirical considerations of empowerment as a strategy of intervention for the various ways female Muslim entrepreneurs negotiate their experiences as religious entrepreneurs to enhance empowerment not only for themselves but for their communities as well. It is necessary to underscore and distinguish the type of

empowerment evoked implicitly and explicitly in this study as it deviates from western liberal frameworks. A review of feminist literature reveals the multitude of ways discourses of empowerment are used and understood throughout feminist and postfeminist discourses (Sharma 2006; McRobbie 2009; Windels, Champlin, Shelton, Sterbenk, and Poteet 2020. While it is difficult to pinpoint an all-encompassing definition of empowerment as it changes according to contexts, I yield to Sociologist Madine VanderPlaat's (1999) general description of empowerment as activities associated with "emancipatory interests" (p.774). The ways in which the term is used ultimately determine the context by which it functions. The women in this study project an empowered sense of self through Islamic entrepreneurship that pushes back against the strictures of social and gender inequities shaping Muslim womanhood in the west today through God-consciousness, self-representation, and community building despite the exploitive neoliberal system through which they operate and participate within.

Feminist debates surrounding corporate initiatives to further women's empowerment or women's social movements are often characterized as suspect of exploitation since such enterprises render women as the "perfect entrepreneurial, neo-liberal subjects on whose backs capitalist expansion is furthered (Tornhill 2019, p.4). However, participants of this wave of female Muslim businesswomen embrace a type of empowerment through religious entrepreneurial activity that frees them from the shackles of a history of misrepresentations and anti-Muslim violence, pressure to live up to western beauty metrics, occlusion from mainstream marketplaces, and even neglect within intra-Muslim entrepreneurial circles. While feminist objections to the notion of empowerment have led

to the rejection of the term due to the agent-subject power positionality, whereby the process of empowering entails power being granted by one with power to one without (Thomas and Velthouse 1990), Fatmah, Lubna, Isra, Batooly, and many other women, I interviewed embody a form of empowerment that intersects with neoliberal objectives such as commodification, self reliance, entrepreneurship, productivity, and financial independence in ways that are nonetheless emancipatory. Instead of being "victims"[7] of neoliberalism, they actively engage in forging a unique assemblage of empowerment and entrepreneurship through God consciousness. Similar to the postfeminist concept of "commodity feminism," which is a form of brand advertisements that promote specific elements of feminist ideals, and thus, become signs for certain causes and standards; in other words, "putting feminism up for direct purchase" (Windels, Champlin, Shelton, Sterbenk, and Poteet 2019, p. 20), so too are the entrepreneurs in this study promoting similar messaging but their intentions that are religiously motivated.[8] Trend analysts credit the Modest Fashion Phenomenon for introducing a new wave of feminism called "pluri-empowerment" (Ainle and Scott, 2017). Iza Dezon, a trend forecaster at the consultancy Peclers Paris, says, "an empowered woman is no longer subject to a specific definition, nor must she live by a specific set of values. We are seeing the opening up of what empowerment means, allowing women to create their own definitions" (ibid.). While commodification and neoliberal ideologies have their consequences, such as

[7] In her article, "A Way to Paradise": Pious Neoliberalism, Islam, and Faith-Based Development, Mona Atia explains how faith-based development organizations in Egypt cultivate a unique merging of Islamic God-consciousness and neoliberal development as a solution to social problems. She describes participants within these organizations not as "victims" of neoliberalism but as active participants of this melding, thereby forging the "script" of the concept she calls "Pious Neoliberalism." (p. 812)
[8] As quoted by Goldman, Heath, and Smith: 1991.

tokenization and exploitation of the entrepreneurial subject, they also have their advantages. In the case of the female Muslim entrepreneurs in this study specifically, practices of consumption, production, and its enmeshment with neoliberal capitalism, coated in an overall Islamic ethos and intentionality, have become transformed from a means of disempowerment and exploitation to a space by which religious entrepreneurs achieve empowerment through serving their Lord, themselves, and their communities. Thus, it neutralizes the authority of neoliberalism's entanglement within female Muslim entrepreneurship, rendering it less threatening and advantageous.

Conclusion

The Social and Cultural Entrepreneurs demonstrate how religious goals for many female entrepreneurs are shaped by an outcome that benefits themselves and the community in order to create new cultural understandings of Islam. The entrepreneurial endeavors exhibited by the women in this study demonstrate the shifting boundaries between Islamic values and neoliberal capitalism and the ways by which the two systems operate in tandem with each other to forge a fresh conceptualization of female Muslim entrepreneurship. Based on the interviews with producers of this niche market Muslim lifestyle from faith, fashion, and food, this new wave of religious entrepreneurs has transformed neoliberal capitalism while maintaining desires to adhere to an ethical Islamic ethos.

The distinct missions embedded within their entrepreneurial enterprises have produced experiences of empowerment that merge religion and economy in unique ways.

Entrepreneurship serves as a means by which female Muslim entrepreneurs achieve various modes of empowerment through the production, commodification, consumption, and construction of the Muslim lifestyle. In conjunction with neoliberal imperatives, Islamic entrepreneurship has had a constructive effect on the operations of the religious entrepreneurs understudy. Starting businesses to create connectivity and support within and outside of their Muslim communities, defying normative metrics of beauty, championing financial independence and entrepreneurship, elevating Black Muslim businesses, and mainstreaming modest athleticism and apparel have all garnered significant social and cultural capital in ways that far outweigh material or financial gain. Instead, such efforts have contributed to normalizing the participation and inclusion of female Muslims across various cultural categories that have excluded, ignored, or delegitimized them. Each of these women deploys their businesses and empowered positionalities in distinctly unique ways but converge on their mission to enhance and expand upon Islam's cultural understanding through female Muslim entrepreneurial enterprises. The next two chapters expand upon this wave of entrepreneurship, specifically highlighting what I classify as "Strategic Entrepreneurs" in chapter three and "Influencer Entrepreneurs" in chapter four.

CHAPTER 3: (PART II) STRATEGIC ENTREPRENEURS

This chapter is the second segment in the continuation of the ethnographic data from the 50 interviews I conducted between 2019-2021 for this project, alongside events I attended for the purpose of participant observation in 2017. It provides insight into the complexities of a group of savvy businesswomen who either have formal training in business development or are self-taught entrepreneurs who have learned on the job. The chapter also contributes to an understanding of the relationship between religion, gender, race, and entrepreneurship. It further demonstrates how Female Muslim Entrepreneurship has contributed to the changing narratives on Muslim womanhood and Islam within the United States. The goal of the strategic entrepreneurs in this chapter is to run profitable businesses while also demystifying Islam in various ways throughout their entrepreneurial pursuits. Many of them have confronted multiple layers of prejudice projected onto them and their businesses. They challenge commonly held stereotypes about women of the Muslim faith from both Muslims and non-Muslims, such as the devaluation of their skills and an underestimation of their business acumen (Haddad, Smith, and Moore 2006). Through analyzing the gendered micro politics of their experiences as female entrepreneurs and examining the methods utilized to run successful companies, new considerations of this group of women are brought to light. This chapter especially emphasizes how their enterprises contribute to the prominence of female Muslims as entrepreneurs in the United States. I now turn to the first case of Strategic Entrepreneurs of a baby brand named “Jasmine and Marigold,” founded by Sidra Trajcevska.

Sidra Trajcevska of "Jasmine and Marigold"

Figure 7: Picture of Sidra Trajcevska of "Jasmine and Marigold" taken from her Instagram page "What Sidra Loves" on October 29th, 2020.

Pakistani American Muslim Sidra Trajcevska describes herself on Instagram as a "girl mom, entrepreneur, always learning" and is the founder of Jasmine and Marigold. This modern baby brand celebrates the richness of Muslim culture. With a background in business development, she started her brand in 2016 out of a need to fill a void for American Muslim families since there were no ways to sartorially celebrate Muslim heritage for kids in the United States. Just as there is plenty of festive baby holiday gear, such as "My first valentine's day" and "My First Christmas" onesies, readily available throughout the mainstream marketplace, she reimagined that concept. She created pieces geared toward Muslim milestones and holidays. She was the first to officially launch "My first Eid" outfits across the U.S. Muslim market. Her collections embody a range of cultural and Eastern nods, from garments with the evil eye to Arabic letters that

symbolize the importance of the Quran, to clothing with phrases such as "Salam world, I'm new here" for the Muslim newborn baby. Like Christmas pajamas, she created Eid pajama sets, her most popular items. While Sidra wanted to highlight Muslim culture within the U.S. western mainstream marketplace, her focus was equally on creating a successful, profitable business.

With a tagline on her site that reads "baby gifts celebrating the richness of Eastern culture," I inquired about why she chose to describe her brand as Eastern and not "Muslim" or "South Asian." The initial tagline previously stated "Muslim culture," but she recently changed it as a marketing strategy to appeal to a "wider net" of customers in hopes that it would get her line into mainstream stores such as Target, "I don't know if I could be selling myself short, but my Muslim identity is first and foremost." Strategically, Sidra employs difference as a marketing "logic of profitability" (Gökariksel and McLarney, 2010), which enhances the value of her products. However, by using the word "Eastern," she also gives new meaning to the supposed opposition between the proverbial East/West dichotomy that posits the west as superior and the Eastern as "Other" (Said, 1978). Instead of the categories of East and west standing in contradistinction to one another, Sidra posits Eastern as an important entity *within* the west. In other words, Sidra unwittingly employs the discursive construction of *difference* as an effective marketing tool fostering a space of belonging for products that reflect Eastern and Islamic heritage for the Muslim consumer within the non-Muslim western mainstream marketplace.

Having a business degree and spent ten years climbing the corporate ladder, Sidra could apply that insight to her own business. She believes the Muslim community is becoming "as savvy a consumer as the mainstream consumer." She is generally "high end," where they are willing to spend $38 for a set of bamboo pajamas because they prefer quality. As a Muslim entrepreneur who does not wear hijab but has a strong desire to pass on Muslim heritage, modesty is an intentional aspect of her collections, even offering modest options for younger kids. Her dresses for girls hang below the knee so as not to reveal their undergarments and establish a modest compass from a young age. Staying true and respectful to the body is an important aspect of her beliefs, and the MFP has affirmed her commitment to a modest lifestyle which is evident across her business practices.

As an American Muslim company, Jasmine and Marigold have been thriving within the intra-Muslim milieu, but it is not without challenges that its success has been possible.

Competitors within the community have produced similar items that are less expensive, but Sidra is unconcerned since "they are neither profitable nor scalable," in her opinion. Competition amongst the intra-Muslim entrepreneurial circles is prevalent, yet Sidra views herself as the "status quo" who is always "five steps ahead of the game," which is her main competitive advantage. While Sidra is no longer concerned with competitors, at one point in time, it was of her main apprehensions when she first started her business. Back in 2016, when she applied to participate in the PFH Convention as a vendor, her participation was contingent upon being the only brand in the baby clothing

business throughout the bazaar to eliminate potential competition. I encouraged her not to let her competitors be her main focus nor hinder potential opportunities for her brand. We discussed this exchange during our interview in 2020 when understanding her experience with competitors creating knockoffs of some of her products. She remembered our exchange and said it was then that her perspective shifted toward competitors, "at the end of the day, these are other Muslim women that are trying to have a business. If they copy me, that's on them; I know that it's my job to constantly evolve and constantly change so that they are five steps behind because I'm always going to be five steps ahead." With high impact marketing strategies, effective selling skills, top-notch products, a strong commitment to customer service, and a dedication to sustainability, Jasmine and Marigold clearly stands out from other Muslim businesses, which is not easy in a niche market with high competition. While she is confident in her business practices and processes, it is clear that many female Muslim business owners are not.

In Sidra's efforts to debunk the notion that female Muslim entrepreneurs are not profitable nor demonstrate individual economic success, she started a new initiative on social media dedicated to educating other Muslim business owners on topics such as branding, pricing, and manufacturing, "Muslim women don't really have that kind of training, and it's hard because they really need it. It's really me wanting to help my sisters because a lot of them are competing against each other when they really shouldn't." By willfully sharing her effective business practices, she not only strengthens her position as a leading Muslim business in children's apparel but also provides an opportunity for like-minded female entrepreneurs to improve their business performance

by fortifying companies catering to the Muslim lifestyle, thereby strengthening this growing sector as a whole. The efforts of Sidra and other female business owners have inspired many women of the Muslim faith to not only start their own businesses but to explore new opportunities within sectors rarely ever tapped into by female Muslim entrepreneurs.

Dania Amaira of "Before and After"

Figure 8: Picture of Dania Amaira of "Before and After" taken from her Instagram on October 5, 2020.

Syrian American Muslim Dania Amaira is a registered Dietitian by trade but has always had a passion for organizing spaces. Once she saw members of her own community start Instagram accounts monetizing their passions, such as Fatmah Muhammad from Knafeh Queens and her sister Kifah Muhammad with "Get Fit with Kifah," she was inspired to launch her own organizational business called "Before and After" in 2018, where she serves as a "decluttering pro" and "efficient system creator" as described on her official Instagram account. Initially, she was afraid people would not

pay for such a service, but she quickly found her clientele amongst affluent communities in Chicago, where she is based, and in her home state of California. Running a profitable business is at the core of her business practices, and the more popular she has become, the more some have dubbed her as the "Muslim Marie Kondo."[9] Dania is a pioneer woman in organizational expertise across the Muslim community within the United States.

Organizational work is very labor intensive, and since she knows her worth and is very confident when it comes to discussing financials, she has no shame in standing firm on her prices, which has been a struggle for many female Muslim business owners when dealing with fellow community members trying to negotiate costs. Her services have become so in demand that she is now able to charge up to $70 an hour. Since it is an exclusive service, Dania only takes on clients who recognize the value her service brings to their homes. While COVID-19 has negatively affected many businesses, it has increased the demand for organizational services since the stay-at-home orders designed to stunt the virus spread sparked a trend of home organizations encouraging people to declutter their living spaces. As a result, Dania received a substantial number of clients and began offering virtual services for non-local clients interested in her expertise, thereby expanding her market reach beyond just Chicago and California and now to all parts of the country, including non-Muslim communities.

[9] Marie Kondo is the leading organizing expert of Japanese descent. She is a tidying consultant and de-cluttering expert. She has authored numerous books on organization and had a television show on Netflix entitled "Tidying Up with Marie Condo" released in 2019. https://konmari.com/about-marie-kondo/

When Dania first launched her business, Muslims were her targeted customers, but recently, she has tapped into non-Muslim clientele across the southwest suburbs of Chicago. In her view, she is "making a good name for Muslim women" since she is hijabi[10]and many of her non-Muslim clients have expressed how happy it makes them have found someone they can fully trust to be in their homes. This is during the aftermath of heightened levels of Islamophobia resulting from the Trump administration, where it became commonplace to view women in hijab with skepticism and hostility (Jamal 2017). However, it was also a time that marked a shift in representation and visibility toward veiled women as the Modest Fashion Phenomenon began to cement its way across the U.S. American mainstream. In Dania's case, her Muslim identity has worked to her advantage within the intra-Muslim and non-Muslim communities, making her a leading force in the home organization industry. While it may have been convenient for Dania to cater to a vast clientele base beyond just the Muslim community, that has not always been the case for other Muslim entrepreneurs struggling to straddle their Muslim and western identities throughout their business practices.

[10] "hijabi" is a common word for a woman who dons the hijab.

Noor Molvi of "Noornoir"

Figure 9: Picture of Noor Molvi of "NOORNOIR" taken from her Instagram on February 1, 2021.

American Muslim of Pakistani descent, Noor Molvi founded NOORNOIR, a semi-fine jewelry company established in 2018. Noor initially started off in modest apparel and fashion design right when the MFM picked up steam in 2015. Her collections featured tops with high necklines and dresses with floor hems. Her goal was to appeal to both the Muslim and non-Muslim markets, but she quickly realized that she could not cater to both the Muslim and non-Muslim consumers. The type of modest coverage her garments offered was precisely what was missing from the mainstream market, but as she approached local boutiques with her collection, buyers were not interested in carrying her items since their targeted customers would likely not feel comfortable with a higher neckline or a maxi dress without a slit. She decided to focus her efforts on the Muslim consumer, but that too became difficult as her clients were unwilling to shop above a certain price point and did not understand how producing garments locally in Los Angeles would need to be accounted for in her overall pricing structure. This was a time

when fast fashion mega apparel retailers such as Zara and H&M also began catering to the Muslim market, and since Noor could not compete with those prices, she decided to pivot her entire business strategy. This is an example of how western retailers jumping on the modest fashion bandwagon have impacted small Muslim business owners like Noor and others by undercutting costs, making it impossible for smaller businesses to compete with mainstream prices. As such, it was important to Noor to be in a business that would appeal to a broader range of consumers beyond the Muslim community, and jewelry provided her with that opportunity, "I like to think there is not a huge difference between what is stylish for a Muslim woman and what's stylish for a non-Muslim customer." Yet maintaining her Muslim values and keeping them deeply embedded within her business ethics and practices is fundamental to her.

Noor's commitment to her ethics is manifested in multiple ways, but specifically in the way she advertises her jewelry, "If you look at jewelry advertisements, there's always a lot of skin, a lot of cleavages, and it does help sell the jewelry. . . I am very careful not to advertise that way." While modesty remains an important element of her marketing strategy, the religious orientation of the founder and the business is intentionally kept ambiguous to achieve optimum market reach for her brand. However, according to Noor's experience, the name NOORNOIR projects as racially and religiously ambiguous, and as a result, the company name is often coded as ethnic and, by extension, "other" by non-Muslim customers. This has affected how potential clients perceive the brand, interfering with Noor's goal of appealing to a broader clientele. When Noor presents her collection to white owned boutiques in Orange County, a region dominated by white

republicans and notoriously riddled with racism, they immediately recognize that she is not white and try to ascribe miscategorized cultural significance onto her pieces, “they are looking at my brown face, and they start asking questions like ‘what is the meaning behind this? Does this rhinestone bracelet have a cultural significance?’ and it’s so frustrating for me because I’m like, this is just a rhinestone.” This type of subtle and often unintentional discrimination or “unconscious bias” is rooted in the “racialization of Islam” which is part of the post-9/11 backlash where people perceived to be of Arab, Middle Eastern, or South Asian descent are viewed through a lens of “nonwhite Otherness” (Jamal and Naber 2008) and has had adverse effects on Noor’s business as she targets non-Muslim customers. Consequently, such perceptions of her business have seeped into her online social media marketing strategies making it nearly impossible to market beyond her own community.

Instagram’s platform is coded by algorithms that ultimately determine who is able to view published content since the algorithm circulates content to communities that are already following you or have shown interest in your brand. Since NOORNOIR has a strong Muslim following, it has been increasingly difficult for the brand to market itself beyond the Muslim community regarding paid advertising. While 60% of NOORNOIR’s clientele are Muslim, 40% are not, and being that it is imperative for Noor to retain her diverse customer base, she is constantly finding ways to fight the algorithm for the business to grow, “time and time again I’ve had to work so hard against the algorithm to make sure that not just Muslims are looking at my account . . . it’s an uphill battle all the time.” Outside of the Muslim community, there is a push to buy from minority businesses

or businesses led by women of color. Ironically, Noor says she experiences the advantages of what she characterizes as "passing privilege" where her cultural or religious affiliations are unclear across the non-Muslim community, and as a result, she is often not coded as Muslim within non-Muslim circles, and as such, finds herself in a position where she actively has to reveal her identity to help conscious consumers understand who and where their money is supporting. Within the intra-Muslim community, there is a push to buy from Muslim businesses. Since she does not embody any overt material markers revealing her religious orientation, such as the hijab, she has to make an extra effort to inform consumers of her Muslim identity, which feels unnatural to her. She ultimately speaks to the identity politics that women of the Muslim faith, especially unveiled women, negotiate on a daily basis, even within their own communities. It also speaks to the struggles of seeking acceptance within non-Muslim and Muslim networks.

Noor's experience as a Muslim small business owner reflects the ways in which Muslim identity is racialized both within and outside of the Muslim community. In this particular instance, race, religion, and gender interlock in very distinct ways shaping not only the realities of women's everyday lives but their entrepreneurial endeavors as well in the fight for inclusion, distinction, and integration within the U.S. American mainstream milieu. NOORNOIR's quest for acceptance within Muslim and non-Muslim communities' sheds light on an ongoing battle of belonging for non-veiled women and reveals the broader challenges of racial, cultural, and religious discrimination many

"ethnic minority entrepreneurs"[11] who straddle the insider and outsider experience within and beyond their own communities (Sithas and Surangi 2021, 195). In theory, as members of the Muslim community, non-veiled women are insiders but experience the consequences of being outsiders since "the Muslim woman image" is expressed through hijab which functions as a monolithic signifier of Muslim womanhood (Cooke 2001, 131). As non-white women, they are viewed as outsiders to a predominantly white mainstream market. These polarized positions place unveiled female Muslim entrepreneurs in a constant state of negotiation as a result of the dualities of their subjecthood as savvy female American Muslim business owners, where on the one hand, they seek recognition within the western marketplace as well as respect and inclusion within Muslim entrepreneurial circles without being dominated by the former or exploited and overlooked by the latter.

[11] "Ethnic minority entrepreneurship" refers to a field of research that examines how minority communities are a growing and significant sector of economic entrepreneurial engagement within developed and developing countries.

Sara Sheikh of “Covered Bliss”

Figure 10: Picture of Sara Sheikh of “Covered Bliss” taken from her Instagram on February 14, 2022.

Sara Sheikh is an American Muslim entrepreneur of Ethiopian descent who has a technical background in engineering and cyber security. She had no intention of ever starting a modest fashion brand, but the demand from her friends and community members led her to start Covered Bliss in 2013. This was a time when modest options were not readily available in the marketplace. She hosted an open house at her home to test the market, and the turnout yielded great success, which led her to launch an e-commerce site and take the business to the next level. Sara began offering kaftans and abayas, cloak-like garments with flowy silhouettes, which were very popular styles at the time. In their first year alone, the brand generated well over 100k in sales. As the brand grew, it released new styles every two to three months and expanded its collections to include maxi dresses, tops, and hijabs. Covered Bliss has participated in many national Muslim conventions such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), Perfect for Her (PFH), and iHeart Halal. One of their greatest opportunities was showcasing at Paris Fashion Week in 2019, where they

debuted modest bridal gowns, formalwear, and casual wear. Sara believes that as much as modest fashion has become mainstream worldwide, the industry is still lacking in providing a diverse array of modest styles that cater to a western aesthetic for Muslims living in the United States. That gap is especially true with regard to formal wear.

While Covered Bliss has had some success, their greatest challenge has been not receiving enough support from within the Muslim community and combating competitors that knock off their designs, "I sometimes consider shutting down Covered Bliss, to be honest with you. Because, at times, it gets pretty hard. You invest so much, and you're not getting the return . . . and then a lot of the companies, they bring a lot of cheaper stuff that is similar to yours, and you're trying to promote higher quality products, and sometimes it's hard to compete." One of her most popular kaftan designs, called "Athena," has been knocked off by other Muslim owned brands who have either unlawfully taken pictures directly from her site and used them for their own site or manufactured something identical to it, "consumers don't know the difference they think it's the same product then they order it and get disappointed." Sara has hired an attorney to trademark some of her designs, but once one company is taken to task for being counterfeit, another one pops up, and Sara simply cannot keep up with it.

Another issue within the intra-Muslim community is the extreme levels of haggling. This was a main concern across many of the entrepreneurs I interviewed, particularly Sara. She has experienced this repeatedly as a vendor at local and national Muslim conventions, "it's ridiculous the amount they want you to discount." She has had customers from affluent backgrounds haggle her for $5, "It's a cultural thing, but it's a

bad habit!" Aside from the financial aspect of it, there is an ethical component to it as well that does not sit well with many business owners. The idea is that one customer purchased the dress for a certain amount, and then another customer who insists on receiving a discount buys the same dress for less, "It's not even fair," says Sara. While haggling is an accepted cultural norm throughout many parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, it does not translate well within the U.S. Marketplace, where the cultural custom is predicated on fixed-price merchandise. Haggling may have once been accepted across the American Muslim marketplace, but there is a serious shift occurring throughout this new tide of female entrepreneurs that rejects old patterns of doing business such as bargaining, below-cost pricing, and female rivalry -- based on the belief that there is only "one seat at the table" -- to an ethos of support, collaboration, and an overall diminished fear of competition or threats to personal advancement rooted in an ethic that believes is the Islamic concept of *rizq*, the belief that sustenance and success are in God's hands only and not anyone else. These shifting behaviors have manifested in a trending campaign across social media called "collaborate not compete," where many Muslim brands have participated, sharing useful resources and engaging in mentorship and advocacy.

Iadayat Sambo of “Cover Me Cutee”

Figure 11: Picture of Idayat Sambo of “Cover Me Cutee” taken from her Instagram page on November 2, 2022.

American Muslim entrepreneur and Nurse of Nigerian descent Idayat Sambo launched her modest fashion brand called Cover Me Cutee in 2015 out of a need to cater to curvaceous women seeking to dress modestly, a niche highly unaccounted for across the modest fashion sector. As a Nigerian immigrant, she takes great pride in her African roots and wants to bring her talent as a fashion designer to the Muslim community in Cleveland, Ohio, where she resides. At the core of Cover Me Cute is an intention that goes against societal expectations of western beauty and instead celebrates the diversity of women. “We were not all built to be skinny,” explains Idayat, who has tapped into a dually disadvantaged and underserved community that has been neglected within the modest fashion industry: Black and plus size women. She expressed to me during our interview that “as women we are underrepresented everywhere, not only in America but in the whole world, and as a Muslim and as a Black Muslim, it’s even worse”. As such, Idayat has a competitive advantage over other designers by catering to the needs of curvaceous women of color. She describes her targeted audience as follows:

> She’s an African American. A big boned, like, a structured African woman. She has a big behind. She is more on the modest side. She’s between the ages of 28-50. She is conscious of being cute, but at the same time she wants to serve Allah. She really likes Target or Macy's, she follows Mufti Menk’s page and Halima (Aden)’s page. She hangs out on Pinterest, she loves to go to the masjid. She loves to communicate with a lot of Muslims. And she's kind of shy, because we are a little bit bigger than people think, on average.

This group of women constitutes a significant part of the modest Muslim community but is rarely ever recognized within the mainstream and modest markets. The majority of Idayat’s customers and followers on social media are Black Muslim women and converts who are new to Islam and are fully dedicated to embracing modesty in all its forms. Her collections consist of modest dresses, tops with various affirmations on them, such as “I’m allowed to take up space,” and color block hijabs inspired by the vibrant colors of Africa. One of the main aspects that distinguish Cover Me Cutee is its size chart. They offer sizes XS up to 5XL, with the average customer being a size 2XL. Not only are modest plus size styles rare to find throughout the MFM, but Black and plus size women are almost invisible due to the fact that much of the modest media coverage elevates white passing and slim figured models who meet Eurocentric metrics of beauty despite the fact that Black women are considered “the backbone of modest fashion” and are pioneers of this style (restlessmagazine 2020). The modest fashion industry has a global appeal but much of the media produced by brands privileges light-skinned women who have taken precedence over Black women. The racial blind spot of the MFP remains a main concern expressed by many of the women I interviewed, but the strategic efforts of Idayat and other entrepreneurs contribute to a growing shift toward diversity that reflects a more inclusive portrayal of the contributions and importance of female Black Muslims.

As western labels continue to tap into the ever-growing modest fashion sector, it is often packaged in a way that privileges western standards of beauty and neglects the empirical realities of actual female Muslims. This is a legitimate challenge that the MFP is not immune to. Even when U.S. retailer Banana Republic began selling hijabs in 2019 and chose Black Muslim model Fatuma Isack Yusuf for their campaign ad, it stirred much controversy because they featured her in a short sleeve shirt and a skirt with a side slit, which does not meet the Islamic guidelines of the hijab (Ifteqar 2019). This is why Idayat, and by extension, many female Muslim entrepreneurs, hope that independent Muslim brands will not be eclipsed by mainstream companies, especially since Muslim business owners have a better grasp of the culture of Islam and can better serve Muslim consumers. However, some major retail stores have found clever ways to collaborate with local Muslim companies.

Mainstreaming Muslims

Muslim designers want to mainstream modesty and Muslim lifestyle through their entrepreneurial enterprises, but the project of mainstreaming also occurs through major retailers catering to the Muslim consumer, especially western brands that have entered this market by partnering with Muslim modest designers. In 2018 department store chain Macy's began carrying Verona Collection, a modest apparel brand co-founded by Muslim entrepreneurs Lisa Vogl and Alaa Ammuss which featured ready-to-wear pieces such as maxi dresses, tops, cardigans, and hijabs (Wang 2018). ASOS, a British online fashion retailer, also partnered with Verona Collection called "The Modest Edit," which features a curated collection of modest options (Waqar and Alawa 2019). The following

year Macy's began carrying Muslim designer Deanna Khalil's brand called Abaya Addict, one of the leading Muslim owned modest fashion brands in the U.S., another triumph for the female entrepreneurial community. I attended the "Macy's x Abbaya Addict" launch party at Macy's in Westminster, California, in April 2019. Macy's celebrated the debut of the line by hosting a red carpet event once the collection dropped with the chance to meet the designer. It was momentous for Muslim communities across the country because it is uncommon to see modest fashion or collections created by Muslim designers debuting on the racks of national department stores. Seeing clothing designed by Muslims catering to female Muslims who have strict religious dress codes, especially within a marketplace that has historically ignored them and their specific sartorial needs, was a watershed moment for multiple reasons. What became clear very quickly was that it was not simply about the fashions; it was about what it represented, which was a semblance of acceptance of the Muslim lifestyle and, by extension, Islam across marketplaces that shape our social systems. It was about recognizing women in the various ways they choose to express and identify themselves by. It was about claiming their own narrative and demonstrating how one does not have to compromise one's values to fit a mold or an imagined norm. Designer Deanna Khalil ended her thank you speech with hopes "that we all go mainstream," to which she expressed her optimism for other Muslim designers to join her in the push toward a more inclusive marketplace that considers the needs of women who adhere to an Islamic dress code. It was not just about celebrating Deanna on her collection; it was a celebration for the community honoring this moment and what it would mean in the story of their history.

The Abaya Addict Launch event led to an encore of Ramadan celebration events that took place throughout various Macy's department stores in California, Chicago, and Michigan just a few weeks later. This event was hosted by Macy's in conjunction with local Muslim companies attuned to the etiquette of Muslim celebrations. I attended one in Southern California at Macy's in Victoria Gardens Mall in May 2019. It was an elaborate event hosted in the heart of the Macy's store. There was food, vendors, favors, a DJ, and an entire program of speakers as well as a fashion show that consisted of Muslim modest brands as well as non-Muslim brands already sold at Macy's. Aside from the overall positive and celebratory tenor of the Ramadan celebration, it was clear that Macy's needed to make sales at the end of this event. This was made clear to me at the Abaya Addict Launch event as well when I asked the store manager how long will Macy's be carrying the collection, for she replied, "so long as it's selling." Given the currently projected market worth of the modest fashion industry valued at $277 billion, it is no surprise that a mainstream brand such as Macy's is tapping into this consumer segment (Benissan 2021). However, Macy's is distinguished from other mainstream brands that have joined the modest fashion bandwagon in that they included modest collections by independent Muslim designers such as Verona Collection, Abaya Addict, Vela Scarves, and Modern Eid, instead of designing their own collection and entering the race themselves. In doing so, they are giving opportunities for local Muslim designers to be distinguished amongst corporate tycoons such as Nike, DKNY, American Eagle, and many others. These types of partnerships yield more acceptance and less skepticism within the Muslim community as major fashion houses highlight female Muslim talent

and elevate Muslim brands. Knowing that big retailers are consulting and engaging with Muslim businesses makes western mainstream fashion brands' attempt at modest fashion more impactful as it yields results that consider and reflect the real needs of actual Muslims while supporting their entrepreneurial enterprises. While there are clear capitalistic gains to be made from the commodification of modesty, as discussed in the previous chapter, Muslim entrepreneurs have benefitted from major brands that influence the mainstream marketplace. They do so by amplifying their entrepreneurial efforts, thereby rendering Muslim modesty and Islam more familiar to the general public.

According to a Pew Research Center survey, the more familiar people are with a religion, the more comfortable or "warm" they feel toward members of that faith (Mitchell 2017). The same survey revealed that more than half of Americans are unfamiliar with Islam and do not know a Muslim. While views toward Muslims continue to be polarized, Female Muslim entrepreneurship and the growing outcome of collaborations and partnerships with mainstream brands have afforded women of Muslim faith impactful opportunities to penetrate the American mainstream in unprecedented ways. Highlighting Muslim modesty, holidays, and enterprises has catapulted Islam into mainstream American culture in a positive light away from its historically negative associations by offering a counternarrative that demonstrates the particularities of Islamic lived religion in the United States. It also disrupts the dominance of the "American Protestant Mainstream" or the authority of "Anglo-American" (Laurence 1987) culture by carving space reflective of Muslims and their experiences. This renders Islam a

continued “American phenomenon” (Yvonne and Addair 1987, 3) and not in contradistinction to its social, political, and cultural composition.

Conclusion

This chapter continued the exploration of a robust wave of female Muslim entrepreneurs with a focus on the category of “Strategic Entrepreneurs.” It examined how religion and entrepreneurship inform the inner workings of these women’s enterprises and shape the challenges, triumphs, intentions, exploitations, and negotiations throughout their experiences as religious entrepreneurs. Strategic Entrepreneurs are savvy and smart women who possess the ability to create profitable businesses that generate lucrative outcomes for themselves and, oftentimes, for the greater good of the Muslim community as well. They debunk the notion of female Muslims as “domesticated and subordinated” (Sakai and Fauzia 2016) and, thus, are incapable of running successful, profit-driven companies. Instead, their entrepreneurial enterprises reflect an opportunity seeking ethos that enables their businesses to stand out and succeed, all the while managing the intersections of race, religion, and ethnicity that inevitably shape their experiences as Muslim entrepreneurs in America. For example, Sidra views herself as untouchable amongst her Muslim children’s apparel industry competitors. Her strategic business practices have positioned Jasmine and Marigold as exemplary businesses while teaching other female entrepreneurs how to scale their companies to the next level. Dania displays her Muslim identity as a viable element of her business by way of standing out within the Muslim community as one of the leading women in the organizational space that is gaining newfound interest and success while achieving clout amongst non-Muslim clients

for her creativity and trustworthy character. Whereas Noor keeps her religious and ethnic identity ambiguous to appeal to a broader audience, which has proven to be a difficult task in the quest for acceptance and belonging within and outside her communities. Idayat caters to curvaceous and modest-seeking plus size women of color, a micro niche sector that is virtually untapped and ignored throughout the MFP, thereby showcasing the talent and contributions of Black female entrepreneurs within the industry.

The efforts of this group of entrepreneurs have contributed to a more accurate portrayal of the MFM and broadened the understanding of Muslim entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship more generally, away from a white/male/non-female ethos and instead focusing on the contributions, developments, challenges, privileges, and penalties of female Muslim enterprises. The cumulative entrepreneurial contributions of these women have not only shaped the cultural discourse on Muslim womanhood but have encouraged the mainstreaming of the Muslim lifestyle in the United States.

CHAPTER 4: (PART III) INFLUENCER ENTREPRENEURS

This chapter is the third and last segment in the saga of female Muslim entrepreneurship collated from the ethnographic data conducted between 2019-2021, in addition to the netnography I completed during that period as well. I classify the women in this chapter as "Influencer Entrepreneurs," a new generation of female influencers who utilize their social media platforms to highlight various aspects of the Muslim lifestyle while also being able to generate revenue from their content, collaborations, and influencer marketing. They have been occluded from the discourses surrounding Islamic Entrepreneurship and have created a niche subdivision within the world of social media influencers that have become popular over the past decade within the global Muslim community and beyond. To understand how these women have creatively shaped discourses on Muslim womanhood through Islamic entrepreneurial behaviors across social media enterprises, I offer, in what follows, a detailed and unprecedented understanding of the innerworkings of the brands they have built and their religious beliefs and practices. I end the chapter with an analysis of contemporary trends in veiling practices and a de-veiling phenomenon and the over implications they have had on the MFP.

Defining "Influencer"

Let us begin by first establishing a proper definition of what is meant by the term "influencer." An influencer is a form of self-branding by "ordinary people" used to describe someone employing social media platforms, an inherently consumer-centric space, to gain a level of authority or "micro-celebrity" in a particular niche which

generates engagement with various audiences or followers across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and most recently Tik Tok (Khamis, Ang, and Welling 2017, 194). Self-branding on such platforms enables the influencer to become a viable candidate for advertisers interested in tapping into the influencer's audience and reach. What enters this group of female Muslim influencers, or "Islamic influencers" as some have coined them (Al-Nasr 2022), into the fold of Islamic Entrepreneurship is their ability to monetize their platforms by portraying various aspects of the Muslim lifestyle. Some influencers have grown significant followers, enabling them to start independent brands. The MFP propelled the female Muslim influencer scene, which has grown significantly on Instagram and gained popularity since 2015. Many of the women I interviewed for this project view themselves as exerting influence in various capacities across the spaces of hijab practices, modest fashion, female empowerment, and everything in between. Their profiles include a range of content from fashion, beauty, lifestyle, travel, wellness, food, and philanthropy. The influencer entrepreneurs I interviewed have a significant following across their social media platforms, and their follower count ranges anywhere between 25k for some and up to 300k followers for others, with a cumulative reach of over one million followers.

I should note a sensitivity around being associated with the term "influencer" as it often conjures images of frivolous social media personalities who succumb to the whims of likes, comments, or paid partnerships, but this group of women distinguishes themselves from the generic understanding of influencers through their commitment to faith first and foremost, and then their own ideals of modesty, which are deeply

embedded throughout the content they produce. I explore the mechanisms of the Muslim influencer marketing industry and analyze how their faith informs their own versions of self-branding while examining the challenges this group of women experience from the pressures of being a female Muslim influencer

Ascia Sahar of "I am Ascia"

Figure 12: Picture of Ascia Sahar of "I am Ascia" taken from her Instagram on November 23, 2022.

Ascia Sahar is a Muslim American woman of Afghan and Palestinian descent who is an Instagram influencer and content creator behind the Instagram account "I am Ascia," which has a reach of over 122k followers. She describes her faith as the "foundation" for her platform and is the guiding force not only in her personal life but throughout her social media outlets. Her vision for her platform is rooted in intention and purpose while simultaneously creating a profitable and monetizable brand. The content she shares is an amalgam of modest fashion, family, and lifestyle inspiration, words of wisdom, collaborations with other influencers, and paid partnerships with various brands.

Ascia has a loyal Muslim following but also attracts many Christians and other women of faith interested in her lifestyle, rendering modest fashion and social media related content not solely a Muslim phenomenon but instead, as Lewis (2015) describes it, "a zone of women-led fashion mediation fostering dialogue within and across faiths and between religious and secular practitioners." While Ascia does not wear a hijab, it is clear that modesty guides her dress code and overall aesthetic, which in her view, is a type of dress that does not sexualize the body and allows her to be able to perform her five daily prayers. Despite her vision of modest attire, she has received comments in the past from Muslim followers about her clothing not being modest enough, which continues to be an ongoing debate that strikes many cords within the community. Social media has opened up a window of endless possibilities when it comes to hijab and modest fashion inspiration, which has led to a cornucopia of creativity within Muslim fashion. It has also led some influencers to portray versions of hijab practices that have pushed the limits of the overall modest tenure of the MFP, such as three quarter length sleeves, v-neck tops, mid-calf length skirts, etc. which is what some influencers have dubbed as the "sexualization of hijab." Though Ascia does not wear a hijab, she has always been public about her intentions to wear it in the near future. However, ensuring that she does not portray herself or her body in a sexualized way is equally as important to her. One of the blind spots that the MFM does not account for are women like Ascia, who are Muslim but do not wear hijab and embody various levels of modesty, which are the majority of female Muslims in the United States (Khalid 2011). Ascia disrupts the notion that only women who don a hijab desire to be modest and are conscious of bodily

comportment, and thus, should be equally accounted for within the modest fashion movement.

For Ascia, hijab feels like "second skin," and to turn her hopes into a reality, she started to practice wearing hijab on Fridays to ease herself into the lifestyle transition it will naturally have once she is fully committed to it. She is not concerned with losing opportunities if and when she decides to officially wear the hijab because she believes the MFP, in tandem with the Black Lives Matter movement, has led to a new wave of increased representation for women of color and minority women like herself. In the wake of George Floyd's death in May 2020, many brands and corporations were taken to task for lack of diversity within their companies and campaign ads and, as such, have released initiatives dedicated to diversity (Stevens 2020) "I think that brands are awakening to the fact that we have to have all colors of the rainbow and I think the Black Lives Matter movement just kind of really shook a lot of campaigns and a lot of influencer marketing . . . it goes hand in hand with the whole modest movement and modest clothing with the collections that came out for Ramadan . . . that for sure has propelled all of this." As such, Ascia has no shortage of collaborations and partnerships coming her way. Brands compensate her anywhere between $1,500 and as much as 5k, which was her most lucrative deal to date. The platform has grown to the point where she is now managed by a top-rated influencer agency that handles all the inner workings of her partnerships with western brands and can negotiate higher rates on her behalf.

For someone whose main goal is "making sure Allah is always on the forefront" in a world where many are intrigued by social media influencers, Ascia recognizes the perils

of gaining popularity on such platforms, “with social media if you’re not careful your ego gets entangled; you get affected by the likes and unlikes the unfollowers and the followers.” That is why she intentionally tries to create healthy boundaries between her platform and personal life. If a deal or partnership that is not in line with her Muslim values comes her way, she will happily cancel or decline it, no matter what the cost.

Muslim influencers often follow different sets of protocols when working with Muslim and non-Muslim brands. Naturally, marketing budgets differ drastically between major conglomerates and small Muslim businesses. When it comes to Muslim brands working with Muslim influencers, brands have the propensity to undervalue the influencer’s compensation with an expectation that they will accept since they are both insiders within the same community (El-Yacoubi 2020). In such instances, Ascia negotiates the terms herself and usually prefers to do affiliate deals where she receives a commission on sales and access to discount codes for her followers. Since supporting the community is important to her, she may occasionally highlight a brand without compensation if she is passionate about the product. As a female Muslim Influencer, Ascia runs a “value oriented” (Davis 2013) Instagram brand, distinguishing her from other non-Muslim and non-religious influencers and demonstrating the complex role religion plays throughout the influencer entrepreneurial process. In the same vein, influencer Sarah Qsaibat recognizes the immense responsibility that comes with her platform but even more so as a visibly Muslim woman.

Sarah Qsaibat of “Hijabi off the Grid”

Figure 13: Picture of Sarah Qsaibat of “Hijabi off the Grid” taken from her Instagram on April 11th, 2022.

Muslim American influencer of Libyan descent Sarah Qsaibat started her Instagram page “Hijabi off the grid” to encourage women to be able to wear hijab and not feel “stuck” or restricted by their hijab. Initially, her parents did not approve of pursuing a career as an influencer, but once they saw the extent to which she could monetize it, they recognized the potential and viability of the platform. With an educational background in economics and marketing, Sarah grew her Instagram page to reach over 100k followers, where she can charge non-Muslim owned brands up to 5k for one post on Instagram. Since she is able to generate sales for other brands, she wants to push that traffic toward creating her own clothing line in the near future.

What drives her platform, in addition to doing paid partnerships with Muslim and non-Muslim brands, is a careful consideration of the Islamic concept of *Amana*, which

translates to an ethic that is dedicated to upholding a sense of trust and integrity throughout her content and partnerships:

> I'm a modest fashion influencer; I exist to influence the Muslim community. I exist to encourage hijab, I have just put my purpose in three fundamentals in our religion and there is so much *amana* (responsibility) that comes with our faith. I need to make sure that this purpose that I have created my whole work around still has *baraka* (blessings) because if I am not actually influencing the Muslim community in a good way there goes that *baraka*, if I am not doing hijab in a correct way there goes that *baraka*.

Her desire to maintain *amana,* to uphold Islamic values and promote hijab uniquely enable her to utilize her social media platform as a proselytizing tool to encourage her vision of a Muslim lifestyle. This speaks to the relationship between religion and the capacity of the internet to shape contemporary religious practices or "networked religion," as some scholars have called it (Campbell 2011, 65). The notion of networked religion offers insight into an understanding of religion that is informed by the interplay between "the sacred and the mundane online" (ibid.). It helps articulate the connection between online and offline realities and the ways by which they inform behaviors, beliefs, and practices. For Sarah, at the core of all her partnerships is a need to retain the *baraka* or blessings of her platform by remaining true to her Islamic values, which entails a level of self-checking that is constantly considering how modest her styles are and how ethical the collaborations she engages with are. Yet she is constantly bogged down by the "burden" of responsibility placed upon Muslim influencers that are typically rooted in an expectation of restriction and prohibition, which reflects a level of internalized misogyny, envy, and lack of representation in Sarah's view.

> In our communities we don't like to see women with so much representation and power in an industry like beauty because it goes into religion, and hijab is literally supposed to protect and cover beauty. The fact that we're making it something where we're selling that beauty now gets systemically very tricky...overall women don't want you to succeed in this industry maybe because of that envy. I think the third thing is in the benefit of the follower, which is they don't feel really represented. Subhanallah, you're a Muslim influencer isn't your whole identity that you're supposed to represent us, an underrepresented community? And when I watch you, I don't even feel like you're Muslim you don't talk about Islamic things. The only time I even remember that you're Muslim, besides, covering your head is when Ramadan comes around, you talk about how you're hungry, you want to break your fast. But like besides that, there, you're really not a Muslim representation. You're just like a fashion representation now. And I think the follower feels betrayed by that as well. It's like, hey, you were supposed to represent me. Now you have, you're just like, creating a whole new identity to Westerners, and what they should think of Muslim Hijabis. And I don't even feel like you appeal to me anymore.

Sarah does not just share such sentiments but, by extension, many female Muslim influencers on social media who feel stifled by this level of expectation and moral responsibility placed upon them. Non-influencer veiled women already experience scrutiny from the general public, but veiled influencers experience an even higher level, especially, if not more, from the intra-Muslim community. Since female Muslim influencers promote themselves on a public platform, they are held to a standard that members within the Muslim community do not hold themselves to but feel the need to be critical and protective over portrayals of hijab, which ultimately leaves no room for the diverse and complex histories embedded within veiling practices. This immense level of scrutiny reflects how wide-ranging and dynamic Islamic beliefs and practices are amongst Muslims but also alludes to the broader consequences of "embodied

intersectionality," which not only accounts for how a subject's belonging to various categories such as religion, race, and gender are mediated through the body, but the "external, material situatedness" (Mirza 2013, 7) such as "the social, political, and economic structures which produce inequality are reconfigured and imagined through the corporeal representation of the Muslim woman's body (as oppressed or dangerous) and lends itself to othering and marginalization (Bibi 2022, 711). The embodied experiences of being a veiled female Muslim influencer are straddled between stereotypical and static conceptions of Muslim womanhood held by Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Social media is both a viable and precarious platform to challenge preconceived notions of female corporeality. Clinging to the Islamic concepts of *amana* and *baraka* are the means by which Sarah mediates and negotiates the double burden of being a visibly Muslim woman and an influencer.

Hakeemah Cummings of "HakeemahCMB"

Figure 14: Picture of Hakeemah Cummings of "HakeemahCMB" taken from her Instagram on May 10th, 2022.

Hakeemah is a Black Muslim American woman who is a popular modest fashion stylist and micro-influencer [12]on Instagram with over 20k followers. Her journey with modest fashion started back in 2011 when she created a Facebook page selling hijabs and continued to grow her brand into a styling business where she is dedicated to normalizing modesty by creating a community of women who value hijab and taking on collaborations with brands that showcase her lifestyle interests. She says, "at this point in our movement as Muslim women are becoming more present in media, we have really established the fact that our hijab is not oppressive, or that we have a voice that's stronger than just what we wear, etc." This marks a point of departure from the constant attempts to "prove" that women of Muslim faith are more than just what they wear and focuses the conversation on everyday aspects and interests reflective of these women's lives. As such, Hakeemah's Instagram page encompasses posts and partnerships across multiple categories beyond just fashion, such as jewelry, skincare, educational resources, Arabic and Islamic learning, and nonprofit organizations work to demonstrate how "well rounded" women of Muslim faith really are.

What distinguishes Hakeemah is her unrelenting commitment to her Muslim values. Religion remains her top priority, which is evident throughout her platform. By scrolling through her posts, one can recognize the level of consistency demonstrated throughout her attire, almost always wearing loose fitted clothing paired with a hijab that covers all of her hair. Remaining true to her vision on social media requires a process of

[12] According to Forbes.com micro influencers typically have smaller scale followings between 10k-100k followers.

incessant self-evaluation where she is constantly checking in with herself and has asked close friends to hold her accountable to ensure that her hijab and wardrobe have not been altered to fit what is trending on Instagram. Hakeemah recognizes that her approach to running her platform may stifle growth rates, but compromising her values is not a risk she is willing to take.

> On the internet there's so many things that can lead you off of the path of Islam. Even in modest fashion. I mean, we talked about women who are kind of altering their hijab or doing things with the hijab that are not necessarily right (e.g. wearing hijab with short sleeves) I feel like there has to be space for someone who's saying that although there's a trend of doing this or that Islam says that's not a trend for us Muslims. So we don't have to do things just because it's popular.

While Hakeemah believes in a clear "right and wrong way" of wearing hijab, she does not view it as her place to call out other women and subject them to further criticism especially in an environment where veiled women already receive an extra layer of scrutiny from the general public and within their own communities. Instead, she leads by example and uses her platform to demonstrate a version of the hijab she believes to be proper. In an era where it is evident that Muslim influencers are removing the hijab at rapid rates, Hakeemah stands out as one of the few modest fashion influencers who has not noticeably altered her embodiment of modesty since she first started her platform on Instagram many years ago. However, her ideas of modesty have transformed with time, knowingly or unknowingly. When she first started posting photos of herself on social media, she used not to show her face to remain anonymous, which was rooted in her trepidation between displaying herself and maintaining modest comportment. She would often ask questions like, "can you be modest and be on the internet? Can you show who

you are, your personality, how you dress, and everything but still have this shyness, modesty kind of thing?" Hakeemah's current content consists of photos and videos of her full self in various contexts ranging from promotional, personal, spiritual, educational, and entertainment, all the while remaining within the bounds of her evolving vision of modesty. This shift in the public display of modesty not only speaks to how diverse and non-static notions of modesty are but also to how the internet can influence religious practices online. Studying religion within online contexts provides insight into trends that shape religious practices and beliefs outside of traditional structures, also known as "lived religion" (Campbell 2011, 66). With the prevalence of modest fashion and Instagram influencers, hijab practices have undergone a "reconstruction process" where the connotation of hijab takes on new meanings, such as shifting from a symbol of religious ritual to a fashion statement and style (Karakavak and Özbölük 2021). Studies have shown (Pemberton and Takhar 2021) that the prevalence of hijabi bloggers and social media have affected the attitudes of young Muslim millennials, demonstrating how impactful the interplay between online influence and offline consequences is. As such, Hakeemah is very mindful of her presence online and constantly engages in self-reflection so as not to get "sucked in" to the whims of the platform, which has the potential to alter her value system and impact the actions of her followers.

While Hakeemah has certainly made a name for herself in the modest fashion scene both on social media and across events such as Fashion Weeks, she is unsure as to the extent to which modesty is truly becoming mainstream in the United States. While multiple fashion houses have begun catering to this sector, she does not trust the

exploitative tendencies of big brands stepping into a sector that Muslims have historically dominated and trying to take opportunities from the Muslim community and potentially tokenize them. The MFP may have helped highlight an important aspect of the Muslim lifestyle, but, in her opinion, Muslims continue to be associated with violence and terrorism. Thus, real inclusion has yet to be achieved, especially toward black Muslim women, which speaks to the racial biases evident within the MFP. The privileging of an ethos inclined toward models and influencers that are "white or fair-skin, angular features, or slim figures" demonstrates the politics of representation even within a movement dedicated to increasing representation (Pemberton and Takhar 2021). However, since the industry is now awakening to the racial disparities amongst its campaigns and collaborations, especially in light of George Floyd's death in connection to the Black Lives Matter movement, Hakeemah has received more opportunities in 2021 than ever before. She charges up to $200 for paid partnerships, but her biggest struggle has been convincing Muslim brands to pay for the content she creates. This goes back to the community undervaluing and undercutting the work of Muslim influencers, which is rooted in a deep lack of understanding of the mechanisms of influencer work and content creation and goes against the Islamic entrepreneurial ethos of contributing to the success of the individual and the greater community (Davis 2013, 67).

Ultimately, Hakeemah's strong sense of self, coupled with the high quality of her content, enables her to only take on partnerships and brand deals where the terms strategically and ethically align with her intentions but enable her to be a leading force within the online Muslim influencer scene dedicated to maintaining her Islamic values

while enhancing representation for women of the Muslim faith. While many of the aforementioned examples of female Muslim influencers come from backgrounds and cultures from within Muslim majority societies, others like Daria Alasmar, who is of Russian decent, unexpectedly found her way to not only Islam but the adaptation of hijab as well.

Daria Alasmar of "Veil with Me"

Figure 15: Picture of Daria Alasmar taken at the 6th Annual PFH Modest Fashion Convention in Irvine California on August 5th, 2018.

Daria Alasmar is a Russian American Muslim influencer in the modest fashion scene, an arena she ironically never thought she would be a part of, given her upbringing. She grew up in Russia, where her understanding of femininity meant the freedom and ability to express oneself in any way one pleased. As a former Christian, she had certain theological disputes with parts of the Christian doctrine, which left her unsettled and piqued her curiosity to study other religions and delve into their scriptural texts to find a

truth that resonated with her. From reading the Quran, she found a clear conviction within Islam and, as a result, converted/reverted. Prior to converting to Islam, a normal wardrobe for her used to be cropped tops, short shorts, shirts, and dresses. She embodied an aesthetic that was, in her words, "sexually oriented that would accentuate parts of my body." Upon moving to the U.S. in 2014 at 22 years old, she met her husband and converted to Islam shortly thereafter. She had no intention of ever wearing a hijab. In fact, Daria almost had an aversion to it as she was afraid it would kill her creativity and sense of self, "if I cover myself it is the end of my life, end of my self-expression, and it's the end of my fashion," which she admits was rooted in a common Western misperception of women who wore hijab. Coincidentally, she is now one of the most up-and-coming Muslim influencers in the modest fashion scene.[13]

As Daria continued to learn more about Islam, she realized the importance of the practice of hijab and naturally became drawn to it. Paradoxically, during Ramadan, she began practicing wearing the hijab but still desired to wear bikinis at the beach. Once she officially wore hijab full time, she instantly felt inclined to share her conversion to Islam and her hijab story. A quick Google search about other women with similar interests led her to discover the world of modest fashion.

Daria began attending the Annual PFH conventions in Irvine as a model during the fashion shows year after year. She would also model for various brands such as Kamal Beverly Hills. In 2016 she created her brand "Veil with Me," where she used her

[13] Since my interview with Daria in 2021, her views toward wearing hijab have shifted and she has since removed the hijab in 2022, which is part of a larger trend amongst the global Muslim community where women have been removing their headscarves at rapid rates for various reasons. I discuss this further in chapter four.

Instagram platform to promote hijab and hijab fashion but would post sporadically throughout the years as she struggled internally with her decision to wear hijab. After a few years of soul searching and understanding more about herself as a woman who dons the hijab, she officially launched her blog in June of 2020 and began fully investing in her content on Instagram as a modest fashion influencer and lifestyle blogger, or in her words "a tastemaker in the modest fashion niche." With high quality photoshoots and avant-garde hijab style, she quickly gained a loyal following with an audience of over 5k. Daria was able to monetize her platform, where she became a brand ambassador for hijab company Veiled Beaut and was the runner-up at the national Miss Muslimah Pageant hosted in Michigan in 2020. This is just the beginning for Daria, as she has high hopes of making her mark in the modest fashion industry.

The Power of The Platform

As hijab practices continue to vary around the globe and within the United States in particular, it is useful to analyze its development over social media, which is a powerful medium that has enabled hijab and modest fashion to thrive and rise in popularity on a macro level. Social media is an effective medium to gauge the state of hijab practices and trace its growth and development as it functions as an influential instrument depicting the social realities of many hijab-wearing women who have promoted and supported hijab fashion for decades. One thing that was very evident across most of the influencers and entrepreneurs I interviewed was their awareness of the ability of social media platforms to alter their value systems. This has become particularly evident with regard to many Muslim influencers or "hijabi bloggers"(Cochrane 2015) who paved the way with modest

fashion inspiration across social media outlets such as Instagram and YouTube by building popular platforms pioneering hijab fashion but removed the hijab years later after having cultivated a loyal following. Among them is Dina Torkia, known as Dina Tokio on social media, who was one of the forerunners of hijab fashion in the UK when she started her blog in 2011. She has been featured and studied across many scholarly and non-academic studies for being one of the first women to build a brand off of posting content demonstrating stylish hijab outfits. Over the past few years, it became clear that Torkia's views toward hijab had shifted. This was evident from how she began showing parts of her hair to then becoming a "part-time hijabi" where she wore hijab some days and not others. To many, this was a very unusual and nonstandard way of wearing hijab which caused a firestorm across the online Muslim community to which she received an onslaught of insults. She took to her Instagram story with her thoughts on the matter, "this 'hijabi' community is starting to become a very toxic cult.. the obsession and entitlement are appalling.. I'm out" (The National 2018). Dina Torkia wasn't the only one; other popular Muslim influencers such as Daisy Khan, Ascia Al Faraj, Hanan Tehaili, and Nuha El-Quesny, amongst many others, have removed it as well. It was as if there was a domino effect of high-profile Muslim influencers removing their hijab. With the growing popularity of modest fashion influencers has come an "epidemic of hijab-removal" (Kalima Institute 2020). Bangladeshi American influencer Ruma Styles also removed her hijab around that same time after wearing it for 15 years. She shared with me during our interview that while she received some support, the backlash was much heavier. People accused her of being two-faced and characterized her as having left the

religion as a whole, which drove her to a state of depression. As Ruma tried to figure out her identity, it quickly became clear that she no longer felt a part of Muslim modest fashion circles and began feeling intimidated by hijabi women.

The concern for many was what would be the ramifications of removing the hijab publicly and to what extent it would encourage other women on the verge of removing it to follow suit. As one commentator on Twitter by the name of Ainee said, "imaan (faith) is a fragile thing. PLEASE don't let her (Dina Tokio's) actions impact your own. You are your own person. Every person wearing the hijab has a unique struggle" (The National 2018). This "struggle" is a uniquely legitimate experience for many, if not most, women who wear hijabs. Just as Torkia's attitudes toward the hijab have shifted, so too did other popular influencers, which created unrest across the online Muslim community. The ability to be swayed by influencers and social media content is precisely what many of the influencers I interviewed were concerned with.

"Influencers also get influenced," says Lebanese American Muslim model, influencer, entrepreneur, and blogger Zahraa Berro who is extremely intentional and careful when it comes to her social media platforms. Zahraa ensures to not partake in any hijab trend that reveals parts of her hair or skin that are considered to be out of the bounds of the normative Islamic requirements for hijab. As such, to protect herself from her "own demons" she is not afraid to unfollow other influencers on social media who do not represent hijab in a way that meets the requirements she holds to be true. Zahraa is not alone in her quest to preserve traditional understandings of hijab. Attorney by day and comedian by night, Yasmin Elhady is a Libyan American woman who considers herself

somewhat of a "traditionalist" when it comes to Islam and believes in clear guidelines for proper comportment for hijab dress codes. While Yasmin admits the extent of this "creativity" with hijab that falls out of bounds with her interpretation of hijab can be uncomfortable or disheartening to see, instead of calling someone out directly or publicly, she shows her support, or lack thereof, through disengaging and unfollowing with certain content on social media that does not fall in line with proper comportment she adheres to. Yasmin admits that she, too, could fall victim to the platform and, as such, goes on hiatus periodically as a form of "protection of your senses and the protection for the portals of your soul." She recognizes the "intense pressure" women who don hijab face on a daily basis and describes it as a "constant magnifying glass" placed upon this group of women that subjects them to incessant levels of surveillance and scrutiny. Yasmin turned to comedy to combat anti-Muslim bigotry prevalent within the United States out of her belief that "people need to meet Muslim women." As a comedian who performs in a highly male-dominated industry and is usually the only comic who wears a hijab, Yasmin feels like an "outsider" and was even kicked out of certain spaces due to her Muslim identity. Being from Huntsville Alabama, a city riddled with anti-Muslim prejudice, Yasmin is used to not fitting in but has learned how to find her path by remaining true to her Islamic values. Despite the setbacks, she continues to take the microphone and perform at various outlets as a way to claim public space for herself and those who look like her. While Yasmin feels that she has lost opportunities for being visibly Muslim, yet at the same time feels empowered for standing out for reasons she decided on her own terms. Such sentiments are reflected by many women of the Muslim faith who feel that

being visibly Muslim in today's society is "a real challenge but a true opportunity," in Yasmin's words. It's an opportunity to assert their subjectivities in ways that do not compromise their Islamic values but a challenge to fight longstanding stereotypes and terms that have assumed their existence for so long, even from cultural stigmatizations engendered by their own communities. However, not all influencers believe in the same level of caution regarding hijab practices and female Muslim embodiment, such as Startup co-founder, modest fashion influencer, and founder of the popular "Muslims Doing Things" podcast, Layla Shaikley.

Layla is an Iraqi American who was one of a few women who wore a hijab from amongst her immediate Iraqi community in Southern California. Despite having grown up in a religiously conservative family, and like many women who wear hijab, Layla has experienced the emotional highs and lows that are inevitable to the wearer. She considered removing it many times, and instead of removing it completely, in 2011, she decided to intentionally wear it in a looser fashion where parts of her hair began to show. As a result, she was dubbed a "poor representation" of Islam by many of her loved ones and encouraged to remove it. Despite the lack of support for her new style of wearing her hijab, Layla kept it on and took matters of representation into her own hands as usual. Just a few years later, she found herself spearheading a new cultural phenomenon through a creative pop culture video about female "Mipsterz" Muslim hipsters that reflect the everyday realities of real women, "No burqas, bombs, or other symbols ignorantly associated with the hijab on our heads. Instead, skateboards, sunshine, and good times -- realities that define us as individuals" (Janmohamed 2016, 28). While the video sparked a

lot of criticism from some members of the global Muslim community for portraying women in seemingly improper ways, it reflected just how varied visions of what it means to be a "hijabi" and a Muslim really are in ways that debunk the Muslim monolith cemented across U.S. American culture but within the American Muslim community specifically. Depicting female Muslims in this new culturally cool way highlighted aspects of Muslim womanhood that paved the path for modest fashion to be recognized as a powerful presentation that reflects agency, difference, and sartorial creativity.

A closer examination of the experiences of influencers Zahraa, Yasmin, and Layla offers an opportunity to understand why such levels of scrutiny are placed upon women of the Muslim faith and the ways by which ideological discussions surrounding proper and improper forms of hijab and bodily comportment remain an ongoing, and an overly exhausted, debate within and beyond the Muslim community until today. Deciphering what constitutes proper dress, actions, and corporeal expressions perpetuates the notion of a monolithic "Muslimwoman" (Cooke 2007) within the Muslim and non-Muslim western imaginary and speak to the cultural and religious dissonance prevalent within the intra-Muslim community. Overemphasizing and deconstructing Muslim dress has been the task of not only critics of the veil and Islam but also members of the global Muslim community whom, since the advent of the MFP, take to social media to oust certain female Muslim influencers for behaving, dressing, or acting in ways that deviate from their own versions of Muslim modesty. Such levels of scrutiny and surveillance placed upon women of the Muslim faith projects a prescribed ideal upon all aspects of their private and public lives, which is inherited from European colonial projects and is

perpetuated by Muslims through unrealistic expectations placed upon women who don the hijab. This form of indiscernible violence afflicts female Muslims, and in particular, women who wear hijab, as it reduces their lives to a misplaced notion of restriction, thereby impeding their mobility and dress as well as limiting their corporeal comportment and deportment. It reifies stereotypical impressions about female Muslim bodies as passive objects needing constant definition and dominance. Lastly, the level of incessant judgment aimed toward hijab donning women misplaces the expectation to uphold the Quranic injunction (24:30-31), which stipulates that modesty is incumbent upon both men and women, onto sole women who wear hijab and absolves non-hijab wearing women and men from the discourse and scrutiny, which ultimately pollutes the realities and experiences of veiled women.

The quest for inclusion and representation on the part of Muslims living in the United States has generally been understood to be a one-sided project whereby Muslims seek inclusion within mainstream western society by demanding equal rights and opportunities, but it is equally, if not more, of a task, to claim that same level of representation and equality within their own communities rendering such a pursuit as a twofold ongoing arduous process. The MFP represents a push in the direction toward recognition and visibility, thereby endorsing the scopes of Muslim womanhood in unprecedented ways creating a shift toward Muslim subjectivities within the United States through new social, cultural, and political possibilities of representation.

It is an interesting moment in the story of hijab practices within the United States today. As hijab continues to gain prevalence within the Euro-American western

mainstream, it is simultaneously losing momentum within Muslim communities despite its growing popularity across media campaigns and marketplaces. Nonetheless, the topic of the veil continues to be, as Ahmed (2011) describes, within "the stratosphere of political, media, and public interest in the West." While it is clear that the hijab is having a moment of embrace within the U.S. through increased visibility and inclusion, thereby projecting an ethos of acceptance and celebration, it is simultaneously experiencing a moment of regress through a concurrent un-veiling, or as Lewis (2015) describes it a "dejabi," moment and residual/perpetual judgment from within and beyond the Muslim community. The prevalence of the MFP has loosened these tensions to an extent and provided opportunities for individual mobility rendering veiling a more legible practice.

Contemporary Trends of Hijab Practices Within the Euro American West

Hijab practices, which reference the multiple ways in which female Muslims adopt and incorporate the hijab into their lives, have varied all throughout Islamic history, and this contemporary moment is paradigmatic of that manifestation. This section explores the effects of the MFP on contemporary hijab practices within the United States since its mainstreaming in 2015 to disaggregate the hijab as a homogenous practice and further complicate the American Muslim fashion landscape by focusing on the individual and not merely the fashion. Past debates surrounding Muslim dress have often assumed, mistakenly, that the global Muslim community adheres to the same rules and requirements established by authoritative interpretations of textual prescriptions for modesty. While Islam establishes modesty as a universal dress code for both men and women, the particularities and requirements vary based on gender and take on various

cultural permutations. Many Muslims consider normative interpretations of modesty --- but others ultimately adhere to their own understandings of modest comportment. Such variations of hijab practices have roots in the history of Islam as it experienced particular developments within the societies it governed (Abdulaziz 2018, 135), reflecting the level of agency and autonomy modest wearers of the hijab exude. Thus, it is no surprise that in the third decade of the twenty first century, hijab practices have morphed into uncommon permutations adding another layer to its historical dynamism.

Arab historian Albert Hourani is often cited for having predicted in the 1950s that the hijab would fade away by the end of the twentieth century (Ahmed 2000, 305). In addition to his belief in secularization theory which purports that religion would lose its social significance and decline in the modern era (Berger 2003), Hourani's predictions were based on his observations of a "de-veiling" trend across the Middle East that first burgeoned in Egypt. Yet studies have shown the growing presence of hijab has doubled since the 1970s, which was very much linked to the rising prevalence of Islamist movements in the Arab and Muslim world that eventually made its way to the west, ultimately proving Hourani indisputably wrong (Welborne et al. 2018). Within the United States in particular, the presence of hijab practices proved to be on a steady incline, yet again proving Hourani and other proponents of secularization theory wrong, but since 2017 there has been a noticeable un-veiling phenomenon within the U.S. that most could not have predicted.

Historically hijab practices have always gone through cyclical waves of veiling and unveiling, often tied to various socio-political and cultural tides of the time. What is

unique and ironic about this contemporary un-veiling moment is that it is concurrent with the rise and prominence of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon, where the hijab is finally being celebrated and catered to within the United States. It is without a doubt that reasons for un-veiling are contextual and highly personal for many women, and deciphering such reasons is beyond the scope of this project, but recognizing the reality of it is important as an analytical framework for exploring conditions of agency and moral dispositions.[14] As previously stated, this project makes no proclamations as to proper or improper prescriptions of hijab practices and instead recognizes the shifting trends and dispositions of such practices by drawing on real experiences from women who wear hijab trend

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to examine how Islamic Entrepreneurship extends into the Muslim Influencer scene across social media while cultivating an understanding of the shifts in veiling practices. For Ascia, Sarah, Zahraa, Hakeemah, Daria, Yasmin, and Layla, a commitment to modesty and their faith manifests in very distinct ways throughout their social media platforms and foregrounds all partnerships and collaborations with both Muslim and non-Muslim brands. While remaining true to one's values and maintaining an authentic sense of self has proven to be no easy feat for anyone but especially for female Muslim influencers attempting to thrive in a world where likes,

[14] I rely on empirical evidence for the proposition of a de-veiling wave as it was increasingly difficult to find accurate statistics corroborating a contemporary un-veiling trend within Muslim communities throughout the United Sates. As such, I add the possibility of taking on the task of producing data in this field in the conclusion chapter of the dissertation under "Limitations and Future Research" for researchers interested in pursuing this topic.

comments, and overexposed glamorous portrayals of women drive popularity, content creation, and brand partnerships.

With the forces of Islamic entrepreneurship and neoliberal capitalism working in tandem throughout this new prominence experienced by Muslim influencers, striking a balance between faith and fashion trends, collaborations and exploitations, public and private life, authenticity and vulnerability, sacred and profane, perfection and imperfection, is at the heart of their daily considerations and negotiations as female Muslim influencers sharing their perspectives on Instagram while recognizing the ways in which their own actions immensely influence the actions of their followers, especially young Muslim girls around the world. The moral responsibility and sense of accountability exhibited by Muslim influencers are reflective of the core principles of Islamic entrepreneurial behavior as well as the complexities of their desire for individual expression against not only cultural misrepresentations of Muslim womanhood but also the imagined ideal articulation of hijab practices placed upon them by their online and offline communities.

Increased representation on the political and cultural front has brought an additional social capital for female Muslims, asserting themselves as more visible than ever before and as an integral part of contemporary U.S. American culture through sociocultural and entrepreneurial projects. The visual presentation of the MFP attempts to dismantle and weaken the association of veiling practices with oppression and women's subordination. Instead, it pushes toward a more positive trajectory that weakens the deep divide between

the “us” and “them” dichotomy that frames discourses surrounding Islam and the west into an analytical framework that positions Islam *in* the west.

CHAPTER 5: MODEST FASHION AS A COUNTER HEGEMONIC PRODUCTION: AN EXPLORATION OF THE SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF MAINSTREAMING MUSLIM LIFESTYLE IN THE UNITED STATES

Until this point, this project has explored the potentiality of entrepreneurship, inclusion, and representation due to the Modest Fashion Phenomenon. This chapter emphasizes the interconnections between religion, gender, and politics through an analysis of the consequences of the MFP, which include an uptick in Islamophobia, an un-veiling phenomenon, and exploitative attempts to capitalize on Muslim womanhood by neoliberal market players. Despite the negative consequences, I argue that the MFP introduced an epistemological shift in understanding Islam's presence within the United States in ways that challenge anti-Muslim conceptions and stereotypes. This chapter underscores the rise of gendered Islamophobia, which is concurrent with the rise of the MFP. It is important to grasp the extent of anti-Muslim bigotry amidst a wave of heightened inclusivity and visibility toward women of Muslim faith so as not to lose sight of the realities of Islam's sociopolitical standing within a contemporary U.S. context.

Gendered Islamophobia

2015 became a notable year for many Muslims worldwide, especially those living in the United States and Europe. It marked a transitional time where the western world began seeing an uptick in the visibility and representation of veiled women of Muslim faith across fashion campaign ads and subsequent debuts over the next few years of modest fashion collections from mega retail giants such as H&M, Macy's, American Eagle, DKNY, Dolce & Gabbana to name a few (D'Alessandro 2018). At the time, trend

forecasters could not have fathomed what would come of the burgeoning Modest Fashion Phenomenon (MFP), especially since trend predictions are generally linked to the socio-political climate of that particular period. Ironically, the advent of the MFP coincided with increased Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hate crimes in the United States. According to a Pew Research Center analysis based on the FBI's annual hate crime statistics report, physical assaults against Muslims in 2015 reached "9/11 era levels" with 257 incidents reported (KISHI 2016). In 2016, another Pew Research Center survey revealed that the majority of Americans recognize that discrimination against Muslims is rampant and increasing. Yet, what both the survey and Hate Crime Statistics Report fail to consider is the extent to which the assaults afflict women in particular, especially those who don a hijab or niqab, as they face dual discrimination given their visual representation of the religion. While these acts are allegedly religiously motivated and are geared toward men and women, they disproportionately affect women of the Muslim faith, who ultimately bear the brunt of anti-Muslim violence. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), while it is difficult to obtain accurate statistics regarding hate crimes toward female Muslims specifically, enough instances of hate crimes have been reported reflecting a sizeable increase in discrimination towards veiled women during 2016. While there are legal protections in place to ensure women of the Muslim faith are not compromised due to wearing hijab in spaces such as the workplace and various government institutions, women continue to experience violations of their rights as they have been terminated from jobs, harassed, discriminated against and denied access to public spaces (ACLU, 2021).

According to one researcher, 69 percent of female Muslims who wore hijab reported at least one incident of discrimination, and for non-hijab wearing women, it was 29 percent (Elmir 2016). Experiences of harassment vary within this group of women and sometimes even amongst children, from a woman being accosted in an airport bathroom and told to "go home where they wear those things" to a woman in Manhattan's blouse lit on fire by a male attacker who was standing near her with a lighter in his hand, or 7-year old girl named Sumayyah who's second-grade teacher pulled off her hijab in front of an entire classroom full of kids (Crowley 2021). Hate crimes and violence targeted towards female Muslims are rampant within the United States and were especially provoked during the electoral campaign in 2016 and in particular with the election of former President Donald Trump, who repeatedly framed Islam as a threat to national security and encouraged antagonism against Muslims, which led to heightened hate crimes toward veiled women (Jamal 2017). His false claims that "Islam hates us" and that Muslims celebrated the terrorist attacks on the twin towers in New York, his calling for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States," and his statement about instigating a database to track Muslims have seriously contributed to the tide of Islamophobia which led to an uptick in anti-Muslim sentiment and multiple "Muslim bans" (Key 2015). The first iteration of Trump's travel ban (Muslim Ban) was enacted just seven days into his presidency, when he signed an executive order banning travel to the United States from predominantly Muslim countries such as Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, would place Islamophobia front and center throughout his immigration and national security policies (Ayoub and Beydoun 2017).

Hammer (2013) argues that Islamophobia "is not about innate or natural fear of Islam or Muslims. Rather, it is an ideological construct produced and reproduced at the intersection of imperial ideology, political expediency, and the exploitation of nationalist, racial, and religious insecurities." The intentional connection of Islam to national security discourses as a strategic ploy to perpetuate hate and fear toward Islam and Muslims has not only successfully instilled distrust and suspicion of Muslims within U.S. American political discourses but also served as a social and cultural mechanism of marginalization coded as non-white, non-Christian, and ultimately as not belonging to the mainstream. An emphasis on the role gender plays within the Islamophobia machine reflects how female Muslim bodies are a core aspect in the discourses on anti-Muslim violence, especially those who visibly identify as Muslim through the donning of a hijab. Not only is this group of women subjected to physical violence through harassment, exclusion, and verbal and physical assaults, but as Hammer points out, they also become a feared target regarding anxieties toward racial and minority communities. Female Muslims and, by extension, the American Muslim community and culture are perceived as "foreign" and thus a threat to the United States.

Muslim bans, in conjunction with domestic terrorist attacks, as well as burkini, burqa, and hijab bans abroad, have further perpetuated additional layers of scrutiny towards female Muslims. As a result, many women have considered removing their hijab or have already removed it after wearing it for more than two decades to protect themselves and their families. Others have decided to continue to wear it out of conviction for and connection to their faith. A significant part of anti-Muslim rhetoric comes from

maligning Muslims throughout the media by news pundits and political officials who deploy feminist rhetoric to propagate anti-Muslim prejudice and fuel Islamophobia as a political tool. A 2018 study conducted by the University of Alabama showed that when Muslims commit acts of violence, U.S. media outlets report it 357% more than acts of violence perpetrated by non-Muslims (Kearns 2019). This level of manipulation and scrutiny is projected onto many Muslim initiatives throughout the United States.

When Ibtihaj Muhammad became the first American Muslim Olympian in hijab to compete and win a medal during the 2016 Summer Olympics, Rush Limbaugh, a conservative political commentator, responding to Hillary Clinton's congratulatory tweet recognizing this historic moment for Muslims, said, "why celebrate a woman wearing something that's been forced on her by a religion? A religion run by men. She may actively agree to do it, don't misunderstand, but it's a religion run by men that subjugates and subordinates women" (Limbaugh 2016). Such statements reflect a level of prejudice toward female Muslims specifically, and as a result, prejudice that extends to Muslim men and Islam at large, whereby women are viewed as victims of male dominance or villains of a violent religion. Female Muslim bodies are coded as dually oppressed objects of an oppressive religion (Islam), as well as violence perpetrated by Muslim men. However, unlike other European countries, the United States is unique because its legal system ensures that head covering is legally protected. However, that does not translate to eradicating anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination.

With regard to employment specifically, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 stipulates that discrimination against an individual based on religion, race, gender, sex, or

national origin is unlawful. That does not mean that there have not been numerous examples of discrimination toward women who wear hijab; in fact, to the contrary, in 2015, the civil case of *Samantha Elauf v. Abercrombie and Fitch Stores Inc* being its most nationally recognized case for having reached the Supreme Court is one of many workplace discrimination lawsuits against major companies that have all settled in favor of the plaintiff (Welborne et al. 2018, 4). What it does mean is that the U.S. has set a legal precedent through Title VII[15] and the First Amendment, which protects religious garb, enjoining an ethos of individual freedom over its western counterparts who have banned the practice. Yet hats and, by extension, all types of head coverings have had a history of being banned in the U.S., given the 181-year ban on any sort of headwear within the Halls of the House of Representatives established as a rule in 1837. This rule was amended once Ilhan Omar, a Muslim Congresswomen from Minnesota, became the first congresswoman to wear a hijab on the floor at the beginning of 2019 to exclude religious head garb (Law 2019). The election of Congresswomen Ilhan Omar in conjunction with the election of female Muslim Representative Rashida Talib within the 116th congress was touted as "the most diverse in American history," which is considered a major victory as it represents new heights and possibilities of visibility and representation for not only the Muslim population but for female Muslims in particular. However, the reality remains that the majority of congress is overwhelmingly white and Christian. As such, both congresswomen Ilhan and Rashida have been the target of

[15] According to the United States Department of Justice, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 makes it against the law for employers to discriminate against individuals on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, and national origin.

Islamophobia, with most of the vitriol being targeted toward Ilhan specifically, who is not only visibly Muslim but is also a Black woman repeatedly subjected to various insults from former President Donald Trump and hundreds of death threats (Smith et al. 2019). A Florida Republican even went to the extent of calling for her to be executed for treason, "we should hang these traitors where they stand" (Milman 2019). Prior to Trump taking office, the United States had historically been known to be a racist nation with a "veneer of tolerance" that was cracked with the presidency of Trump, which was characterized by white nationalism and a leader known for "stoking the flames of division and prejudice" (Ricard 2018). Against that political backdrop, Muslims and Islam would become the "bogeymen" of his political agenda, ultimately shaping the experiences of Muslims living within the U.S. and abroad.

To counter the rise in anti-Muslim violence, the US House of Representatives passed a bill led by Congresswoman Ilhan Omar instilling the means necessary to seriously combat the rise of Islamophobia around the world (Firstpost 2021). While the bill was well received amongst democrats, republicans denounced it by accusing Ilhan of being associated with terrorist organizations. According to scholar of anti-Muslim racism Evelyn Alsultany, U.S. citizens are divided with regard to the general perception of Muslims today, "Islam is not seen as an American religion protected by the First Amendment right to freedom of religion, but rather of terrorism, anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, and homophobia. Some even believe that it is not a religion but an extremist ideology (Key 2020). The constant scrutiny, hatred, and criticism demonstrated toward Ilhan, amplified by fake news reports and misinformation campaigns, reflect the

extent to which veiled women bear the brunt of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States more so than their non-veiled female counterparts and even Muslim men. The intersections of race, religion, and gender manifest within the political and social realities of female Muslim lives through a trifecta of discrimination unique to the experience of being a veiled woman in the United States and the racist construction of Islam as a political ideology. As such, the MFP has played a powerful role in combating Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment through new modes of visibility that have shattered misconceptions and misrepresentations of Muslim womanhood and Islam.

Modest Fashion as Counter Hegemonic

The use of fashion and visual identity to express one's religious and social identities has had a great cultural impact on Islam in America. Modest fashion led to the growth of an entire industry comprising Muslim models, designers, stylists, influencers, and entrepreneurs. Anthropologist Muna Ali (2018) argues that, like most cultural producers, American Muslims are "enmeshed in specific but multiple intersecting historical, sociocultural, local, and global spheres of power … the narratives of word and image they create in the arts and other forms of expressive culture subvert the hegemonic tropes and topoi circulating in the popular and political discourse and as reflected in the media (pg 265)." To that end, young Muslims engaging in cultural production disrupt the "frames" that depict Muslims as intrinsically violent and foreign, and instead engender fresh subjectivities that can exist beyond preconceived notions of Muslimness. Moving beyond "burqas and black hijabs," the MFP provides an expressive and expansive space for women of the Muslim faith perceived as a type of "Muslim Cool," to borrow Su'ad

Khabeer's (2016) phraseology, or a "cool Islam" as Imene Ajala (2017) calls it, where modest fashion has altered ways of being Muslim in the U.S. and encouraged an epistemological shift on Islam's cultural impact throughout the American mainstream. This cultural capital posits Muslims as practitioners of a visible and viable faith that is not immune to consumerist and neoliberal trends. As Reina Lewis explains, "alongside the depiction of Islam as a religion of peace and universal values, the depiction of Islam as part of contemporary consumer culture is an effective way to convey the message they live in the same world as everyone else" (Friedman 2014). The MFP highlights that Muslims proactively engage in globalizing trends that counter an essentialist view of Islam as an antiquated religion impervious to change. This phenomenon is credited to female Muslims, particularly as leaders of this mission, for having shaped Islam's cultural presence in the U.S.

The shift in outlook toward veiled women and Muslim embodiment runs in tandem with a shift in anti-Muslim hate crimes. In 2018 as the prevalence of modest fashion, Muslim influencers, and entrepreneurs whose imperatives offer a counter narrative to Muslim stereotypes and work toward emphasizing lived Islam as a mainstay faith within America's religious landscape continued to increase on the social and cultural front, anti-Muslim hate crimes began to decrease on the political side. Anti-Muslim hate crimes, as reported by the FBI Hate Crimes Statistics, have dipped nearly 40% since 2016 and steadily decreased each consecutive year, making a cumulative decrease of almost 70%

from 2016 until 2021.[16] According to Brian Levin, the Executive Director of the Center for Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, hate attacks have shifted more toward Latinos instead of Muslims, "A couple of years ago, Muslims faced a rise in hate crime due to stereotyping around terrorism and negative stereotypes in politics and social culture. More recently, the issue of immigration appears to have reshuffled attacks toward Latinos as opposed to Muslims (Farivar 2019). Although national hate crime statistics are not completely accurate since motivations and prejudices are not always discernable, it is no coincidence that the downtick in anti-Muslim hate crimes concurs with the peak of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon, where modest clothing, veiled women, and Islam are being catered to and included across clothing collections, storefront windows, and mainstream cultural project rendering hijab practices as more commonplace and conventional rather than eccentric and unusual (Medium 2018). While stereotyping and discrimination continue to persist toward veiled women, this cultural shift has afforded many female Muslims various entrepreneurial, socioeconomic, cultural, and political opportunities.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Islam is gaining more cultural presence within the United States due to the MFM. Women of the Muslim faith have more opportunities and are given more space to express their individuality publicly, more so than before. While Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment continue to be a reality with which many Muslims contend, heightened

[16] According to the FBI Hate Crime Statistics, anti-Muslim hate crimes went from 307 incidents in 2016 to 273 incidents in 2017 to 188 incidents in 2018 to 176 incidents in 2019 to 110 incidents in 2020 to 95 incidents in 2021. https://www.justice.gov/crs/highlights/2021-hate-crime-statistics

levels of visibility, inclusivity, and representation experienced by female Muslims mark a historical moment in the new prominence experience by female Muslims and, by extension, Islam. The Modest Fashion Phenomenon, in conjunction with its enmeshment within neoliberal networks of capitalist consumption and exploitation, has produced a powerful and positive outcome in the project of making Islam more legible within the U.S. American mainstream.

The MFP engendered an appeal for better understanding toward Muslims worldwide, particularly within the United States. There have been ample efforts trying to understand better this vast group of women and adherents of the Muslim lifestyle, who reflect the most diverse population of Muslims throughout the history of Islam. This new prominence has also allowed for more social, cultural, and political possibilities of representation not only within the western mainstream but from within the Muslim community as well.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation demonstrated how female Muslim participation in the Modest Fashion Phenomenon shifted Islam's cultural footprint within the United States through sartorial and entrepreneurial practices. Participants of the MFP engendered new embodiment and conceptualizations of Muslim womanhood that serves as an effective counter hegemonic narrative counterbalancing the effects of anti-Muslim sentiment within the U.S. by empowering female Muslims in their religious identity. Fashion historian Shehnaz Suterwalla contends that there has been "a seismic acceptance" toward hijab when women of the Muslim faith use it to make a statement and, in this case, assert their visibility as modest and Muslim (Rosenberg 2019). This new acceptance of modest fashion has instilled a level of confidence in young Muslim girls and women's religious identity by enabling them to explore their modest fashion sense with pride and zeal (Syeda 2018). The younger generation, in particular, who grew up with identity complexes and battling feelings of discrimination and alienation, now possess a newfound sense of empowerment in their religious identity. Women of the Muslim faith are no longer depicted as a singular archetype; instead, the "mute button"[17] has been replaced with a cacophony that reflects the complexities of this diverse group of diverse females (Jamal 2017). Fashion has provided a powerful medium for Generation M, a term coined by Shelina Janmohamed (2016) referencing Muslim millennials as not only an expression of style but of faith as well, "it's almost as though being fashionable is a

[17] In Amaney Jamal's (2017) article "Trumping on Muslim Women: The Gendered Side of Islamophobia," she explains how Muslim women continue to be spoken for despite the fact that "their voices are louder than ever" and calls for the unmuting on their voices. I argue that the MFP is one of the most powerful articulations of that "unmuting" process.

duty for Generation M to dispel stereotypes that may be held about Muslims being oppressed, backward, or simply out of touch with the modern world (Janmohamed 2016, 155)."

The Modest Fashion Phenomenon mobilized a substantial space of historic proportions for entrepreneurial opportunities for female Muslims within the United States by analyzing the sociocultural and political motivations that propelled the MFM and the hundreds of women who have entered this space in the capacity of entrepreneurs, influencers, designers, models, activists, and scholars, deeper understandings of Muslim womanhood and Islamic Entrepreneurship are put forth, to articulate this "transitional moment" within U.S. American mainstream society. Amidst an ethos of continued Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiment, female Muslim entrepreneurship functions as a strategy of empowerment to counterbalance the stereotypes shaping discourses on Islam and Muslim womanhood. It contributes to the objective of mainstreaming the Muslim lifestyle within the United States. This project is part of a much larger academic endeavor that seeks to disaggregate the monolithic "Muslimwoman" by shedding light onto the various ways U.S. women of Muslim faith have reconfigured the concept of Muslim embodiment through entrepreneurial endeavors while simultaneously intervening within the neoliberal marketplace to carve space for the Muslim consumer, producer, and entrepreneur.

Additionally, this work deliberately moves beyond an orientalist outlook, whereby the assumption of women who are Muslim is that they are free thinking agents devoid of colonial docility ascribed to their subjectivity and corporeality. It works against and

intentionally moves past the static representations of "Muslim women" as a homogenous category and gender by challenging the conventional conceptualization of Muslim subjectivity beyond depictions within the Muslim and Orientalist imaginaries. This project demonstrates the extent to which the modest fashion movement has propelled Islam as a social and cultural phenomenon that showcases the diversity embedded within its practices. It presents modest fashion as a collective yet intensely individuated practice that unites such a diverse and vast group of people and showcases the diversity in Islamic beliefs and practices.

While the marker and meaning of hijab practices are in a state of noticeable transition within Western mainstream culture, it does not ignore the fact that it still remains a marker of otherness for some Muslims and a sign of oppression and Islamic patriarchy for others. Given the persistence of attacks on veiled women in America and heightened anti-Muslim sentiments, the veil is not fully devoid of its historical and colonial connotations, but the modest fashion movement certainly serves as an epistemological corrective to that understanding. Dress is a powerful means through which Muslim identity is performed and negotiated, and as such, this dissertation offers a reconceptualization of female Muslim subjectivities through sartorial corporeality and entrepreneurship within a western context. Through disrupting mainstream sartorial norms and establishing entrepreneurial enterprises dedicated to various aspects of the Muslim lifestyle, many women of the Muslim faith have managed to cultivate their own individuated expressions of Muslim womanhood by asserting their visible presence and specific needs throughout various communities across the U.S. and globally. While the

Muslim modest fashion landscape is a complex terrain for its inextricable connection to veiling practices, its ahistorical associations, its enmeshment with neoliberalism, and its imbrication within the politics of representation, it has opened up a transnational space for female Muslims to connect, create, reflect, and reverse the hegemonic narratives that have plagued discourses on Muslim womanhood for centuries. The data that this dissertation puts forth shows that the greatest outcome of the Modest Fashion Phenomenon is an empowered group of female Muslim entrepreneurs who have taken matters of representation and Muslim lifestyle into their own hands, rendering their subjectivities and enterprises as authoritative and agential.

Lastly, instead of simply observing how Islam is shaping and informing the lives of these women, this project offers a perspective shift in trajectory from the bottom up in order to observe how these women's daily lives, sartorial practices, and entrepreneurial enterprises are in turn shaping and redefining Islamic culture throughout the America mainstream, thereby re-characterizing the boundaries of religion, fashion, and gender.

Plans for Future Research

Since my methodology involved ethnography and netnography, I believe studying the "afterlives"[18] of the women I interviewed is necessary to examine how ideas have evolved and transformed. Since conducting interviews, some of my interview subjects have either removed their hijab, shut down their business, or shifted their trajectories in a completely different direction, online and offline. Additionally, an exploration and focus on the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic affected their businesses is also an important inquiry in understanding the impact it had on small Muslim businesses. While I included insight from female entrepreneurs on the effects of COVID throughout this research, it was a marginal part of the project that is worthy of more attention.

[18] In the article, "The Public Afterlife of Ethnography," Didier Fassin argues the importance of studying the afterlives of ethnography as a rich intellectual exercise that contributes to the public presence of ethnography beyond the academy. p. 607

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