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Hijabi fashion influencers: Defining Islamic modesty online

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## **Abstract**

There is variability in the definitions and understandings surrounding modesty. Veiled Muslim women practice modesty by concealing their hair, skin, and body. The veil is a signifier of their religious affiliation and modest lifestyle. This honours thesis is a study of performance and visual enactment within the photos and videos posted by a sample of veiled Muslim women influencers, which include Jasmine Fares, Omayya Zein, Leena Snoubar, Nawal Sari, and Rawdah Mohamed. It uses visual rhetorical analysis to examine the captions and the clothing, pose, background, symbols, colours and textures present in the photos and videos. Theoretical frameworks, such as post-colonial feminism, orientalism, and creative labour support the interpretation of the data. The research question that this thesis answers is: how do hijabi influencers define modesty in Islam through the photos and videos uploaded on their visual social media platforms? This research demonstrates that the definition of Islamic modesty can be understood beyond a binary perspective.

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## Table of Contents

### *Chapter I:*

*Introduction.....1*

*Chapter II: Literature Review.....4*

**Veiling and Modest Fashion .....5**

### **Representations of Muslim**

**Women.....10**

**Representations from Muslim Women .....15**

**Conclusion.....16**

### *Chapter III: Methodology and Theoretical Framework*

*.....18*

### **Sample and Sampling Criteria**

*.....19*

### **Visual Rhetoric as a**

**Method.....20**

### **Ethical**

**Implications.....22**

**Theoretical Framework.....23**

**Post-Colonial Feminism.....24**

**Orientalism.....28**

**Cultural Translation.....29**

### **Creative Industries and**

**Labour.....31**

**Conclusion.....32**

*Chapter IV: Analysis.....34*

**Background.....34**

**Performing Through Photographs.....36**

### **Performing Through Videos**

*.....53*

*Chapter V: Conclusion .....72*



## **Introduction**

Modesty is practiced by people regardless of their class, sexuality, gender, race, or religion. However, there is an association between modesty, Islam, and the Islamic veil (or hijab). The hijab is an Islamic garment that is meant for Muslim women to wear if they choose to do so. The Qur'an has verses that regard the hijab as a compulsory practice for Muslim women. The hijab is meant to conceal the hair, neck, chest, and ears of a woman. When wearing the hijab, women are also expected to conceal other areas of their body by wearing modest clothing. The body parts that do not need to be covered include the hands, feet, and face. There are Islamic codes that explain how women should wear the veil, and what it means to be modest. However, definitions and/or interpretations of the veil may differ based on the social, cultural, religious, and political context of an area or person. Within the Muslim community, women describe the veil as liberating, a reminder of their pious lifestyle, and as a behaviour check (Droogsma, 2007). This thesis is interested in the definitions of Islamic modesty in relation to hijabi social media influencers.

Hijabi influencers, or hijabistas, are veiled Muslim women who are consistent with fashion trends and hijab styles in an online context. These group of veiled Muslim women are fashion conscious (Hassan & Harun, 2016). This means that they are aware of trends and engage in fashionable lifestyles where they creatively style themselves through clothing (Hassan & Harun, 2016). This thesis examines visual artifacts produced and shared by five hijabi influencers: Jasmine Fares (Arab-Canadian), Omayya Zein (Arab-Venezuelan American), Leena Snoubar (Arab-American), Nawal Sari (Arab-Australian), and Rawdah Mohamed (Somalian-Norwegian). These veiled Muslim women have great influence through their large follower-counts. The goal of this study is to find out how Islamic modesty is defined by these hijabi

influencers by examining one video and one image from each of them. The photos/videos are chosen based on whether the influencers are present in the artifact, their association with fashion and modesty, and whether they have been posted in the past year. Moreover, the selection was based on Foss' (2005) description of what a visual artifact must include to be studied under the umbrella of visual rhetoric: symbolic action (communicating through signs), human interaction (human involvement within the artifact or during the making of it), and presence of an audience (how the artifacts communicate with a given audience).

This research will use a visual rhetorical approach to analyze the visual elements of each video and image. These elements include clothing, background, symbols, pose, colours, and texture. I will analyze the ways these influencers engage in the rhetorical strategy of visual enactment, which is defined as the ways ideology and meaning are communicated through embodiment, in this case how influencers wear modest attire (Foss and Foss, 2020). I am particularly interested in how these elements constitute a visual performance. Therefore, this thesis argues that hijabi influencers visually enact their beliefs and values regarding modesty in Islam through their online platforms. My interest in this topic originated in my personal experience of wearing the veil and maintaining modesty. Much of the discussions surrounding modesty growing up revolved around wearing abaya's, which are loose dress-like garments. Fashion trends are rarely discussed in relation to modesty and veiled Muslim women. This is because there exists an assumption that modesty can only be maintained through simple attire and the wearing of an abaya. This motivated me to conduct a study that focuses on veiled Muslim women who are fashion conscious (Hassan & Harun, 2016). Therefore, I decided to observe online influencers and the ways they practice modesty. Although hijabi influencers tend to follow similar trends, they each have their own modest style and ways of veiling. This interest

led to this study, which aims to answer the following question: how do hijabi influencers define Islamic modesty through the texts, images, and videos they produce on their visual social media platforms?



## **Literature Review**

There is a large selection of literature on the representations and lived experiences of Muslims within the West. Until recently, studies on anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiments often excluded the experiences of veiled Muslim women. Current research on the gendered experiences of veiled Muslim women draws on work by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Edward Said (1978), and Frantz Fanon (1969). Research on gendered experiences seek to understand dominant discourses surrounding veiled Muslim women in the media and how these discourses influence public attitudes (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010; Macdonald, 2006; Satiti, 2017; Zine, 2002). Scholars assert that the negative representations of veiled women in dominant media relate to anti-veiling political discourses (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010). Although there are studies on the representations of veiled women, few studies examine the self-representations of veiled Muslim women. Therefore, this chapter will address non-academic sources that recognize the perspectives and experiences of veiled Muslim women in relation to veiling, modesty, and the politics of self-representation. These sources are directly coming from veiled Muslim women. Many of these discussions build associations between modest fashion and modesty in Islam; therefore, studies examine the ways in which clothing communicates meaning (Droogsma, 2007; El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020).

With the emergence of hijabi fashion and online social media platforms, there are a few recent studies on how veiled Muslim women incorporate modest fashion in their pious lifestyle (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020). These studies assert that modest apparel and the desire to dress trendy lead to the description of many veiled Muslim women as “fashion-conscious” (Hassan & Harun, 2016), which influences the production and consumption of Islamic modest apparel in the mainstream fashion industry (Lodi, 2020; Shirazi,

2020). However, there is still a limited number of studies on Islamic modest fashion and hijabi women online.

### **Veiling and Modest Fashion**

Although modesty and veiling are highly associated with Islam, these are practices that were also historically adopted by pre-Islamic religions such as Christianity and Judaism (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014). Pre-Islamic practices of veiling originates from many non-Arab societies within the Middle East (Hoodfar, 1993). The practices of women veiling and dressing modestly are meant to protect women from the male gaze (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014), and can be observed in the Abrahamic religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Ternikar, 2009). Within the values of these religions, the veil often was a signifier of high-status women in society (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Hoodfar, 1993). Furthermore, Ternikar (2009) asserts that modesty in appearance reinforces modest behavior. Modesty is often mentioned in the Bible to maintain virtuous and honorable women; therefore, Christian women would wear head-coverings to church up until the 1950s (Ternikar, 2009). Ternikar (2009) explains that before the emergence of Christianity, Jewish women would also veil in piety. In contemporary society, women from religions other than Islam, such as Catholic nuns, continue to wear head-coverings; yet the veil is viewed as an Islamic practice (Ternikar, 2009).

Interpretations of Islamic texts indicate that women in Islam are required to dress modestly from head to toe. There are verses within the Qu'ran that explain women's modesty and veiling, for example, women are told to cover their bodies, wear a headcover and to not expose themselves to any man who is not their father, father-in-law, brother, husband, grandfather, nephew or any young boy before the age of awareness (or puberty) (The Qu'ran, 24:31). There are also Quranic verses for men which guide them to lower their gaze (regarding

women) and to guard their bodies by being modest (24:30). Islamic rulings explain that both men and women have *awrah*, which is an Arabic term to describe the body parts which should be guarded and kept private from the public. Muslim men's *awrah* is from the navel to below the knees; Muslim women's *awrah* is everything excluding the face, hands and feet. Modesty is a religious duty within Islam which both genders are expected to follow. However, veiling and practicing a modest lifestyle is a choice (Ternikar, 2009; Shirazi, 2020).

The terms 'veil' and 'headscarf' can be used interchangeably to refer to *hijab*, which is an Islamic garment for women that is intended to conceal their hair, neck, ears and chest. The hijab enforces modest apparel of Muslim women and acts as a visual marker of Islam (Al-Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Najmabadi, 2005). Consequently, those who wear a hijab are first identified as Muslim (Al Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014); this differentiates veiled Muslim women situated in the West. This identification allows outsiders to view and acknowledge the veiled Muslim woman as part of the Muslim community and contributes to the segregation of Muslim women from other groups (Droogsma, 2007). Fanon explains that the veil, in particular, "generally suffices to characterize Arab society" (Fanon, 1969, p. 43). He also suggests that the clothing, or attire, of a group in society is distinctive; therefore, clothing can signify various things (Fanon, 1969) depending on the "social and political currents of a society" (Shirazi, 2020, p. 407). Clothing also allows for self-expression and the construction of one's identity (Droogsma, 2007; Shirazi, 2020). The veil, for example, can empower the wearer and give her autonomy (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Shirazi, 2020). However, because the hijab holds diverse cultural meanings, every veiled Muslim woman has a different lived experience and attitude toward the hijab (Al Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; El-Bassiouny, 2017; Hoodfar, 1993).

There is immense variability in the interpretations of the hijab, which illustrates the versatility of clothing in terms of the social, cultural, religious, and political significance that it perpetuates (Hoodfar, 1993; Shirazi, 2020). However, two main discourses are pervasive in Western society when discussing the veil: it is seen as either a signifier of oppression or liberation (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014). Veiling is associated with being submissive to and controlled by a patriarchal order (Hoodfar, 1993). Many women in Middle Eastern countries are forced by patriarchal regimes to dress modestly and to veil; therefore, they do not find beauty or liberation in modesty (Lodi, 2020). Moreover, competing discourses attempt to negatively define veiled Muslim women and the veil becomes a signifier of gender oppression and as a barbaric – or radical – religious practice (Droogsma, 2017; Ternikar 2009). However, veiling is also seen as a way for Muslim women to resist patriarchy (Hoodfar, 1993). For instance, Muslim women situated in the West believe that modesty is liberating (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Lodi, 2020). Lodi (2020) claims that many women who dress modestly for Islamic purposes believe that their “portrayal of modesty is inherently liberating” (p. 238). Veiled Muslim women, who are also social media influencers, demonstrate this liberation through the exploration of different styles, such as streetwear and unique poses (Lodi, 2020). This liberation is also achieved as Muslim women believe their veil is an escape from a “hyper-sexualized society” (Lodi, 2020, p. 240).

The negative discourses surrounding the hijab impact veiled Muslim women, as discussed by Droogsma (2007). In her study, she adopts a feminist standpoint to analyze how veiled Muslim women position themselves against the competing discourses which attempt to define the hijab. A sample of 13 Muslim women were gathered through the snowball sampling method (Droogsma, 2007). Through a series of interviews, Droogsma (2007) seeks to understand how these veiled Muslim women combat Western misconceptions by voicing their experiences

and definitions of the Islamic veil. Droogsma (2007) finds that the participants often struggle with the negative representations of the veil; however, despite their struggles, they see the hijab as further integrating them within their communities and supporting their pious lifestyle. Respondents from Droogsma's (2007) study also claim that their hijab offers multiple meanings and functions that shape their identities, such as "behavior check, resisting sexual objectification, affording more respect, preserving intimate relationships, and providing a source of freedom" (p. 301). Therefore, veiling becomes part of identity expression and construction of Muslim women.

Clothing is a form of identity expression that facilitates an association between individuals and a social group (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020). Therefore, veiled Muslim women publicly identify themselves as participants in Islam (Droogsma, 2007; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020). Shirazi (2020) claims that the veiled Muslim women in her study are the same as other women in the sense that "they are interested in how they look and the clothes they wear" (p. 412), meaning that they are fashion conscious (Hassan & Harun, 2016). Fashion consciousness is defined as a "person's awareness to fashion and the ability to pick, dress similarly or imitate and be responsive to fashion" (Hassan & Harun, 2016, p. 480). Veiled women creatively style and wear their hijab by following fashion trends (Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020); therefore, they are being fashion conscious by exploring and consuming hijab fashion as an attempt to identify, or associate, with images of Muslims (Hassan & Harun, 2016). These women are referred as hijabistas, which are veiled women who engage in fashionable lifestyles and accentuate themselves through stylish hijab practices (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016). In their study, Hassan and Harun (2016) discover that hijabistas aim to dress by following trends and maintain their pious image simultaneously. However, in Iran, particularly, women who explore fashion through clothing and style their hijab

in different ways are often viewed negatively by hardliners (Shirazi, 2020). These women are labelled as “Westernized” as they do not follow the traditional or proper ways of wearing the hijab (Shirazi, 2020). The Iranian government that makes the hijab compulsory believes that a “proper” hijab is black and simple (Shirazi, 2020). Therefore, veiled Muslim women living in Iran may face harsh consequences, such as tickets, when they are wearing the hijab in an “improper” way (Shirazi, 2020). This indicates that much like the hijab, modest fashion is subjective as it holds multiple meanings depending on “culture, class, ethnicity and generation” (Lodi, 2020, p. 19).

People practice modest fashion regardless of their religious faith (Lodi, 2020; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020). However, many corporations market modest fashion toward Muslims (El- Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020) because they believe that Muslim and Middle Eastern communities are wealthy (Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020). This indicates that the global fashion industry targets Muslim consumers in large part for financial incentives (Bahrainwala & O’Connor, 2019; Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020). According to the State of the Global Islamic Economy Report, Muslim consumers spent a total of US \$243 billion on modest attire in 2015, and there is an estimation that this number will reach US \$368 billion by 2021 (Lodi, 2020). The commodification of Islamic clothing is becoming a global practice; however, it is increasingly seen within Western fashion conglomerates (Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020). Moreover, modest fashion that is marketed toward Muslim women are sometimes labelled as *halal*, which is an Arabic term to describe things that are permissible in Islam (Shirazi, 2020). These labels are controversial within the Muslim community (Shirazi, 2020). Many of the Islamic garments that are targeted toward Muslim women follow the trends of each season; however, they are often modified to be worn by veiled Muslim women (Shirazi, 2020).

Shirazi (2020) claims that the commodification of Islamic modesty is interpreted through both a negative and positive lens. Muslims may view this commodification as a sinful practice; however, others view it as a positive way to integrate the Muslim community within the fashion industry (Shirazi, 2020). The availability of modest fashion for veiled women allows hijabi women to explore their identities through fashion.

### **Representations of Muslim Women**

Research indicates that the discourses surrounding Muslims after the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11) encouraged widespread beliefs that Muslims are evil, and veiled women are agentless and oppressed (Byng, 2010; Satiti, 2017; Zine, 2002). Media representations of Muslims during and after 9/11 are mostly negative, which impacts public attitudes toward Muslims (Ogan et al., 2013). Although Islam is a religion, it has historically been racialized and categorized as non-White (Byng, 2010; Goodwin, 2020; Ogan et al., 2013). This influences prejudice against Muslims, which is labelled Islamophobia, a term to describe Anti-Muslim attitudes such as hate and fear (Goodwin, 2020; Ogan et al., 2013). However, scholars suggest that categorizing these attitudes as a phobia is an inaccurate way to describe the evident “religious intolerance” towards Islam (Goodwin, 2020, p. 464).

Anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiments increased immensely in the post 9/11 world, triggering the resurgence of Orientalism (Ogan et al., 2013; Zina 2002). Orientalist narratives became more pervasive in the West, where Islam is seen as a barbaric and backwards religion (Satiti, 2017; Zine, 2002). Edward Said’s (1978) Orientalist theory describes how the West has objectified Muslim and Arab identities and experiences and explains how this objectification

facilitates the colonial domination of the ‘Other’. Orientalist representations of Islam advance the belief that Muslims, especially Muslim women, are “culturally incompatible with the values, norms, and interests of Western nations” (Byng, 2010, p. 110).

The events of 9/11 triggered stronger associations between the veil and Islam (Macdonald, 2006). Although the veil is “hypervisible as oppressive and repressive barriers, Muslim women ‘behind the veil’ are not merely invisible to the western gaze but are *made invisible* as subjects” (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 886). This invisibility of veiled women is simultaneously created and reinforced through the “oppositional difference of ‘West’ and Islam” (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 889). These political discourses fuel Western interests of ‘rescuing’ the veiled woman from her oppression (Al-Saji, 2010; Racco, 2014) and to reinforce Western values, such as “gender equality, modernity, and freedom” (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 889). Therefore, while observing anti-Muslim discourses, it is important to understand that these attitudes are also gendered and racialized (Goodwin 2020; Karaman & Christian, 2020). This is because Muslim women hold intersectional traits that further marginalizes them in media representations (Goodwin, 2020; Karaman & Christian, 2020). Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), assists in the understandings of why veiled Muslim women are often targeted by the dominant culture (Goodwin, 2020). Intersectionality is defined as an individual’s overlapping qualities, such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation, which further develops ‘Otherness’ (Goodwin, 2020). Therefore, veiled women experience a different form of racialization in comparison to Muslim men (Karaman & Christian, 2020).

Dominant discourses attempt to define the lived experiences of veiled women, which results in misrepresentation (Al-Saji, 2010). Constructing veiled Muslim women as the ‘Other’ through media discourses allows for the reinforcement of dominant values and beliefs (Al-Saji,



2010; Zine, 2002). Therefore, scholar Al-Saji (2010) suggests that the representations of veiled women constitute a “negative mirror in which western constructions of identity and gender can be positively *reflected*” (p. 877). By portraying the veiled Muslim woman as oppressed, the liberated Western woman ideal can be reinforced in the media as the desirable identity for women to attain (Zine, 2002). This can be categorized as “positional superiority” where media discourses use the undesirable and agentless identities of Muslim women to maintain Western dominance (Zine, 2002). This indicates an apparent “obsession with veiling/unveiling” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 9). The desire to liberate veiled Muslim women is justified by the cultural and religious racialization prevalent in media outlets (Zine, 2002). The Islamic veil becomes a symbol of the problematic and backward thinking of Islam (Macdonald, 2006); therefore, hijabis are portrayed as oppressed, which further marginalizes and ‘Others’ veiled women (Al-Saji, 2010; Satiti, 2017).

Being a visual signifier of Islam, the veil faces competing discourses and becomes an issue in the West (Droogsma, 2017; Satiti, 2017; Saroglou et al., 2009; Zina, 2002). However, through problematic representations of the veil in dominant media sources, the veil “becomes seen as more than a religion sign” (Al-Saji, 2010, p. 880). The veil has turned into a signifier of oppression and gender inequality (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010; Satiti, 2017). This promotes political meanings of the veil (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010), for example, veiled Muslim women are seen as a “threat towards the secular tradition and freedom value” (Satiti, 2017, p. 189). Research demonstrates that the representations of veiled women relate to the proposed veil bans in places such as Quebec and France (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010). To enforce secularism and anti-sexism, France passed a law in 2004 which bans the “wearing of conspicuous religious signs” (Al-Saji, 2010 p. 878; Byng, 2010; Satiti, 2017). This ban most notably targets the Islamic

veil, which forces hijabi women to remove their veil in public spaces, such as schools (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010). Studies show that anti-veiling attitudes, such as the willingness to ban the veil, are a result of “subtle prejudice, Western ethnocentrism and self enhancement values” (Saroglou et al., 2009, p. 424). Moreover, it also relates to the gender and political ideologies of an individual, for example, men and right-wing political orientations perpetuate more anti-veiling attitudes (Saroglou et al., 2009).

Fanon’s (1969) discusses the colonial relationship between the European man and the veiled Algerian woman. He explains that there exists a desire to unveil the veiled woman (Fanon, 1969). This is because the veiled woman frustrates the European man’s desire to see her beauty; therefore, the desire to unveil the woman is a form of sexualization (Fanon, 1969). This is further reflected in bell hooks’ work (1992) as she indicates that the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” desires the Other; however, this is a form of exploitation that “reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*” (p. 367). hooks (1992) explains that the ‘Other’ is a site where dominant bodies can enforce their ideologies and maintain power dynamics, for example, anti-veiling attitudes are triggered by the desire to reveal the veiled woman (Fanon, 1969), and to promote secularism and anti-sexism (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010). Although anti-Muslim and anti-veiling attitudes are pervasive in dominant cultures, there are still attempts to incorporate or give agency to veiled Muslim women in the media.

An example of a contemporary media representation that attempts to provide agency to the veiled Muslim woman is the Nike Pro Hijab campaign in Spring 2018, launched by the sportswear company Nike. This campaign marketed the Nike Pro Hijab toward “serious” and “professional” veiled Muslim women athletes (Bahrainwala & O’Connor, 2019, p. 1). Scholars Bahrainwala and O’Connor (2019) discuss how the Nike Pro Hijab campaign claims to offer an

inclusive space for Muslim women within the Western professional athletic industry and in media. However, instead of fully providing the veiled woman with agency, the Nike Pro Hijab campaign is an example of the fetishization of the Other (Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2019). Instead of using this campaign for veiled women to construct their own voices in media representations, the Western corporation, Nike, maintains Orientalist tropes by framing (and speaking for) Muslim women (Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2019). The scholars claim that Nike “re-centers whiteness by secularizing the hijab and bolstering the moderate Muslim trope that serves national interests” (Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2019, p. 1). Bahrainwala and O'Connor (2018) use the term “moderate Muslim” to describe the “good” Muslim whose values align with the West. Moreover, the Nike marketing team successfully dissociates the Nike Pro Hijab from religious and cultural discourses by emphasizing the performance of the hijab (Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2019). Nike commodifies the hijab for financial incentives, to exoticize veiled Muslim women, and perpetuate Orientalist tropes (Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2019). As bell hooks (1992) explains, the dominant culture commodifies the Other “to enhance the white palate” (p. 380). hooks (1992) explains that this is a process of fetishization where dominant cultures commodify the Other for pure enjoyment and personal benefit, which is seen in the Nike Pro Hijab campaign (Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2019).

## **Representations from Muslim Women**

Dominant media discourses often silence or ignore Muslim women (Droogsma, 2007; Macdonald, 2006; Najmabadi, 2005; Satiti, 2007); however, there has been multiple studies where veiled women define their own experiences and identities (Macdonald, 2006). The findings of these studies are similar: veiled Muslim women define their hijabs as a symbol that reminds them of their religious duties, publicly identifies them as Muslim, and enforces modest behavior (Atasoy, 2006; El-Bassiouny, 2018; Droogsma, 2007). The veil also provides some Muslim women with confidence and a source of identity construction (Atasoy, 2006; Droogsma, 2007). Furthermore, the veil provides Muslim women with the opportunity to further integrate themselves within the Muslim community and build connections (Atasoy, 2006; Droogsma, 2007). Although there are studies that focus on the voices of veiled Muslim women, veiled Muslim women are rarely the authors of pieces that communicate and analyze their lived experiences around veiling. There are some interviews and blog posts written by hijabi women in popular culture, but they fail to fully capture the ways in which veiled Muslim women define their hijab and experiences, such as Dina Torkia's blog in Vogue UK which focuses on solely modest fashion. A remarkable exception is an interview that Sodaba Haidare had with Halima Aden, Vogue's first hijab-wearing model, where the model describes the difficult experiences that veiled women face in the mainstream fashion industry (BBC News, 2021).

Halima Aden recently quit the mainstream fashion industry as she claims that it compromises her religious affiliations (BBC News, 2021). Within her interview with Sodaba Haidare, Halima explains her lived experiences as a hijabi woman highly integrated in the Western fashion industry (BBC News, 2021). Near the beginning of her career, Halima explains that she brought her own hijabs and modest apparel on campaign sets to ensure her hijab is not

compromised (BBC News, 2021). However, she explains that as her career progressed, she allowed her hijab to be styled by the teams on-set (BBC News, 2021). She explains that in some magazine covers she was featured in, she looked like the “white man’s fetishized” version of herself (BBC News, 2021, para. 45). One of the publications includes the King Kong magazine, which is a magazine that aims to showcase models, designers, and other talented individuals. Halima’s experience illustrates bell hooks’ (1992) idea that the commodification of the Other often decontextualizes veiled Muslim women’s lived experiences to serve white interests.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter illustrates a complex set of meanings which the Islamic veil holds and how these meanings change depending on varying social, cultural, and political conditions (Hoodfar, 1993; Shirazi, 2020). Meanings and understandings of the veil differ within both Muslim and Western communities. The hijab, a religious garment, is worn as a form of identity construction and expression (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020). Many veiled Muslim women combine their religious duty of modesty with fashion by following trends (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020). A few studies recently emerged focusing on the association between veiled Muslim women, modest fashion, and the commodification of Islamic modesty. The literature illustrates that modest fashion that is catered toward Muslim women within mainstream fashion industries serves Western interests (Bahrainwala & O’Connor, 2019; Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020). The commodification of Islamic modest apparel is often done for financial incentives (Bahrainwala & O’Connor, 2019; Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020) and to fetishize veiled Muslim women (Bahrainwala & O’Connor, 2019; hooks, 1992). This commodification of modesty is certainly controversial within Muslim communities (Shirazi, 2020).

Although limited, there is literature on veiled Muslim women's experiences in Western societies. The veil is often seen as a signifier of oppression in the West, or liberation, by the wearer (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014). Many hijabi women in the West claim that the hijab is a symbol of their religious affiliation, which provides them strength and liberation (Atasoy, 2006; Droogsma, 2007). However, veiled Muslim women live in contexts that negatively define their veils (Droogsma, 2007). In a post 9/11 world, hijabi women face gendered racialized experiences because of their intersectional qualities (Goodwin, 2020; Karaman & Christian, 2020). This is because hijabis are both women and visibly Muslim. Some veiled Muslim women also belong to racialized minorities. The Orientalist representations of veiled Muslim women serve to marginalize them (Al-Saji, 2010; Goodwin, 2020; Satiti, 2007). This is done to reinforce Western ethnocentric values and beliefs, such as dominant discourses surrounding identity and gender (Al-Saji, 2010). Media representations of veiled Muslim women are also understood through hooks' (1992) discussion of the exoticization of the Other. The veiled Muslim woman is seen as a desirable body to the White colonizer; therefore, anti-veiling attitudes are prevalent in political discourses (Al-Saji, 2010; Byng, 2010; Fanon, 1969). Both the ethnocentric condemnation of the veil and the construction of the veiled woman as an object of desire operate to silence veiled Muslim women. This study is therefore an attempt to give agency to veiled Muslim women by showing how they engage in complex performances that both incorporate and respond to the hegemonic discourses that marginalize them.

## **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This study is a visual rhetorical analysis of the online performances by veiled Muslim women influencers. The analysis focuses on photos and videos uploaded on Instagram and TikTok that relate to fashion and Islamic modesty. This study will also consider the influencers' written captions as part of the analysis. The visual rhetorical approach is influenced by Sonja Foss's (2020/2005) work on visual performance.

Hijabi influencers are the focus of this study. The complex experiences of veiled Muslim women have received little attention by Western feminist scholarship (Mohanty, 1984). Echoing Spivak (1988), it can be said that veiled Muslim women have often been "spoken for". Theoretical frameworks that shape and influence this study mainly focus on the historical struggles between Othered groups and the West. This study draws on scholars such as Mohanty (1984), Spivak (1988), Ahmed (2000), and Said (1979) to develop an understanding around these struggles. These frameworks provide a standpoint to explore how veiled Muslim women mitigate the understandings of them that are embedded in discourses, even if some of these frameworks position Muslim women outside Western hegemonic discourses. This study aims to challenge a reductionist conceptualization of the veiled Muslim woman as outsider to explore veiled Muslim women's performance within Western culture. This investigation into veiled Muslim women's visual performance reveals hijabi influencers engaged in creative labour to define modesty for a global audience.

## **Sample and Sampling Criteria**

This research aims to answer the question of how hijabi influencers define modesty in Islam through the texts, images, and videos they produce on their visual social media platforms. To answer this question, I use visual rhetoric and analyze ten images and videos from five hijabi influencers: Jasmine Fares, Omayya Zein, Leena Snoubar, Nawal Sari, and Rawdah Mohamed. I chose to analyze one image and one video from each influencer, resulting in an analysis of 10 visual artifacts. A small sample size was chosen considering the scope of this study. The influencers selected as part of the sample are popular and explicit about the importance they attribute to modesty in their lives. Considering that I have been following these influencers for a couple years now, I am aware of their online practices: they use their platforms mainly to inspire others through their modest fashion content. Therefore, I chose to include them within this study knowing that they fit the purpose of this research, and that their content will assist in answering the research question.

The selection of visual artifacts is done using a purposive sampling method. This sampling method ensures that the visual artifacts are chosen to efficiently capture the research goal. There is a set of criteria that I followed when gathering my sample. This criterion included considering the how recent the influencer posted the image/video (it must be within the past year to develop an analysis around recent definitions of Islamic modesty), whether the influencer is in the image/video, and the presence of a direct relation of the image/video to fashion, modesty, and Islam.

During the selection process, I looked through the influencers' public profiles on Instagram and TikTok and began to save each image/video that fit the criteria. To organize the data, a separate folder was made for each influencer. The visual artifacts that fit the criteria were



saved into the corresponding folder. Initially, I was going to gather my sample from the influencers' YouTube channels as well. While browsing their YouTube channels, I noticed that each influencer was not consistently active in producing and uploading videos to this platform. Even though they all have previously uploaded videos, these did not always fit the sampling criteria as they were either older videos and/or they did not relate to fashion or Islamic modesty. Some of the hijabi influencers, such as Leena Snoubar, Omayya Zein, and Jasmine Fares, post some fashion-related videos on their YouTube channels. However, most of their videos, along with the other hijabi influencers' videos, consist of house tours, pranks, and 'story times'. Therefore, for the purpose of this research and the set criterion for sample collection, I excluded YouTube from the process of sample collection.

### **Visual Rhetoric as Method**

The method of analysis that this research follows is visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric is a method that primarily focuses on "the symbolic or communicative aspects" of visual texts (Foss, 2005, p. 145), such as images or videos. According to rhetorical scholar, Sonja Foss (2005), the use of visual rhetoric has grown considering that the method "provides access to a range of human experience not always available through the study of discourse" (p. 143). Studying visual imagery offers an alternative lens to human interaction and experience that is analyzed through "nondiscursive symbols" (Foss, 2005, p. 143).

Visual rhetoric can be used to analyze "the rhetorical strategy of visual enactment" (Foss & Foss, 2020, p. 129). The focus is placed on material aspects of an image, like clothing (Foss & Foss, 2020). These visual components constitute a performance (Foss & Foss, 2020). Visual

rhetoric studies how persuasion arises from symbolic action (Gries, 2020) that is “virtually limitless” (Foss, 2005, p. 145). Essentially, the meanings are dependent on how the researcher views and analyzes the image.

The goal of visual rhetoric is to understand how a visual artifact “operates rhetorically in contemporary culture” (p. 151). It is important to note that “not every visual artifact is visual rhetoric” (Foss, 2005, p. 144). A visual object must comply with three main characteristics to be studied under the lens of visual rhetoric. These three characteristics are: symbolic action, human interaction, and presence of an audience (Foss, 2005). Foss explains that the visual artifact must communicate meaning through a system of signs (symbolic action), involve human action “either in the process of creation or in the process of interpretation” (human interaction), and communicate with an audience (presence of an audience) (p 144). The visual artifacts that I analyze fit into these characteristics. The images/videos included in this study produce rhetorical meanings through their symbols and signs, incorporate human intervention as the influencers are featured in each image, and are uploaded to social media platforms intended to be viewed by a large audience.

While using visual rhetoric, the researcher aims to understand the rhetorical response of an image (Foss, 2005). Developing a rhetorical response involves attributing meaning to the elements of an image, such as body language, colours, and textures (Foss, 2005). Moreover, visual artifacts can perform ideological meanings (Gries, 2020). Individuals or groups of people can deliver and subvert hegemonic meaning regarding a particular topic through visual performances (Gries, 2020).

Veiled Muslim women influencers communicate meaning through their online performances. According to Foss & Foss (2020), “performance is a major aspect of how

visibility is made” (p. 141). A core concept in this study is ‘visual enactment,’ which Foss & Foss (2020) define as “the way in which a challenge to an existing belief system and the presentation of an alternative are performed in some detail for viewers, primarily via the dimension of visibility” (p. 141). A focus on performance or visual enactment requires the examination of how “individuals enact the part” (Foss & Foss, 2020, p. 125). This reveals the “ideological meanings”, or “social agendas” conveyed through the artifact (Foss & Foss, 2020, p. 127).

My analysis will focus on both the performance and “sensory aspects of the image”, such as colour and texture (Foss, 2005, p. 145). This research aims to find out how the images/videos uploaded by hijabi influencers constitute an online performance and contribute to the definitions of Islamic modesty. In my analysis, the focus is placed on the hijabi influencers’ attire (colour, texture, fabric, patterns, etc.), body language (eye contact, placement of hands, and pose), symbols, and the background/location of the artifact. Clothing can influence social change by resisting hegemonic “rhetorical code or syntax of dress” (Foss & Foss, 2020, p. 127). Hijabi influencers engage in visual enactment as they embody ideologies through clothing and style. In addition to a focus on visual enactment I will consider the captions of images and videos as framing the performance of modesty in each case.

## **Ethical Implications**

All research must consider potential ethical implications. My data collection is dependent on the uploaded content of five hijabi influencers, so I must consider the ethics around this data collection. The hijabi influencers that are included in this research all have public profiles with

larger follower counts (all over 100,000 and a few over 1,000,000); therefore, I do not need to request access as it is readily available to myself and others. Townsend and Wallace (2016) outline that each social media platform has a set of terms and conditions that each user must comply with to continue using their services.

To ensure that the data collection is ethical, researchers should be aware of the terms and conditions of the platform they are using to conduct research. Therefore, I have consulted with the terms and conditions of both Instagram and TikTok. In terms of their data policy, both platforms outline that they have no control over how third parties use public data. Instagram and TikTok claim that people can screenshot, share, and use content that is uploaded by public profiles. They maintain that if users are uncomfortable with this potentiality, they have the option to alter their privacy setting and make their profiles private. Townsend and Wallace (2016) also encourage researchers to consider whether the data is sensitive. Considering that the influencers' content I am analyzing is uploaded for the intent to *influence* their audience, it is not deemed sensitive. Therefore, I conclude that there are no potential ethical implications.

## **Theoretical Framework**

To interpret the data, this thesis focuses on the theoretical frameworks of post-colonial feminism, orientalism, cultural industries, and creative labour. The performance and visual enactment that the sample of hijabi influencers engage in will be understood through these frameworks. Both post-colonial feminism and orientalism will help address these influencers' femininity and how they operate in relation to Western women. The goal is to interpret the differences and similarities between the live experiences of veiled Muslim and non-

veiled/Muslim women, specifically those situated within the West. Moreover, these theoretical lenses will assist in interpreting whether veiled Muslim women continue to be Othered and identified through homogenous experiences of oppression and submission to a patriarchal society, which will reveal whether the East-West dichotomy is still at play. Through the lens of cultural translation, modesty and modest fashion as a practice exercised by hijabi influencers will be understood as a negotiated process. Finally, the online practices of hijabi influencers, such as their production and consumption of cultural artifacts online, will be interpreted through the theory of creative industries/labour.

### **Post-Colonial Feminism**

Post-colonial feminism emerged as a critique, or response, to “Western” feminist texts (Mishra, 2013). Western feminism has often disregarded, or homogenized, the different experiences that women in postcolonial nations endure, which reinforces an ethnocentric view and understanding of women (Mishra, 2013). One of the main contributors to postcolonial feminism is Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984), an influential feminist studies scholar. In her seminal essay, “Under Western Eyes”, Mohanty (1984) explains that Western feminist literature is not “homogenous in its goals” (p. 335). She argues that a handful of Western feminist authors tend to classify “Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western” (p. 335). These texts typically embed structured power relations within them (Mohanty, 1984). This is done in various ways, for instance, Western feminism often colonizes the experiences, “material”, and “historical heterogeneities” of third-world women (Mohanty, 1984). Mohanty (1984) explains that third-world women are often described as a “singular monolithic subject” in many Western feminist texts and are classified as “non-Western” (p. 333). The representations of the third-world woman “appears arbitrarily constructed”; however, Western discourses are still

reflected within these representations (Mohanty, 1984, p. 342). To demonstrate this tendency in feminist texts, Mohanty (1984) analyzes five examples where third-world women are viewed “as a homogenous ‘powerless’ group often located as implicit *victims* of particular socio-economic systems” (p. 338). One of these is the case of how Western feminism has interpreted the Muslim veil as resulting from patriarchal dominance (1984). This is problematic because “the more the number of women who wear the veil, the more universal is the sexual segregation and control of women” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 347).

Mohanty (1984) proposes a notion called the “third-world difference”, which refers to how feminist scholarship colonizes the differences of ‘Othered’ women. Essentially, some Western feminist texts colonize the diverse experiences of “third-world women” by suggesting that they are homogenous (Mohanty, 1984). The notion that Othered people hold homogenous experiences further feeds into the idea that third-world women are a monolithic group (Mohanty, 1984). This belief extends to the struggles that these women endure within the society they reside in (Mohanty, 1984). Essentially, it is often assumed that third-world women live in a space that is dominated by men, which leads to a state of oppression (Mohanty, 1984). Mohanty (1984) advocates for inclusivity in Western feminist texts, rather than continually referring to non-Western women as powerless subjects.

Sarah Ahmed (2000), another key contributor to post-colonial feminist theory, has focused on the discursive construction of “stranger-ness”. She explains that those who are called “strangers” are so in relation to the West. Multiculturalism attempts to be inclusive of the ‘stranger’; however, this inclusivity results in further marginalization of Others because of their differences (Ahmed, 2000). There also exists ‘stranger fetishism’ which “invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts ‘the stranger’ off from the histories of its

determination” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 5). Essentially, ‘the stranger’ is thought to have a unique “nature” (Ahmed, 2000). The different experiences and characteristics of strangers are fetishized and “come to mark out terrains, subjects and bodies” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 103). These known differences are concealed, meaning that ‘the stranger’ is unaware of the “histories of determination” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 31). Moreover, the ‘the stranger’ is systematically othered (Ahmed, 2000).

Ahmed (2000) maintains that post-colonialism “is about rethinking *how* colonialism operated in different times in ways that permeate all aspects of social life, in the colonised and colonising nations” (p. 11). However, she tends to focus more-so on post-colonialism and feminism. Her main question is “who is speaking here?” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 69). In other words, she is wondering whether the dominant culture is speaking for strangers or the strangers speaking for themselves. To answer this question, Ahmed draws on scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and Mohanty (1991).

In her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, Spivak (1988) concludes that “the subaltern cannot speak” (p. 184). The West examines non-Western cultures and aims to understand their differences. However, during this process, the heterogeneity of the Other is ignored. Western feminism is interested in “international feminism” which develops a form of division between the West and colonized nations (Spivak, 1988, p. 84). These texts fetishize the experiences of third-world women. The Othered women are unable to speak against these exploitive texts that homogenize their experiences (Spivak, 1988). This process allows Western feminism to position itself in an ideal position and to further fuel ethnocentric thought (Spivak, 1988). As mentioned previously, Mohanty (1991) explains that Western feminist literature has the tendency to homogenize the experiences of ‘third-world women’. This suggests that Western feminism has

historically spoken for the Other, which influences the “politics of not-hearing” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 61). Rather than focusing on the voice that constitutes the dominant discourses surrounding ‘the stranger’, Ahmed (2002) focuses on the question “who knows?” (p. 70). Essentially, there is a shift from the “production of otherness to the (re)production of strangeness” which allows for figures to continue learning about ‘the stranger’ and be in conversation *with* them or *for* them (Ahmed, 2000). This new framework will place ‘the stranger’ in a position where they will be able to re(represent) themselves rather than the West solely speaking for them (Ahmed, 2000). The focus shifts from the power relations within representations to a broader, and possibly more inviting, relationship between the West and the subaltern (Ahmed, 2000).

Post-colonial feminism provides this research with a theoretical standpoint that will assist in investigating how veiled Muslim women influencers contribute to, or complicate, the discourses surrounding them. As mentioned within the literature, representations of veiled Muslim women, constitute a “negative mirror” where Western female ideals are reflected (Al-Saji, 2010). Veiled Muslim women have historically been and, to an extent, are still being spoken for. However, these women are engaging in a form of (re)representation by adding to current discourses (and potentially challenging them) through their creative work online. Veiled Muslim women can be categorized as a subaltern as their voices are often silenced, the “exotic” nature of their differences is commodified to enhance whiteness (hooks, 1992), and veiling is still seen as a “backward” practice. However, this research aims to explore the agency of veiled Muslim women and the extent of their subaltern status. Veiled Muslim women influencers are in a place of privilege where their online content and voice reach thousands of people. This privilege is also achieved through their economic, social, and cultural capital. This constitutes a



form of agency that complicates their status as subaltern and shifts the voice from the West to veiled Muslim women.

## **Orientalism**

Renowned scholar, Edward Said (1979) developed the theory of “Orientalism” to explain how the West discursively produced the “Orient” to both justify the “superiority” of the West and politically and culturally control the Middle East. Said (1979) defines Orientalism as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 3). The Orient is typically spoken for and written about by European (or American) scholars (Said, 1979). This distinction between the “Orient” and the “West” constitutes a dichotomy that is reproduced through stereotypical representations. This reinforces Western power and domination, essentially reinforcing hegemonic ideologies (Said, 1979). The Orient that Said explores in *Orientalism* includes Middle Eastern and North African countries that are predominately Arab, along the Eastern Mediterranean. In his work, Said (1979) describes the Orient as “almost a European invention”, where “exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes,” and “remarkable experiences” exist (p. 1).

Applying a Foucauldian notion of discourse, Said (1979) discusses how Western societies discursively maintain superiority of the West over the East and reinforce “Oriental backwardness” (Said, 1979, p. 7). Said (1979) explains that there are three main conditions to identify, or speak about, the relationship between the Orient and the Occident. These are: 1) the Orient is not just an idea or creation, 2) cultural, social, and historical ideas cannot be understood

or discussed without the awareness of power dynamics, and 3) “the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths” (p. 6).

There are multiple forms of racism and imperialism, which serves to ‘Other’ people within the East. This constitutes a dominating relationship between the West and veiled Muslim women, which is explored throughout the literature review. The dehumanizing “images, themes,” and “motifs” of veiled Muslim women define Western women as “liberated” and “beautiful”. It is important to note that this Orientalization of veiled Muslim women take place even when the subjects are born and/or live in the West. This “Orientalization” within the West is the reality of many hijabi influencers that is not captured in Said’s (1979) original discussion of Orientalism. As Orientalist discourses, whether against North American or Middle Eastern veiled Muslim women, present false or exoticized representations of the Orient, it is expected that a form of re-representation should emerge from “Orientals” themselves. This thesis proposes hijabi influencers as active agents who can complicate Orientalist power dynamics through visual performances of modest fashion.

## **Cultural Translation**

This thesis regards the visual performance of hijabi influencers as a process of cultural translation, in which symbols and practices belonging to fashion corporate culture and to Muslim religious and cultural views of modesty are negotiated. This thesis’ use of the term “cultural translation” is influenced by the work of Walter Benjamin (1923) and Boris Buden and Stefan Nowotny (2009). In his essay ‘The Task of the Translator’, Benjamin (1923) views translation as a form of agency, challenging common views of translation as a “betrayal” of the original.

Benjamin (1923) maintains that a translation supplements and adds to the original, constituting a creative act. Elements of the original are present in the translation; however, the original is transformed into a new product and is “continually renewed” (Benjamin, 1923, p. 255). Therefore, a translation and an original are never fixed and continually unfolding into new creations (Benjamin, 1923).

Cultural translation is discussed across a variety of disciplines and is understood through the “contradictory paradigms of postmodern theory and postmodern political visions: essentialist multiculturalism and its counterpart, deconstructionism” (Buden & Nowotny, 2009, p. 198). Multiculturalism challenges the notion of universality as it views all culture as unique and original (Buden & Nowotny, 2009). Buden and Nowotny (2009) maintain that multiculturalism “is the ideological background of what we call identitarian politics” (p. 198). Identitarian politics illustrates how we view and talk about others, for example, someone can be referred to as “Muslim” or “Arab” or “female”, or they can be a combination of these identities (Buden & Nowotny, 2009). On the contrary, deconstructionism challenges the notion of essence (Buden & Nowotny, 2009). In this view, “culture is a narrative without any historical or physical origin” (Buden & Nowotny, 2009, p. 198). Deconstructionists maintain that culture does not relate to the “natural state of things”, like race and ethnicity (Buden & Nowotny, 2009, p. 198). In this sense, culture emerges from other forms; however, throughout this process, it still maintains its “own origin” (Buden & Nowotny, 2009). The process of cultural translation can be explored through the analysis of hijabi influencers and their agency online. Hijabi influencers indulge themselves in various practices at once, which may work to reveal the ambiguities of the original, the Islamic doctrine. These influencers engage in production and distribution of content on Western platforms and integrate Western fashion trends in their modest lifestyles. This may constitute a

form of cultural translation where a new form of experience and expression emerges through the negotiation of multiple “originals.” The visual performance of hijabi influencers may also reveal the limitations of the original texts, such as competing notions of “modesty” and the commodifying effects of mainstream fashion styles.

### **Creative Industries and Labour**

The emergence of creative industries has been studied by cultural theorist, Rosalind Gill, and academic scholars such as Stuart Cunningham and Andy Pratt. Cunningham (2002) asserts that the creative industry is a recent area of study within academic and industry discourses. The creative industry differentiates from the culture industry as it can “capture significant ‘new economy’ enterprise dynamics that such terms as ‘the arts’, ‘media’, and ‘cultural industries’ do not” (Cunningham, 2002, p. 54). This means that the creative industry allows for “activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation through generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (p. 54). Creative industries prioritize technological innovations which enable interactivity and convergence (Cunningham, 2002). Gill and Pratt (2008) borrow the term ‘informationalization’ from Hardt and Negri (2000) to discuss the extent of influence that technological advancements and practices have on this kind of labour. This places emphasis on content creation and online distribution as sources of profit (Cunningham, 2002). Creative labour is “insecure, casualized or irregular labour and is often defined as ‘precarious’ (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 2).

Although there are competing discourses surrounding the terms ‘cultural industries’ and ‘creative industries’, Gill and Pratt (2008) refer to creative industries as “a political rebranding of

the cultural industries” (p. 2). Creative labour consists of the production and distribution of content which results in the commodification of cultural content (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Youth tend to engage in creative labour more than others (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Moreover, creative labour involves self-representation, self-expression, and self-actualization that exist in this form of labour, which is linked to “work as play” (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 15). This causes a deep interconnection between work and every-day life that is hard to separate, and results in the capitalist colonization of all areas of life (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Considering that the internet enabled the emergence of “participatory economy”, “free time becomes free labour” (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 17). Therefore, pleasure and self-exploitation are two key features of creative labour, often resulting in “embodied experiences” where individuals engage in the “materialization in the subject’s flesh” (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 19). This refers to creative labour as an embodied experience. Finally, Gill and Pratt (2008) discuss the lack of organizational structure in creative labour, which contributes to individualized and deregulated work.

The concept of creative labour reveals the potential contradictions of hijabi influencers’ visual performance as the same practices that may allow them to articulate a voice and engage in complex practices of translation that challenge orientalism may also contribute to commodify their bodies and practices.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis’ visual rhetorical analysis will focus on how five hijabi influencers embody different cultural practices and symbols to articulate a voice. This will be done by focusing on the influencers’ attire, pose, background, symbols, and accompanied captions for each photo and video analyzed. Foss & Foss’ (2020) definition of visual enactment will assist in the discussion of how veiled Muslim women complicate some of the orientalist assumptions associated with

veiled Muslim women, and third-world women in general, discussed by Mohanty (1984), Spivak (1988), Ahmed (2000), and Said (1979). Hijabi influencers do this by visually performing their understandings and beliefs around Islamic modesty. Moreover, this study complicates the notion of agency by investigating how veiled Muslim women may engage in the commodification of their own bodies by engaging in creative labour.

## Analysis

This analysis examines the ways in which hijabi influencers perform their values and beliefs surrounding Islamic modesty through content creation. Influenced by Foss & Foss' (2020) work, "An Explication of Visual Enactment in *Advanced Style*: Fashioning a Challenge to the Ideology of Old Age", I use a visual rhetorical approach to analyze visual enactment. To do this, I interrogate the elements within each image/video and identify emerging meanings and interpretations. This is done through an analysis of the ideological meanings performed through elements such as attire, body language, symbols, and the background/location.

## Background

Jasmine Fares is an Arab-Canadian influencer based in Toronto, Ontario. She mostly posts fashion, marriage, and comedic content. She is a founder and designer of a modest fashion brand called Fares Collection. Her brand targets both veiled Muslim women and women who dress modestly regardless of if whether they veil or identify as Muslim. She often models her own clothing, but there are also many non-hijabi women who model the clothing as well. Omayya Zein is a Venezuelan-Palestinian hijabi influencer who is based in Florida. She is verified on Instagram and TikTok, which means she has a blue checkmark next to her name. Most of her uploads are fashion related; however, she does engage in "couple" content as well, where she makes videos with her husband. Leena Snoubar used to be a nurse, but she left nursing to pursue a full-time job in content creation. She is an Arab-American influencer based in Texas who engages in modest fashion content on all platforms, like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Nawal Sari is an Arab-Australian hijabi influencer based in Sydney, Australia. Like Zein, Sari is

also verified on Instagram. Sari is highly integrated within the Western fashion industry and collaborates with and models for high-fashion brands, like Gucci. The last influencer, Rawdah Mohamed, is also verified on Instagram. Mohamed models for many high-fashion brands and tends to wear bold outfits. She has been featured in fashion magazines, like Vogue Arabia, and is an editor for Vogue Scandinavia. She is a Somali-Norwegian content creator based in Oslo, Norway. These influencers were chosen to be included in this study based on both their online practices surrounding modesty and Islam, their immense popularity and presence online, and my familiarity with their work. Photos and videos of these influencers will be examined through a visual rhetorical lens, which will assist in revealing patterns or inconsistencies in definitions of modesty.

Visual rhetoric focuses on the symbolic meanings of an artifact and how ideologies are performed (Foss, 2005). Using visual rhetoric, I analyze the ways these influencers are engaging in the rhetorical strategy of visual enactment. Essentially, I will examine the ways they embody, or enact, their ideologies and meanings surrounding the veil and modest fashion. Through the elements present within each artifact, I develop an understanding of how these influencers perform their ideologies surrounding their identities. I examine how meanings are conveyed through different elements in the artifact, like clothing, body language, facial expression, symbols, and backgrounds. By doing this, I will reveal potential meanings and agendas that are being conveyed (Foss & Foss, 2020).



## Performing Through Photographs



*Figure 1.* Screenshot of Jasmine Fares' photo that was uploaded on her Instagram on September 12, 2021

The first notable feature of Jasmine Fares' photograph (see **Figure. 1**) is the bright, yet subtle, colour scheme of her outfit. While Fares positions her body to directly face the camera, she wears a classy outfit comprised of neutral-toned colours. She has a pair of ripped blue jeans on with black open-toe heels, a burnt-orange satin button-up blouse, a rose hijab, and a Burberry handbag. Fares positions her bag toward the camera; therefore, the label of the luxury brand, Burberry, is visible to the viewer. This placement of the bag leads viewers to assume that Fares holds wealth and economic power. Fares incorporates luxury brands in her representation, which illustrates integration within mainstream fashion industries. This demonstrates her involvement within the fashion industry. Moreover, Fares' blouse engages viewers and brings their eyes to the center of the photograph, allowing them to fully observe the outfit. Fares ties her hijab effortlessly, yet it still serves its purpose in concealing her hair and providing modesty. Although Fares' jeans are ripped, she continues to wear them in a modified way. Rather than the skin of her legs showing, Fares wears tight, white leggings underneath the jeans. This practice is consistent with Shirazi's (2020) claim that veiled Muslim women are continually modifying their clothes to maintain modesty. The jeans have a loose-fit and are long, which conceals the shape of her legs and covers everything excluding her ankles, which works against Islamic rulings of modesty. Fares tucks in half of her blouse into her jeans which covers her crotch area. Like the jeans, the blouse is loose-fitting and has wide, long sleeves.

The photograph is shot at a lower angle, which makes Fares appear in a superior position. This is because she stands tall and is looking downward at the camera. Fares positions her body toward the camera with one foot in front of the other and a slight bend in her knees. Behind her, there is a double car door garage attached to a house. The simplicity of the background further allows Fares' outfit to be the main feature of the image. Fares gently holds the fabric of her hijab

in one of her hands with a delicate smile. The caption of Fares' Instagram post reads, "A little late, but here is the birthday fit" and mentions that her blouse and jeans are from the Canadian-based brand, Dynamite. Shirazi (2020) and Lodi (2020) claim that Western fashion conglomerates target veiled Muslim women through the production of modest clothing. Considering that such modest attire is being sold by Dynamite, a Western brand, it can be inferred that the company is being inclusive by selling clothing for veiled Muslim women. Although Fares explores Western brands by wearing their clothing and making minor modifications to maintain modesty.

Fares explores distinct colors and textures in her clothing. Through her attire, pose, featured Burberry bag, and caption Fares holds a considerable amount of power in her performance. This is achieved through both her social and economic capital. The embodiment of social/economic capital is demonstrated through the garments she wears, her pose, and the background. Moreover, Fares' photo is a product of creative labour where she engages in self-representation (Gill & Pratt, 2008) by developing understandings of modesty in Islam and through her implicit advertising of the two fashion brands Dynamite and Burberry. Creative labour is defined as precarious as it is an irregular form of economic gain. It is practiced in a casual atmosphere, such as Instagram. Furthermore, her eye-catching yet neutral-toned outfit challenges the belief that veiled women should only wear black and simple hijabs and clothing (Shirazi, 2020). She steps away from these traditional practices by wearing mainstream clothing, like a pair of jeans and a blouse. This is a form of cultural translation as Fares is engaging with cultural objects within the West, such as jeans and a shirt, but modifying it to fit her religious and cultural practices. This new form is a modest outfit that complies with the religious rulings of Islam while remaining stylish. Fares covers her everything excluding her feet, hands, and face, which

are permissible to reveal in Islam (Qur'an, 24:30). However, her ankles are exposed, which goes against Islamic rulings.

Fares holds agency as she chooses what to wear, how to pose, which picture to post, and what messages she wants to convey through her photo and caption. This departs from Said's (1979) theory of Orientalism where the West speaks for the Other. In this case, Fares is not being spoken for. Instead, she has a voice. As Ahmed's (2000) maintains, the West and 'the stranger' can be in conversation with another. In this case, Fares contributes to the discourses prevalent within the West in a self-representative way. This conversation does not occur in a literal sense, rather it is demonstrated as Fares wears Dynamite clothing and chooses how to wear it so she can maintain her modesty. Moreover, her performance challenges some characterizations of third-world women as uniformly powerless (Mohanty, 1984). She is engaging in a leisure practice and explores neutral colours, different textures, and a powerful pose. Although empowering, this performance demonstrates a more nuanced form of modesty and Islamic practices within a Western society. Through the incorporation of mainstream clothing and fashion trends, Fares negotiates the meanings surrounding modesty in Islam. She exists in this in-between space of traditional symbols, experimental attire, mainstream fashion and modest practices.



*Figure 2.* Screenshot of Omayya Zein’s photo that was uploaded on her Instagram on August 11, 2021

In this photograph, Omayya Zein is walking across an empty street where no one else seems to be present. She looks directly at the camera, building a relationship between her and the viewer. While staring at the camera, she wears a small grin on her face. The background appears peaceful as there are silences in the background; the streets are empty. The background also matches the tones of Zein’s outfit. Her pastel blue and white colour combination is tied together

with black and gold detailing. The brick road that Zein is walking on in Florida acts as an ideal canvas to display her carefully crafted outfit. She wears a pair of loose-fit blue jeans that are long enough to reach the ground. They have slits on the bottom, likely for mobility reasons; however, it works in Zein's favour as she can show off her white strapped heels. She wears a bra-top, which is a top that is bra-like in terms of the straps and length. Although this top is meant to be more revealing, Zein adds a modest twist which also serves as a fashion statement. She pairs the bra-top with a thin, long sleeve blouse underneath. Throughout her online career as a modest influencer, Zein explores different ways to be modest while incorporating Western and Muslim-owned brands. She often demonstrates different ways to make outfits more modest through videos. The blouse is long enough to conceal her crotch area. To show off her bra-top and blouse combination, Zein wears her hijab to the back. This essentially exposes her chest area. Zein poses in a walking motion toward the camera to achieve a candid-like photograph. This indicates that Zein is living leisurely as she freely walks the streets of Florida. One hand is gently raised toward her head while the other is holding a white Coach bag with gold detailing. Zein holds her bag toward the camera, showing the symbol of the brand.

The caption of Zein's photo mentions the weather and how lucky she is to get this photo since it started raining shortly after. This caption has nothing to do with her outfit; however, she does include multiple hashtags. A couple of these include: #ootd, #hijabfashion, #hijabinspiration, and #omayazein. These hashtags work in favour of Zein's overall performance as she is illustrating her veiling practices and beliefs through modest fashion. Through her use of hashtags, she implies that she is intending to inspire her audience through her style and hijab-friendly attire. These hashtags are consistent with her other uploads. She ensures to mention that her content is for modest and hijabi inspiration. This adds to her performance and implies that

veiled Muslim women can engage in leisurely practices and explore different fashion trends. This challenges the traditional belief that veiled Muslim women are oppressed (Al Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007). Zein challenges dominant views that are sometimes found in some Western feminist texts that position the veiled Muslim woman as a victim of patriarchal control (Mohanty, 1984). She does this through her experimentation with clothing by integrating Western fashion trends into her modest lifestyle. Since Zein is exploring different materials such as chiffon, jean, and leather while modifying clothing to be more modest, she appears to be fashion conscious (Hassan & Harun, 2016).

Everything about this photo appears perfect from the empty streets to the well-planned outfit. Zein appears to have strategically captured a moment where her outfit meets the modest requirements set by Islam and herself, while also staying trendy. This photo illustrates creativity as Zein is producing and distributing fashionable content for her audience. It is also an instance of cultural translation as Zein is finding elements within the dominant culture, such as social media practices and Western fashion, and modifying it in ways that stays consistent within her own belief system. This provides Zein with agency as she is choosing which elements in Western culture to integrate and modify into her own cultural and religious practices (Buden & Nowotny, 2009).

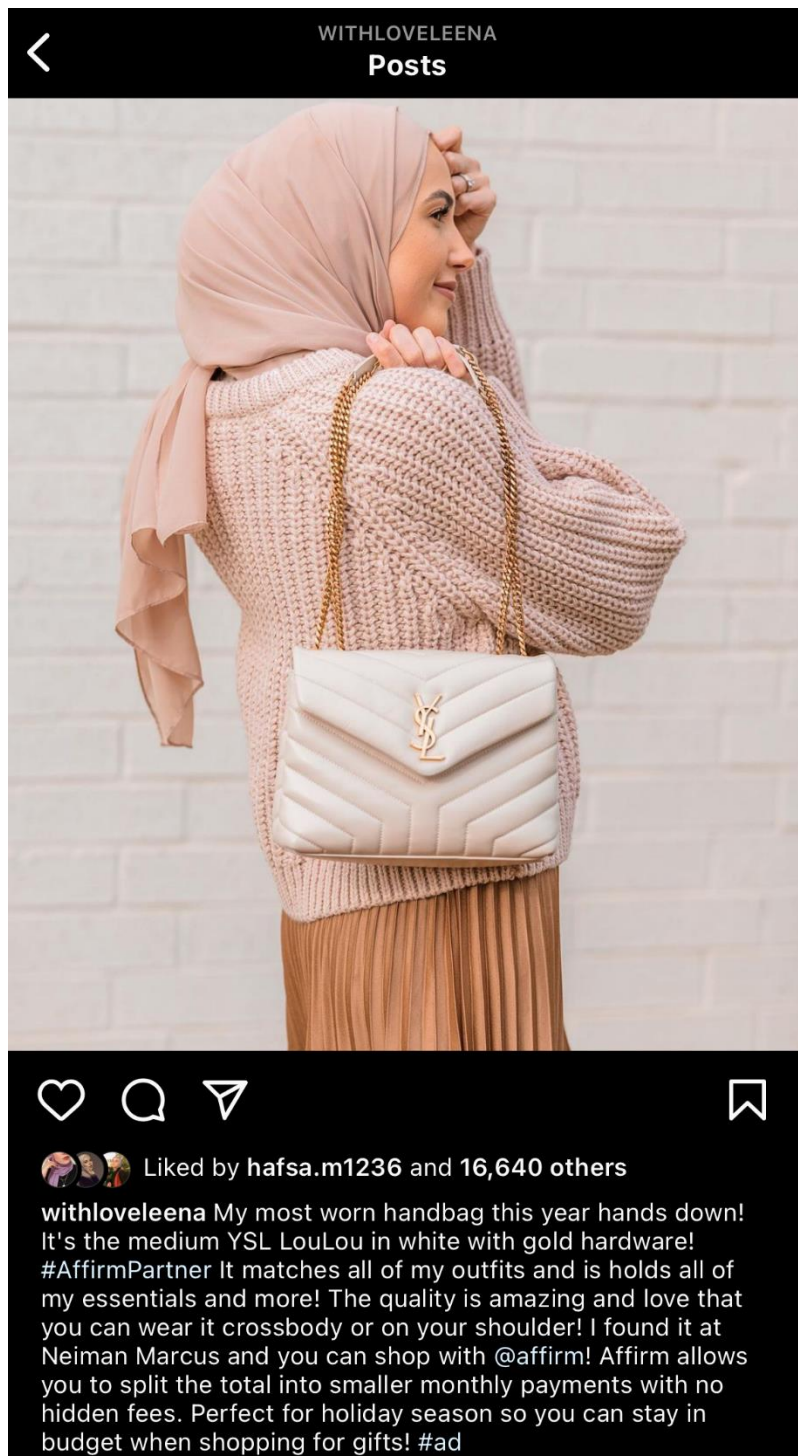


Figure 3. Screenshot of Leena Snoubar's photo that was uploaded on her Instagram on

December 22, 2021



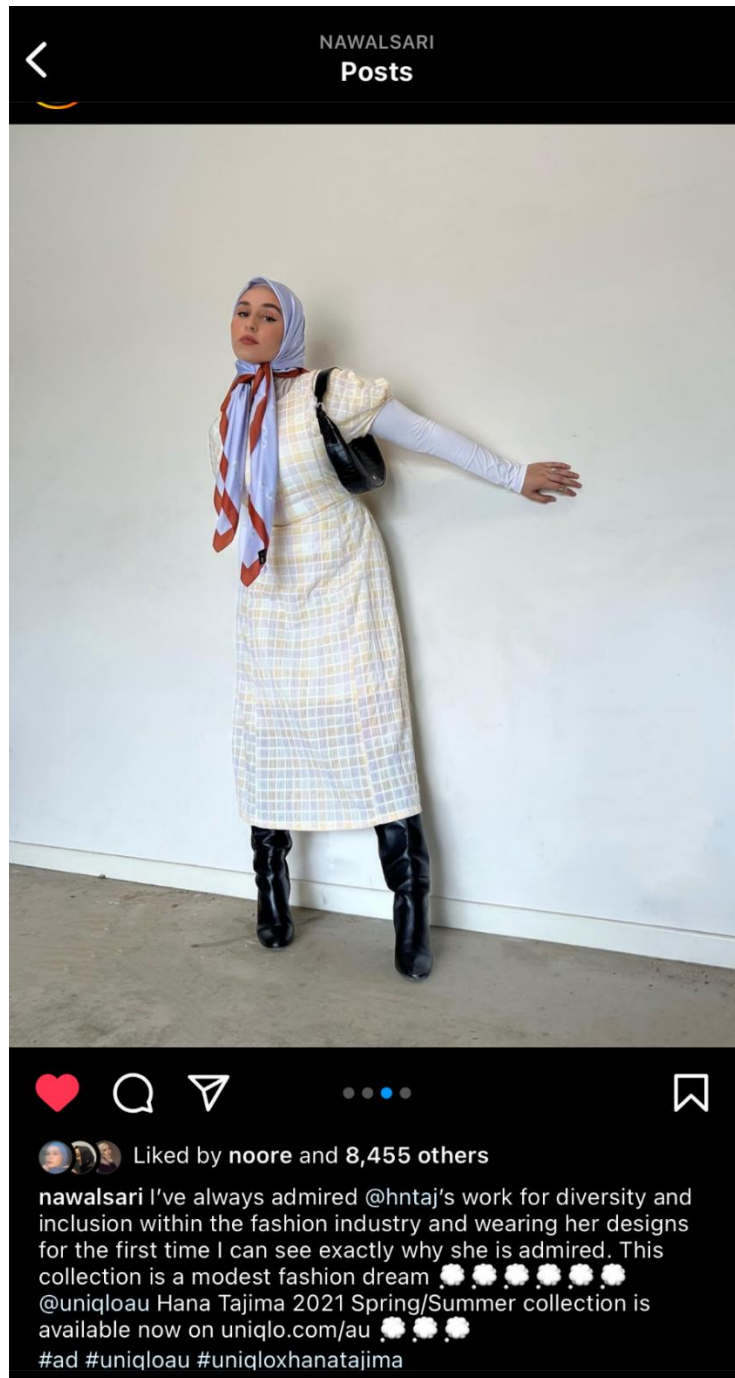
Leena Snoubar posted an image that showcases the high-fashion brand, Yves Saint Laurent (YSL). YSL is a luxury brand that is timeless, chic, and engages in Parisian aesthetics. YSL mainly focuses on cosmetics; therefore, the bag that Snoubar is wearing appears to be vintage. Vintage YSL illuminates luxurious and classy style through its cultural products. This form of femininity promotes strength and confidence. In contrast, new YSL demonstrates edginess through grunge aesthetics while still holding onto the traditional aesthetics of the brand. The meaning associated with YSL adds dimension to Snoubar's performance. By incorporating this brand in her performance, Snoubar demonstrates a form of wealth. Considering the meaning behind YSL's brand and its association to grunge style, there seems to be a negotiation of modesty. Snoubar is attempting to remain stylish, trendy, and embody cultural capital by wearing a YSL bag. At the same time, she is trying to demonstrate her modest lifestyle through the wearing of loose and neutral clothing. This negotiation occurs as modesty is not only understood as a way of concealing one's body but is also in association to style. This negotiation still occurs regardless of whether Snoubar is aware of YSL's overall aesthetic.

Snoubar is looking away from the camera and standing in front of a white brick wall. She positions her body toward the wall which allows viewers to see her outfit from the back; this works to show off her YSL bag. While standing to the side, Snoubar smiles and looks upwards. Her facial expression is welcoming and invites the viewer to interact with her photograph as she appears friendly. The public's eyes are first drawn to the YSL purse, which appears to be the main feature of the image. This focus in turn, influences the overall pose, outfit, background, and angle of the photograph. One of Snoubar's hands is holding her bag to her shoulder while the other is gently holding the edge of her hijab, which frames her face. The theme of modesty is performed through Snoubar's attire. The sweater provides an oversized fit for Snoubar to hide

the shape of her upper body. She pairs the light-pink knitted sweater with a taupe pleated skirt. The skirt is loose, which further provides modesty. This monochromatic outfit is completed with a pink hijab that conceals Snoubar's skin and hair completely. Through her unique style of outfit and economic capital, Snoubar's performance demonstrates heterogeneity in veiled Muslim women experiences. Moreover, by wearing light-coloured attire and maintaining a level of light and brightness in her image, she challenges the belief that all veiled Muslim women wear black (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Shirazi, 2020). These light colours can be seen as a form of resistance against the belief that Muslim women are policed into wearing veils that are dark and oppressive (Al-Saji, 2010).

The caption of this photograph expresses Snoubar's interest in the high-fashion brand, YSL, and a financial service called Affirm. Affirm allows consumers to finance the cultural products they are purchasing. By associating Affirm with a high-luxury brand, YSL, Snoubar is performing aspirations of social, cultural, and economic capital. As mentioned previously, modesty goes beyond concealing the body. Modesty is also understood as behavioural. By consuming luxury brand with credit and advertising this practice, Snoubar negotiates her practices of modesty. This is because she is displaying her wealth and financial practices while embodying cultural capital through the wearing of a vintage purse. There is a hashtag at the end of the caption that says '#ad,' which illustrates Snoubar's transparency about her paid partnerships. This indicates that she engages in creative labour as might be getting financial compensation for the content she produces and advertises for brands. This works in relation to her modest lifestyle as Snoubar can demonstrate her interest in fashion, Islamic modesty, and the veil while increasing her wealth through online practices (Gill & Pratt, 2008). She engages in the notion of "work as play" through self-representation and self-exploitation. Her work online,

which constitutes creative labour, is casual and integrated within her every-day life. This can be seen as an exploitative; Snoubar is gaining economic power by commodifying herself. She also engages in self-representation by exploring her identity online through fashion interests as a veiled woman. Snoubar uploaded this photograph which shows her wearing a modest and stylish outfit, which demonstrates her religious affiliation and fashion consciousness (Hassan & Harun, 2016). She can be referred to as a hijabista, which are veiled women who engage in fashion trends and playful ways of styling the hijab (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan and Harun, 2016). However, while participating in self-representation, Snoubar is engaging in a form of creative labour through a paid partnership where she is exploiting her fashion skills to promote a high-fashion brand. Although this is an exploitative practice, it still provides her with agency (Gill & Pratt, 2008).



*Figure 4.* Screenshot of Nawal Sari’s photo that was uploaded on her Instagram on December 2, 2021

There is a level of confidence that Sari embodies from the way she is dressed to the way she is posing and staring directly at the camera. Her pose is striking as she is standing up against

a wall and holding up one of her hands against the wall. Sari's head is lifted upward, and she holds a straight face. Her pose alone demonstrates confidence and agency. The background consists of a white wall and concrete floor, which acts as a perfect canvas for Sari to show off her outfit. She is wearing a short-sleeved calf-length dress. The dress has a checkered pattern which entails different shades of yellow. Under the dress is a tight long-sleeve top that is white in colour which allows for modesty but does not take away from the detailing of the dress, such as the puffed sleeves. Since the dress is not long enough to conceal the skin on Sari's ankles and calves, she wears long leather boots. The pointed toe, loose-fit, and length of the boot adds dimension to her outfit while offering more modesty. The shape of her body is completely covered as the dress and boots are loose. By doing this, Sari demonstrates to her audience that she is staying consistent with the modest practices of Islam while also being trendy. The lilac purple and fire red hijab add a pop of colour to the neutral outfit. Sari ties it in a way that allows the hijab to fall in the front which works to conceal her chest. The black, leather shoulder bag matches perfectly with her boots as they share the same material and colour.

Through her performance, Sari is experimenting with alternative ways of tying her hijab to develop a more stylish look. This indicates that she is exploring hijab fashion through clothing and styling as many hijabistas do (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Hassan & Harun, 2016). This often equates to being labelled as "Westernized" by other Muslims since the traditional wearing of the hijab is not being practiced (Shirazi, 2020). Rather than wearing plain attire and a simple black hijab, Sari experiments with different patterns and textures. From a leather bag and boots to a checkered yellow dress and purple hijab, Sari's performance entails levels of integration within the Western fashion industry while still following the Islamic rulings of modesty. She is following mainstream fashion brands and selecting pieces that are unique and modest. Sari

covers her hair, neck, chest and ears while also concealing the shape of her body (Al-Saji, 2010; Droogsma, 2007; Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Najmabadi, 2005). Through the pose, outfit, and caption of her photograph, it can be inferred that Sari holds agency.

The caption of this photograph states that it is an advertisement for Hana Tajima's 2021 Spring and Summer collection. Sari expresses her interest and appreciation for this collection and Hana Tajima's ability to maintain diversity and inclusivity in the mainstream fashion industry. Sari says that "this collection is a modest fashion dream" within the caption of her image. This demonstrates that the mainstream fashion industry and veiled Muslim women are in conversation with one another. This is consistent with Ahmed's (2000) new framework that calls for Westerners to establish dialogue with strangers (p. 61). Essentially, when Islamic modesty is understood in a broader context, brands can incorporate modesty and develop ongoing dialogue. There is more agency in the representations of veiled women as they are in control of the performative aspects of advertisements, for example, Sari uses her platform to model a fashion brand's new collection that contains modest styles. She uses her voice to express appreciation for the integration of modesty within the industry. This indicates that Sari, who is part of a group of women that has historically been considered as subalterns, has the agency to speak on her own behalf and use her voice and fashion skills to integrate herself within high fashion. Finally, as Sari is wearing clothing from a high fashion brand and promoting it through her photograph, she is engaging in creative labour. Although Sari is gaining economic wealth through this labour, she is also engaging in self-exploitation. This may take away from her agency as her body, fashion sense, and modest lifestyle is being commodified through her labour practices.



*Figure 5.* Screenshot of Rawdah Mohamed’s photo that was uploaded on her Instagram on January 30, 2022

In *Figure 5* Mohamed is wearing a completely red outfit. Like Snoubar in *Figure 3*, Rawdah is also not looking directly at the camera. Instead, she is looking to the side and her eyes are covered by large sunglasses. The sunglasses reflect the sun, sky, and trees that she is gazing at in the distance. With one foot in front of the other, Mohamed stands effortlessly in the snow. This directs all attention toward her outfit and how it is styled. The background contrasts with

her outfit in multiple ways. For one, the bright red colours that make up her outfit stand out against the white snow and blue sky. The winter snow and weather typically call for cozy outfits like puffer jackets and oversized sweaters; however, Mohamed is wearing a fashionable outfit despite the location. She is experimenting with bold colours and statement pieces while being in the wilderness, which demonstrates uniqueness and fashion consciousness (Hassan & Harun, 2016). Fashion conscious individuals often wear unusual clothing to adhere to a unique fashion style that enhances their self-representation (Hassan & Harun, 2016, p. 483). Mohamed is playful in her fashion choices. Even though red is already a bold colour, she is completely covered in it. Through this, Mohamed challenges the traditional expectations of veiled Muslim women and how they should wear plain attire to ensure there is no attention drawn to them (Fayyaza & Kamal, 2014; Shirazi, 2020).

The red theme that Mohamed integrates within her performance appears to be purposeful. This inference is made through her caption as she says “on some red tings” with red exclamation marks and a red stop sign. These emojis are used to show excitement. The term ‘*tings*’ is slang for “things”. The caption allows for viewers to directly look at Mohamed’s outfit and observe the unique qualities of it. Mohamed wears red, baggy pants with white stripes on the sides of them and tucks them into white snow boots. She pairs these pants with a red asymmetrical long dress-like top. The short side exposes one side of the red pants, and the long side conceals shorter one until the knee. She wears a metallic red jacket on top and finalizes the outfit with a red hijab. This offers modesty as everything is covered including skin, body shape, and hair. Mohamed embodies her Islamic beliefs through the wearing of modest clothes. Rather than perpetuating the hegemonic understandings of the veil, such as it being oppressive and backward, Mohamed engages in a playful performance surrounding modesty and the Islamic veil (Droogsma, 2007).



This playful performance is demonstrated through the bright colours she is wearing. Red is not a traditionally accepted colour for the veil. Black has traditionally been the accepted colour for veils. The combination of different materials, such as metallic and matte red, demonstrates that Mohamed can fully represent her fashion interests and creatively style her hijab (Hassan & Harun, 2016; Shirazi, 2020). This resists the dominant stereotypical beliefs that that Islam limits women through the veil.

Mohamed's performance entails bold attire, fashion experimentation, and a confident pose. This performance maintains the idea that modest fashion can be practiced through bold fashion statements and by being integrated within the mainstream fashion industry. This demonstrates that Mohamed is culturally translating Western fashion and showing its potential to accommodate modesty. Mohamed holds agency through her ability to choose what to wear, how to wear it, and whom to share it with. She engages in re-representation of veiled women through her boldness and high levels of agency, which complicates the belief of veiled women as a "single monolithic subject" (Mohanty, 1984).

## Performing Through Videos



Figure 6. Screenshot of the TikTok video, *Wearing hijab limits your life and shows you're oppressed*, uploaded by Leena Snoubar on August 4, 2021.

Snoubar's video consists of a compilation of different modest outfits that she has worn around the world while travelling. The audio that she uses is mostly instrumental with a defined beat and a lyric that includes a sigh that says, "try me". Snoubar mouths the lyric at the beginning of the TikTok video and, once the instrumental part of the audio begins, she shows multiple outfit photos. The caption embedded in the video reads "wearing hijab limits your life and shows you're oppressed". She appears to be addressing a common stereotype held within the West regarding veiled Muslim women. Based on the audio and the caption that accompanies the video, which says, "you can dress modestly and still follow your dreams! It's all in your mindset", it can be inferred that Snoubar is attempting to combat the negative stereotypes held in Western societies. She does this by building a compilation of modest fashion photographs she has taken around the world during travel. By acknowledging this stereotype, Snoubar contributes to competing discourses (Droogsma, 2007). Dominant discourses marginalize veiled women and view them as 'backward' or 'oppressed' which contradicts with the lived experiences of some veiled women (Droogsma, 2007). However, even when resisting she associates the hijab with oppression.

The stereotype that Snoubar is addressing is outlined quite well by Said in *Orientalism*. Said (1979) claims that the Occident enforces authority and power over the Orient. This is done through the systematic misrepresentation of the Orient. In this case, Western discourses surrounding Islam propose that veiled Muslim women are oppressed by their veils and modest attire. This belief extends to Western feminist texts, as explored by Mohanty (1984), where there exists the belief that third-world women have the homogenous experience of being oppressed and victims of sexual segregation. These beliefs are developed through the 'stranger' qualities of veiled Muslim women. To be categorized as 'the stranger', there must be recognizable

differences between the group and the dominant culture. Since veiled Muslim women are visual minorities, they have historically been categorized as ‘strangers’ and are often fetishized (Ahmed, 2000). This fetishization can be demonstrated through the idea that the West views the hijabi woman as oppressed and, therefore, in need of “liberation.” (Al- Saji, 2010; Zine, 2002). The attempt to liberate veiled Muslim women is done through proposed veil bans (Al-Saji, 2010). Through her performance, Snoubar is attempting to resist these stereotypical beliefs by demonstrating that veiled Muslim women are liberated and can partake in adventure while maintaining their modesty (El-Bassiouny, 2018; Lodi, 2020). While doing this, Snoubar feeds into the stereotype by suggesting that veiled Muslim women can be free if they have the right mindset. This suggests an inseparable association between the veil and oppression.

Snoubar shows 24 modest fashion photos in the video. With each beat of the TikTok audio, a new image is shown. In almost every photo Snoubar wears a long sleeve maxi dress and a matching hijab. In the couple of photos where she does not wear a dress, she is wearing a long sleeve top that falls to her mid-thighs with a pair of pants under. Each of her outfits conceals her skin and shape of body. Her hijab covers her neck and hair completely. Each of the photos is taken in exotic and modern places around the world, like beaches and high-rise buildings. Snoubar embodies the belief that veiled Muslim women are liberated and can engage in leisurely lifestyles while living in piety. Through the dramatic angles of the photographs, scenery, and neutral, modest attires worn by Snoubar, this video indicates that she is comfortable with her identity as a veiled Muslim woman and her modest practices. Snoubar also shows resistance to the societal constraints or beliefs toward veiled women, which emphasizes agency and awareness.



Figure 7. Screenshot of a TikTok video uploaded by Omayya Zein on January 25, 2022

In this ‘get ready with me’ TikTok video, Zein shows her audience how to create a modest and hijab-friendly outfit. She does this while using a popular song on TikTok by CKay called Emiliana. The background music seems to have nothing to do with the actual objective of

the video, rather it adds an extra feature to it to gain the attention of the viewer. Zein starts by wearing a light brown, almost a burnt-orange, jumpsuit with fuzzy slippers and a neutral toned hijab. Although the initial outfit is intended to be loungewear, it is still modest and fully conceals her body. Zein holds up different garments, starting with an off-white pair of trousers. After showing each garment, she puts them on one at a time. She pairs the trousers with an oversized off-white sweater with balloon sleeves. The trousers and sweater match perfectly and offers a cohesive look. She wears a neutral hijab in a darker tone to contrast with the attire. A mixture of dainty and bold rings with stones are worn to accentuate the outfit. Zein playfully does jazz hands to show off her rings with a big smile on her face. She shows a close-up of her zipping up high white boots, which works to further show off her gold rings. For a pop of colour and a more modest look, Zein buttons up a mint-green blazer. To finalize the look, Zein wears a purse from a high-fashion brand called YSL. She shows the detailing and logo with a close-up shot and then shows how it looks with her full outfit. Zein blows a kiss to her audience, waves, and walks out of the frame.

By choosing her own outfit and paring different garments and accessories together, Zein holds agency. This is seen as she decides what to wear. She also shows that she owns a variety of clothes and bags in the background, which is her closet. Through her performance, Zein embodies the idea that there is versatility in clothing. She illustrates to her audience that there is little difficulty in creating a fashionable outfit that still maintains modesty. Clothes can be paired and worn in ways to make it modest. Although the trousers and sweater are modest already, they are simple, so Zein accessorizes them with a nice blazer, bag and jewelry. Moreover, her performance offers a re-representation of hijabi women. Veiled Muslim women have been absent or silenced in dominant media discourses (Droogsma, 2007; Macdonald, 2006; Najmabadi, 2005;

Satiti, 2007); however, Zein is able to re-integrate and re-represent herself and hijabi women through her video production and distribution. This is done as she demonstrates the unlimiting features of the veil. She demonstrates that the hijab can be worn while exploring fashion trends, wearing high-fashion brands, such as YSL, and expressing oneself through colours other than black.

The caption of the video reads, “get ready with me” with a sparkle emoji at the end. Zein accompanies the caption with multiple hashtags, such as ‘#ootd, #fyp, #hijabstyle, #hmxme, #hm, #hijab’. These hashtags give the viewer more insight on what Zein is performing. She demonstrates that the intent of her performance is to provide outfit inspiration for people, specifically those who wear the hijab. The hashtags ‘#hmxme’ and #hm’ are promotions for the brand H&M. This shows that while Zein is embodying her value of Islamic modesty through her performance, she is also engaging in creative labour. It can be inferred that this is a paid partnership, but Zein does not explicitly state this in her caption. However, based on the hashtags, the use of a popular TikTok song, and her overall reach on TikTok, Zein may be receiving financial benefits from this TikTok. In a way, this creative labour becomes inseparable from Zein’s normal lifestyle. This can lead to further self-exploitation as she is commodifying almost every aspect of her life. This is because she is filming things that are present in her life. While getting ready, she produces a video, then continues with her day-to-day activities (Gill & Pratt, 2008).

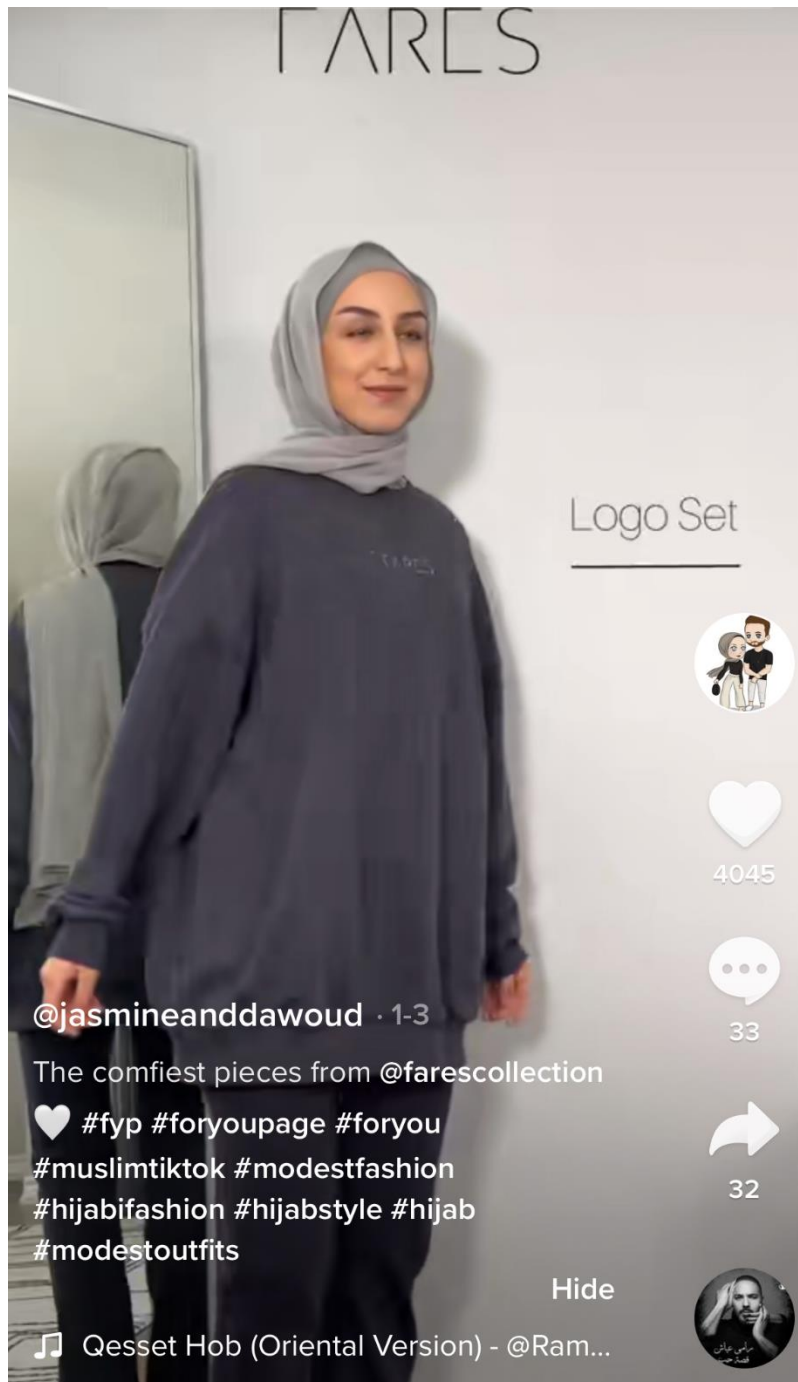


Figure 8. Screenshot of a TikTok video uploaded by Jasmine Fares on January 3, 2022

Fares owns her own modest fashion brand, based in Toronto, called ‘Fares Collection.’ Every garment she designs, and sells, is created for veiled Muslim women and non-veiled women who dress modestly. Much of the clothing in her collection consists of comfortable



clothing, often referred to as loungewear, such as matching joggers and sweaters. The collection not only offers loose-fit clothing, but most of the tops cover the crotch and behind area. This offers more modesty and ensures that veiled Muslim women do not need to modify any of their clothing to achieve a modest look.

Living in a capitalist society, all businesses are interested in profit. It can be inferred that Fares launched this business in response to her personal experience with wearing the hijab and looking for modest and affordable attires. This means that Fares, like non-Muslim owned Western brands, understands the demand of modest clothing in Muslim communities; therefore, they target Muslims since they can produce much revenue (Bahrainwala & O'Connor, 2019; Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020). In a way, Fares is commodifying Islamic modesty through her business and the garments she sells (Lodi, 2020; Shirazi, 2020).

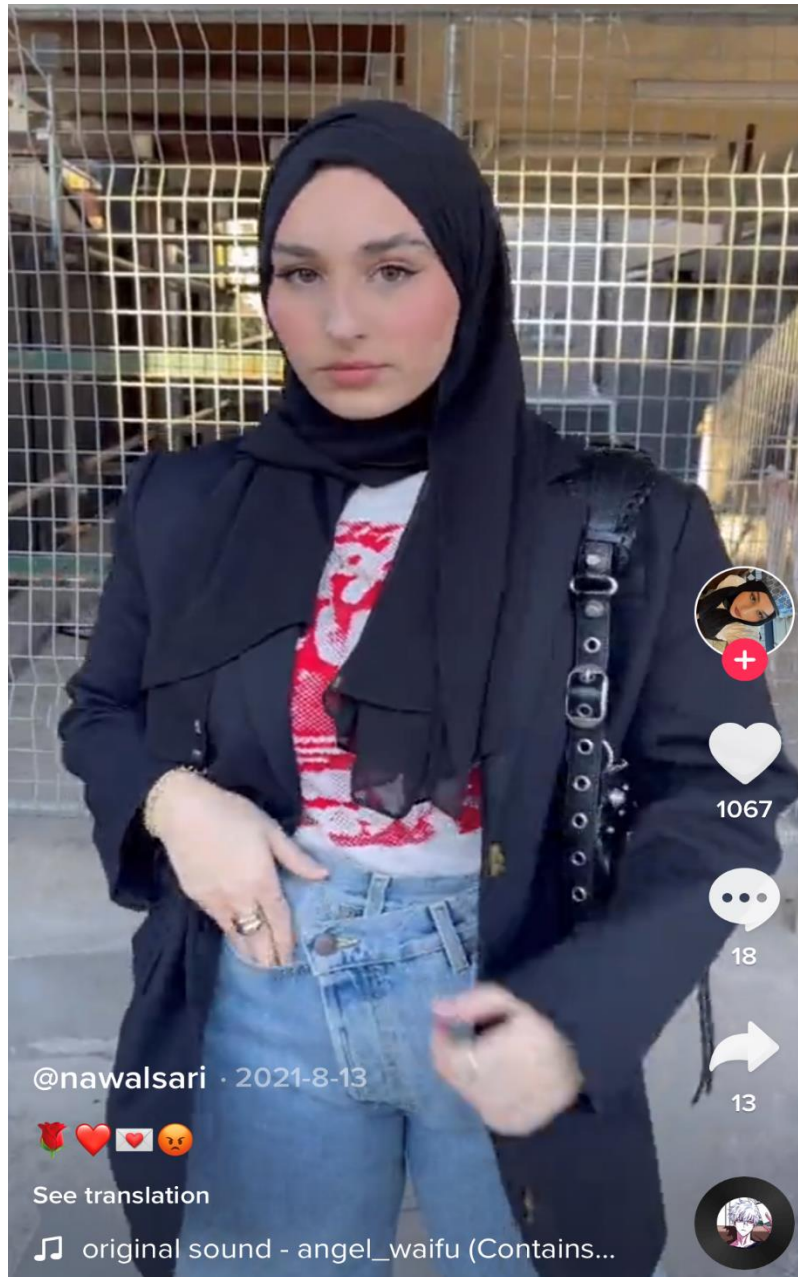
The video that Fares produces and uploads on TikTok consists of five different Fall/Winter outfits that she sells. The audio she uses for this video is an Arabic song, which is captivating for the audience. This is because most songs used on TikTok videos are English songs and extremely popular. Hearing a song in Arabic that does not have much hype attached to it is an attention grabber. She starts off her video with her regular outfit in the frame, and a close-up of her face. She wears a black beanie on top of a chocolate brown hijab. Beanies are popular hats, which are typically used for warmth during the winter. Fares takes a beanie and finds a way to wear it with her hijab. She places it on top of her brown hijab, which offers an alternative style of the hijab and extra warmth. The embedded caption in the video, before she starts showing outfits, is “comfy f/w fits”. The ‘f’ stands for fall and the ‘w’ stands for winter. The caption that accompanies the video is: “the comfiest pieces from @farescollection” with a heart at the end. Fares incorporates many hashtags at the end of her caption. Some of these are: ‘#muslimtiktok’,

‘#modestfashion’, ‘#hijabifashion’, ‘#hijabstyle’, ‘#hijab’, and ‘#modestfashion’. These hashtags illustrate that Fares is trying to attract modest fashion lovers and hijabi women to view her video. She is intending to promote modest attire in Islam through her own brand.

The first outfit that Fares shows is a matching sweater and jogger set in a taupe colour. Fares pairs this outfit with a dark brown hijab and moves around to show off the outfit in different poses. The second outfit is a charcoal black long-sleeve top with a cuffed wrist and a tighter black pant. Fares wears a taupe-coloured hijab. The third outfit is a dark grey loungewear set with the brand name, ‘Fares’, embroidered on the sweater. A grey hijab is worn with this outfit to fully develop a monochromatic look. Fares wears a full black outfit including a long hoodie, a beanie, and leather leggings. The only non-black garment worn by Fares in the fourth outfit is light grey. Finally, the last outfit is like the first except it is a toffee-brown colour and Fares wears a taupe hijab for contrast. While showing off these five outfits, the ‘Fares’ brand name is embedded on the top area of the video to indicate to viewers that the clothes shown are her brand. A similar feature with each garment is that they are all loose, modest, hijabi-friendly, and neutral colours.

As mentioned in the literature review, the campaigning of the Nike Pro Hijab was an example of fetishization and maintains Orientalist tropes by speaking for veiled Muslim women (Bahrainwala & O’Connor, 2019). Moreover, instead of having a veiled Muslim woman choose on how to be represented, Nike took the representation into their own hands. They went insofar as to disassociate the Nike Pro Hijab from veiled Muslim women (Bahrainwala & O’Connor, 2019). As a veiled Muslim woman, Fares chooses how to build a connection between her clothing line and veiled Muslim women. She does this by using hijabi women, including herself, as models for her brand. This constitutes an act of agency as Fares is actively re-representing

veiled Muslim women through her own lens that is influenced by her lived experiences as a veiled woman. Through this TikTok, Fares demonstrates that the purpose of clothing in Islam goes beyond modesty. She is playful in the clothing she makes by producing styles with different colours, fabrics, comfort levels, and textures. This demonstrates agency as Fares is controlling the narrative of her brand by designing clothing, choosing models, and advertising tactics. This also shows that veiled Muslim women hold power in their experiences and voices, which departs from some Western feminist views as outlined in Mohanty's (1984) work.



*Figure 9. Screenshot of a TikTok video uploaded by Nawal Sari on August 13, 2021*

By putting a series of short clips together and experimenting with different poses and angles, Sari creates a playful TikTok video to showcase a trendy outfit. The caption of the video is 4 red emoticons (emoji), which includes a rose, heart, letter with a heart on it, and an angry face. These emojis seem to add stylistic features to Sari's performance rather than ideological

meanings. Behind her is a metal gate that completely encloses the area behind it. This is a simple background for Sari to showcase her outfit, while also adding mysterious elements to the video. The song she uses for this video is called ‘What You Waiting For’ by Gwen Stefani. It is popular on TikTok as it is loud and repetitive, which makes it catchier. The loud qualities of Gwen Stefani’s voice and the beat within the song contrasts with modesty as it brings attention to Sari and engages users. This song adds to Sari’s performance as she is negotiating the meaning of modesty by introducing “untraditional” music for veiled women while posing to show off her fashion look. This music is defined as untraditional as it explores louder vocal and instrumental sounds. Through both the music and the exploration of metals and textures, Sari is capturing grunge aesthetics in her performance. This performance is alternative to the hyper-femininity often associated with veiled Muslim women.

Sari stares directly into the camera at the start of her video while adjusting her jeans and placing her hand, which is covered in big, gold rings, in her front pocket. She looks to the side briefly, then back at the camera with her initial pose. While fixing her bag, she looks to the side again. She poses to emphasize the front of her outfit and her side profile. For face makeup, Sari wears natural-looking makeup and brightens her cheeks with pink blush. She does the ‘soapy’ brow look, where gel is used to brush the eyebrows in an upward motion. She wears lipstick and eyeshadow that are different shades of pink to keep her makeup subtle and neutral. Unlike most jeans, the pair that Sari is wearing has a ‘crisscross’ quality to them. Rather than zipping up straight, the buttons are sewn diagonally on. This makes a simple jean appear classier and adds dimension to the outfit. Paired with the blue, baggy jeans there is a graphic tee that is mainly white with red detailing. The red detailing of the shirt matches the pink tones in Sari’s makeup look. To complete the look, the influencer wears an oversized black blazer that has gold buttons.

She keeps the blazer open to show the ‘crisscross’ on her jeans and the pop of colour from her graphic tee. Her hijab is simply black, which matches well with the blazer and bag. Sari, who wears a straight face at the beginning of the video, starts to smile when she shows the back of her outfit and the detailing of her shoulder purse, which is black leather and much metal detailing, like zippers and buckles. The amount of metal on her purse, thick rings, oversized black blazer, and asymmetrical jeans offers a grungy look. These aspects of her outfit, along with the song used, provides edge to the outfit. Throughout the video, Sari is showing her outfit and makeup at multiple angles. Near the end of the video, Sari’s back is completely facing the camera. She slightly turns around and while looking over her shoulder, she does a “duck face” by pressing her lips together and pouting.

The loud characteristics of the outfit, like the leather and metal features of the purse, crisscross jean, hints of red colour, and song, add emphasis to the overall performance. There is a level of experimentation associated with the way Sari is dressed, how she stares as intimidated by the camera in the beginning, and the song attached to the video. She also engages in playfulness through certain poses and facial expressions. There is ease in her movements. This is seen through her ability to act natural in her performance while clearly posing and trying to look good. Her smile and pout demonstrate that she is engaging in a leisure experience. This allows Sari to embody the experience of being a liberated Muslim woman, which is contrary to many discourses. The liberation achieved through her appearance is a sign of detachment from popular beliefs surrounding veiled women, such as hyper-femininity and traditional clothing (black abaya and black hijab). She demonstrates this to her rhetorical audience (Foss, 2005), which are her TikTok followers and anyone who sees this video on their ‘for you page (FYP)’. She engages in visual enactment (Foss & Foss, 2020) through the performative aspects of the video. In this

sense, she is challenging the notions that veiled Muslim women cannot be playful or creative in their appearances and behaviour. Moreover, she is wearing a black hijab, which is a colour that has oppressive connotations attached to it when referring to hijabi women (Droogsma, 2017; Shirazi, 2020; Ternikar 2009). However, while she wears it, she does not demonstrate that she is oppressed. Her performance indicates that the colour black is used mainly for fashion purposes, such as matching colours, and to add to her edgy look. This illustrates that Sari is negotiating the understandings of modesty. This is contrary to the dichotomy between the East and West that is discussed in the theoretical framework (Mohanty, 1984; Said, 1978). Rather than completely practicing the Islamic traditions of modesty or integrating within the West, Sari finds her own way of maintaining piety and fashion.



*Figure 10.* Screenshot of an Instagram video uploaded by Rawdah Mohamed on March 1, 2022

Mohamed is walking across a street, in what appears to be a French city based on the sign that is written in French that reads ‘Rue Sainte-Cécile’ and translates to ‘Sainte-Cecile Road’. Mohamed edits this video into slow-motion, which acts as a form of dramatization. This is because the action of walking across the street appears dramatized as her body movements are slowed down and we can see slight movements of her clothing, like the blazer and skirt, which



are caused by the wind. The audio that Mohamed uses for her video has one lyric, “it’s a look”, which is a phrase repeated throughout the song. The beat to the audio sounds like something that is used in a fashion show, which fits the video perfectly as Mohamed is strutting across a street in a fashionable way. Through her performance, Mohamed uses the aesthetic streets and neutral background as a fashion runway to emphasize the uniqueness of her outfit.

As she walks across the street, Mohamed looks ahead of her and slowly glances to the side. Covering her eyes are a pair of black sunglasses which are tucked into a black hijab. For a clean look, her hijab sits tightly around her head, and is tucked into her red blazer. In her caption, Mohamed gives credit to the person who seems to have designed the “magnificent blazer” (2022). The red blazer is unique in every aspect. Firstly, it has intricate details where white lines are sewn on in a specific pattern. There is a white line that goes upwards and two lines on each side that are sewn on diagonally. This pattern is all over the blazer, and on both sides which develops symmetry. The blazer also has padded shoulders and big collars, which gives it a bolder look. The blazer is cropped, and Mohamed closed it with the two medium sized buttons at the bottom. The sleeve of the blazer falls just above the knees, which covers Mohamed’s entire arm. The design is purposely supposed to be oversized and hide the arms of the wearer. Although this is the style of the blazer, there is a functional feature where the inner sleeve has slit for the arms to escape. While wearing a pair of straight-leg leather pants, Mohamed layers it with a skirt with a large open slit in the front. The skirt could be buttoned but Mohamed only keeps one button enclosed at the very top of the skirt. To complete the entire look, she wears square-toe leather boots. By wearing black leather on black leather with a bold, red blazer, Mohamed demonstrates the versatility of clothing. She also wears black lipstick on the outer areas of her lips, leaving the middle of her lips a natural colour.

Since Mohamed explores fashion through bold statements, layering, textures, and patterns, she performs the idea that unique fashion can be worn with the hijab. Mohamed's performance indicates that she is fashion conscious (Hassan & Harun, 2016). This fashion consciousness is presented through the pairing of different pieces of garments and responding to fashion trends through bold statements. Moreover, she is interested in her appearance through the carefully planned outfit (Hassan & Harun, 2016). Mohamed wears original clothing that enhances her individuality and acts as a method self-representation. This awareness influences their decision to wear bold colours and explore a variety of fashion styles (Hassan & Harun, 2016). Her outfit is mostly all black, excluding her blazer. However, her use of black is liberating through the unique textures and styling methods. By being fashion conscious, Mohamed holds a level of agency. She can represent herself and her hijab in an alternative way. This can be described using Benjamin's (1923) theory of cultural translation as Mohamed reveals the limitations within the original definitions of modesty. She uses bold fashion to demonstrate that modesty can be playful. To do this, she wears fashion garments from luxury brands and styles it with the hijab. This reveals that Islamic modesty and fashion is not limited and develops deeper meanings that are not present in the original. She seems to subvert the tensions surrounding the veil and Muslim women by being loud in her fashion decisions. The first thing that the viewer may notice about Mohamed's performance is the clothing and the last noticeable feature would be the veil. This blends the differences between the veiled woman and the West. The West tends to identify these differences to make 'the stranger' recognizable (Ahmed, 2000). Mohamed performs the idea that all veiled Muslim women embody different experiences and represent themselves through fashion. Therefore, they do not hold homogenous experiences (Mohanty, 1984).

This analysis demonstrates that there are similarities in how these five veiled Muslim women define Islamic modesty. Islamic modesty can be explored through different aesthetics, such as grunge and feminine styles. The analysis indicates that the different aesthetics can be incorporated into Islamic modesty and hijab practices without taking away from the overall purpose of the veil. However, at the same time, these hijabi influencers negotiate the meanings of the veil as they are not practicing Islamic modesty exactly how it is outlined in the Qur'an. The Qur'an outlines that modesty is achieved through veiling everything except the face, hands, and feet. Fares and Zein reveal their ankles. The Qur'an also mentions that Muslim women should conceal, or hide, their adornments, removing any attention from one's body by avoiding bold accessories, jewelry, make-up, and colours wearing outfits allows for greater modesty. Each of the influencers wear statement pieces, whether it is a purse or blazer, and eye-catching colour schemes. Although this is not entirely consistent with the Islamic rulings of modesty, their hair, skin, and body shape are completely covered. These veiled women are also practicing Islamic modesty in a way resists and challenges dominant views, which suggest that the hijab oppresses women and veiled women only wear black, simple attire (Droogsma, 2007; Shirazi, 2020). Instead, these hijabi influencers explore fashion and trends through their clothing.

All the influencers engage in a form of creative labour, which becomes integrated within their daily lives (Gill & Pratt, 2008). Although this labour allows for self-representation and self-actualization, it contributes to the commodification and exoticization of veiled Muslim women. As these influencers pose for the camera, wear stylish clothing, and advertise for different brands, they negotiate their modest lifestyles. Modesty is maintained through clothing and refraining from practices that bring high levels of attention on oneself. The influencers may believe that their practices are revealing a level of agency and inspiring other modest/veiled

women, which is true to an extent. However, their agency is also being compromised and they are further exoticizing their veiled and modesty lifestyles through self-exploitative practices.

## Conclusion

This thesis rhetorically analyzed an image and a video from each of 5 hijabi influencers: Jasmine Fares, Omayya Zein, Leena Snoubar, Nawal Sari, and Rawdah Mohamed. These influencers explore modest fashion, Islamic modesty, and fashion trends on their platforms. The bulk of their online content is related to modest fashion. This analysis offered insight on how visual elements of an artifact, like clothing, pose, background, and logos, can communicate meaning. This thesis demonstrates that veiled Muslim women engage in visual enactment, where they perform their beliefs and ideological views through visual components of their performance (Foss & Foss, 2020). They are also continually negotiating the definitions of Islamic modesty. This is because their practices contrast with dominant views of veils and modesty and do not completely align with the Islamic doctrines of modesty.

Although the purposive sample was limited to a total of 10 images and videos, the analysis outlines multiple similarities and differences in how hijabi influencers define modesty in Islam. For one, each influencer appears to be integrated within the mainstream fashion industry in a certain way. They wear luxury brands, like Coach, YSL, and Burberry, and in some cases, as with Fares, they also own modest apparel brands or work in the fashion industry a Mohammed. By building an association with corporate fashion these influencers demonstrate knowledge and experimentation in fashion, as well as economic wealth/power. Moreover, each of these influencers demonstrate the versatility of clothing by taking an immodest garment and modifying it in a way that maintains modesty. Zein, for example, wears a bra-top on top of a long blouse. This demonstrates creativity and the idea that veiled Muslim women are not limited to certain brands or types of clothing, like traditional dresses (abayas) and simple, black hijabs. This constitutes cultural translation to an extent though the notion does not fully capture the fact that

most influencers were born and/or live in the West and the fashion codes they are translating are not entirely foreign to them. Moreover, these influencers experiment with different aesthetics. For instance, Sari embodies some features of grunge-aesthetics through the buckles on her purse and experimentation with the colour black in contrast to red, white and blue. Fares, Zein, and Snoubar all engage in a more traditional “feminine” style by exploring neutral-toned colours, like taupe, soft textures, monochromatic outfits, and natural makeup. more trendy and elegant attire. Mohamed has a unique sense of fashion. She explores fashion statement pieces that are separate from trendy attire. Through their unique styles, these fashion influencers define Islamic modesty as something that can be practiced within Western societies through incorporation of different styles, trends, and high-fashion brands.

These influencers engage in creative labour, which is a form of labour comprised of activities that depart from traditional notions of work (Gill & Pratt, 2008). They blend their work with their everyday work, which means that they are continually engaging in self-exploitation (Gill & Pratt, 2008). In return, they achieve make profit and gain notoriety. However, this form of labour objectifies their performances by rendering into content to be consumed by global audiences, and, in turn, facilitating the future commodification of modesty, a process that is already manifest in corporate fashion as the attempt of Nike to commodify the hijab reveals.

The codes of modesty in Islam are simultaneously practiced and compromised in the influencers’ visual performances. This is demonstrated through the apparent distance from traditional notions of Islamic modesty, like wearing simple attire. Instead, the adornments of the hijabi influencers’ outfits attract attention and illustrate that modesty can result from stylish performances. Therefore, this thesis reveals that the influencers contribute to complicate mainstream views of veiled Muslim women and their modest fashion practices. The visual

performances analyzed in this thesis show that neither are veiled women oppressed by their male counterparts (Byng, 2010; Satiti, 2017; Zine, 2002), nor modesty is a homogenous set of practices that grant veiled Muslim women's autonomy. Instead, veiled Muslim women resist aspects of the Islamic doctrine and completely challenge Western beliefs toward the veil.

This thesis reveals a range of modest practices and understandings in Islam. The analysis shows that the hijabi influencers conceal their bodies, hair and skin the way that Islam outlines, apart from Fares and Zein who reveal their ankles. However, the way that these influencers approach modesty differs. On one side of the spectrum, there is extravagant high-fashion clothing that is worn to turn heads. The last noticeable feature while wearing such bold pieces of clothing is the hijab. Mohamed resides on this end of the spectrum as she wears monochromatic and layered, bold outfits. On the other side of the spectrum, there is fashionable and trendy attire that is more typically modest. This attire is trendy and explores ways of incorporating different types of garments, modest or immodest, into their every-day attire. Even by doing this, modesty is still achieved.

With any research, there are limitations. Although the purpose of this study is not meant to represent the entire group of hijabi influencers, size of the sample may constitute a limitation. In addition, the criteria followed in the selection of the sample introduced bias. For instance, the fact that I included influencers I was familiar with resulted in a sample of influencers who live within Western societies and share similar living standards and experiences. In a more expansive project, this thesis would examine a greater number of influencers, potentially within Western and Eastern societies, and examine how modesty is defined. With more time, this thesis may have efficiently revealed similarities and differences in the definitions of modesty in relation to different cultures, political contexts and economic groups.

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