

**Refashioning Hijab Practices Through Modest Fashion:
A Study of Islamic Feminism and Actions Towards Inclusion
for the Muslim Woman in America**

By

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We're all crowded around one small vanity mirror. Giggles fill the air. We're pushing and shoving each other. I'm the smallest one there so I'm getting knocked around but also being taken care of and pampered. The girls take turns wrapping my hair up in different colors and fabrics. They smear gloss over my tiny lips and brush sparkles over my tiny eyelids. I'm not accustomed to all this attention. My life is filled with men and boys, cousins, uncles, brothers, so to be treated like a doll is new and exciting for me. The girls take turns, or go in small groups, behind the partitioning wall we set up in the back room of the basement of the *masjid*, or mosque.. Behind that wall they change their outfits from simple abaya's to jeans, slacks, maxi skirts, turtle necks, dresses, cardigans, button down flannels, bedazzled belts, hoop earrings, heels, sneakers. I stand by wide eyed, watching my friends and family transform externally while remaining the same warm and vibrant women that I grew so familiar to and fond of. One of the older sisters bangs on the door. "*Khalas!*" she shouts, "Enough!" It was time for the fashion show to start. Despite being all made up, I was too young, or maybe just too shy, to participate. We all rush out excitedly, still giggling. I take my seat beside one of the aunties, who was dressed in the traditional all-black *niqab*. The lights are off and I can still hear the teenage sisters giggling from behind the curtain that leads out onto the catwalk. The show starts and again, I am wide eyed. Each girl has their moment on the runway- twisting and turning, showing off their long *hijabs*, each with a bright smile from ear to ear.

It was only a few years after the terror attacks of September 11th. Fueled by the Bush administration's "War on Terror" and the media coverage surrounding it, anti-Muslim rhetoric was intensifying in the country. Practicing Muslims carried the weight of murders committed by individuals we had never met and, more importantly, never identified with. The Muslim in America became an enemy. While many mosques have become targets of unconstitutional investigations and hyper-policing, they manage to maintain the role of sanctuary to their frequenters. It's not only a place to worship *Allah*, the word for God in Islam, it's a place to experience solidarity. From a young age, I was already aware of the strange looks and mumbled comments we received in public when walking around with my aunt in her traditional all black abaya and black hijab wrapped tightly around her face covering the entirety of her hair and part of her forehead. We were lucky, because many others suffered more violent expressions of this post-9/11 hysteria than we did. I didn't fully understand at the time, but to display such pride through confidently

existing as Muslims, during a time when Muslims were demonized, was an act of political defiance. It was activism. The older sisters, or aunts as they're typically referred to in Islamic culture, watching the fashion show may have felt sadness though. Watching their young kin happily embracing American culture which refuses to embrace them as Muslims must be strange. Yet, the aunts may have also felt hopeful and excited for the future. The older sisters experienced 9/11 more fully than any of us children and teens; they understood what it was going to take to establish the female Muslim population in America.

The rules we abide by and what we prioritize, our beliefs, are apparent in how we dress. How we choose to dress ourselves is a tangible representation of our identities and is interpreted by those around us as such, as our outfits are vessels for self expression. Muslim women, or *Muslimah*, in America have managed to manipulate their style advantageously, using it to adhere to their religious beliefs and enact their form of womanhood while also establishing and maintaining a prosperous position in a society that has disassociated from them.

The terms "woman" and "womanhood" are too often used as umbrellas which engulf all individuals who identify as female, regardless of cultural backgrounds, with a singular universal definition. These definitions in America are standardized and regulated by the western experience. Because of this it's assumed that *Muslimah*, who follow Eastern tradition and philosophy, do not understand how to enact their own womanhood and therefore lack an understanding of feminism. Feminism is the practice of female empowerment. In western context, the first wave of feminism occurred in the late 19th century through the early 20th century. This movement was particularly focused on gaining voting rights for white women. The second wave of feminism started in the 1960s and continued on through the 90s. This wave is considered "radical" and

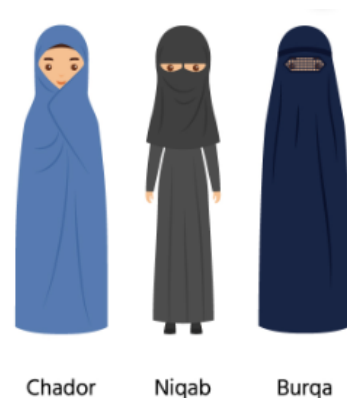
“liberal” feminism in the west. It focused primarily on sexual rights, reproductive rights, beauty standards, and the roles of women. It aimed to shift from the ruling idea that women belong solely in the private sphere. This mass movement towards social equality for women provided some room for minorities to participate more so than they were able to in the previous wave, as women aimed to be united. Yet ideas of individuality and differences among women continued to be overlooked, homogenizing all women into one group. The third wave of feminism started in the mid-90s and worked to destabilize the notion of a universal female experience. The third wave was an attempt to be all inclusive but not homogenizing. Still, though, incorporating ideas that applied to Eastern women’s cultures had yet to happen except in the case of a white savior complex which implied that women outside of western culture needed to be saved.

As American ideals of female empowerment are formed through an almost exclusively western lens, they cannot be fully applied to *Muslimah*. Islamic lifestyle functions within lines that tend to run perpendicular with that of western culture- not parallel. While modern feminists in America claim and intend to be inclusive, they often disregard the contextual differences that shape what it means to be liberated, autonomous, and fulfilled. Women exist in Muslim culture through their own avenues of feminism that are relevant to Islamic life and Islamic morals, and this is displayed in numerous ways, including the way they dress. *Muslimah* in the west operationalize womanhood differently than non-Muslim western women because their social circumstances are unique to their religious and cultural identities. Muslim women in America experience western culture in addition to their inherited or adopted Eastern culture and must work to navigate them both. This is a phenomenon experienced by all individuals who don’t fulfill the

standard normalized requirements for membership in America, such as immigrants and other minorities i.e. African Americans.

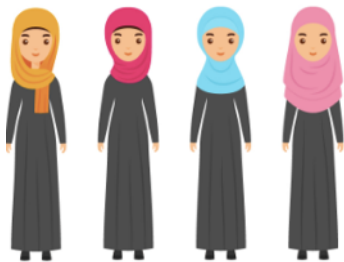
The Islamic veil is an aspect of Muslim fashion traditionally observed by *Muslimah*. In America, the most commonly sported version of the veil is referred to as the *hijab*. *Hijab*, though, is a practice not an article of clothing. Rather than it being a headscarf, which many mistakingly assume, *hijab* is the practice of covering oneself. The word translates to “partition.” *Hijab* acts as a partition between Muslim women and the outside world, specifically men who are not directly related to them.

The *burqa*, *niqab*, *chador*, and the veil, are all forms of *hijab* practices, which are seen in the image to the right. The word *hijab* is commonly used and socially accepted to mean the physical scarf that *hijabis*, women who observe *hijab*, are re-



quired to wear. The styles shown in the image below are generally referred to, in America, as *hijabs* but each style has its own name. For the sake of this research, these four styles are what is being referred to when the word *hijab* is used. In popular colloquial culture, the term *hijab* has a

shared meaning: It refers to the practice and the article of clothing.



In its intended form, *hijab* as a practice requires a woman to cover her whole body with the exception of her forearms to her fingertips and from the middle of her shin to her toes, while also concealing her body’s curves.

In practice, *hijab* takes on variations that deviate from how it was originally prescribed to Muslims over one thousand years ago. By traditionally religious standards, many of these

styles do not reflect *hijab*. For the sake of this research, these styles that deviate from the original intention of the practice will be included in the definition of *hijab*, as they are considered to be so by the *Muslimah* who wear them. *Hijab* is also prescribed in the Quran to Muslim men but this research focuses solely on women's *hijab*. Not all *Muslimah* wear *hijab*. When the terms Muslim woman and *Muslimah* are used in this research, it is referring to the visibly practicing Muslim women in the U.S., the *hijabis*. *Hijabis* are a symbol of Islam as their religion is made evident through their fashion choices and, more specifically, their veiling practices. They are easily excluded as their otherness is evident at all times, which makes their understudied increasing inclusion into society a radical movement that deserves academic attention. While much research has been done examining the oppressiveness of *hijab* practices, there remains a gap in regards to the empowerment that exists within the voluntary practices of *hijab*. *Muslimah* who observe the *hijab* in the west, regardless of nationality, are often ridiculed and outcasted for their religiously fueled conscientious fashion choice. Though homogenized into one outcasted group, *hijabis* operationalize their multitude of individual cultures and personal perspectives when deciding to wear a veil and cover most of their skin in public.

Hijab practices have roots in traditionalism but due to contemporary events and their subsequent ideologies towards *Muslimah*, *hijab* has been refashioned. Modest fashion is the practice of blending old and new, traditional culture with current culture. Modest Fashion opens up the doors to assimilation for *Muslimah* in America without entirely compromising their Islamic identity. Dressed in modest fashion, a woman can wear her *hijab* and still be perceived as a valuable part of American society, rather than an oppressed outsider. Islamic modest fashion is when popular trends conform to the Quran: covering the legs at least to the middle of the shin, the arms to

the upper forearm, the chest up to the neck line, and the entire midriff area. Islamic modest fashion also involves covering the hair with a veil. These regulations prescribed in the Quran are typically tweaked, especially in the west, to reflect women's personal choice and their cultural heritage.

Regardless of the personalization incorporated into modern day *hijab* practices, the Quran's guidelines continue to be the basis for *hijab*. Modest fashion is an example of altering traditionalism. It provides a space for Muslim women to embrace their own method of feminism and womanhood, while also engaging with popular western culture in a way that stands appropriate to their religious lifestyle. This harmonic balance of "old" and "new" is necessary to *Muslimah's* safety and success in the U.S. Adjusting their traditions with and for contemporary American culture is a strategic act towards an extent of assimilation which allows *Muslimah* to hold onto their heritage: their *hijab*. This research will examine the areas of society where *Muslimah's* modest fashion in America is reproduced, normalized, and celebrated. Through this examination, I will map out how adopting modest fashion helps *Muslimah* to be understood by and relatable to people in America who don't share the Islamic aspect of their identities. As I will show, modest fashion is a tool that is crucial to the viability of the *Muslimah* in America. Dressed in modest fashion, a *Muslimah* gains access to different areas of the public sphere that she would otherwise, typically, be denied while dressed traditionally. Her economic and social status reach heights which are harder to attain in the U.S. while dressed in traditional garments. Dressed in modest fashion, as I will display, Muslim women are CEOs, designers, models, brand ambassadors, artists. In the following section, I discuss relevant literature on gender, feminism and fashion in the context of the formation and expression of shifting Muslim identities in America.

Literature Review

Formation of Gender through Social Construction

Muslim culture has historically been rejected in America. “Spanning the European Crusades into West Asia, the Spanish Inquisition of North African Moors (Rana 2011), the targeting of enslaved Africans who were Muslim in the Americas (Diouf 1998), and the numerous Muslim organizations in the 19th and 20th centuries in the United States (Curtis 2002), the Muslim has served as the template of the existential Other from which Europe and the United States have defined themselves” (Ali, 2016). Post 9/11, negative attitudes towards Muslims escalated throughout the country, with Muslim women explicitly receiving much of this backlash. “The CAIR recently published a study that not only found Islamophobia to be on the rise, but also found that hate crimes and acts of violence are more often directed at Muslim women, who wear the *hijab*” (Al Wazni, 2015). Muslim men’s *hijab* is not a noticeably different style of dress from that of any other non-Muslim man. Muslim men are prescribed to cover their chest, shoulders, and legs from the shin up. Rulings on *Muslimah’s hijab* are not significantly different from that of Muslim men, except in regards to the head covering, or veil.

Because the veil is an extremely obvious display of their religion, which has been demonized in America, *Muslimah* face a unique form of discrimination and stigmatization in the country. Thus the *Muslimah* identity becomes highly socially constructed. Her identity is constructed by her religious and cultural heritage, but also by those who exist outside of her religious background and by the interpretations they may have of her. She must embrace and combat both realms of social construction in order to more safely practice her form of womanhood and feminism which conflict with normalized womanhood and feminism in America.

When writing on the war in Afghanistan, Abu-Lughod says, “as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) has cynically put it: white men saving brown women from brown men” (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Brown men can be equated to brown culture as the majority of societies are patriarchal in some sense, meaning men take a front seat in the creation of culture. Americans insist that *Muslimah* must be saved from themselves, from their own religious cultures. But to *Muslimah*, their religious cultural heritage is a source of confidence and identity confirmation. Wadud, a Muslim feminist, writes in her final chapter of *Inside the Gender Jihad* (the term *Jihad* translates to struggle), “‘God created women fully human. Anything, anyone, or any system that treats them privately or in public as anything less than that is destroying the potential harmony of the entire universe’ This notion of women as fully human within Islam’s teachings is critical... and is deeply integrated in their ways of being U.S. Muslim women” (Chan-Malik, 2018). Islam teaches that to *Allah*, women are fully human just as men and should be treated as so. Going against this teaching is considered *haram*, comparable to a sin in Christianity.

In the Quran it’s said that *Jannah*, or paradise, what is heaven in Islam, is at the feet of our mothers and that a wife completes half of a man’s *deen*, or religion. Because the role of mother and wife are given such an honored meaning, Muslim heteronormative womanhood and feminism are firmly centered around the two. Islam, at its core, does not recognize queer identities as capable of being Muslim. In recent decades, there has been a slight shift in this way of thinking, specifically amongst younger generations in the west. Many Muslim women express themselves as lesbian, trans, bisexual, but also as proud and pious Muslims. In present day, there are numerous mosques, particularly in the U.S., that are inclusive towards the LGBTQ communi-

ty but it still remains a major conflict in the *ummah*, the community of Muslims globally (Siraj, 2012).

The woman is central to the home and is to be protected as such. A mother is inherently a teacher in Islam. She is believed to be the direct link to her children's education and, in turn, the *ummah's* education. *Muslimah* strive for high levels of education and high salaried careers, but also focus on maintaining the household by fully embracing their roles as wives and mothers. Much of Islamic teaching devotes itself to placing all roles that women are capable of, in both the public and private sphere, onto a pedestal. The Prophet (pbuh), the founder of Islam, celebrated women of all identities: businesswomen, mothers, divorcees, elderly women, infertile women. In Islam, it is believed that each woman is a benefit to society in her own way. The Islamic social construction of the female gender recognizes heteronormative *Muslimah's* humanity and womanhood, and celebrates them with a status that is to be upheld and respected. Muslim women's internalization of this cultural and religious social construction of gender is the basis for the *Muslimah* identity.

George Herbert Mead's theory of symbolic interactionism explains that the shift in America of public perceptions of Muslims, from accepted or tolerated to demonized, is the inevitable outcome of human interaction. Things inherit meaning through constant action and reaction, and the solidified internalization of the two. Reactions shift as time passes and normalizations alter. It's an ongoing process. What is viewed as bad in one moment in time, may be normal and accepted in another. As Meade's theory explains, learned behaviors and ideas become internalized through either repeated social sanctions and or celebrations. Therefore meanings are inherently contextual; they vary in location and time. The meanings we assign to people, places, and things

are developed, applied, and maintained within different cohorts, locations, and objects through our different interactions with and regarding them.

Cigarettes in the past were viewed as luxurious and considered harmless, even healthy. Individuals who smoked cigarettes were accepted; people of all classes, races, and genders took part in the practice- even pregnant women smoked free of judgment. Since the first U.S. Surgeon General's Reports in the mid-1960s, warning that smoking was extremely harmful and addictive, smoking habits have gone down in the U.S. (Cummings, Proctor. 2014). Smoking has been banned from most indoor spaces in America, pregnant women cannot openly smoke cigarettes, it's no longer acceptable for preteens to smoke cigarettes, colleges have started to ban cigarette smoking on their campuses- things have changed dramatically. There has been a major shift in public attitude, social sanctions and even laws, regarding cigarette smoking in America. Because of this, the rate of smoking has gone down in the country (Alamar, B., & Glantz, S. A., 2006).

Similarly to the way meanings change over time, what is deemed socially acceptable in one place, may be frowned upon or even illegal in other locations. For example, public nudity is largely accepted in different European countries but across the majority of America it is neither legal or socially accepted. Public nudity in the U.S. is immoral and so when it's seen in the country, it is assumed that there is either something wrong with the individual, it's done to make a specific statement in protest, or it's simply for entertainment- unlike in places where it's normalized and seen as very casual. The concept of symbol interactionism is also applied to identities such as womanhood, our own conception of self, the veil, and the Muslim woman. Meanings for these are not static, as they continuously evolve through our interactions with others. The pockets of normalization and accepted status that are beginning to form throughout the U.S. in regards to

Muslimah and their veils, which I will display in my research, reflects this. The expansion of the definitions of the accepted woman and womanhood, which we've seen through the different waves of feminism and through contemporary events, are also a reflection of the way meaning shifts over time.

The word feminism itself comes to life in many different forms as it evolves with political and social climate. Today, all women in the U.S. face Trump-era sexist legislation and ideologies, wage gaps based on gender and race in the majority of professions, unrealistic and demeaning beauty standards, etc. Muslim women in America must learn to operate under these aspects of American life, as all women in American do. Additionally, Muslim women are also influenced by and operate under Islamic ideology. Islamic feminism is rooted in an Islamic lifestyle and culture, functioning in conjunction with the meanings applied to women within an Islamic framework. "Feminism itself is grounded in culture and feminists from any society or any particular cultural tradition hold and internalize premises and assumptions stemming out of their culture that shape their orientation to feminist issues" (Gundi, 2005). The concept of womanhood is understood in accordance to each social groups' lived experience and historical reality.

In America, the face of feminism remains one that belongs to the standardized contemporary American women- depicted as American born, secular, educated, able bodied, cis heterosexual, upper and upper-middle class, outgoing, and white (Fraser, 2005). This definition excludes a majority of the American population as it refuses to recognize the womanhood of trans women, disabled women, *hijabis*, and many other groups. *Muslimah* are often misunderstood within this context of American womanhood. They are labeled as lacking in feminist thought,

autonomy and liberation, because aspects of their lives do not perfectly align with the assumed and homogenizing experience of womanhood in the U.S.

Perceptions of the female gender have been socially constructed differently towards different groups of women through constant maintenance in the form of media reproduction and social interactions. Schueper-Hughes and Lock analyze the three types of bodies in their article “The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology.” The first type of body is the individual body. The individual body understands itself as its own and as a reflection of its lived experiences. *Muslimah* see themselves in accordance to their religion and their own experiences. The second type of body is the social body. That is to say that the body is also a reflection of how others perceive it. *Muslimah* view themselves as liberated but the popular assumption in America is that they are not. Outsider interpretations build up and reinforce the meaning of *Muslimah* as oppressed. The third body is the body politic which refers to “the regulation, surveillance, and control of bodies (individual and collective)” (Schueper-Hughes and Lock, 1987). *Muslimah* have a sense of self that is derived from their life experiences, but additionally their identity is shaped by how others may see and react towards them.

People are treated in accordance to how they are perceived. Preconceived negative notions against *Muslimah* mobilizing into physically, mentally, and verbally abusive treatment is social control. *Muslimah* identities as women in America are shaped by the forms of control enacted against them. American society, where *Muslimahs* are deemed oppressed and undeveloped in feminist thought because of their religion, plays a major role in the ways Muslim women express themselves. To many who are not Muslim, *hijab* represents oppression, dehumanization,

and seclusive. To practicing Muslims, *hijab* is a positive embracement of an obligatory act of worship and is respected as such.

Cultural Understandings of the Veil and Islamic Modest Fashion

Individual ideas regarding the exact reasoning behind veiling vary but the majority of Islamic scholars and practicing *Muslimah* agree that, no matter the reasoning, it's an order from *Allah* that should be followed. Mohiaddin Meshabi, a professor at Florida International University, in an interview with Gehrke-White, spoke about the trend of voluntary veiling amongst *Muslimah* in the United States. "They are returning to their identities, to spirituality, but they are feminists." Gehrke-White adds that "these veiled feminists believe Islamic traditions have benefited women. Passages in the Quran, for example, promote educating women, emphasizing education over physical looks" (Gehrke-White, 2018). This is a description of Islamic womanhood which has been embraced by Muslims since the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) first began to spread the religion.

Modern day violence against *Muslimah* in America, and also abroad, acts as a new driving force behind the reasoning for observing *hijab*. The incorporation of *hijab* into one's every day life is often times a direct reflection of the trauma she experiences from physical, political, social, and emotional violence enforced upon her and the *ummah*. "The assault on the Palestinians, on Iraq, and on Afghanistan and the Israeli-British-American occupation of Arab and Muslim lands is sure to fuel a resurgence of Islamizing in the region. Whether in its exemplary form of appearance or in political mobilizing at the grassroots, it has shown to be an effective expression of resistance" (Gundi, 2005). Embracing Islam in their outward appearance by donning the

veil and practicing *hijab* is Muslim advocacy and has a direct link to the assault, physical and media based, on Muslim communities globally.

Constantly faced with injustice, it's natural that *Muslimah* are politically conscious. A Muslim American professor of law at the University of Wisconsin explained that her father was a Palestinian immigrant in America who was always an advocate for his home country. She explains “that was always in the background of our family life: activism, our educations, and gaining knowledge.” She goes on to say, “activism is not incompatible with who we are as Muslims” (Chan-Malik, 2018). The traumas in a Muslim woman's life are not limited to the oppression she faces day to day, but also includes the oppression faced by those in generations before her. These generational traumas are key influences in the lives of *Muslimah* and in their choice to veil. “The Islamizing of life, politics and resistance is directly related to the colonial/imperial assault on Arabs and Muslims” (Gundi, 2005). Veiling is a daring act in American society as it exposes one's Muslim identity, which would otherwise be visually unapparent.

Incorporating Islam into one's life publicly, while done for the sake of Allah, requires conscious actions that defy American norms. Every action becomes political while encapsulated by extreme forms of social control. Secular American society aims to erase the evident religious identities of *Muslimah* in the country. Faced with discrimination and other forms of extreme social control, *Muslimah* have reshaped themselves by engaging with a main marker of American life: American fashion. Still holding onto their *hijab*, *Muslimah* have altered the meaning of what it means to be Muslim in America, as well as perceptions of *hijab*, by participating in trends that American society has declared attractive and ultimately acceptable. This combination of modern and traditional, Eastern and western, is referred to as modest fashion.

Craciun paints a picture of Turkish society prior to modest fashion's rise. While a large portion of the Turkish population is Muslim, the government considers the country to be a western and secular state, just as America does. In both countries, religious dress and the Islamification of every day life is described as "non-modern, and, therefore, an undesirable and unacceptable present in the public sphere of the modernizing society" (Craciun, pg 25). The traditionally dressed *Muslimahs* in Turkey reportedly had difficulty existing in the public sphere. In America, one *hijabi* named Michaela from Seattle, Washington spoke on the importance of modest fashion in the public sphere.

"Some of us feel that we look ridiculous in shawar kameez [the traditional pant and long shirt worn by many Pakistani women]. Putting a scarf on your head already makes you look like a foreigner (and not just a Muslim), so those of us who are not immigrants do not want to look like we come from another country. Don't get me wrong,' she adds, 'I wear just about every type of Muslim dress from a variety of countries, but when I go into the office, I don't want to look like anything other than a Muslim who is also an American'" (Gehrke-White, 2018).

Modest fashion makes Michaela feel more comfortable and more empowered in her *hijab* while at her place of work. It provides her with a balance of her Eastern religion and her American nationality. She feels like less of a foreigner in her headscarf when she incorporates American trends into the rest of her outfit, which is a product of the socialization that exists in America. Michaela feels like a foreigner in her headscarf because America labels veiled women as inherent Others. Another *hijabi* Gehrke-White interviewed reflected on her high school years and the hardships she faced as the only girl in her school who wore a headscarf. The woman explained that she would try to focus on the things she had in common with her non-Muslim classmates. "I wore jeans like everyone else'" (Gehrke-White, 2018). She describes having a lot of non-Mus-

lim friends and enjoying her time with them. Despite her headscarf, wearing the same type of clothes as her peers, connected her to their lives.

Social theorist George Simmel describes fashion as a key to inclusion. "Thus fashion on the one hand signifies union with those in the same class, the uniformity of a circle characterized by it, and, *uno actu*, the exclusion of all other groups" (Simmel, 1957). If *Muslimah* in America do not practice the common fashion of the ruling culture, they are outcasted and denied access, they are excluded and even dehumanized. Simmel sees fashion as a source of social control and or adaptation. Adapting to American standards of fashionability is *Muslimah's* reaction to the American assault against them, which is ultimately social control. Muslim women are directly and indirectly forced to dress in modest fashion in order to achieve a more liberated status in the country, as it allows for them to be better understood in a western context. Conforming to the popular culture's trends creates a safer space for *Muslimah* and their veils; it's like a layer of protection for these women against stigma.

Media's continuous production of sexualized females contributes to ideas of what a woman should be. These normalized expectations of the ideal woman, conflict with the majority of female identities in America; they more than often depict a white, cis, heterosexual, upper-middle class, thin, secular or Church-going woman. A line is drawn between all those who fit into the normalized, and therefore desired, definition of female and all those who do not- which includes, for example, poor women, outwardly religious women such as Hasidic Jewish women, women of color, transgender women, tomboys. All of these groups, along with *hijabis*, refuse to fully conform to these normalized standards and so they are faced with violence which acts as social control, like workplace discrimination, physical abuse, and or constant alienation.

Modest fashion becomes necessary to protect the practicing Muslim female body. In his piece "On Fashion", Georg Simmel acknowledges the fact that fashion is replicated behavior based on what is socially acceptable. He writes, "Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaption; it leads the individual upon the road which all travel" (Simmel, 1957). He asserts that conforming to socially acceptable fashion practices means a loss of autonomy; "It signalizes the lack of personal freedom" (Simmel, 1957). Associating with popular trends is evidence of the influence of society, rather than individual choice. For *Muslimah* in America, who have less privilege than their non-Muslim counterparts in the country, this adaptation Simmel is referring to is necessary to their successful cultural survival. They must assimilate to an extent in order to prosper in American life. "As anthropologists know perfectly well, people wear the appropriate form of dress for their social communities and are guided by socially shared standards, religious beliefs, and moral ideals" (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Muslim women traditionally did not wear western style clothes but due to increasing Islamophobic attitudes, they are left with little to no choice but to do so. Reconstructing their identity with modest fashion is a strategy which allows them to somewhat blend in, diminishing some of the stigma in America that they are faced with.

The veil has even been foundational to that motivation for war against Muslim countries, as Americans assume the veil to be something inherently forced upon Muslim women rather than a voluntary action. Layla Abu-Loghod references the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan when posing the question "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?" She insists that "we need to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom" because "humans are social beings, always raised in certain social and historical con-

texts and belonging to particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world” (Abu-Lughod, 2002). A socially acceptable woman in the west is not necessarily a socially acceptable woman in Islam- and vice versa. Again we see how viewing *Muslimah* through a western lens poses a danger to them and the rest of the *ummah*. Living in America, the *hijabi* must build somewhat of a bridge that connects western concepts with Muslim values in order to dissolve these interpretations of herself as unfree. This bridge can be many things; fashion is one of them.

Muslim women have lost a part of traditional their identities by shedding their cultural garments, but modest fashion allows for *Muslimah* to hold on to a major factor of their religious identities: their *hijab*, their modesty. Veiling and dressing modestly goes against what American popular culture has deemed as proper and attractive behavior for women. When *Muslimah* in America wear normalized American clothes with a modest influence which includes veils, they are defying what is socially expected. In doing so they are altering perceptions of who is included under the title “American woman,” as well as what it means to be a Muslim woman. Modest fashion fuses Islamic rulings into American trends, giving space for veiled women, *hijabis*, to proudly embrace their religious identities. *Muslimah* are increasing their chances of being accepted as women in America despite the stark contrast that exists between western and Eastern culture.

Feminism as a Western Invention and Contemporary Muslimahs in America

Feminism is a complex ideology which is extremely contextual, meaning the practice of feminism varies from culture to culture, and looking even deeper, person to person. The

western feminist movement of the 60s that continued through the 90s, the second wave of feminism, also known as Liberal Feminism, was originally fueled by the American woman's dissatisfaction with her everyday life. The American woman was not fulfilled by her role as a wife and a mother. She wanted a career and an education, full access to the public sphere. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* quoted a New York Times article from the early 60s which said that American women were "deeply frustrated" by "the routine of family life and the confinement of it" (Friedan, 1964). This wave of feminism was also titled Radical Feminism, as it aimed to radically deconstruct the enforced roles of women, highlighting sexual liberation and reproductive rights. The women being referenced in this movement, particularly in its early stages, were normalized, traditionalized, white American women; Muslim women were not a part of the discussion. It was movement that originally addressed mostly, if not only, the white, cis, heteronormative, middle and upper middle class, western women's issues. Towards the final decades of the movement, steps towards inclusion were taken which allowed for some involvement of minorities (hence the name Radical Feminism). Despite claiming to be radical and liberal, many women were not given a seat at the table. Even with a movement more inclusive than in previous years, the voice of feminism remained unchanged: white and upper middle class. As previously discussed, Muslim womanhood is largely based on exactly what had white American women so frustrated in the 60s: wifhood and motherhood.

On top of the common desire amongst *Muslimah* to fulfill their roles as mother and wife, they also care for their education and careers. *Muslimah's* primary priority is religion; It acts as a source of inspiration and peace in her life. A study done by Ihsan Bagby in Detroit in 2004 of 1,298 mosque goers "found that the average Muslim is thirty years old, married with children,

has at least a bachelor's degree, and earns about \$75,000 a year" (Gehrke-White, 2018). The limits regarding dress expressed in the Quran don't inherently set limits on how successful a Muslim woman will be. Bagby went on to conclude that *Muslimah* are "very desirous of becoming involved in society" (Gehrke-White, 2018). It's society's perceptions of Muslim women that limit their opportunities for participation and success. The major disconnect between the two forms of womanhood -Islamic and western- establishes the *Muslimah* in America as an inherent Other, restricting them from societal involvement.

Zakaria highlights another significant feature that American feminism holds in contrast to Muslim feminism when she discusses the role of sex and sexualization in American feminist movements. "Sexual liberation had become not simply the centerpiece but the entire sum of liberation in general" (Zakaria, 2016). Feminist movements in America focus largely on a sexual liberation of the female identity. "Free the nipple!" is a popular phrase in America that was originally coined during the feminist movement of the 70s. Muslim women "[refuse] to affirm that freedom essentially and centrally means the freedom to have sex" (Zakaria, 2016). Because of differences such as this, it's commonly assumed that *Muslimah* are not in touch with their womanhood nor are they capable of understanding true freedom.

Both groups of women, Muslim and non-Muslim, strive for autonomy over their own bodies. This idea is operationalized very differently among the two groups. Non-Muslim American women want the right to expose parts of their bodies and be respected while doing so. Muslim women in America want the right to cover their bodies and be respected while doing so. In this sense, the popular western feminist phrase "my pussy, my choice" can be applied to both groups. In fact, all the interviewees in Al Wazni's study stated that "they do feel that the *hijab*

may challenge western images of empowered or feminist women, but that it is not necessarily in contradiction to western values of female empowerment and feminism.” The right to self regulation over ones body exists as a core goal of feminism in both Muslim and non-Muslim groups.

Contemporary feminism in America has seen some progress towards inclusion as it now aims to address issues faced by women of all sexualities, economic statuses and cultural backgrounds. Yet still in the 2000s Muslim women’s veils have become, and remain, symbols of oppression in the eyes of many Americans. After the Taliban in Afghanistan dissolved, to Americans’ shock, many women in the country did not shed their *burqas*, a form of *hijab* which covers the entire face including the eyes with a perforated piece of cloth in order to see (pictured on page 6), which became mandatory under Taliban rule. “Liberals sometimes confess their surprise that even though Afghanistan has been liberated from the Taliban, women do not seem to be throwing off their *burqas*” (Abu-Lughod, 2002). The *burqa* became a primary reason for war against the Taliban.

America sought to free the women of Afghanistan from the chains of their traditional fashion. But Afghani women were more concerned with their education rights, food supply, sexual safety, and other socio-economic hardships they faced. Additionally, covering practices such as the *burqa* and other forms of *hijab* predate the Taliban’s rule in Afghanistan. “Can we only free Afghan women to be like us or might we have to recognize that even after ‘liberation’ from the Taliban, they might want different things than we would want for them?” (Abu-Lughod, 2002) Abu-Lughod is criticizing these ideas of a feminism which reflect western goals, that the U.S. imposed on Afghani *Muslimah*.

Just as American women wished to free Afghani women from their *burqas*, they wish to free Muslim women in the U.S. from their veils. *Muslimah*'s covering practices act as an antithesis to the images of supposedly empowered women that American media feeds society. *Hjabis* criticize western feminists, asserting that they often go against women's total autonomy that feminism is supposedly based on, by forcing onto others what they claim to be the correct form of freedom. But as we know from Meade's symbolic interactionism, there is not one correct way to operationalize autonomy or freedom. A woman's autonomy is a reflection of her life's circumstances. *Hjabis* criticize western feminists for engaging with practices that one may find oppositional to values of feminism.

One American *hijabi* spoke on images she sees reproduced in popular media as representations of beauty that are consumed by viewers throughout the country. She said, "those images are totally disempowering for women to be with their bodies on display as an object, because that's all it is. It has nothing to do with freedom. It has to do with people who are objectifying women and are making that the standard of how women should be viewed. We're back to being objectified and sexualized. That whole thing that feminism was set to, you know, be against" (Al Wazni, 2015). American feminists often claim that *hijabis* need saving but *hijabis* view themselves as safe from the negative influence of American media's objectification and sexualization. Many *hijabis* in the west shy away from the feminist label because of the attitude it holds towards Eastern practices. One participant in Al Wazni's study (2015) said that "a lot of feminism, sometimes I've seen, is more against *hijab* than anything. They feel that it's oppressive and I don't believe in any of that. I mean I feel that if you're a feminist you should be for whatever

women want.”” *Muslimah* believe women have a right to their own choices and that popular feminism in America is an assault on their right to choose.

Though stigmatized as lacking in feminist thought, Muslim women position themselves as maintainers of original feminist goals. *Hijabis* in the U.S. find American feminism to be offensive and oppressive as it aims to restrict and ridicule Muslim women’s freedom of choice and expression. “The body of the veiled Muslim woman became the entity on which Western liberal neo-Orientalists superimposed their values (Maira, 2009), and it was the exposed female body, active in the public sphere, which became the marketable image of women in free market capitalism” (Al Wazni, 2015). Because *Muslimah*’s practice of covering is the opposite of what is normalized, profitable, and accepted in America, many Americans are confused by and even cautious of them.

As Muslim ideologies often diverge from that of their non-Muslim American counterparts, the multilayered identity of *Muslimah* living in America can be alienating. “Being Muslim and female was an identity that rhymed effortlessly with repression and oppression in the view of most liberal academics and students” (Zakaria, 2016). This definition that Muslim women have been assigned becomes almost inescapable, even on American college campuses where education, diversity, and liberal attitudes are typically promoted. In order for a *Muslimah* to achieve higher status and break away from this assigned definition, modest fashion is adopted as one’s daily style. Incorporating modest fashion into one’s lifestyle calls for a removal of traditional wear seen in Muslim cultures but it’s a route towards inclusion in America that keeps space for *Muslimah* to continue observing *hijab*. It may minimize *Muslimah*’s autonomy, as they have lost

the power to freely chose how they present their bodies, but it simultaneously grants *Muslimah* with access which creates space for autonomy in other areas of their lives in America.

Modest fashion is a unique trend in that it's an acceptance of American influence that also allows for Muslim women to resist American influence. Dressed in modest fashion, *Muslimah* can openly identity with their religion, and also prosper in American life. At the time of the war against the Taliban, First Lady Laura Bush said that the Taliban aimed to "impose their world on the rest of us" (Abu-Lughod, 2002). This is ironic because Americans like herself aim to impose their world on the woman of Afghanistan and other Muslim communities, in the U.S. and abroad, by assuming they hated their veils and needed to be rescued from them. Haddad (2007) studied second-generation American Muslim communities and found that Muslim women born and raised in the United States were increasingly engaging in *hijab* practices as "an iconic symbol of the refusal to be denied by the Western media and war propaganda since 9/11" (Al Wazni, 2015). Women's veiling practices of today come from religious inspiration and are also a retaliation against American ideologies which deny *Muslimah* a positive status in society.

Hijab, while more socially acceptable in the U.S. when practiced with modest fashion, is a symbol of self advocacy and self affirmation to Muslim women. "The reclaiming of the Islamic practice of the *hijab* as a Muslim women's movement of solidarity, and affirming the Islamic religion and identity as liberating and not oppressive, is an emerging trend amongst American Muslims" (Ahmed, 2011). It's a representation of Muslim feminism. In fact, "many [practicing Muslim women in America] have adopted Islam because of their desire for gender rights and racial justice and did not seek to reinterpret but instead to follow its teachings in order to achieve such goals. Being Muslim further refined their understanding of justice and offered them reli-

gious, ethical, and embodied structures through which they could translate these desires into lived praxis” (Chan-Malik, 2018). Operationalizing Islam into their lives is an example of women fighting for equality against U.S. institutions and ideologies that oppress them, such as racism and sexism.

The women who voluntarily practice *hijab*, collectively understand it as a command from God. In making the decision to obey this command, each woman’s reasoning differs from one to the next. One woman described her *hijab* and modest style of dress as a “reminder that she has crossed into womanhood” (Gherke-White, pg 48). Here, we see that *hijab* can be enacted as a symbolic and direct link to a girl’s coming of age. A Muslim woman has much room to decide how and to what extent she will wear her veil. For example, one Iraqi woman who lives in America with her husband explained,

“When I go back to Iraq, I completely lose my hijab. In the United States, I feel much better about my hijab but in Iraq I don’t. Sometimes I wear it but not like I do here. I don’t wear it in front of my husband’s family or relatives—I should, but I don’t. I live with them for a long time, they are my relatives” (Mohibullah and Kramer, 2016).

According to the Quran’s standards, she should observe hijab in the presence of her husband’s family but she decides not to. When she goes back to her home country, she either doesn’t wear her veil or wears it differently than how she does in the U.S. Another woman said that she often forgets to wear it. Her veil is casual for her. These meanings of the veil created by Muslim women change over time in accordance to the structure of their lives. A woman living in Texas, originally from an Arab country, explained that her “styles of cover evolved according to how she was perceived by people in different times and arenas of her life” (Mohibullah and Kramer, 2016). The veil does not mean one thing to Muslim women, as their lives vary in experience,

exposure, and ultimately, in personality. The veil does not even mean one thing to one Muslim woman.

As *Muslimah* exist in nearly every country on the map, drawing from Mead's symbolic interactionism theory, it's understood that cultures and the ways they are experienced inevitably shape the meaning of the veil. Additional to the varied personal and cultural reasoning in individual Muslim women's decision to observe *hijab*, the practice is also enacted through numerous different styles.. *Muslimah* of today wear head wraps, turbans, baseball caps over their veils, scarves tied in a multitude of creative ways. Some women let their side-bangs dangle out from beneath their veil, while others choose to cover the entirety of their hairline and part of their forehead. Some women pin their veil under their chin to cover their entire neck, while others leave their veil to drape openly from shoulder to shoulder. Many *Muslimah* wear all of these styles, alternating day by day, choosing which style is most appropriate and comfortable for that day's setting. Despite the variety that exists in the ways *Muslimah* observe *hijab*, they are all homogenized into one Othered group. The shift towards modest fashion is an attempt to shed this Otherness.

Collaborating Islamification and westernization into one's life is displayed through modest fashion. This act allows for Muslim women to not look, what some would call, "too Muslim" in comparison to the stigma they attract when wearing a full outfit of traditional dress. While it's a sacrifice to be cornered into embracing a culture that doesn't fully accept you, modest fashion is a strategic and necessary practice for *Muslimah* in America. The veil-wearing *Muslimah* that Craciun (2017) surrounded herself with explained that "the fashionability of their

garments was important less as a marker of class distinction and more as a marker of modernity” and “as a marker of integration into a public sphere.” Modest fashion is a tool *Muslimah* use to move deeper into mainstream American society. This form of strategic navigation is female empowerment; it is a mobilized feminist action. *Muslimah* in the U.S. manipulate their modest clothing to cater to their setting. It’s a tactic used to perpetuate fluidity and flexibility, which allows Muslim women to blend in or stand out whenever they see fit. This ability to somewhat blend in provides more space for self expression.

Of all the *hijabis* that Al Wazni interviewed, “every single participant stated that the *hijab* gave them a sense of respect, dignity, and control over who has access to their physical body. All participants felt that this, in turn, offered them security, self-confidence, and empowerment” (Al Wazni, 2015). These are similar goals of the dominant feminism in the west, but through different means than that of western feminism. One interviewee even admitted that while she does not like to label herself as a “feminist,” that “a lot of the principles included in feminism are included in Islam” (Al Wazni, 2015). American feminism aims to eliminate involuntary sexualization of the female body by the male gaze. Muslim feminism aims to do the same, in order for men and women to coexist in a functional society. By practicing *hijab*, participants of Al Wazni’s study reported that they had a better perception of their body image. By covering themselves, it forced their peers to get to know them, rather than judge them based on their bodies. “Islam acts as an insurgent ethos in their lives, one intertwined with their desires for racial, gendered, and religious freedom, formed in response to the social and political contexts of the time” (Chan-Malik, 2018). Embracing Islamic ideology and culture is a product of desire for equality and liberty.

One woman said, *hijab* “challenges the definition of beauty” reproduced and enforced in American culture. Challenging normalized beauty in the country, *Muslimah* in America are using their religious practices as weapons against oppression, as a vessel for feminist thought and action. Feminism is an act of rebellion, an assertion of female power to counteract the social standards created by those in the ruling groups. “For many young women, the *hijab* is about liberation, not confinement. It’s about new possibilities, not the past. It provides a kind of social armor that enables Muslim women to chart their own course, personally or professionally” (Wright, 2011). Contrary to stereotypes in America regarding *hijab*, to *Muslimah*, the *hijab* is essential to their autonomous independence.

In the next sections I will discuss how and where I conducted my own research, along with my reasoning behind this. I will delve into real life modern-day examples of inclusion and acceptance of *Muslimah* in America through their use of modest fashion.

Methods

Content analysis involves data which “make up the content of communication (letters, books, sermons, conversations, television programs, therapeutic sessions, paintings, and the like)” (Gibbs, 2004). Qualitative content analysis is “inductive, non-statistical, and exploratory” (Gibbs, 2004). This form of research is a relatively new style of ethnographic research. Ethnographic methodology involves in-person observations of social interactions and practices. Sociology has historically depended on ethnographic research, which placed anglo-saxon Americans in settings where they did not necessarily fit in. This is intrusive and destructive to the natural narrative of a community, which can ultimately alter the authenticity of the data collected. With

traditional ethnographic research, individuals being studied know they are being monitored; they are aware of the researcher as a stranger among them, thus their actions might be modified from their original and natural state.

While I am a *hijabi* who is a part of a Muslim community in America, and could easily fit into most Muslim communities throughout the country, I employ media content analysis. This type of cyber ethnography, rather than traditional ethnographic fieldwork, allows for the data collected to be as unobstructed as possible. There is no level of physical intrusiveness involved in media content analysis. I'm removed from any in-person interactions when I analyze data produced by and or for *Muslimah* on the television series Project Runway, on Instagram, and on fashion retail brands' online platforms. The content produced by Muslim women for other Muslim women is an expression of the result of, and also the creation of, the modest fashion profitable trend. Similarly, the content produced by western or secular brands for *Muslimah* in America is a product of, and also the creation of, modest fashion. Muslim women's and non-Muslim companies' participation in Islamic modest fashion is necessary for both parties to benefit from the trend. Brands are trying to take hold of the multi-billion dollar Muslim market and *Muslimah* are trying to attain social equality in America.

Fashion retail websites reveal how modest fashion is advertised and presented to those who take part in the trend. The accessibility and fashionability of modest fashion on retail websites reveals its popularity and validity. By analyzing the Islamic brand, Modanisa, the ways *Muslimah* create styles for themselves can be explored. Non-Muslim fashion retail websites, such as ASOS and Uniqlo, adoption of modest fashion is proof of the inclusion modest fashion creates. Modest fashion can also be examined and defined by assessing the different types of

clothes being sold on these sites. It's evident that modest fashion is relatable to all women when we are shown how exactly modest fashion is being packaged.

Televised media is particularly significant as all television shows start with someone who has power i.e., producers, directors, creators. Accepting attitudes towards Islamic modest fashion are laid out for American viewers on the secular American television series *Project Runway*, which is hosted and created by supermodel Heidi Klum. One of their more recent seasons, which featured a *hijabi* who created modest clothing, will be explored. Her clothes were praised by American and European non-Muslim icons such as celebrities, designers, and models. More evidence of inclusion and membership into American culture is displayed here.

In the present digital age, representations produced on social media contribute to perceptions of different sociocultural identities. Social groups form online communities where ideologies can be easily assessed in live time. Muslim women, from all different cultures, occupations, and ages, are active on Instagram, a popular social media application and website for sharing photos and videos with attached captions. The identities of many Instagram users can be found in their bio, where individuals typically advertise their permanent living location, their heritage, religion, age, school and or work status. This research aims to study *hijabis* on Instagram within the age range of early 20s to about 40 years old, without separating data based on class, cultural background, sexuality, or occupation. By sharing their perspectives which promote ideas of feminism, and by simply existing as *Muslimah* dressed in modest fashion, these women are doing the symbolic and subconscious work to establish contemporary Muslim feminism and modest fashion as an expression of it.

Individuals rely on social media as an outlet for expression. With permanently recorded reactions, unless manually deleted, social media is an area rich in evident sociality. Establishing and reshaping meanings, and developing perceptions, takes place here. *Hijabis* use Instagram as an expressive and experimental platform where they showcase their latest looks and receive feedback on them. Instagram is a location where beauty standards are reinforced and also resisted. *Hijabis* are resisting stereotypes placed on them by those in America who are not Muslim. To many Americans, the image of *Muslimah* may be a traditionally dressed woman, but the images seen online produced by *Muslimah* themselves paint a different picture. These representations of resistance, of changing the current rhetoric surrounding *hijabis*, may not be spelled out on *Muslimah's* Instagram pages as a personal intentional goal, but are outcomes of their online presence regardless. Similarly, developing and maintaining contemporary beauty norms for Islamic modest fashion in America may not be highlighted as an intentional goal in a *hijabi's* biographic section of her Instagram. Yet still, this is a product of the images they upload to their Instagram accounts which are reflections of their day-to-day reality.

These Instagram blogs can be viewed as cultural artifacts as they withhold key insights to the contemporary experiences of *hijab* observing Muslim women of modern day. Through self promotion and strategic content curation, one's representation of self is advertised. Communities on social media are formed when individuals with similar interests follow each other, like each other's posts, and share each other's photos. Communities on social media become so tight knit, the ideologies of a group can be easily assessed as a whole. Zooming in on individuals who are part of an online community reveals what qualities grant membership (Wills, Fecteau, 2016). The hashtags #modestfashion and #hijabifashion will be utilized to dig deeper into these practicing

Muslimah online communities, as they organize ideas for viewers and are additional strategic choices made by each *Muslimah* when she posts an image. She must decide to add a hashtag to her caption, subsequently adding it to a public collection of all similar images. These online social interactions, while not in person, are still sources of “transmission of meaning and affects” which help to create and reflect specific identities (Wills, Fecteau, 2016).

In my research, I examine individual Instagram famous accounts, those with 50,000 followers or more, that belong to *hijabis* in America. The clothes they wear and the praise they receive will be analyzed as data which highlight the important role modest fashion plays in assimilation. These *hijabis* with Instagram fame are considered to be influencers. An influencer is someone with a large amounts of followers, who forms close ties with brands and companies as ambassadors and advertisers. They often use their social media accounts to act as advocates. The influencers I’m analyzing act as main contributors (Trammel, Keshelashvili, 2005) to the socialization of *Muslimah* and those who come into contact with them. Because of their often global fame, these influencers become the face of the *hijabi* population. They become symbols of women in Islam that many lesser known *hijabis* base their fashion choices off of. Many of these women have such a high following count due to their style and online presence alone. *Hijabi* influencers whom hold positions of power, whether that be political or artistic, in their offline lives will also be assessed. These Instagram accounts are public but offer a view into the private personal lives of practicing Muslim women and what brings them acceptance in America.

Instagram accounts and hashtags, the television series *Project Runway*, and the clothing brands ASOS, Modanisa and Uniqlo, all reveal the influence modest fashion has on inclusionary status. They also display how modest fashion is promoted to and adopted by the *hijabi* communi-

ty. Digital expressions of American acceptance of the *hijabi* in modest fashion can be found throughout all of these listed locations. These *hijabi* communities on Instagram are global and are pivotal to the maintenance of modest fashion. *Hijabis* are the producers of this shift towards modest fashion; they are the maintainers as well.

In the section below, I analyze the different platforms where the maintenance for modest fashion takes place. It is here, online and on television, that trends are established. These platforms also provide insight into peoples' perceptions of contemporary Muslim women. The acceptance experienced by those practicing Islamic modest fashion will be analyzed. Those who make modest fashion, wear modest fashion, promote modest fashion, and enjoy modest fashion will be evaluated as they are all involved in the success of this contemporary trend and the benefits it affords *Muslimah* in America. These benefits are a driving force behind the increasing participation of *Muslimahs* in modest fashion. I conclude with a discussion of the social implications modest fashion has on current American culture and on the future of the *Muslimah* in America.

Findings and Analysis

The Makers and Maintainers

Through my personal experience as a *hijabi* in the U.S., I quickly began to understand that fashion has the ability to span across one culture to another and connect them to each other. My research reflects this, making evident that fashion can be a powerful tool in the process of achieving assimilated and inclusionary status within a society. The cultural artifacts I decided to analyze, the fashion brands Modanisa, ASOS, and Uniqlo, multiple Instagram accounts such as

@indoanisa, @hautehijab, @neelam_, @mariaalia, and the television series *Project Runway*, all display a mixture of cultures, through the use of fashion, and its effect on individuals and cohorts.

Instagram, online shopping, and television, are all a part of a privileged lifestyle as they require some form of financial income. You need money for a phone or laptop in order to access social media and online shopping sites. Many live without access to free wifi, so money is needed for private wifi in their homes. You also need money for cable or a subscription to an online streaming site (I watched *Project Runway* via my Hulu account which I pay for monthly). Yet in the United States, these forms of consumer culture are infused into our every day lives; participation in them is normalized. It's expected that members of American society participate in, or have some sort of interaction with, these platforms. These three different platforms all require a steady income, but despite income inequalities throughout the country they're all regarded as standard possessions. This implies that *hijabis'* Instagram accounts, *Project Runway*, and retail brands online like Modanisa, ASOS, and Uniqlo are reaching people regardless of class, gender, nationality, and race. All three platforms are also international; their impact isn't restricted to the United States. Though slightly exclusive, they can still be considered very close to public platforms as virtual public spheres. Because of their wide reach, it's understood that these platforms are vital to socialization in America.

Project Runway

Season 16 of *Project Runway*, along with many other seasons of the series, can be streamed on Hulu. The reality television show consists of clothing designers from around the

world competing in New York City for a cash prize, sponsorships from established brands in order to develop their own fashion collection, and other types of perks like a lifetime supply of sewing materials. The contestants face differently themed challenges each week but are also required to incorporate their own personal style into the clothing they create. The finalists compete at New York Fashion Week. The designer with the best fashion show wins. Season 16 was special because not only did the producers decide to include, what are referred to as, plus size models, but also, for the first time ever, one of the competing designers was a *hijabi*. Even more interesting, this *hijabi* contestant, Ayana, mostly designed modest fashion pieces. She even included a veil in many of the looks she sent down the runway. The examination of her as a competitor, the clothing she produced, along with the judges' comments on her designs, overtly highlight the ways that modest fashion is a balance of the two cultures and is popularly accepted and even celebrated by non-Muslim individuals.

We are introduced to Ayana in the first minutes of season 16 during episode 1. She doesn't mention her faith initially but it is evident through her clothing choice. She is seen wearing pants, a long sleeved blouse, and a black veil which covers the top of her head, the sides of her face, her neck, her upper back and chest. In her mid-20s, after ditching her career as a nurse, Ayana decided to create the modest clothing she couldn't find in her hometown in Tennessee. She was looking for something modest but stylish and modern. Ayana originally picked up sewing from her mother, also a *hijabi*, who was a seamstress during Ayana's childhood. Ayana tells the viewers that she is a divorcee who ambitiously "wanted to make [her] own business."

The outfit she creates for the first challenge is a metallic long flowing dress. It's dark grey with green leaves and purple flowers that cascade down the side of the torso. The dress is

accompanied by a veil in a similar colored chiffon fabric which drapes to the floor down the back of the model. The look is very high fashion, elegant but dark. Episode 12 is a winter themed challenge and features the five designers left. Ayana sends out her model in a long bright pink and black peacoat with a houndstooth jumpsuit underneath comprised of long sleeves and long



pant legs. As seen in the image to the left, all of the model's hair is completely tucked into a black top hat. As the model walks down the runway, Ayana narrates that the look is "really nicely high-fashion, and it is fully modest." Zach Posen, famous American high end fashion designer and creative director for Brooks Brothers Women, judges the outfit and says, "If this were in a store today, I think it would

be a really big hit." His words imply that in an American store, a modest look created by a *Muslimah* could be popular amongst American women. This is significant because as Al Wazni described, "the marketable image of women in free market capitalism" has always been the "exposed" woman (Al Wazni, 2015). Yet here we see an explicit shift from that reality. When Posen saw Ayana's design he saw financial gain which is equated to success in America, and through this, Ayana advanced to the next stage of the competition.

In episode 11, the contestants had to create a look for "warrior women." Ayana created a modern version of tailored suit overalls with an intricately constructed type of collared shirt with gold buttons going down the side. The look is pictured on page 39. Ayana describes what she made as "strong" and "fun." The model's body is completely covered, even hiding the shape of

her upper thighs and hips with a mini skirt layered over the pants. Ayana says, “it definitely represents what I feel is a warrior woman.”

When Heidi Klum asks her what the inspiration for her look is, Ayana explains that it was the women in her family, who we know from at-home interviews are all *hijabis*. She reveals that she is one of eight daughters and says that there’s a lot of “woman power” in her family of Muslim women.



Heidi responds by saying, “I feel like a lot of times as a woman you feel like you have power when you show some skin, you show some leg or a little cleavage. She is showing none of that and she looks so powerful and strong and sexy without showing any skin at all.” Ayana won that challenge.

Ayana makes it to the finals where she shows her collection at New York Fashion week. Pictured to the right, all of her models are dressed modestly while half are veiled and the other half are unveiled. During the judges’ critique of the modest collection, Jessica Alba, American actress and guest judge, says that all of the clothes were “sensual”;



Zac Posen describes the collections as “hip and seductive” and demonstrating “an empowered sexiness.” Ayana was second place in the entire contest.

On an American television show, judged by well respected figures in American culture, a *hijabi* who designed for other *hijabis* was runner-up to first place. While the contestants’ progression through the competition is not established by viewers’ votes, the crowd at New York Fashion Week seemed captivated by Ayana’s designs just as much as the judges were. *Project Runway* didn’t discuss Ayana’s religion directly but it was never something she hid. Since episode one, she labeled herself a modest fashion designer. Ayana herself is a representation of contemporary Muslim women. She has a college degree, she had a prosperous career in the medical field, she is independent enough to leave a marriage that did not fulfill her, she followed her dreams and focused on her creative ambitions- all of which was molded by, as Ayana stated, the *hijabis* in her life and inherently her religion. Prominent figures in American fashion respecting and celebrating the modest clothing Ayana created, even going so far to describe her designs in ways that conflict with American stereotypes of what *Muslimah* are, displays the inclusivity that modest fashion promotes and obtains. They didn’t have to be Muslim to enjoy her clothes. Her clothing seamlessly crossed cultural boundaries.

ASOS, Modanisa and Uniqlo

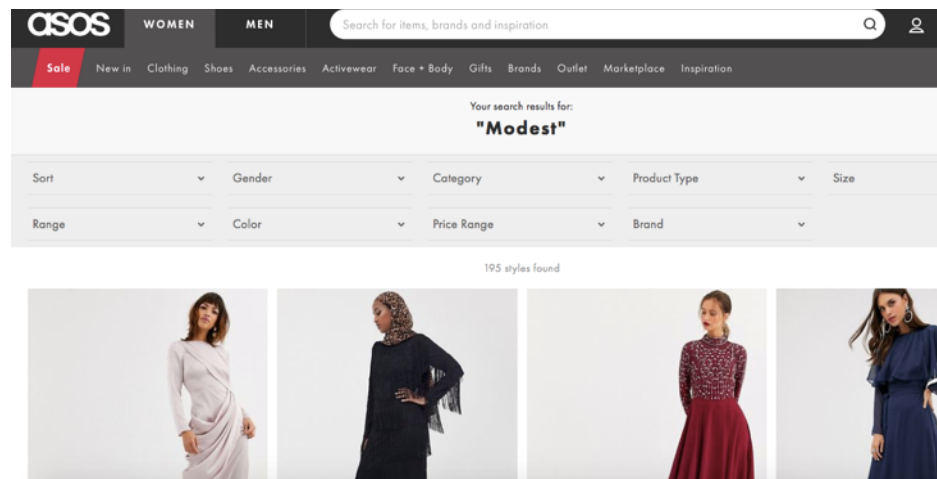
ASOS is a European brand which has gained much popularity in the U.S., as they have a warehouse in the country and advertise heavily. They sell all types of clothes for men and women. Their website reveals a fresh acceptance of Muslim women by embracing modest fashion without exclusively being a modest fashion brand nor being based out of a predominantly

Muslim country. Modanisa, on the other hand, is an Islamic modest fashion brand. The clothing they sell and how they're marketed on the brand's webpage reveal the similarities between mainstream fashion and modest fashion as its sub-genre. Uniqlo is a brand that originated in Japan but is now one of the top brands in America. They're known for their high quality fabrics and relaxed but trendy styles. The brand has brought on *hijabis* as designers, and as models to be the face for their seasonal campaigns. The incorporation of *hijabis* into secular retail fashion exhibits the import role of capitalism in America, as this has led to inclusion of *Muslimah* in the country. As Muslim identities become increasingly profitable, they also become more tolerated.

Headquartered in London, ASOS has made a name for itself in America. The website sells clothing from the ASOS brand and others for men and women in all types of settings. They have business attire, streetwear, outerwear, swimwear, accessories of all kinds, pajamas, lingerie, shoes- basically

everything. The website has

reached popularity amongst practicing Muslim women due to its sensitivi-



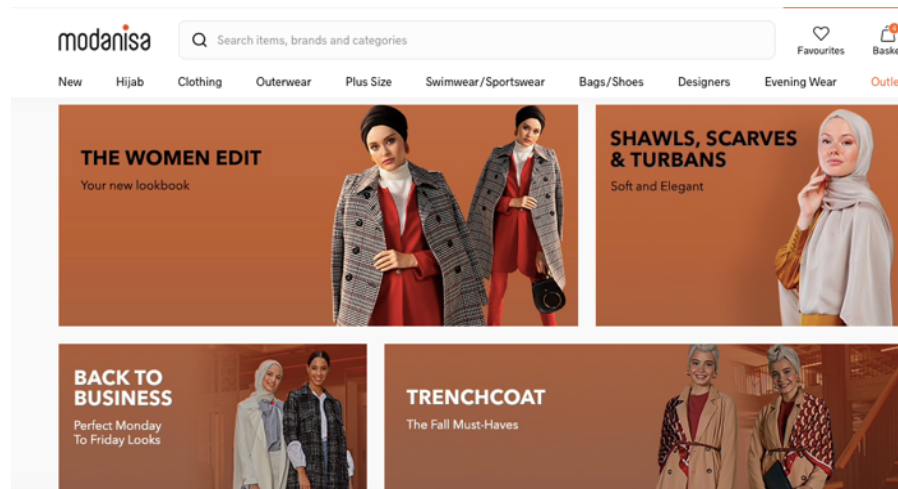
ty to the needs of the Muslim market. Shown in the image above, you can click on the search bar, type in "modest," and about 200 items are found. You can scroll through and find trendy dresses that cover the entire body, long sleeve blouses, button downs, jumpsuits, denim pants, and more.

The site even sells veils under the label “headscarf.” Their models sport differently wrapped turbans often paired with big door-knocker earrings to advertise the scarves.

The clothing found under the search “modest,” can also be found amongst more general searches like “dresses,” “tops,” “jumpsuits.” They are appropriate for both *hijab* observing Muslim women and women who don’t observe *hijab*. The clothes are in-trend and stylish, with striking prints and alluring fabric materials. The ability to search “modest” on the ASOS site reveals the brand’s keenness to the desires of *Muslimah* shoppers. For a western brand to promote clothing relevant to Muslims in the same way it promotes clothing relevant to non-Muslims, without separating the two, reveals a capacity for inclusion that ultimately leads to success as ASOS is currently one of the top one-stop online shopping destinations. The inclusivity that the clothes demonstrate reveal a shift in *Muslimah* fashion. ASOS doesn’t sell traditional clothes like opened or poncho style *abayas* nor does it advertise its scarves as “*hijabs*.” Yet despite this, the clothing manages to meet standards prescribed in the Quran, while also satisfying the needs of contemporary *Muslimah* striving to excel in modern American society.

Modanisa is a company based out of Turkey where there is a huge market for modest fashion and a large Muslim population. Because of its low international shipping rates, the brand, like ASOS, has made a name for itself in the United States. The website, also like ASOS, sells clothes from its own brand along with other retailers. The site sells clothes for men, women, children, and babies. The company’s mission statement reads “Discover latest *hijab* fashion and modest women’s dresses online at modanisa.com, with great prices and a return guarantee.” The homepage of the brand’s website from Fall 2019 is show on the top of page 43. The website holds true to their promise, only selling what is to be considered immodest clothing for young

children- shorts, tank tops, skirts above the knee. The occasional knee length skirt or tank top for women will be sold but they never advertise these clothes on models. Clothes that do not align



with Islamic rulings are displayed on hangers, laid out flat, or on mannequins. The adult models are always dressed modestly. For women, they sell long skirts,

long coats, oversized turtlenecks, jeans, shoes and more. All modest but all still in-trend. The clothes are not necessarily exclusive to *Muslimah* as they're appropriate for both women who observe *hijab* and women who don't. The site also sells traditional clothes such as *abayas*. While the site does sell scarves, the models don't always wear a veil; many models have their hair exposed which adds to the inclusivity of the site and the modest fashion they sell.

Modanisa is intended to be a site for practicing Muslim women but it's also used by secular or non-Muslim individuals. This mixing of the two styles on one site, a site head quartered in a predominantly Muslim country, forms a connection from one culture to the other. One culture's clothing flows seamlessly into the other's on one page of search results, reflecting the way modest fashion is a fluid representation of womanhood amongst *hijabis* in America.

Uniqlo, founded in Japan, has gained much popularity in the U.S. and Europe over the last decade. One of the collections from their Spring/Summer 2019 series was designed by *Muslimah*, and *hijabi*, Hanah Tajima. Consumers were highly reception to Tajima's first collection

with Uniqlo and so she went on to design another collection for Uniqlo’s Fall/Winter 2019 series.

The collections features simple designs for casual but elegant looks. “Embracing the beauty of all women” is the slogan for both seasons’ campaigns, pictured to the right and below. The face of both of these campaigns is a *hijabi* model (the woman seen in the turban in both images) but other models who present as non-Muslim, as they are not veiled, are

also incorporated into the ads (also seen in both images). The popularity of these clothes among Muslim and non-Muslim women employs the idea

that modest fashion is embraced and accepted in America. A secular brand promoting contemporary Islamic style of dress in America is vital to understanding the progression that *Muslimah*



6,028 likes
uniqlo HANA TAJIMA FOR UNIQLO
Embracing the beauty of all women



have made in the U.S. through fashion.

The beauty of “all women,” including Muslim women, was highlighted in these campaigns.

Major retail brands’ utilization of *Muslimah* and modest fashion has re-

sulted in more tolerance and understanding of Muslim women. It’s the combination of popular brands’ inclusion of *Muslimah* and adoption of the modest fashion trend, paired with the willingness of *Muslimah* to work with these brands and wear modest fashion, that has ultimately lead to

this newfound tolerance that *Muslimah* are beginning to experience in America. The brands need *Muslimah* in order to gain the attention of the Muslim market and *Muslimah* rely on these major brands to pave the way and the set the stage for acceptance of Muslim identities.

Instagram

Instagram provides a more personal look at the actions and reactions required to maintain and develop modest fashion. Through this online platform of sharing and resharing, trends descend a hierarchy of cultural capital. Instagram is a platform that connects influencers to “average” people. Celebrities’ lives become intertwined with the lives of middle and lower class individuals. Scrolling through *Muslimah*’s lives and the different hashtags that feature them, provides real life perspective on who utilizes modest fashion, how, and what benefits it affords them. It’s here on Instagram that much of the symbolic, and often subconscious, work to establish modest fashion is done.

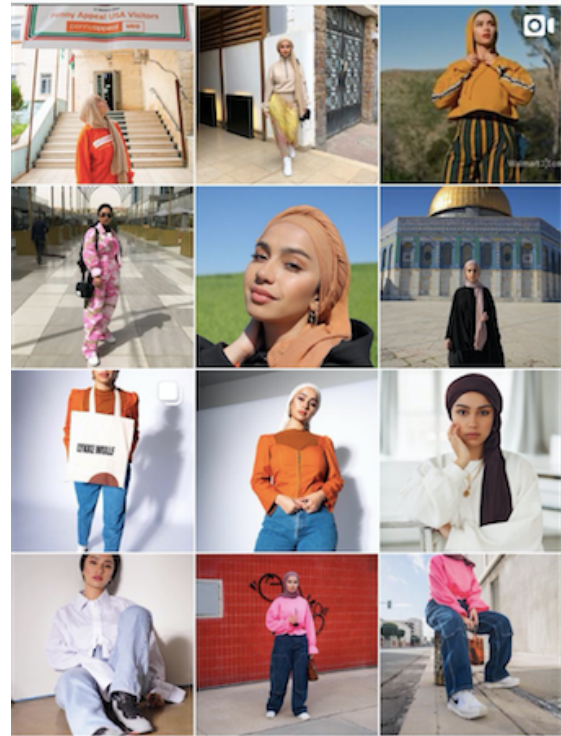
@Indoanisa is the Instagram account for Anisa Stoffel, a *hijabi* in her twenties from California. Every single photo on her account is of her, or her with her friends and or sister, showing off her outfits. With 227,000 followers, she’s known for her streetwear style, pairing oversized



pants with vibrant Nike sneakers. Anisa presents as single as there is no evidence of a husband or children on her Instagram ac-

count. She keeps the account centered around her and her clothes, and her travels. She’s permanently pinned Instagram stories to her bio, which would otherwise vanish from the public eye in 24 hours, of her explorations to different countries. Seen in the image above, the top of her page

lists Dominican Republic, Egypt, Palestine, St. Thomas, Puerto Rico and Gambia. She always only travels with other women. This and the lack of insight into her romantic life are both signs of what, in America, is considered an independent woman. She's also known for her unique veil styles. Some of which are pictured in the image to the right. Like the Muslim women Gehrke-White interviewed (2018), Anisa doesn't have only one way of veiling. One follower pointed out, "You have some very creative ways of doing *hijab*" with a thumbs up emoji. It's rare to see her in anything relating to traditional Muslim culture unless it's *Eid al-Fitr*, the biggest Muslim holiday which marks the end of the holy month of *Ramadan*.



She has collaborated with major American brands like Nike, Gap, Walmart, and more. She has even been featured in @Hypebae, a popular American company which highlights trendy and often well known women. Hype Bae refers to "hype beast" culture, which is a global movement of trends geared towards streetwear, and "bae" refers to women. The @hypebae account is not exclusive to Muslim women and currently has 8.1 million followers globally. Featured on @hypebae, Anisa is seen in pink camouflage cargo pants with a black turtle neck and a black blazer, paired with some Air Force 1s. A variation of this outfit is displayed in the image above. She can also be seen on her own Instagram account in baggy light denim jeans and a Nas T-shirt, an American rapper most popular in the 90s, with a white turtle neck underneath paired with Yeezys, a popular Adidas sneaker designed by rapper

Kanye West- all while in *hijab*. As Abu-Lughod discusses in “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” the way Anissa dresses is a direct reflection of the combination of her religion but also her social setting. As an upper-middle class young woman living in Los Angeles, it’s no surprise that she is so trendy. As a practicing *Muslimah*, it’s no surprise that she modifies her trendy outfits to comply with *Allah’s* instruction.

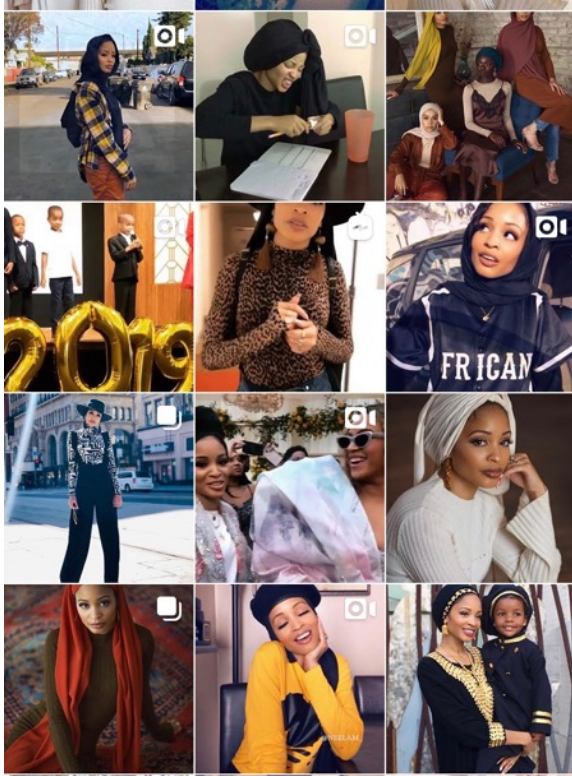
Some of the comments on her photos include “pretty!” with the heart eyed emoji, “this fit!” with the stars emoji, “*mashaallah* sister!” which translates to “God has willed it” and is used in Islamic cultures when something is seen as amazing or fascinating. More comments include, “boss lady” with the fire emoji, and “I love your style” followed by multiple heart eyed emojis. Her followers, *hijabi* and non-*hijabi* admire how she dresses and often inquire about where they can get pieces of her outfits which illustrates her influence on others. Veiled and unveiled women ask Anisa, “where are those shoes from?!” with heart eyed emojis. Women often ask, “can you link your outfit please?” which is a request for Anisa to tag all the brands she’s wearing in the photo and add the product’s codes to the photo’s caption, which makes it easier for people to find the items online and purchase them. Many of these women who interact with Anisa on Instagram are not Muslim and of the ones who are, many do not observe *hijab*. While still adhering to the Quran’s orders on how to dress, Anisa manages to remain stylish by contemporary western standards, gaining the attention of major American brands. With such a huge and supporting following, brands see Anisa as a means to make money. Anisa sees these brands as a means towards inclusion for *Muslimah* and as an opportunity for her to promote her own social value as a *hijabi* in American society.

The Instagram account @Neelam_ belongs to Neelam. With 410,000 followers, she is a mother and a wife who observes *hijab*. While proof of her role as a mother and wife is stitched into her Instagram, she doesn't advertise that aspect of herself in a bio. Her bio reads, "Art. Not your typical rapper. I'm an MC and so much more!" Drawing on Al Wazni's statement regarding the veil's ability to provide *Muslimah* with empowerment, the focus of Neelam's rap music is always pride, strength, and confidence. Some of her songs even specifically mention her veil. In her song Run It, she smoothly rhymes, "when I tell him no he's gonna be mad - you gettin' bodied by a *heejab*" when she speaks on denying men's advances. The term "bodied by" means "overpowered by," so Neelam is ultimately saying that she overpowers men as a *hijabi*. The song is off her album titled The Crown, which is also a reflection of this "security, self-confidence, empowerment" (Al Wazni, 2015) women in *hijab* experience that Al Wazni speaks on.

Occasionally, Neelam will post about the blessings and struggles involved in raising an autistic son. On one of these posts, her followers commented things such as, "so inspirational sister", "beautiful" with the heart emoji, "the relationship you two share is so beautiful to watch. May *Allah* reward you." She uses her account primarily, though, to promote social change through her rap music. As Chan-Malik (2018) highlights, activism is an inherent part of being Muslim and Neelam displays this aspect of her identity continuously.

She, like Anisa, rarely wears her veil in a traditional style and rarely wears traditional Islamic garments, which is displayed in the image on page 49. She sports overalls with graphic long sleeve shirts underneath, high waisted pants with vibrant prints and elegant blouses, long cardigans with bell bottom denim jeans, oversized flannels and sports jerseys.

While still technically working towards becoming more of a mainstream artist, Neelam is accepted by the American rap community. She attended Beyonce and Jay Z's , two of the most



significant faces of American pop culture, Roc Nation Brunch in celebration of Jay Z's long running music label. The brunch was filled with stars like producer DJ Khaled, comedian Kevin Hart, rapper and producer P Diddy, rapper Meek Mill, rapper and producer Swiss Beats, singer Alicia Keys, and many more- and Neelam in *hijab*. In a short clip Neelam posted from the event, pictured to the left in the center of the image, Beyonce is seen and heard calling her "so pretty."

Neelam has been featured in Forbes magazine, Essence magazine and Instagram account, The Shaderoom Instagram account, Revolt magazine and Instagram account, XXL Magazine, Teen Vogue magazine, and other notable American platforms. These American outlets embracing Neelam is a display of tolerance for *Muslimah* that is rarely experienced by *hijabis* in traditional garments. Neelam receives plenty of positive feedback from her followers, veiled and unveiled. One woman wrote "your style is just... as other worldly as you." Another follower wrote, "I like this look. Fire!" and on the same photo someone else wrote "that jacket!" with the heart eyed emoji. On another photo Neelam posted, followers wrote "love your style giiiiirl" with heart eyed and fire emojis, "slay!" and "I

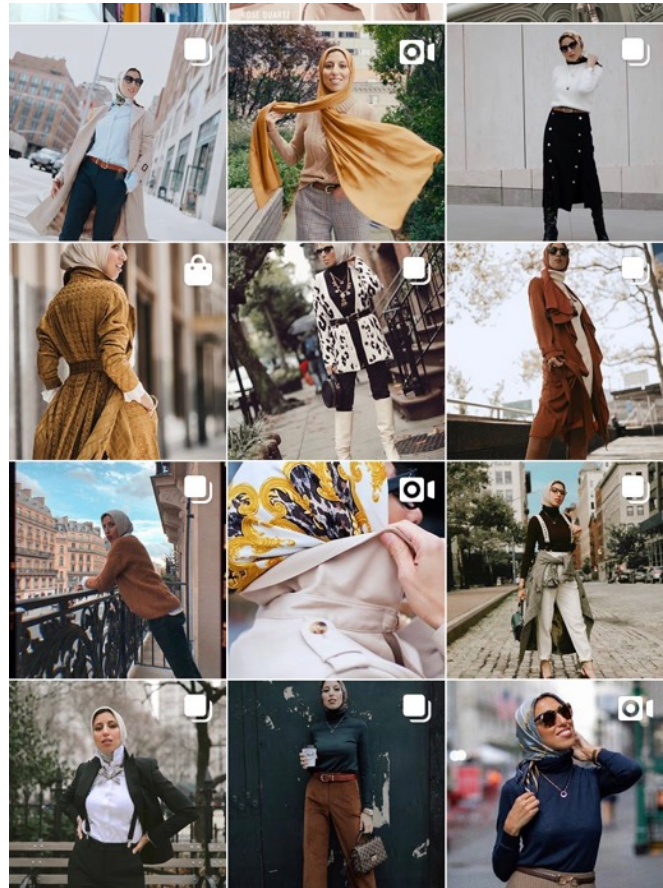
love your vibe and your style” with the rose emoji. Neelam is adored for her layered identity as a mom, wife, rapper, and for her style, by Muslims and non-Muslims, *hijabis* and non-*hijabis*.

Melanie Elturk is a Filipino and Lebanese *hijabi*. She grew up in Detroit and graduated from law school at 23 years old, all the while selling scarves online as a way to make money on the side. Ihsan Bagby’s study, evaluated in Gehrke-White’s research (2018), concluded that the average Muslim in America is college educated, upper-middle class, and with a family of their own. Melanie is a prime example of this. After earning her law degree at a young age, she decided to turn her side hustle into a full time business. Melanie, with the support of her husband, created Haute Hijab in 2016 and runs it as CEO ever since. The brand sells scarves and all types of accessories that are necessary to wearing the veil, including but not limited to under caps and pins in an array of styles which both help to keep a veil secured to the head.

Melanie doesn’t have a personal Instagram account. She uses the @HauteHijab Instagram account to discuss problems she and many other *Muslimah* face while also advertising the veils she produces with her team in New York City. The Instagram account has 276,000 followers. Its bio reads “the world’s best *hijab* for the world’s most powerful women” followed by a 100 emoji which intends to highlight the truth of this statement. Melanie is asserting that *hijabis* are the most powerful women in the world. Here, again, we witness the empowerment that veiled women experience which Al Wazni describes. The majority of the posts feature Melanie modeling her brand’s scarves. Some photo posts also include her husband who, she explains in one post, she has been married to for ten years with some help from a marriage counselor.

There is no traditional Muslim style of dress seen on this account. In each post, Melanie is seen in a business casual outfit. She wears blazers with black denim pants, long snakeskin

skirts with white pants underneath, plaid pants with white high heels, bell bottom chiffon red pants with a matching red turtleneck sweater - all while wearing *hijab*. Some days Melanie goes a little more casual and sports jeans with a blouse or a Tommy Hilfiger sweatshirt. Some of Melanie's looks can be seen in the image to the right. She almost always incorporates a high end accessory, like a Louis Vuitton or Chanel bag.



Melanie's career orientated mindset, which she constantly puts forward as a significant piece of her personality, combined with her honesty about life as a woman- and life as a Muslim woman specifically- paired with her choice to dress

modestly, is a picturesque representation of the contemporary Muslim woman. Advertising her company's veils on models dressed in modest fashion, Haute Hijab is currently, in 2019, the leading American based *hijab* manufacturer. Melanie has managed to take full advantage of the access that engagement with capitalism provides *Muslimah* in the U.S.

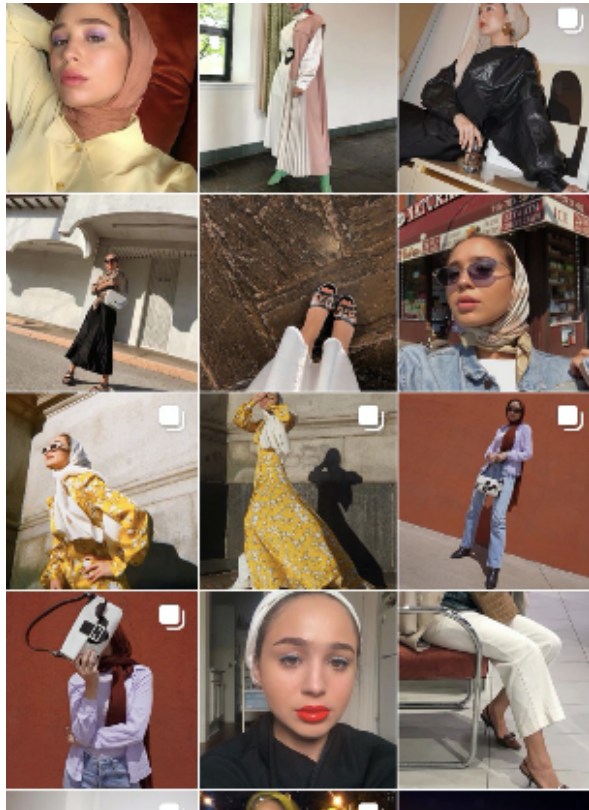
@Mariaalia is half Puerto Rican, half Palestinian. She was born in the United States in Alabama. She has three sisters, only one of whom observes *hijab*, and one brother. She moved to New York city to establish a name for herself in the fashion world. With 429,000 followers on her Instagram account, she is one of the most popular *hijabi* influencers on the app. Because of

the fame she has acquired, she commonly collaborates with American brands. She advertises brands' clothes and other products on her account.

Over the course of just 24 hours, she advertised numerous brands on her Instagram story: @viannaocchino, a high end active-wear brand based in New York City; @typologyparis, which is a French cruelty-free skin care brand with 69,600 followers; @veja, a sneaker brand with 364,000 followers that uses only organic material in their production; @freshbeauty, a make up and skin care brand with 784,000 followers; @velascarves, an American based brand that sells and manufactures veils with 148,000 followers; @nike, one of America's top selling sneaker brands which has 65,300,000 followers; @lapimaofficial, a sunglass brand from Brazil which has 20,000 followers; @away, a luxury suitcase brand with 537,000 followers; @proenza-schouler, a famous fashion designer based in New York City with about 100,000,000 followers; and @officialbyredo, a perfume brand with 207,000 followers. Maria collaborated with H&M, American fashion brand, on their Spring/Summer 2019 collection inspired by animal prints and tropical patterns, acting as one of the faces of the campaign. In 2018 she partnered with Macy's, one of America's most notable department retail stores. During Fashion Week in the winter of 2019, she was invited to shows of major designers such as Phillip Lim and Stuart Weitzman.

There is not one post of Maria in traditional Islamic wear. She flaunts dresses, jeans, leather pants, skirts. She layers turtle necks under tank tops. She's into vintage clothing, shoes, and accessories, and typically dresses in a stereotypical feminine style. She always wears her veil. Many of the photos in the image on page 53 are examples of Maria's collaboration with popular high end brands. Sometimes Maria will post about vacations she takes overseas, whether it be to her father's hometown in Palestine or to Madrid Spain for a long weekend with her sis-

ters. The bulk of her Instagram is her expressing herself through modest fashion. Seen in the image below, many of her posts are close up shots of her outfits where she shows off the details of the clothing she seems to effortlessly piece together. Her obvious success in the American fashion



world displays how far modest fashion can take *hijabis* in America.

The list of secular brands and non-Muslim individuals that these influencers have been involved with is extensive- all while observing *hijab*. This level of inclusion for *Muslimah* in America is something to celebrate in a post 9/11 society, but it's also something to be critical of. Fashion retailers are tapping into the *ummah*, which in 2016 was a \$266 billion dollar market (Nadeau, 2016). Al-Wanzi (2015) discusses how

western society traditionally found the “exposed body” to be marketable. In recent years there has been a major shift in this due to the economic success of the *ummah*. Now the covered body is also marketable as the consumers for this genre of retail continue to grow in number and financial ability. The brands are practicing inclusion and acceptance in order to make money. It brings up the question of whether or not these brands truly stand in solidarity with Muslims or if they're merely concerned with gaining more customers. It is a strategic move for both retailers and *Muslimah* though. We should not write these women off as being taken advantage of by these companies. All of the influencers listed have branded themselves, commodifying their

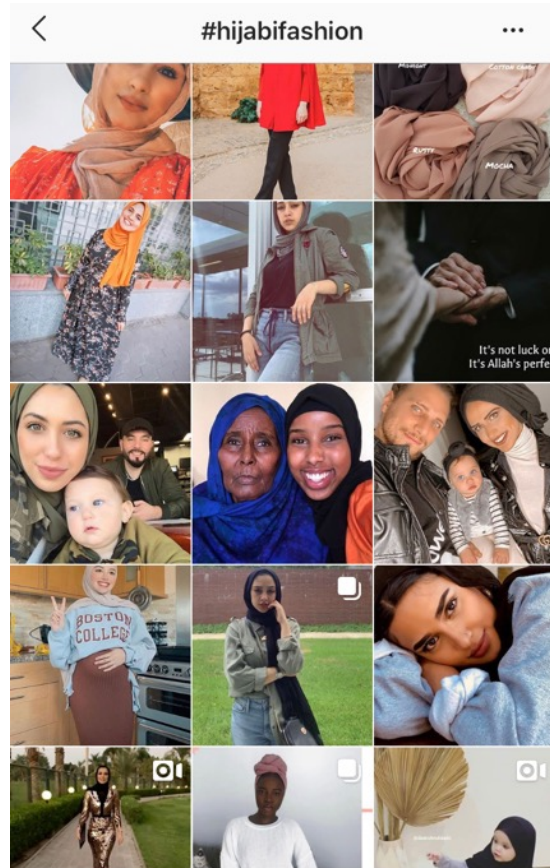
identities and making themselves marketable. Stigmatized in America as oppressed, even often seen as threats with the term “Islamaphobia,” these *Muslimah* have managed to overcome that by tapping into the capitalist infrastructure of America.

Hashtags are a feature of Instagram that captures similar posts and groups them together. The #Modestfashion hashtag, pictured to the right, is comprised of 2.2 million posts as of December 2019. This hashtag is not exclusive to *Muslimah* as many women from other faiths may decide to dress modestly, but *Muslimah* are accountable for a large portion of the photos. Because not all of the women featured in the hashtag are Muslim, not all women are in veils.

The hashtag #hijabifashion, pictured on page 55, narrows down the #modestfashion hashtag as it’s exclusively for *Muslimah*. This hashtag is comprised of 400,000 posts as of December 2019. Photos of women with their families, friends, and by themselves, are featured on this hashtag, along with an array of tutorials. Many of the tutorials are aimed at teaching other *hijabis* how to tie their veils in creative ways not typically seen in traditional attire. Other tutorials are walk throughs of women’s wardrobes, where they advise *Muslimah* on how to layer and mix n’ match clothes in order to achieve a modest but fashion forward contemporary look.



The women featured in both hashtags vary in follower count: some women are Instagram famous with thousands of followers while many others have less than 500 followers. Some of the women are in their teens, while others are over 30 years old. Some of the women are stay-at-home moms while others are pursuing a degree or working in challenging fields. These are women you see in school, at the mall, in your place of work. These hashtags are digital representations of the *ummah* which make apparent the ways that modest fashion is incorporated into Muslimah's lives regardless of age, skin color, heritage, marital status, and nationality.



The women featured in both of these hashtags are making statements with their clothing; some clothes are bright, some are patterned, some clothes are tailored while others are oversized, some styles are elegant while others are more athletic, some outfits are professional while some are casual and comfortable. No matter look each woman is trying to achieve, all of them abide by the Quran's guide of how to dress as a *Muslimah*. The women featured in the tag remain modest, yet are still engaging with modern day western trends. These modest fashion looks highlight Muslim women's desire to be accepted in American society and their simultaneous refusal to neglect their religious obligations and priorities.

Concluding Thoughts

The relevant literature and my own research, through cyber ethnographic content analysis, advance the idea that assimilation through fashion is indeed a key that *hijabis* may use to unlock the door to inclusion in the United States and gain recognition of their form of womanhood. Despite donning *hijab*, which is highly stigmatized and Othered within the country, their practices of dressing in Islamic modest fashion allow *Muslimah* to move closer into the centerfolds of American life as women capable of feminist thought, or “girl power.” *Hijabis* were granted access into the business world, music world, fashion world as a result of their decision to dress in western styled outfits which subsequently abled them to be better understood and respected as women in America.

An understanding of the feminist thought and action that exists within the Muslim community in America is crucial to the understanding and acceptance of veiled *Muslimah*. This research has shed light on an alternative form of feminism, lesser acknowledged by western thinkers and typically left out of popular feminist rhetoric. I have attempted to map out an understanding of historic and contemporary Islamic feminism in order to draw connections from it to popular American feminism. Highlighting the fluidity of *Muslimah* in their ability to alter themselves in order to achieve higher status, and in order to exist in numerous different spheres, I hope to have proven that Muslim women are not a one dimensional group, nor are their individual identities fixed.

Media content is not the only location for this phenomena. Media is a reflection of our interpersonal connections and an extension of our daily lives. Proof of the importance of modest

fashion in regards to membership into American society is evident in work place interactions, in schools, on public transportation, and other areas of reality- not just within digital expressions. While my research has centered on online and television spaces, future research with more time and resources should aim to attend to these non-digital domains in order to develop a deeper understanding of the role that modest fashion plays in the lives of *hijabis* in America. Future studies should consider interviewing *hijabis* who dress in traditional wear and *hijabis* who dress in Islamic modest fashion, then compare the experiences of the two groups. Additionally, non-Muslims in America should be shown photos of a *hijabi* in traditional garments and a *hijabi* in Islamic modest fashion, then asked to describe each woman's life and personality. These two experiments will further develop the reality of discrimination and acceptance based on fashion that takes place in the country.

Many have done research on the boom of modest fashion and how younger generations of *Muslimahs* are the fuel behind this. But there has yet to be a specific correlation, comprised into one body of research, connecting Islamic modest fashion to the inclusion of Muslims into non-Muslim societies. The current research analyzes the adoption of Islamic concepts into western fashion brands such as Gucci, Tommy Hilfiger, Ralph Lauren, Dolce & Gabanna, Nike, whom have all created *Eid* collections or other collections marketed towards *Muslimah*. The current research fails to highlight Islam's adoption of western style and the privilege it affords *Muslimah* in America and in the rest of the western world. I assume that this topic will receive more attention as time goes on and the current negative attitudes towards Muslims in America, fueled by the Trump administration and initially the Bush administration, continue relentlessly. Despite my research's focus on America, this is not a problem exclusive to the country. The current polit-

ical discussion and legislation regarding *Muslimah's* style of dress in Europe, and specifically in France, continues to become more aggressive, intrusive, and damaging to the lives of Muslim families.

It's also important to note that the exclusion, and verbal and physical violence, that *Muslimah* face is not a problem exclusive to women; Muslim men who follow the *sunnah*, the sayings and actions of the prophet of Islam (pbuh) which are recommended ways of life for the *ummah*, face similar persecution. Men who decide to grow their facial hair long, wear a *kufi*, which is a brimless rounded cap that is fitted to the head, or wear *thobes*, long robe-like garments which covers the arms and legs entirely, are comparable to *hijabis* in that their religion is outwardly apparent. Muslim men are turned into suspects even for joining their college campus's MSA/U (Muslim Student Association/Union). These Muslim men face hyper policing in America, stigmatization, and extreme exclusion from all areas of American life, especially the workforce (Kamali, 2017). There has been a decent amount of research done on the experience of the practicing Muslim man in America. These social sanctions, and at times even legal rulings, have pushed the Muslim community away from their original traditions. While this paper recognizes inclusion as a positive thing, the requirement to assimilate remains questionable. It would be interesting to capture and compare opinions of all generations of *Muslimah* in America in regards to assimilation through fashion, a capitalist practice, as well as through other routes.

Capitalism, the foundation for American life, is highly individualistic. It promotes and feeds off of individual production, whether that be of actual material or time spent working, and self-gain as a subsequent reparation of that. Islam is the opposite of this. The importance of the *ummah* in Islam is contradictory to the importance of capitalism in the U.S. The *ummah* is the

foundation to Islamic culture and creates a familial group from Muslims spread across the globe i.e., a woman may be a stranger but because she is Muslim she is my sister. Despite the religion's disregard for capitalist thought, *Muslimah* in the U.S. are now targets and users of capitalism through the increasingly popular modest fashion trend and they continue to benefit from this. It's a mutually beneficial relationship. *Muslimah* gain access, acceptance, status, economic success—all of these things create the safe space necessary for them to continue practicing Islam in America as they alter the dominant ideas Americans have of Muslim women. The brands that take part in the modest fashion movement, whether or not they truly respect the womanhood and humanity of *Muslimah*, gain money. *Muslimah* are not the only group that have gained access by tapping into the economic market. Many African Americans are highly critical of the acceptance they gain in the U.S. for playing sports or rapping, two significant aspects of their culture, that cannot be achieved by the average blue collar worker. While modest fashion is an entryway into acceptance in American society, my research has revealed that this is only an extension of the opportunities that commodification brings to Othered minorities in the country.

Desecularizing modernity is an overarching theme of this paper, which I hope is acknowledged by future readers and is given more attention by future researchers. It's a predominant view in the west that modernity and religion are incompatible; that religion cannot be the basis for feminism nor for the contemporary woman's lifestyle. I aim to demolish this myth by indulging in examples of modernity that exist through a religious framework. Muslim women of today who hold their piety as a central point for all their subsequent actions, manage to be significant and successful in American society, which displays their ability for modern thinking. While the brands and companies that associate with *hijabis* are profiting off of this newfound inclusion,

Muslimah are gaining recognition as autonomous and modern women who simultaneously aspire to serve *Allah*. Within liberal contemporary western societies, citizens are expected to be secular in order to achieve full membership. This secular construction of the model citizen, specifically the model feminist, goes against what the Muslim woman is in America. By engaging with capitalism through modest fashion, *Muslimah* have carved out a safer space for themselves in the U.S. which provides them with more access, social status, and equality. While current means of marginalization in the country are generally understood, there is more to be explored in regards to the increasing inclusion of *Muslimah* in America by means of commodification and desecularization.

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا

Allah does not burden a soul with more than it can bear. (Surah al-Baqarah 2:286)

Dedicated to Tawfiq,
to the sisters at The Abrar mosque,
and to the rest of the *ummah* - past, present, and future.

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