Examining the self-representation of hijab fashion bloggers as a postfeminist phenomenon: discourses of empowerment and their limitations

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Abstract

In the last decade, hijab fashion bloggers on Instagram have gained remarkable levels of popularity among young Muslim women. While scholars have recognised the importance of describing and celebrating the empowering sides of hijab fashion as a subculture, hijab fashion bloggers' online self-representations remain understudied from an intersectional feminist and cultural studies perspective. To evaluate the emancipatory value of these images, particularly in relation to Islamophobia, I argue that hijab fashion blogging should be studied as a postfeminist phenomenon. Drawing on academic discussions about self(ie)-empowerment, microcelebrity, popular feminism, meritocracy, the beauty industry, self-Orientalism and more, I provide a detailed insight into the limitations as well as the appeal of postfeminism for Muslim women in an Islamophobic context. Based on semiotics and discourse analysis, I perform a visual media analysis of more than 20 bloggers' representations of femininity and empowerment in over 160 Instagram images. My research shows that these bloggers rebrand veiled Muslim femininity as empowered, entrepreneurial and beautiful—which are also three areas of postfeminism's undoing of feminism. As a result, in a bid to hyper-counter Islamophobic stereotypes, hijab fashion bloggers (subversively) challenge certain inequalities by (problematically) reproducing other inequalities, such as returning to normative femininity. Additionally, by conducting a small audience study, I demonstrate that young Muslim women in the UK both enjoy and problematise hijab fashion content. Ultimately, my findings help reshape our understanding of the ways in which hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations relate to empowerment in a feminist, postcolonial and critical sense of the word.

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I began studying feminism in 2007 when it was not popular yet, or widely understood. I thank the feminist scholars at Utrecht University: you taught me the importance of studying imagery, and to observe the world through the lens of intersectionality. You introduced me to a rich body of literature about Black feminism and beauty politics, and enabled me to apply that knowledge to case studies of Muslim women. You shaped me academically.

As touched on briefly in this thesis, women sometimes juggle responsibilities in many (clashing) areas in life. Although everyday duties can tire one out and make one forget that writing is a happy place, never once did I get bored of my research. I grew up immersed in postfeminist culture, and eventually embraced Islam in which I found alternative and empowering gender constructions; hence my surprise at witnessing the incorporation of Muslim women's subcultures into postfeminism.

For years, my order of priority in daily life was as follows: child, PhD, household, husband, God. Yet I owe my PhD to these latter two. All praise to God, All-Wise, the Bestower of Blessings, who Guides with Light and Compassion. I am eternally grateful for my husband's support, encouragement, patience and strong belief in my abilities. For being the one who would listen to my ideas. For putting our heads together. For building our family on foundations of laughter and stability. For early mornings with our little one—our best friend. Thank you as well, *mijn lieve kindje,* for your love and amazing company.

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Personally, hijab fashion has meant a lot for my development. I found inspiration in friends around me, in pioneering style icons Dina Tokio, Basma K and Yuna Zarai, and in early hijab fashion brands such as

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and Motivation

The rise of social media has enabled marginalised groups to counter negative stereotypes about them, increase their visibility and create positive and heterogeneous self-representations. In this thesis, I explore the images veiled Muslim women produce when they are in control of their own media representation. More specifically, the aim of this thesis is to examine the construction of femininity and empowerment in hijab (headscarf) fashion bloggers' self-representations on Instagram. Although hijab fashion as an online and offline subculture has been studied in detail by some key scholars in anthropology, fashion studies and religious studies, I aim to analyse the subculture's social media images using a media and cultural studies perspective. Applying a critical and intersectional feminist lens to this content is crucial for understanding how representation is connected to power, however, this does not happen sufficiently in existing studies of hijab fashion. Thus, I ask whether these images form a radical departure from conventional or stereotypical representations of Muslim women in traditional, mainstream or right-wing media—or whether these images reproduce existing social inequalities.[1]

The past decade has seen a rapid growth of online content within the social media genre of hijab fashion blogging—which could also be referred to by several alternative labels, including: modest fashion, Islamic fashion, the Muslim influencer sphere or the sphere of the hijabers or hijabistas.[2] Hijab fashion bloggers provide many young Muslim women with ideas about how to combine their headscarves with clothes from high street chain stores as well as Muslim-owned brands, and create a religious yet modern identity (Tarlo, 2010: 1; Lewis, 2010: 68; Lewis, 2013: 3). For some Muslim women, hijab fashion is a daily lived experience, necessity, or pleasure. To others, such as certain Muslim conservatives or Western secularists, hijab fashion is an oxymoron (Woodhead, 2013: xx; Lewis, 2013: 1). Nonetheless, the number and popularity of hijab fashion bloggers on Instagram grows rapidly. Hijab fashion bloggers fulfil an important role regarding the representation of the headscarf,

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[1] Procter et al. (2015: 493) explain: "There is no simple way to scope what 'mainstream media' entails. In this day and age this arguably includes organisations that started out as challengers to more traditional print and broadcast media." Based on Chomsky (1997), I define traditional mainstream media as large, established, agenda-setting corporations or institutions with big resources and mass audiences.

[2] These labels all have different connotations. I prefer the term "hijab fashion blogging," because it emphasises the centrality of the headscarf, the Muslim identity, the Anglophone Muslim digital sphere, and blogging as a form of online self-representation.

since it is "spiritually, socially, politically and personally significant" for Muslim women to have their dress represented, shared and discussed online (Lewis, 2013: 44). In that regard, social media platforms offer a crucial space to marginalised groups and subcultures, as well as popular culture, which is an exciting and fruitful site due to its "cultural politics of difference, of the struggles around difference, of the production of new identities, of the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage" (Hall, 1993: 470).

The idea for this study was motivated by the ground-breaking but controversial Mipsterz video (2013) that featured female American Muslim creatives and role models and showcased their fashion, hobbies and passions.[3] Some Muslim critics argued that the women featured in the video looked too Western and objectified (Peterson and Echchaibi, 2017: 144). Other Muslims raised concerns over American Muslims' wish to fit in and appear hip, because hipness is often equated with being a 'moderate' Muslim (Saeed, 2013). Conversely, the video was praised by many Muslims and non-Muslims for showcasing diverse, relatable and aspirational Muslim women. In a societal context that is characterised by populism, Islamophobia and a fear of Islamic extremism (Weller, 2006; Bakali, 2016; Hardy et al., 2017: 1), positive self-representations matter. In this marginalised context, there is a need for varied and humanised images of the hijab and its wearers. Another good example of positive and humanising representations is the collaboration between *Getty Images* and *muslimgirl.com* in producing a collection of images that show young Muslim women in everyday situations, in a very humanised format, "[a]nd that, on its own, can be revolutionary."[4]

Although these representations are much needed, something more problematic can be observed in the way in which the Mipsterz video was celebrated by journalists and academics. In this celebration, certain Islamophobic ideas were left unproblematised, such as the association of being fashionable with being empowered and modern, and being unfashionable with being oppressed and backward. For instance, scholars Golnaraghi and Daghar (2017) highlighted that the Mipsterz women's hipness shattered Islamophobic stereotypes of the oppressed or radical Muslim woman. Many journalistic headlines promoted this idea as well, including: "How Muslim hipsters aka 'Mipsterz' are breaking stereotypes in America" and "Meet the Mipsterz: A group of young women is trying to prove that it's possible to be hip and stylish, while still covering up. Can they break the stereotype of the hijab as a symbol of oppression?" (GirlTalkHQ, 2013; Cunningham, 2014).

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[3] Sheikh Bake, 20 November 2013, SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA #MIPSTERZ
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68sMkDKMias
[4] http://press.gettyimages.com/getty-images-and-muslimgirl-com-partner-to-promote-positive-images-of-modern-muslim-women/

In the context of hijab fashion, I have also come across such statements in which style is linked with Muslim women's empowerment and societal recognition. It is often said that the ways in which hijab fashion bloggers represent themselves are empowering to Muslim women, because it defies stereotypes of the oppressed, backward or radical Muslim woman. One example out of many headlines illustrates this argument: "12 Muslim women shatter stereotypes by showing off their style: It's time to banish the idea of the 'oppressed' Muslim woman" (Husaini, 2015). Hijab fashion bloggers and designers themselves have mentioned the concept of empowerment as well, such as Melanie Elturk, CEO of Haute Hijab, who states: "I believe in the power of fashion [...] it'll be *one* of the many outlets in which we make a cultural shift in today's society to normalize hijab in America—to break down stereotypes and demystify misconceptions" (Elturk, 2016). Similarly, Marwa Atik, CEO of Velas Scarves, "founded her company with the intention of building community and empowering other Muslim women through modern style" (Harder-Montoya, 2018). Furthermore, academic scholars have made similar associations. For instance, Lewis (2015b), who has researched many facets of the hijab fashion industry, notes that hijab fashion is empowering in the sense that mainstream brands join Muslim designers and bloggers "in using style to combat stigma".

Likewise, Bucar (2018), who researched young Muslim women's hijab styles across the world, argues that, "as Muslim models and Muslim designers are increasingly recognized by the fashion world, the misperception of Muslims as outsiders has the potential to change. [...] Fashion makes it clear that Muslims are not only part of mainstream society, they are contributors to it." Bucar (2018) tells a story here of inclusion, visibility and the mainstreaming of Muslim femininities. Conversely, what this story assumes—perhaps unintentionally—is that with becoming more popular in fashion and marketing, Muslim women become more popular in society. This logic connects aesthetic appearance and economic power with social acceptance, which is problematic and needs unpacking. It assumes that Muslim women finally qualify for respectful treatment, because they are more human than previously thought, more wealthy/sexy/talented than previously perceived, and have more interesting voices than previously known. This logic would make the concept of empowerment dependent on aesthetics and associated modernity myths. It also conveys that empowerment means becoming "a better economic subject, not necessarily a better feminist subject" (Banet-Weiser, 2018c: 155). Countering stereotypes through the display of their opposites can be powerful in principle, but from a postcolonial point of view, it is far from ideal if this is done to seek validation or show to certain spectators that Muslims "are 'really as good as' or 'as human as' white people in the context of the negative stereotypes and assimilationist expectations of white society" (Barker and Jane, 2016: 612). It is sexist, racist and Islamophobic to expect Muslim women to look acceptable to a non-Muslim gaze, or expect that they spend and attract money, before being tolerated or accepted.

These debates made me wonder; what does empowerment mean in this discursive context? Which stereotypes do hijab fashion's aesthetically pleasing images shatter? And where do these stereotypes come from, in the first place? What is specific and novel about the Muslim femininities displayed on Instagram? Do the images form a significant or radical departure from mainstream media representations of Muslims? Whereas existing research primarily focuses on hijab fashion's empowering aspects, I am interested in the discourses that underlie these representations of empowerment, and the strength or limitation these discourses provide to the images' emancipatory value. I argue that these themes can best be explored through intersectional analysis.

Since media discourses "change and mutate in response to critique" (Gill and Elias, 2014: 180), it is more effective "to move beyond determining whether representations promote 'positive/realistic' or 'negative/unrealistic' images of women" and to rather examine "new forms of media sexism that function via neoliberal logics to deflect attention away from wider structural and cultural conditions that sustain gender inequalities" (Thorpe et al., 2017: 18). While hijab fashion is embedded in the fashion, influencer and Islamic culture industries, surprisingly, its neoliberal character has been understudied.[5] Neoliberalism affects the way in which hijab fashion is presented as a tool for empowerment. For instance, the Thomson Reuters report on the Islamic culture industry states that hijab fashion "is a way to empower Muslim women and give them choice, and help them express themselves" (2017: 127).

The celebration of hijab fashion as an empowering phenomenon—and hijab fashion bloggers representing themselves as empowered—should not be studied separately from popular feminism, which is the renewed and popular interest in feminism in popular culture. The celebration of women's empowerment in popular culture is often more postfeminist than feminist, "particularly those aspects that relate to corporate culture, celebrity and the embrace of feminism as a 'stylish' identity" (Gill, 2016b). Postfeminism is a gendered form of neoliberalism and can be described as a discourse in which empowerment is based on consumerism and self-transformation, and in which both feminist and anti-feminist ideas are promoted (Gökarıksel and McLarney, 2010: 4). Postfeminism could reduce bloggers' feminist politics, *and* their ethnic and religious identities, to an aesthetic. Popular culture increasingly celebrates diversity and inclusion, hence corporate brands aim to stay relevant through diverse representations. When diversity sells, the line between representation and exploitation becomes thin. The hijab may be added to campaigns as a unique feature, pictured as an exotic eye-catcher and marketed as the hallmark of a niche. Despite a growing body of scholarship on (digital) postfeminist culture (e.g. Duffy and Hund, 2015), applying its concepts to the study of hijab fashion on social media

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[5] Someone who does include neoliberalism in her analysis of hijab fashion content is Peterson (2017).

is rare. Consequently, my approach of understanding hijab fashion as a postfeminist phenomenon contributes new data and perspectives to various fields in which hijab fashion in studied, in addition to media studies itself.[6]

A corollary question to this is: how do (gendered and raced) factors such as contemporary Instagram aesthetics and a continuously reproduced "beauty myth" impact the images' emancipatory quality (Wolf, 1991)? Adhering to such ideals would imply an added pressure on Muslim women to reach societal standards or gain visibility, as explained by Malik (2017): "The grotesque prejudice and violence against Muslims has created a counter push where only positive, stylized, aspirational, attractive, overly feminized, bourgeoisie Islam has flooded the zone." Observations like these have driven my curiosity to investigate whether the hegemonic femininities described by Malik are present in the most popular hijab fashion images; why the take-up of postfeminism is popular in an Islamophobic context; and whether this limits the otherwise subversive, progressive and novel femininities displayed.

Against this backdrop, in order to appreciate the novelty of hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations, the context of this study is introduced in the section below concerning Islamophobia and the mainstream media representation of Muslims. This is followed by the aim, hypothesis and research questions that guide this study, after which I outline the structure of this thesis.

1.2 Context: Islamophobic Representations

Although the British (news) media are not homogeneous in content and organisation, they generally report about Islam in distinctive ways, portraying Muslims as a different or negative Other (Poole, 2018: 379). This creates a problematic gap between mainstream media representations and many Muslims' self-perceptions (Said, 1978: 21; Morey and Yaqin, 2011: 1). Muslims are framed as the monolithic, uncivilised, non-modern, sexist and threatening Other (Mepschen et al., 2010: 962). On top of this negative framing of Muslims, the absence of Muslim women's perspectives, experiences and expertise in media content—especially concerning such Muslim women's topics as the hijab—further marginalises Muslim women (Shadid, 2005; Navarro, 2010). Negative stereotypes about Muslims are harmful because they easily stick in people's minds (Shadid, 2005: 337) and trigger or

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[6] I single out the factor of postfeminism here (instead of highlighting mainly classism or neocolonialism etc.) because it is an umbrella ideology: it enables women to proclaim/construct an empowered or even feminist identity, while maintaining a status quo in many aspects, including those related to gender, sexuality, race, religion, age, class, location, body-type and more.

justify "anger, resentment and fear" among certain non-Muslims towards Muslims (Said, 1997: 3, 43). As such, they promote discriminatory attitudes in politics, policies and legislation, discrimination, offline and online attacks (which especially peak around derogatory reporting in mainstream media), and "everyday relationships of power" encountered at work, school or family (Allen, 2010: 188). Islamophobic (for definition, see below) media representations thus impact many Muslims in a plethora of ways (Said, 1997: 47).

While certain discourses or narratives in public discourse might seem neutral and innocent, they can in fact be deeply ideological and reflect powerful interests in society (Said, 1997: 47; Prins, 2002: 365). Discourse can be defined as "the production of knowledge through language that has a will to power" (Foucault, 1980: 201). Representations of Muslims consist of language and symbols that are subject to social conventions and historical processes (Hall, 1997: 15, 2009: 22). Many such factors as the Cold War, postcolonial immigration, the Rushdie Affair, the events of 9/11 and other terrorist attacks in the West, the War on Terror, the West's foreign policies, the rise of 'jihadism' and Daesh, the financial crash and the refugee crisis, have all perpetuated narratives about Muslims as a cultural and terrorist threat (Allen, 2010: 84; Poole, 2011: 51; Bakali, 2016: 11). There is, for instance, a strong bias in what mainstream media describe as terrorism or not, based on whether an attack is somehow related to Islam (Hanif and Hamid, 2020).

Islamophobic narratives are normalised by mainstream media's use of discursive strategies (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010: 12), such as division and rejection (Rojo, 1995), or separation, differentiation and negativisation (Richardson, 2004: 232). Media demonise Muslims, especially those in the spotlight, by framing them as guilty-by-association, and by arbitrarily distinguishing between and criminalising groups of believers such as *salafi* or *ikhwani* Muslims. More specifically, Merali (2019: 46) found that media frame Muslims as threatening, misogynistic, un-British, oppressive, subhuman, extremist, in need of integration and more. Many such Islamophobic narratives are framed in terms of the clash of civilisations between the secular modern West and the traditionalist religion Islam (Huntington, 1996; see also Lewis, 1990). These frames are rooted in a long history of Orientalism, which is a Western colonial/imperial discourse of the East as inferior (Said, 1978; Khiabany and Williamson, 2008: 85; Poole, 2011: 50-56; Lewis, 2015: 3).

Because of the pervasiveness of these media representations, Islamophobia is normalised in everyday talk as being common-sense (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010; see also: Moscovici, 1981, 1988). Despite observations that Islamophobia is a discourse that is primarily circulated by the extreme right (see for instance Lean and Esposito, 2012), Islamophobic tendencies can be detected throughout the entire spectrum of political and public discourses (Prins, 2002: 364). For instance, Prins (2002: 363-365) notes

that one particular genre of discourse, neorealism, has become particularly dominant in Western European media and political debates. In neorealist discourse, populists straightforwardly "say what we were not allowed to say" previously because of (alleged) political correctness. This is related to Williamson and Khiabany's (2010: 73) observation of a "new orthodoxy" discourse, in which progressive attitudes towards diversity and multiculturalism made way for an emphasis on the threat that diversity poses to British values and free speech (see also: Titley, 2020).

While the term Islamophobia has received scholarly attention and recognition recently, scholars have studied shifts in dominant discourses about Muslims for decades (Williamson and Khiabany, 2010; Bakali, 2016). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when activism against racism encountered by Black people was growing, the term Islamophobia provided a separate position for Muslims within that activist debate (Allen, 2010: 16). The Rushdie Affair, and later the Runnymede Trust's academic report on Islamophobia, accelerated the use of the term (Conway, 1997). Since then, there have been debates between many stakeholders about the definition, causes and effects of Islamophobia (Allen, 2010: 83, 2020: 507). In summary, Islamophobia can be described as anti-Muslim hostility or an "'anti-Muslim' prejudice, exclusion and rejection" (Richardson, 2004: 1). Islamophobia is also described as "a discourse of control" (Jackson, 2018: 152), that frames Muslims as deserving of suspicion, discriminatory practices and hostility (Poole, 2011: 56; Taras, 2013: 418-419). Allen (2014: 146) argues that Islamophobia is essentially about the stigmatisation of Muslim visibility or perceived Muslimness. Similarly, Kumar (2012) understands Islamophobia as a racialisation of Muslims (see Barker, 1981 on "new racism"), and some scholars, therefore, prefer the term "anti-Muslim racism" (Halliday, 2003: 160; Allen, 2010). Despite these relevant debates, Islamophobia remains the key term used within academic research (Hargreaves, 2016).

The definition of Islamophobia designed by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims is: "Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness" (APPG, 2017). However, this definition is contested by certain groups, which is explained in the comprehensive research "Defining Islamophobia" by Bhatti (2021). Although the categories of religion and race intersect in Islamophobia, it is important to note that Islamophobia cannot be reduced to racism, since Muslims are specifically monitored and targeted for their religious expressions, practices and spaces. This is not necessarily different in the beauty, fashion and influencer industries, where religious expressions are often reduced to aesthetic and marketable elements.

Although I recognise the value and usefulness of the above definitions of Islamophobia, I subscribe to De Koning's (2015) definition, as cited in Abaâziz's (2015: 11; my translation): "Islamophobia is the

construction of a negative, generalising and essentialising definition of Islam that leads to a hierarchical differentiation of non-Muslims and Muslims. The aim of this is to problematise Muslims as a group on the basis of their religion." Furthermore, Abaâziz (2015: 11) defines Islamophobic incidents as: "physical or verbal violence, exclusion and discrimination aimed at Muslims because of their 'Muslim-ness': discrimination at the job market, at work, in education, and verbal and physical violence on the street and aggressive online rants." Islamophobic attacks are of gendered and raced nature, with most online and offline attacks carried out by White(-supremacist, misogynist) men targeting veiled Muslim women, including pregnant women and women with their children present (Hopkins, 2016: 187; Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010: 31).

Scholars have pointed out the highly gendered nature of Islamophobic narratives, as Muslim women are centralised in public debates about Islam and multiculturalism (Allen, 2014: 146). For instance, Muslim women are framed as being particularly or exclusively vulnerable to oppression and gender-based violence within 'their' communities, because of an inherently sexist Islam (Shehada, 2011: 246; Shadid, 2005: 335). According to this narrative, Muslim women are trapped in this position and cannot escape from it, unless they are being saved and liberated by non-Muslim Westerners from their men and their religion (Shehada, 2011: 243). This frame can be called "the rescue narrative" (Shehada, 2011: 243), and is rooted in a discourse of "colonial feminism" (Ahmed, 1992: 151; see also Williamson and Khiabany, 2010: 93). In this story, the hijab is seen as the ultimate symbol of this oppression and any liberation process therefore possibly includes unveiling. Furthermore, according to counter-terrorism discourses, Muslim women's oppression by 'their men' leads to their radicalisation. Islam is seen as an extremist and sexist ideology and therefore antithetical to British values; hence, Muslims are consistently urged to further integrate and assimilate (Poole, 2002a: 81, 2011: 52, 2018: 376). Assimilating to British values is then equated to women's empowerment, which is proposed as a tool to prevent radicalisation; the British government's Prevent strategy, for instance, "focuses specifically on initiatives to empower Muslim women in order to combat terrorism" (Rashid, 2013: 3).

Moreover, Muslim women's dress and headscarves are centralised in Islamophobic narratives and "reduced to a threatening set of symbols of difference and otherness" (Williamson and Khiabany, 2010: 87). Before the events of 9/11, veiled Muslim women were framed in Orientalist representations as foreign, secluded, oppressed, mystic or exotic (Said, 1978; Zine, 2002: 3; McDonald, 2006: 19; Navarro, 2010: 101). Even after 9/11, media continued to focus on the relation between veiling and women's rights (Baker et al., 2013: 198), using a mix of Orientalist/Islamophobic frames and colonial feminist frames, especially in debates about foreign military intervention (Ahmed, 1992: 151). Arguably, Islamophobia is an extension of Orientalism, thus many stereotypes in both frames are overlapping (Beydoun, 2018: 36). However, the emphasis in Islamophobia lays on the veil as a symbol

of oppressive (Taliban) tyranny (Williamson and Khiabany, 2010: 87) and of "terrorism and a lack of integration" of Muslims in the West, which resulted in several European countries adopting legislations that outlaw hijabs, niqabs or burqas (Kumar, 2012: 45; Zempi and Chakraborti, 2014: 1). As Kumar (2012: 45-46) explains, these public debates about Muslim women's dress excludes the women it speaks about, many of whom would provide "an alternative narrative—one which speaks to a self-conscious choice made by autonomous individuals [...] instead of being portrayed as voiceless victims." Although Kumar's quote holds much significance for Muslim women in terms of inclusion in the public debate and possibilities for self-representation, it mainly highlights the discursive dichotomy of hijab as oppressive vs. the hijab as empowering. Kumar's quote could therefore also be understood as an explanation of the connection between Islamophobic debates and postfeminist self-representation. In other words, it refers to the pressure on Muslim women to speak about their religion and their headscarves in terms of personal choice, empowerment and social media's promise of subversive representations—all of which are typical tropes of postfeminist discourse, which would explain its appeal for Muslim women.

In addition to public debates about Islam, multiculturalism and foreign interventions, even certain (liberal) feminist scholarship perpetuates the idea that the headscarf and feminism are mutually exclusive by keeping research "structured around the question 'is the headscarf oppressive or emancipatory?" which (Bracke and Fadil, 2012: 36; see also Zine, 2008: 2 and Midden, 2010: 11). This is rooted in "the oppressed Muslim woman paradigm" (Zine, 2002: 13), in which the veiled Muslim woman is assumed to be oppressed, radical and backward, as opposed to the empowered, modern and free (white) Western woman (ibid.: 15). Based on gender and sexuality, non-Muslims are claimed to be emancipated and progressive, and thus culturally superior over Muslims (Prins, 2004; Bracke, 2011: 34). As (Williamson and Khiabany (2010: 91) put it, the hijab is central to narratives "of 'us' and 'them', the 'West' versus Islam, modernity versus tradition" and these narratives are framed as humanitarian concerns (Williamson and Khiabany, 2010: 93). Furthermore, in many European countries, veiled Muslim women are assumed to be unintegrated, poor, unprofessional, ultra-conservative, inaccessible and unattractive (Moors, 2009a: 196; Zempi and Chakraborty, 2014: 68; Himmat, 2004: 88). These negative stereotypes do not only effect women politically and representationally, but also in everyday life, especially when wearing a headscarf, which can lead to receiving a differential treatment or being ostracised in families, public transport, workplace and marketplace (Mora, 2011).

Media-wise, in the UK and some other Western countries, there is an increasing amount of positive mainstream representations of Muslim women. However, these representations usually still (implicitly) discuss headscarves in relation to women's empowerment and societal position. For

instance, they often feature success stories of veiled Muslim women that non-Muslim audiences can 'surprisingly' relate to: "Olympic athletes, […] feminists, politicians, musicians, or even comedians" are among the ones highlighted (McDonald, 2006: 15, 19)—as well as TV (baking) show winners or Muslim influencers. These 'extraordinary' veiled Muslim women form the exceptions to the oppressed stereotype: they are integrated, professional, modern, accessible and beautiful. Although such exceptional stories are important for breaking down stereotypes and creating role models, this representational preference also fits within a discourse that puts Muslim women on a scale of acceptability (Saeed, 2016: 75). Jackson (2018: 161) calls this seemingly positive discourse "inclusive Islamophobia," with which she refers to cases in which Muslims are accepted as part of the national narrative but only under certain conditions. This creation of hierarchies of Muslims is also described as the "successful immigrant" discourse (Rigouste,2005, cited in Navarro, 2010: 105), the "good/bad Muslim dualism" (Jackson, 2018: 161, see also Mamdani, 2005) or the "moderate-extremist spectrum" (Saeed, 2016: 75, see also Kundnani, 2008: 43). Ultimately, this seemingly positive mode of representation is thus not entirely in Muslims' interest and may instead serve to define, divide and discipline Muslims.

Some Muslim women who are in the spotlight are aware of the problem of being pushed into countering stereotypes through their work or through their own bodies/fashion. However, I noticed that, even for them, the 'extraordinary-surprising-exception-to-the-rule' discourse is hard to escape when representing the self and other Muslim women. For instance, *The New York Times* describes Yasmin's (2020) book *Muslim Women are Everything* as "born from her frustration with narrow, one-sided narratives about Muslim women, [breaking] apart tired old tropes" (Donner, 2020). Yasmin explains the motivation behind her book as follows: "I was just absolutely fed up that even when Ibtihaj Muhammad, the American fencer, won a medal at the Olympics, the way that she and other Muslim women were celebrated was like, 'Oh my God, look at that woman, she's an athlete, and she's a Muslim.' And I was like: Wait, are you really trying to celebrate us by making it sound like we can't do anything?" (ibid.). However, Yasmin's aim of "messing up all the boundaries" resulted in a book with exceptional stories of, say, a niqabi heavy metal guitarist or a hijabi NASA engineer. But instead of dissecting Islamophobia, it responds according to Islamophobic logic: after all, Islamophobia asks of Muslim women to exhibit their exceptional awesomeness or 'badassness' that makes them deserve and achieve things, instead of turning a critical gaze upon sexist, classist and Islamophobic structures. Another example of this dynamic, found in the hijab fashion sphere, is blogger Dina Tokio (@dinatokio), who has often spoken out against Islamophobic micro-aggressions. In her documentary YOUR AVERAGE MUSLIM, she expresses her frustration with the fact that Muslim women are expected to break stereotypes: "How many years are we just all going to be just breaking the stereotype, which kind of

takes away from what [Muslim women] are actually doing and their actual skills?"[7] Nonetheless, in her hijab fashion content, breaking stereotypes about the headscarf remained a key element for a long time. Hijab fashion bloggers' (exceptional) self-representations should therefore be studied with this discursive context in mind.

There is a lack of studies that focus on the concrete ways in which Islamophobia impacts Muslims/women (e.g. Kunst et al., 2012; Beshara, 2019), and in particular its cultural impact, such as in representing the self online (Allen, 2015: 288). In 2011, I conducted interviews with young Dutch Muslim women who engaged in image management through affective labour and adjustment of their dress (Mora, 2011). These adjustments are based on a silent Islamophobic agreement that the hijab must meet non-Muslims' "right to 'feel comfortable'" (Jackson, 2018: 166). Moors (2009a: 195) mentions that, due to the recognisability of the headscarf, (young) Muslim women often "feel a strong responsibility to counter negative stereotypes about Islam by presenting a positive image" (see also Ryan, 2011; Suleiman, 2017). Moors (2009a: 196) also explains that, "because fashion has historically been linked so strongly to modernity," fashion is used as a tool to negate stereotypes of the backward, poor, foreign and oppressed Muslim woman. Poignantly, notes Moors (2009a: 197), "[h]ow the majority public perceives the public presence of Muslim women seems to depend on how aesthetically pleasing Islamic styles of dress are to the majority gaze." The logic Moors observes here is highly problematic: it places the responsibility on veiled Muslim women to be accepted and denies the pervasiveness of Islamophobia. After all, looking fashionable will not prevent Islamophobic laws, attitudes or attacks. But experiencing or fearing Islamophobic attacks has made Muslim women hyper-aware of their hijab and identities (Allen, 2014). Women may thus invest in the hipness of their clothing in the hope to avoid Islamophobic hate, in addition to undoing their own internalisation of Islamophobic narratives (Mora, 2011). It is important to note here that I am not against promoting feminism and countering Islamophobia through fashion and online branding. However, if this results in a "reactive identity formation" (Zaman, 2008: 465) that is not agenda-setting, but taps into old Orientalist curiosity and fascination with the hijab (McDonald, 2006: 8), it is arguably not very emancipatory in the intersectional feminist and postcolonial sense of the word.

Arguably, hijab fashion bloggers' online self-representations should not be seen as an activist form of "counter-Islamophobia" (Merali, 2018), but rather as a popular form of "hyper-countering" Islamophobia (Suleiman, 2017: 5). Suleiman (2017: 5) has coined the term "hyper-countering" to describe the ways in which American Muslim youth internalised Islamophobia and hence feel

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[7] Dina Tokio, 7 November 2017, YOUR AVERAGE MUSLIM | FULL DOCUMENTARY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f14GtLR7O0Y&t=172s 0:05

compelled to negotiate their identities to fit into mainstream culture, even when this is not entirely "in line with their value systems". It is unfortunate that Suleiman does not further expand on his definition of the term, but in the context of hijab fashion blogging, I understand hyper-countering as veiled Muslim women's—conscious and unconscious—efforts to counter Islamophobic stereotypes on a *wide scale* in a *reactive* way to the dominant culture's expectations.

Put differently, in an Islamophobic society, veiled Muslim women are 'always already' questioned, silenced, dismissed, suspected or undermined—and are thus pushed into hyper-countering this stigma: they may over-compensate, prove, showcase, defend, explain, humanise and rebrand themselves (Moors, 2009a: 196; Narkowicz cited in Merali, 2018: 16). Following the War on Terror, the perceived threat of 'Islamist' terrorism (Muslims as perpetrators) turned religious signifiers—and even ethnicity—into reasons for non-Muslims' suspicion. Counter-terrorism discourses tend to stigmatise Muslim identity *a priori,* as Morsi (2017: 17) explains: "[t]he radical is the starting point, is the skin we are born in." As an effect, many (visible) Muslims are expected to "negotiate the stereotype" and "prove [their] normalcy" (Morsi, 2017: 59). This highly raced (and gendered) dynamic could possibly be at the heart of bloggers' instrumentalisation of hijab fashion for hyper-countering stereotypes and being included in the national narrative.

For instance, if Islamophobia claims that the headscarf is backward, Muslim women will hyper-counter this by showing it is fashionable. If Islamophobia assumes that veiled Muslim women are submissive, they will showcase their badassness. If Islamophobia deems veiled Muslim women unattractive, Muslim women will beautify. If Islamophobia finds Muslim women inaccessible or lacking personality (Navarro, 2010: 101), they will open up and comfort some non-Muslims' anxieties. In order to grasp this phenomenon, I explore what role postfeminism plays in this rebranding of Muslim women into the opposite of Islamophobic stereotypes.

1.3 Aim, Hypothesis and Research Questions

Against this background, this thesis aims to map out the feminine archetypes and notions of empowerment in 161 images of the 23 most popular hijab fashion bloggers among a UK audience—supported by insights extracted from semi-structured interviews with nine Muslim women in the UK. Furthermore, I aim to critically examine the ways in which postfeminism limits the empowering value of hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations for young Muslim women.

I hypothesise that hijab fashion bloggers make use of an aestheticised, postfeminist empowerment discourse in their self-representations, and that, perhaps unknowingly, postfeminism is appealing to many Muslim women in rebranding (veiled) Muslim femininity, because it offers ingredients for countering Islamophobic stereotypes. Moreover, I expect that any subversive and powerful representations are alternated with more problematic ones that reproduce inequalities, which is something that will surface during intersectional analysis.

In order to test this hypothesis, this study addresses five core research questions:

1. What femininities do hijab fashion bloggers construct in their images on Instagram?
2. How do these self-representations relate to power?
3. What notions of empowerment are represented and which discourses underlie these?
4. What postfeminist elements can be seen in the images, and how does this rebrand Muslim femininity?
5. How are hijab fashion images received by some Muslim women in the UK?

The answers to these questions reveal the emancipatory potential of hijab fashion images.

1.4 Outline

To answer the above research questions, this thesis contains three analysis chapters which are all data-driven and based on three key themes found in the data. However, the analysis demanded further exploration of topic-specific literature at the start of each analysis chapter, to enable "a constant movement back and forth between theory and empirical data" (Mogashoa, 2014: 111). Therefore, the literature review in Chapter 2 is shorter than usual and limited to outlining contemporary academic discussions on the question of whether digital media, selfies, market logic, microcelebrity and postfeminism are empowering to people generally and to marginalised groups specifically—keeping the shift from mainstream media representations to self-representation in mind.

Chapter 3 *Methodology* positions my research within feminist media studies and presents the methodologies (semiotics and discourse analysis) I applied to do a detailed visual media analysis (images) in addition to an audience research (interviews). This chapter details the importance of performing a discourse analysis on case studies of marginalisation, in order to highlight how alternative (religious) knowledges, cultural traditions and opinions may be silenced in popular/mainstream

discourses. It also discusses why interviews are an important feminist research tool for not only analysing interviewees' words, but also treating them as co-creators of knowledge.

Chapter 4 *Popular Feminism and Self-Branding* explores which feminist or feminist-sounding discourses underlie hijab fashion bloggers' notions of empowerment as represented in their Instagram posts, such as postfeminism, fourth-wave feminism, Islamic/Muslim feminism, Black feminism, popular feminism, femvertising and feminist self-branding. The chapter mainly explores how postfeminism (still) rebrands feminism and runs through images in all the above categories. Using Gill's and Banet-Weiser's work on postfeminism and brand culture, the chapter also analyses the interplay between the subversive representation of empowerment and the use of empowerment as a marketing tool (that rebrands Muslim femininity). In the process, I coin and explore the new term "empowerism" to describe the branding of oneself as empowered in a marginalised context.

In Chapter 5 *Entrepreneurialism as Empowerment*, I map out which feminine archetypes and buzzwords are dominant in entrepreneurial representations in my data. In line with postfeminism, neoliberalism and meritocracy, bloggers represent empowerment as defined by economic success and upward social mobility, reached through entrepreneurial activities and attitudes. I demonstrate that many contemporary archetypes I found, such as the girl boss/lady boss, the badass, the queen mother and the mumpreneur, are based on such earlier postfeminist archetypes as the can-do/top girl. Here, the rebranding of Muslim femininity is based on neoliberal hallmarks such as ambition, education, power dressing, overcoming adversities and creating a work-life balance. Primarily based on Littler's, McRobbie's and Duffy's insights, this chapter also explains that this genre can be best understood by viewing digital labour and meritocracy as co-constructed by Islamophobia.

Chapter 6 *Beauty as Empowerment* is filled with both very powerful and very problematic expressions of femininity, containing tensions between (feminist) ideas of empowerment and (anti-feminist) ideas of beauty. Progressive(-sounding) discourses of body positivity, self-care and cultivating confidence are met with an intensified beauty culture of makeup, skincare, botox and fillers. Based on the works of Lazar; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer; Elias, Gill and Scharff; and Stuart and Donaghue, amongst others, this chapter evaluates the relationship between empowerment and rebranding Muslim women as beautiful. Drawing on my data, this chapter discusses bloggers' return to hyper-feminine beauty; followed by an analysis of the return to classic Hollywood beauty icons; and a sporadic but growing return to Orientalist aesthetics. These latter two phenomena are packed with, respectively, references to class and Eurocentrism which minimise perceived Muslimness, and with luxurious ethnic elements and Orientalism which accentuate Muslimness.

These three analysis chapters sharply lay out the tensions between popular empowerment discourses, as present in hijab fashion on Instagram, and intersectional feminist understandings of empowerment/emancipation. Ultimately, in Chapter 7 *Conclusion*, I demonstrate how my findings answer my research questions, after which I evaluate how my data relates to questions about power. Overall, this thesis demonstrates the importance of further scholarship on postfeminism in a variety of subcultures, and provides young Muslims with food for thought in discussing such pressing matters as media literacy and developing empowering/emancipatory self-representations.

2 Literature Review

In the introduction chapter, I have described the stigmatisation (veiled) Muslim women face due to Islamophobic/Orientalist public discourse and media representations. With the emergence of the Internet, however, mass media's traditional gatekeepers have lost part of their monopoly power (Akou, 2010: 332). The Internet provided Muslim women with unprecedented opportunities to create their own (counter-)narratives and to build empowering connections with each other. Since the rise of social media, multiple platforms and technologies are readily available to Muslim women to display positive and radically different stories and visual images. Unsurprisingly then, one of the key discussions in feminist scholarship on women's online presence centres on the term "empowerment" and its limits (Dobson, 2015: 4). Hence, I start off this chapter by reviewing what scholars have written about the empowering potential of the Internet, social media and selfies for (marginalised or Muslim) women. Some argue however that, despite the empowering potential of social media, the consequence for individuals to participate in current digital "freedoms" is to submit to new control mechanisms, such as the rules of the attention economy and postfeminist culture (Dobson, 2015: 5; Milestone and Meyer, 2012: 112). Therefore, the second part of this literature review discusses the questions of whether the market and the attention economy offer space for empowerment, and whether postfeminist media culture can be thought of as empowering—especially in relation to Muslim women's unique context. Ultimately, this review lays the foundation for exploring the idea that hijab fashion blogging is filled with powerful imagery, but is nevertheless a postfeminist phenomenon that hyper-counters Islamophobic stereotypes.

2.1 Digital Media

When the Internet was first introduced to the public, it was primarily a text-based medium. Popular and scholarly discourses initially celebrated the Internet's endless possibilities and promises of equality and democracy. For instance, regarding the Internet's potential for women's empowerment, Morahan-Martin (2000: 683) states: "Online anonymity […] frees individuals of social and physical restraints, and has allowed women to express parts of themselves that they might not otherwise in a safe environment, enabling them to explore new identities." Nevertheless, Morahan-Martin (ibid.) also points out that there are limits to these promises, since "[p]ower is not distributed equally online". Similarly, in relation to Muslims' emancipation, Poole (2002b: 57) found that, on the one hand, the

Internet promises connectivity and empowerment, and holds potential for marginalised groups such as Muslims to "produce their own material […] where they have been previously marginalised in mainstream media forms." On the other hand, a utopian narrative seems too celebratory, since many communities have limited access to the Internet, and since offline power relations are reproduced in the digital world (ibid.). This could be problematic for theorising the Internet as an empowering tool for Muslims or Muslim diaspora in absolute terms, because, depending on each specific case study, empowerment is constrained by economic, political and technical exclusion (ibid.). Barker and Jane echo this in their book on digital inequalities related to racism and Orientalism (2016: 330-337), as well as gender and postfeminism (2016: 347-349). These factors ask for a critical examination of the Internet's empowering value for Muslim women's self-representation.

With the emergence of Web 2.0 and social network sites/social media, the exploration of the digital world's utopian and dystopian qualities continued. Such technological advancements as tablets and smartphones engendered the integration of social media into many people's daily lives (Boyd and Ellison, 2007: 211). Young people spend more time viewing, creating and sharing content on social media, than consuming traditional mass media (Gauntlett, 2008: 2; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010: 61; Castells, 2014: 145). Some well-known social media platforms are YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, SnapChat, Tumblr, Pinterest and Instagram—the latter being a visual, advertising-style platform for profiling oneself or one's business and sharing photos/videos, that initially became popular for its filters and hashtags.

Since social media is more interactive, immediate and visual-based than its forerunners Web 1.0 and 2.0, questions about democracy and empowerment remained important in media scholarship. A revolutionary difference between traditional mass media and social media, is that the former only allow a small number of sources to broadcast to many receivers, whereas the latter enable many sources to broadcast to or interact instantly with many receivers (Pavlik and MacIntoch, 2015: 189). The introduction of user-generated content (UGC) formed a historic shift "from mass communication to mass self-communication" (Castells, 2014: 143). Traditional "analytic boundaries between production, text and reception are increasingly difficult to sustain," which has prompted scholars to further conceptualise audiences' power to produce and negotiate messages (Thumim, 2012: 13).

For instance, users of Web 2.0 have been described by scholars as "produsers", "co-creators", "prosumers" and, more traditionally, "audiences" (Bruns, 2006: 276; Van Dijck, 2009: 41; Gauntlett, 2008: 2). At times, the term "Generation C" has also been used, whereby the letter C refers to users' *content creation*, the *creativity* they put in, the *control* they have over their content, and eventually, the *celebrity* status they acquire if they get recognised by other users (Bruns, 2006: 276). I deduce two

kind of relations from the above studies, namely between bloggers and their followers/audiences, and between bloggers and social media companies. The first relation reminds one that the democratisation and empowerment narrative of Web 2.0 and social media may essentially be digital marketing rhetoric, providing users/consumers with a *feeling* and *performance* of participation (Pham, 2011; Hjorth, 2006: 3). After all, from an e-commerce point of view, user-generated content is a media model that spikes enormous growth in online niche markets (Palmer, 2005: 4). The latter relation reminds one that any technology is embedded in a historic and economic context. This is relevant to the question of empowerment because, while it could be argued that social media users—especially professional bloggers—are empowered by the platform and earnings they gain, many are disempowered at the same time, considering the fact that they primarily create value for social media corporations and have limited control over such factors as algorithms. After all, social media platforms are designed in a way that particularly serves their owners, more than their users, by encouraging users to present themselves according to a neoliberal consumer logic and strategy (Genz, 2015: 546). Therefore, Duffy (2010: 27) notes: "At the heart of this dialectic are issues of power, labor, and leisure and, indeed, much of the contemporary discourse on user-generated content (UGC) situates it within a framework of either exploitation or empowerment."

In the next section, I take these general discussions on the empowering possibilities of the Internet to a more specific discussion of its value for Muslim communities and women.

2.2 Muslims Online

With the rise of the Internet, scholars conceptualised the promises and possibilities of the new digital realm and introduced terms such as the "global village" (McLuhan, 1964) and "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983). Based on these concepts, and the Islamic concept of the "ummah" (Vroon, 2014: 101), Bunt introduced the term "digital umma" to think of Muslims' online connectivity as amplifying to their experience of a global Muslim community (Poole, 2002b: 55). Since the Internet both accelerated globalisation, and is itself a product of globalisation, concepts such as the "global village" described how the Internet connected people worldwide (McLuhan, 1964), especially diaspora (Poole, 2002b: 53). Muslims are an interesting target group for research (Poole, 2002b: 55), since the Internet may provide such marginalised groups as Muslims with opportunities for connection and self-determination. This is endorsed by Varisco (2010: 157), who found that certain blogs run by Muslims function as commentary on the mainstream media and provide alternative messages. This view is also shared by Bunt (2018) and Poole, Giraud and de Quincey (2019) who analysed Muslims' hashtag

activism and online production of counter-narratives against Islamophobic discourse. Additionally, Bunt (2009: 97) avers that the Internet enhances the pluralisation and decentralisation of Islamic knowledge and authority, and as "a space for identity-formation and cohesion". Thus, the Internet may provide Muslims in the West with tools to side-step official, institutionalised Islamic knowledge producers and build their own grassroots communities. Mandaville (1999: 23) called this a "postmodern Islam" that emerged from free online discussions, enabled by the online anonymity mentioned earlier.

When the Internet was upcoming, scholars were initially interested in exploring the online content of diasporas in general and Muslim Internet communities more specifically. Only later did attention shift specifically to Muslim *women's* online subcultures and counter-narratives. Barlas (2005: 172) argues that digital media's emancipatory potential lies in the possibility for women to bypass dominant gatekeepers, such as mainstream media or patriarchal religious establishments. Whereas the hypothesis of connection and pluralisation has been more difficult to quantify in the one-directional context of the old-fashioned Internet (Poole, 2002b: 56; Brouwer, 2004: 47), it is easier to substantiate these claims in the context of Web 2.0 and social media. For instance, using netnography and interviews, Leurs, Midden and Ponzanesi (2012: 152, 162) found that young Dutch Muslims use the Internet as a "missing middle" between scholarly Islamic texts and their cultural experiences as ordinary believers. Piela (2010b: 427) argues that this is particularly relevant to Muslim women who participate in online debates to counter Orientalist/Islamophobic discourses and reject certain gender discourses within the Islamic context.

Since a substantial part of Muslim women's online presence is made up of fashion, the above ideas are explored by Lewis, Moors, Tarlo and Bucar in their books on hijab fashion: *Modest Fashion* (Lewis, 2013), *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion* (Tarlo and Moors, 2013), *Muslim Fashion* (Lewis, 2015) and *Pious Fashion* (Bucar, 2018). Tarlo (2010: 209) demonstrates the Internet's emancipatory value by showing that it enables Muslim women to set up online businesses, amongst other reasons. Similarly, Lewis (2013: 44) says the Internet enables Muslim women to enterprise, find sartorial inspiration, participate in discussions about modesty and interpret religion in their own ways. Relevant to this is Boubekeur's (2005) notion of a "cool Islam", because it captures how, in this process, religion is infused with youth culture, such as fashion, to navigate multiple belongings and to counter negative stereotypes (see also, Leurs and Ponzanesi, 2014: 156). To sum up, this existing literature suggests that online self-representation in hijab fashion is emancipatory because young women make use of the Internet's participatory, connecting, democratising, pluralising and economic possibilities.

Against this background, it appears that self-representation in hijab fashion could even be a movement or a form of Muslim women's online activism. Examples of existing literature on Muslim women's online activist use of the Internet are Echchaibi's (2013: 852) analysis of the activist and feminist blog Muslimah Media Watch; Weber's (2016) study on German journalist and feminist activist Kübra Gümüşay; Eckert and Chadha's (2013) who interviewed Muslim bloggers in Germany that created an emerging counterpublic; and Bouclin's (2013: 1158) who analysed Muslim women's counter-narratives on social media and found that they create "alternative subjectivities and […] represent and evaluate their own understandings of feminism, normative femininity, religious practices, including the multiple meanings that attach to the donning of Islamic headscarves." Furthermore, Pennington (2018) has found, through content analysis and interviews, that young Muslims create a "third space" on Tumblr; and Islam (2019) analysed Dina Tokio's documentary on YouTube as a form of Muslim women's "digital activism that seeks to subvert essentialist narratives". Certain Muslim women's cultural interventions and acts of resistance thus exemplify digital media's empowering possibilities for creating self-representations that challenge Islamophobic and sexist narratives. However, most of these scholarly works focus specifically on activist case studies, while hijab fashion blogging may be primarily embedded in a consumerist culture industry and—as I discuss below—postfeminist media culture.

2.3 Self(ie)-Empowerment and Microcelebrity

Recent years have seen a spark in scholarly articles examining the sociology and aesthetics of the "selfie", which can be defined as a (digital) self-portrait that is sent through or posted on social media, usually to communicate one's image or brand (Fausing, 2013). Iqani and Schroeder (2016) note that "[t]he selfie is connected to concepts of authenticity, consumption, and self-expression." Unfortunately, many (male) scholars' of selfies, in all kinds of disciplines, are preoccupied with young women's narcissistic vanity and sexuality (for instance Nauert, 2015, cited in Senft and Baym, 2015: 1589). This has constructed the selfie as a highly gendered phenomenon that deserves to be devalued as trivial. Burns (2015: 1718-1720) explains: "it perpetuates a vicious circle in which women are vain because they take selfies, and selfies connote vanity because women take them." Although there are some feminist concerns over self-objectification, exhibitionism and privacy issues surrounding selfies, Ehlin (2014: 73) notes that the selfie has subversive potential for women to negotiate gender roles, as long as selfies do not self-objectify but rather revolve around awareness and agency. Moreover, Koskela (2002: 199) points out that "sometimes it is more radical to reveal than to hide," especially in cases where women are shamed into invisibility by mainstream media/culture (think of blackness,

disability or hijab). Tiidenberg and Cruz (2015: 91-95) argue that, in the context of sexist beauty standards (see Chapter 6), selfies of women that do not meet the conventional standards introduce new ways of seeing—and a link could be made here with the hijab.

In the humanities, academic literature on selfies often discusses both selfies' empowering potential on the one hand, as well as their commercial exploitation on the other, similarly to discussions about the Internet. Walker (2005), among other scholars, claims that the selfie is an empowering form of online self-representation. Instead of being passive objects or audiences of mass media representations, virtually anyone can access a camera and social media and gain a certain control over their own image. This argument holds particular value for marginalised people who are homogenised, stereotyped and stigmatised in mainstream media (Lee, 2005; Walker, 2005). Selfies and other self-directed representations are therefore often conceptualised as a feminist tool: women are simultaneously being the object, subject and publisher of their image (Piela, 2010a: 93-101). This subversive potential is illustrated by Piela's (2010a: 102) analysis of Muslim women's selfies that display a range of "religious identity narratives: powerful, direct, serious, but also funny, poetic, subversive, and intimate ones, thus contradicting the essentialist and simplistic nature of labels stuck to Muslim women."

Some celebratory voices in these discussions assume that selfies automatically contribute to women's empowerment, which Barnard's (2016) calls the "self(ie)-empowerment" discourse. This stance does not take sufficiently into account the role of audience expectations and the commercial interests of all parties involved. For instance, self-disclosure is often used in content to generate more followers or views, which leads to women feeling trapped in, what Tiidenberg and Cruz (2015: 93) call, "the popularity paradox". Women may create selfies that follow gendered conventions and satisfy followers: "With camera phones, women learn by themselves how to design their own images, even if in order to reproduce the cultural stereotypes of beauty, as defined by a patriarchal capitalist society" (Lee, 2005). Hence, scholars need to take into account this complex relationship between representing the self on one's own terms and conforming to a culture's visual codes (Hall, 1997). Additionally, Khamis et al. (2016: 3) point out that social media are embedded in a (marketing) model that serves commercial purposes, thus should not be idealised as merely facilitating cultural creativity and emancipation. This factor is of particular importance to my study, given the fact that I do not study ordinary or activist women' images, but rather popular (fashion) influencers' images. Arguably, the aesthetic selfie mainly functions as a form of commercial currency in the "attention economy" (Marwick, 2015a: 138): it maximises views, hits and likes and thus enhances one's online status. As a marketing tactic, the selfie encourages consumers to identify with bloggers and the products they are promoting in those selfies (Fausing, 2013). Selfies are also bloggers' "advertisements for the self" that are "produced and carefully selected for promotional purposes" (Marwick, 2015a: 142). This

contributes to bloggers' "self-branding", which is a self-presentation strategy to create a desirable and aspirational public image (Genz, 2015: 546; Marwick, 2015a: 140; Khamis et al., 2017: 191-193).

Hence, the selfie is inextricably linked to the phenomenon of celebrity. Enabled by the selfie and social media applications such as Instagram, users can become well-known bloggers among other users in their niche, and eventually reach a "microcelebrity" or "Instafamous" status (Marwick, 2015a: 139-140). Microcelebrity and Instafame are self-branding techniques with which social media bloggers enhance their online status: they regularly update their profile, reach out to followers and reveal personal information (Marwick, 2015a: 138; Marwick, 2015b: 334-335; see also Senft, 2013). Whereas in previous literature, the term microcelebrity referred to written self-representations, Marwick (2015a: 138) extends the use of the term to visual self-representation on social media. Microcelebrity is a useful concept for my research, because it implies that hijab fashion bloggers' counter-narratives are not necessarily created for activist purposes, but mainly to keep demographics, tastes, trends and monetary goals in mind. After all, the more microcelebrities can attract attention with their images, the more money they earn, usually in the form of advertisements and sponsorship deals (Marwick, 2015a: 138). Hence, the emancipatory potential of their content is subject to this market logic (Waninger, 2015: 22).

While the idea of women being "in charge of their own feminine self-branding" (Genz, 2015: 556) is empowering, microcelebrity as a visual discourse complicates this. In their quest for fame, Marwick (2015a: 156) found that bloggers (are expected to) reproduce certain social inequalities, by creating content based on "aspirational production". This includes, for instance, the display of rich lifestyles that privilege "glamour, luxury, wealth, good looks and connections," and the reproduction of beauty standards that privilege the young, slim-bodied and light-skinned (Marwick, 2015a: 138, 157). In a similar vein, Genz (2015: 556) found that, while the self-branding discourse "promises empowerment and creativity", it rewards a "hyper-stylized, heteronormative, consumerist" display of the feminine body. Likewise, Duffy and Hund (2015: 3, 9) say that a microcelebrity status is often reached by performing femininity in ways that are gender normative. This type of glamorous self-representation is discursively framed as a sign of empowerment, success and respectability, while it is mainly based on "a capitalist entitlement to consume and neoliberal imperatives to improve and transform the self," says Genz (2015: 555-556).

The above discussions of the empowering value of selfies, I argue, should be extended to the study of marginalised groups in society. In the next section, I thus explore what scholars have written about social media's role in Muslim women's self-representation, counter-narratives, hijab fashion and empowerment.

2.4 Hijab Fashion Images

Research focusing on Muslim women's online images in general, and hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations in particular, remains fairly unexplored terrain in academia. That said, one of the first studies to focus on Muslim women's online photographic—as opposed to textual—self-representation is Piela's (2010a: 91), in which she analyses the aesthetics, focus and context in Muslim women's self-portraits and other self-directed photos. Piela sees these self-representations as offering a unique insight into Muslim women's own perspectives, which replaces the Orientalist, objectifying gaze in representation (ibid.). Other examples of existing work in this area are Wheeler (2014: 152), who explored Muslim women bloggers' counter-narratives of Islam as un-Western and patriarchal; Peterson (2016), who analysed such bloggers as Amena Khan and Dina Tokio in her article "Performing piety and perfection: the affective labor of hijabi fashion videos"; and Waninger (2015), who analysed such bloggers as Ascia and YazTheSpaz in her master's thesis *"The Veiled Identity: Hijabistas, Instagram and Branding in the Online Islamic Fashion Industry".*

My research differs from theirs in terms of data: whereas Peterson and Waninger analyse a small number of bloggers in great detail,[8] I study as much as 161 images, posted by 23 tree hijab fashion bloggers. This expansive selection of data enabled me to both detect broader themes/patterns and recognise the heterogeneity and specificity of these representations. Nevertheless, in a very useful way, Peterson (2016: 7, 25) demonstrates how hijab fashion bloggers amalgamate an Islamic identity with neoliberal culture (see section 2.5 on the Islamic culture industry). Moreover, Peterson (2016: 11) points out that social media culture creates an added pressure on Muslim women to, beside countering Islamophobic stereotypes, meet certain beauty standards (see Chapter 6).

Despite these inspiring observations, my research does not further build on Peterson's study, because her aim and angle differ from mine. Firstly, she aims to show how bloggers perform "affective labor" on YouTube to construct "a new Islamic subjectivity" (2016: 17). In contrast, I intersectionally analyse bloggers' representations of femininity and empowerment on Instagram. Secondly, she aims to show a "larger picture of how Muslim women balance aesthetic styles and fashion with religious ethics" (2016: 10). In this process, she draws on the scholarship of Mahmood (2005), Tarlo and Moors (2013), to create a scholarly angle which I believe is part of the postsecular turn within (feminist) academia. For more than a decade, there has been a growing academic interest in "the study of religious women's

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[8] Peterson analysed approximately 50 YouTube videos of one blogger for her 2016 publication, and the Instagram pages of three bloggers for her 2017 publication. Waninger (2015: 15) analysed 100 Instagram images of five bloggers.

agency" (Singh, 2015: 657) in social and cultural theory. Postsecular scholarship aims to counter mainstream/academic notions of religion as an oppressive factor in women's lives, by affirming religious women as agentic and empowered instead of passive (Braidotti, 2008: 1; Singh, 2015: 661). Scholars may show how diverse, modern, empowered, successful and creative Muslims are, or any other positive trait that humanises Muslims, which is a well-needed approach that counters any Orientalist tendencies within academia itself. But perhaps hijab fashion images would have already been analysed more critically from an intersectional or postcolonial point of view, if existing research was not solely embedded in this postsecular turn.

Thus, although religion is one of the analytical categories in my study, I do not map out the hijab fashion subculture in an ethnography/netnography style like Lewis (2013, 2015), Moors (2013a, 2013b), Tarlo (2010, 2013) or Bucar (2017). Nor do I discuss bloggers' Islamic pious identity or attitudes as Peterson (2016, 2017) does. Neither do I consider hijab fashion *a priori* as a "feminist strategy" as Rosenberg (2019) argues.[9] Instead, I focus on the ways in which microcelebrity, postfeminism and consumerism intersect with such factors as sexism, Islamophobia/Orientalism and Eurocentrism in hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations. I ask what ideological narratives remain implicit, and what is emancipatory on multiple levels for Western Muslim women (a label that includes me) in the face of Islamophobia, sexism, capitalism and colonial legacies. My deconstructive approach is characteristic of both intersectional feminism and a growing postcolonial academic field named Critical Muslim Studies.[10]

Waninger's (2015: 23) analysis has been key to my research process, with regards to understanding hijab fashion as a project of modernity; as a way of branding the veiled self in opposition to Islamophobic representations of the hijab in mainstream media; and as bloggers' way of combating stigma through taste. She explains that such social media platforms as Instagram provide "new channels for identity-making, specifically among marginalized groups" (2015: 52). Waninger also makes the useful remark that, while at times hijab fashion bloggers are able to counter certain Orientalist/Islamophobic ideas, they ironically reproduce other Orientalist ideas simultaneously, because their images are embedded within a "capitalist logic that reinforces Western narratives of consumerism" (2015: 19). Similarly, in this thesis I lay out my own observations about how hijab fashion bloggers create progressive images yet reproduce a certain status quo. Waninger shows that fighting stigma through images is a complex, and not straightforward, process. She observes that hijab fashion images are not merely shaped by the Internet's possibilities for creative self-representation

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[9] Neither do I discuss issues of modesty and hijab itself, such as Kavakci and Kraeplin (2016)—or Ahmad (2017) and Baulch and Pramiyanti (2018) in an Indonesian context—because I consider this a form of policing women.
[10] https://www.criticalmuslimstudies.co.uk/manifesto/

and subversive counter-narratives, but certainly also by the money-driven world of e-commerce and the Islamic culture industry (2015: 52). This resonates with Gökarıksel and McLarney's (2010: 2) comment that Muslim women's identities are formed, negotiated and represented "through or in reaction to the images, narratives and knowledges about Muslim womanhood constructed in the marketplace." Therefore, in the next section, I discuss existing literature on the Islamic culture industry and connect this to questions of empowerment.

2.5 Islamic Culture Industry

Lewis (2010: 61) states that, essentially, hijab fashion provides a "model of identity through consumption". Hijab fashion is part of the booming "Islamic culture industry", which is "a series of images, practices, knowledges, and commodities [that] are marketed specifically to Muslim women" (Gökarıksel and McLarney, 2010: 2). The Islamic culture industry is heavily gendered: "Muslim women have been active participants in this industry as both consumers and producers," particularly in fashion (Gökarıksel and McLarney, 2010: 2). The term "Islamic culture industry" derives from the cultural critique of "the culture industry," which is a concept that was introduced in 1947 by Adorno and Horkheimer, founders of the Frankfurt School, to discuss the mass commodification and homogenisation of art and culture at the time (Ponzanesi, 2014: 11). The culture industry was exploitative, according to their Marxist theory, since it mainly benefitted the economic elite (ibid.). They also argued it had a depoliticising effect, because its entertainment value eradicated consumers' critical awareness and oppositional power (Ponzanesi, 2014: 11-13). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, "the culture industry does not satisfy the desires of the public, either as consumers or audiences, but it produces them, stifling the possibility for choice and agency in the process" (Ponzanesi, 2014: 13). Although contested over the years, these ideas are still relevant for thinking about how the current market logic homogenises tastes and gender identities in hijab fashion, who benefits from this industry, and what possibility for emancipation there is in representing the self in such digital environments.

The production and distribution of hijab fashion is becoming increasingly globalised (Lewis, 2010: 69), which, on the one hand, positively allows Muslim women to connect with each other and create a distinct generational identity (Gökarıksel and McLarney, 2010: 2). On the other hand, some argue that a globalisation of culture necessarily implies a (multi-centred) homogenisation of "a transnational Muslim femininity" (Gökarıksel and McLarney, 2010: 5; see also: Appadurai, 1996), that is "bottled and sold" by bloggers on Instagram (Hamad, 2018: 44). One way in which consumer logic encourages

consumers to make desirable choices, is through a system of identity-through-consumption, whereby consumer identities are constructed and marketed along the lines of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion and other such categories. The representation of these identities contributes to the way in which consumers see themselves, and this sense of identity in turn affects the choices they make to construct a lifestyle, fitting within that particular identity category (Reed, 2004: 286; Reed et al., 2012: 310). Not only would this marketisation imply the circulation of clearly defined, standardised, glamorised, profitable tastes in fashion and Instagram visuals, but also would this lead to narrow gender representations of Muslim women. This raises such questions as: is the market empowering? Can consumerism be subversive and have political significance?

Although fashion is sometimes used in a feminist way, to challenge the political or economic structures of its production, sales, and marketing (Mendes, 2012: 564), it is arguable that within a market paradigm, consumer choices replace relevant political engagement (Pham, 2011: 16). Certain lifestyle choices—what to wear, eat, drive and watch, for instance—function as a sign of consumers' agency, beliefs and belongings (Lewis, 2010: 62; Portwood-Stacer, 2013). Some argue that this kind of "lifestyle politics" will not bring about a radical shift in power relations, since it "is very assimilable within capitalism for the creation of new niche consumer markets" (Leonard, 2019). Others, such as Pham (2011: 10) and Portwood-Stacer (2013) say that lifestyle politics, or bloggers' commercial self-representations, can indeed contain transformative acts of resistance, although certain tensions need to be navigated. Likewise, Peterson (2016) responds to the popular/academic assumption that lifestyle blogs solely revolve around appearances, and argues that through "aesthetics and affects" in self-representations, bloggers "do political work". That is, visual self-representation offers Muslim women "the chance to control their own visual images" and deconstruct dichotomies of "Islam vs. the West, traditional vs. modern, oppressed vs. sexualized, or authentic vs. commercialized" (Peterson, 2016). Nevertheless, both Peterson and Pham take into account the neoliberal (and postfeminist, see below) pressures on women to "perform an ideal form of femininity", as Pham (2011: 10) says, of which blogs/vlogs are an illustration. In a similar vein, Ponzanesi (2014) evinces that whereas the postcolonial cultural industry (in this case, the Islamic culture industry) is a field of resistance and rewriting dominant forms of cultural imposition, it "cannot be simply progressive and politically emancipatory" because of the neo-colonial power relations involved.

Moreover, Lewis (2010: 71) explains that hijab fashion bloggers' images are "not just about empowering religious practice for Muslims, it is also about re-situating how those practices are seen by an external world." Moors (2009a: 195), Tarlo (2010: 13) and Tarlo and Moors (2013: 20) speak

about the role of hijab fashion in young Muslim women's "burden of representation" or "representational challenge" which veiled women experience as visible Muslims in non-Muslim societies. Gökarıksel and McLarney (2010: 6) also argue that, by producing their own images, Muslim women endeavour (consciously or not) to challenge and reverse the Orientalist representations of them in mainstream media and markets. This venture "inevitably entails producing a marketable image that is attractive and desirable, that of the 'good' or ideal Muslim woman fashioned by the sensibilities of Islamic ethics and consumer capitalism" (Gökarıksel and McLarney, 2010: 6). In other words, "the marketing of a Muslim identity" (Gökarıksel and McLarney, 2010: 8) follows a consumerist or neoliberal capitalist logic, whereby Muslims/Muslim women value their own position, value each other, or are valued by the dominant culture, according to the desirability of their images or the way their identity is branded. Hence, hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations are not necessarily internally motivated and created, but also externally motivated or influenced by what works marketing-wise to construct a modern Muslim niche or follower-base. That is, these self-representations are mainly triggered by commercial trends, Islamic ethics and countering Islamophobic/Orientalist narratives. Therefore, Gökarıksel and McLarney's work is extremely useful for thinking about hijab fashion bloggers' self-representation as a form of rebranding Muslim femininity into the opposite of negative stereotypes, in an attempt to appeal to their (potential) audience and (mainstream or Muslim) beauty brands with whom they seek collaboration as influencers/brand ambassadors.

Thus, to summarise, the emancipatory and revolutionary potentials of hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations are impacted by colonial history, the Islamic culture industry, narratives of consumer power, and the influencer industry in which they are embedded.

2.6 Feminism vs. Postfeminism

I understand feminism as an anti-sexism, anti-misogyny and pro-emancipation agenda supported by scholarly theory, organised activism and individual efforts. Feminism does not consist of one coherent ideology or authentic movement (Rottenberg, 2014: 431). Instead, the term includes countless groups and approaches, such as radical feminism, liberal feminism, corporate feminism, socialist feminism, Black feminism, postcolonial feminism, post-structuralist feminism, ecofeminism, feminist art/prose and religious feminisms (Milestone and Meyer, 2012: 10). Additionally, feminism can be theorised in terms of four historical waves that are recognised in the 'Western' world, see section 4.2 for an elaboration on the key aims of the fourth wave, for example. All forms of feminism believe that patriarchy, i.e. an "overarching system of male dominance", is a fundamental root for the oppression

of women's interests and legitimation of men's interests (ibid.). Male privilege and domination, together with other interlocking oppressions based on colour, sexuality, class, religion, (dis)ability and such categories, structure private affairs and public institutions (ibid.).

Due to first and second-wave feminist efforts, women in many societies got "formal access to important institutions such as the labour market, politics or education" (ibid.). Postfeminist narratives after second-wave feminism therefore claimed that feminist goals are achieved in the West, thus, it was proposed, women could return to enjoying their 'feminine nature' again (ibid.: 11). However, according to third and fourth-wave feminists, many women continued to be systematically excluded through law, racism, reproduction, income, relationships and popular culture—with (postfeminist) media playing "a crucial role in contributing to the maintenance of patriarchy by perpetuating gender ideologies" (ibid.: 10). These ideologies are upheld by discourses in which dominant language privileges some knowledges over other ways of knowing—and such mechanisms can be made visible, politicised and historicised using Foucauldian theory.

Although feminist scholars have made and make use of multiple theorists, according to their strand of feminism, such as Marx, Derrida, Lacan, De Beauvoir, Butler and Foucault (ibid.), my analysis is mainly influenced by Foucauldian feminism, which is based on Foucault's (1988: 18) theories on power and discourse. In Foucauldian feminism, power is conceptualised as relational and relative, meaning that power is not centralised or owned, but decentralised—and power does not merely create "docile, passive and disciplined subjects" (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 19), but "works productively by calling us to 'act upon ourselves'" through language and discourses of knowledge (ibid.: 16; see also Foucault, 1980: 201). Seeing a discourse, including media representations, as a "technology of self" can be useful for exploring the tension between power structures/institutions and opportunities for (partial) resistance, or in other words, "the link between wider discourses and regimes of truth, and the creativity and agency of individual subjects" (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 19). A prominent example of a feminist scholar who applies Foucauldian theory is Mahmood (2005), who has used Foucauldian concepts of power in her analysis of pious movements to challenge existing (White, secular) feminist discussions of resistance, agency and internalisation of discourse (see section 3.2.3 in the methodology chapter for an elaboration on the internalisation of discourses). I also engage with and apply Foucauldian discourse analysis throughout the analysis chapters when examining several (textual and visual) empowerment discourses and the alternative discourses that interviewees subversively use to negotiate these.

Hence, feminist scholars such as Gill (2008b: 432) argued that analysing postfeminist discourse is essential for understanding the power struggles that take place when popular media celebrate women's rights while reproducing traditional gendered ideas. For example, scholars noted that female

characters in popular shows such as SEX AND THE CITY, BRIDGET JONES and DESPERATE HOUSEWIVES (Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009: 20) enjoyed their rights and freedoms, while considering feminism itself too radical, unglamorous and no longer needed (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 1). Instead, these characters modelled a very particular kind of femininity: they were successful, assertive, autonomous, empowered, stylish and sexually confident. This gender construction is referred to as "postfemininity" (Genz, 2015: 545) and is criticised by feminist scholars for being too commercialised and sexualised (Gill, 2007b).

For some time, there was no consensus within academia on what the term postfeminism signified exactly (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 3). The term was introduced into feminist discussions in the late 1980s, whereby "post" sometimes literally means "after", in the chronological sense of a historical shift after second-wave feminism (Milestone and Meyer, 2012: 11; Gill, 2007b). However, more broadly, "post" is used by scholars to refer to all popular gender constructions that promote women's empowerment yet undermine feminism and feminist achievements (Gill, 2007b; Tasker and Negra, 2007: 1; McRobbie, 2004: 255). This response to feminism takes place repeatedly and evolves through time. Most contemporary literature—for example Mendes, 2012; Genz, 2015; Murray, 2015—is based on Gill's (2007b) understanding of postfeminism as a sensibility. Sensibility here refers to the cultural mood or attitude concerning gender in Western, and in the meantime also other, popular media (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 4; Dosekun, 2015). I take "sensibility" to mean an ideological discourse: a certain way of thinking and speaking about a topic, that depends on context, and is instrumentalised in power relations. Seeing postfeminism as a sensibility, or evolving ideology, is useful in the sense that it does not require comparing postfeminism with an (imagined) authentic form of feminism—since that would be problematic, as there are many forms and interpretations of feminism, as mentioned above (Gill, 2007b; Rottenberg, 2014: 431).

Postfeminist gender representations and discourses of empowerment are problematic because they are paradoxical and based on a "double entanglement": they contain both feminist *and* anti-feminist elements; counter certain gender norms while others are reinforced; and regard feminism as common sense while repudiating it at the same time (McRobbie, 2009). On the one hand, postfeminism promotes feminist messages that, for instance, say that women should not be judged based on their looks, because their worth does not solely lie in their appearances—while on the other hand, women's confidence and status continue to rely on the fashion, lifestyle and beauty industries (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 229), see section 6.1.1 about the body-positivity discourse. Due to "a profound relation between neoliberal ideologies and postfeminism" (Gill, 2008b: 442), "female empowerment is always brokered by consumption" in this mediatised discourse (Arzumanova, 2009: 248). Consumerism is presented as the ultimate site for female independence, choice and self-expression (Walter, 2010: 65).

This "commodity-centric view" is problematic, as Barker and Jane (2016: 348) explain, because it suggests "that liberation is only available to those who can afford to pay for it."

Moreover, to fit within the neoliberal paradigm, a postfeminist discourse of empowerment is depoliticised and de-radicalised (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 5). Postfeminism, as a gendered form of neoliberalism, stimulates women to individually search for market-based solutions to their structural problems, while consumer-based choices are in fact a disempowering substitute for transformative feminist politics (Feldmar, 2009: 147; McRobbie, 2009). Women are expected to resort to self-critique and self-regulation instead of critiquing late-modern structures for their marginalisation (Mendes, 2012: 555; Milestone and Meyer, 2012: 80; Tasker and Negra, 2007: 3). The concept of 'free choice' is an important vehicle for this: women are expected to think of their lives as the outcome of their choices instead of discriminatory structures or the cultural imperative to display desirable or normative femininity (Gill, 2008b: 436).

Postfeminist discourse frames normative femininity as personal choice in several ways, Gill (2008b: 437) observes: firstly, through a mode of representation that can be described as 'the subjectification of women'. In this paradigm, women display sexuality but, it is claimed, not to be objectified by men. Instead, they do it for themselves: they reclaim power over their own image, acknowledge their individuality, express their desires and do things to make themselves feel good (Gill, 2003, 2008b: 437). Generally, sexual subjectification could be considered as something positive and empowering to women, especially when they present this (publicly, on social media) as an authentic experience of pleasure and choice, which relates to the above-mentioned ideas about self(ie)-empowerment (Barnard, 2016). However, the fetishizing of choice, in addition to these sexualised "fantasies of power", often lead to an anti-feminist kind of representation in which women are, again, reduced to pretty things to look at (Mendes, 2012: 564; see also McRobbie, 2009). Moreover, the concept of free choice makes such representations harder to critique by obscuring the "connection between representational practice and subjectivity—for example, the ways in which a cultural habitat of images may be internalized to form a pernicious disciplinary regime" (Gill, 2008b: 438).

Secondly, through an imperative to 'remake the soul', women are encouraged to not only look good, but feel good about oneself and be confident as well (Gill, 2008b: 441). Women are expected to constantly transform their attitudes regarding gender with the help of inspirational and aspirational content (such as that commonly found on Instagram). On the one hand, the idea of self-acceptance sounds empowering, but on the other hand, when this message is promoted by (media serving) the beauty industry, the body remains a woman's "key (if not sole) source of identity" (Gill 2007a: 255).

Thirdly, women are addressed as "empowered consumer[s]" and are thus offered choices within the limited parameters of the neoliberal market (Whelehan, 2010: 165). Initially, neoliberalism referred to a set of economic policies introduced in the West in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but developed into a form of governmentality that constitutes rational, self-motivating, autonomous and self-managing subjectivities, whereby consumption is equated with freedom, autonomy and empowerment (Mendes, 2012: 557). Neoliberalism brings about more than merely a shift from citizenship to consumerism: neoliberalism "transforms consumption *into* a form of citizenship" (Roberts in Tasker and Negra, 2007: 228, original emphasis). Likewise, postfeminism (as a gendered manifestation of neoliberalism) transforms consumption *into* a form of empowerment (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 7).

In each analysis chapter (4, 5 and 6), I elaborate more on the ideological underpinnings and distinctive features of postfeminism, such a commodification of feminism, the glorification of entrepreneurialism and a return to traditional (hyper-)femininity, amongst others.

2.6.1 Applicability to Hijab Fashion

While the rise of social media and selfies provides women with more tools to create new modes of representation, postfeminism may still be a dominant paradigm, including in hijab fashion. Hijab fashion has not been studied extensively in the light of postfeminism yet and this option might not be obvious to scholars, because the most popular hijab fashion bloggers seem to avoid the sexualisation of women's bodies; their content is not directed at a White Western audience per se; and their content contains many references to feminism and politics. However, hijab fashion is part of a bigger mainstream online postfeminist trend of remaking the self through fashion and adornment.

Gill (2007b) posed the following question in 2007: "What features need to be present in order for any media scholar to label something postfeminist?". In 2011, however, Gill and Scharff stress that the aim of analysis is not to tick boxes and label media messages as postfeminist or not: rather, postfeminist characteristics are discussed within a case study's own unique context and should not be restricted to (White) American and British media (2011: 9). For this study on hijab fashion, Gill and Scharff's approach is particularly useful, because it allows room for applying critique of postfeminism to a different (sub)cultural context.

In the 2000s, Gill (2007b: 147; see also Gill and Scharff, 2011: 4) mentioned the following eight characteristics of postfeminist representations: (1) the idea of femininity as a bodily property; (2) a shift from objectification to subjectification in women's representations; (3) an emphasis on self-surveillance and discipline; (4) a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; (5) the dominance

of a makeover paradigm; (6) a revival of ideas of natural sexual difference; (7) a re-sexualisation of women's bodies; and (8) an emphasis on consumerism. Evaluating what these characteristics mean in this time in general, and for my case study of hijab fashion blogging in particular, I notice that most of Gill's observations here still hold sway or have become stronger. For example, the femininities promoted by postfeminism are both progressive yet excessively feminine—which can be seen in hijab fashion as well (McRobbie, 2009). On the one hand, through the concept of modesty, hijab fashion offers a (feminist) critique of dominant beauty standards while, on the other hand, it still upholds Gill's first point about femininity as a bodily property. Gill's third point about self-surveillance and monitoring is also relevant, since a social media career means a disproportionate amount of aesthetic and affective labour is involved (see analysis chapters) whereby the rules of the attention economy remain largely uncriticised (Milestone and Meyer, 2012: 18).

When analysing postfeminist representations in the "niche-oriented digital culture" of hijab fashion (Levine, 2015: 7), an intersectional approach is crucial, because these representations are embedded in a history of colonialism and immigration, situated in a globalised capitalist economy, and organised along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity, class, religion, sexuality and age, amongst other categories. These categories may create significant differences (vis-à-vis White/mainstream postfeminism) in the type of discourses that hijab fashion bloggers tap into, their privileges, marginalisation, histories, experiences and interests. A relevant illustration of this difference is that a postfeminist discourse might be very appealing to some young veiled Muslim women because its empowerment rhetoric is the exact opposite of the victimized Muslim woman narrative. Moreover, an intersectional approach can complicate existing theories about postfeminism by demonstrating that certain postfeminist ideals are heavily negotiated in hijab fashion because of issues to do with religious views, female sexuality and a history of Islamophobia and imperialism (Berger and Guidroz, 2009: 77). These factors and nuances help to answer the question of whether, and in what ways postfeminism holds significance to veiled Muslim women.

2.6.2 Understanding Postfeminism in Hijab Fashion

The above demonstrates the relevance of (intersectionally) understanding postfeminism when studying hijab fashion content. To the best of my knowledge, Peterson is the only other scholar who has applied theories on postfeminism to hijab fashion content: she mentions postfeminism briefly in her 2016 article, and more elaborately in her 2017 book chapter about hijab fashion and her 2018 article about the Mipsterz video. As mentioned before, she describes how postfeminism is, besides

Islamophobia, an added source of pressure for Muslim women to perform an ideal kind of femininity (2017: 250). However, her perception of how postfeminism intersects with bloggers' self-representation differs from my approach.

Firstly, Peterson analyses social media representations without incorporating certain literature about self-branding and microcelebrity, which I deem essential, given that online self-representation often follows a postfeminist logic of self-branding, affective labour and bodily display (Walter, 2010; Duffy, 2010; Senft, 2013; Marwick, 2013b; Duffy and Hund, 2015; Dobson, 2015; Genz, 2015). Secondly, Peterson's (2017: 216) main goal is to describe how hijab fashion complicates postfeminism, in particular with regards to the expression of sexuality: "the Islamic values of modesty, piety, and humility are subtly present in these Instagram images and complicate the ideals of postfeminism." Thus, concludes Peterson, "Amena does not need to abandon her faith in order to be an empowered woman" (2017: 257). Whereas this is one of Peterson's research aims, it is a given in my research that sexuality is represented differently, hence I focus more on the ways in which postfeminism continues to shape gender constructions in a multitude of ways.

Thirdly, Peterson suggests that "the presumed freedoms of postfeminism" provide empowerment to the extent that it strengthens Dina Tokio's entrepreneurialism (2017: 257), and allows Amena the opportunity to have control over her own images; to represent herself as "attractive but not overly sexualized"; and to counter the dominant idea that Muslim women can only be liberated if they uncover (2017: 255). However, it is questionable whether these freedoms and strengths derive from postfeminist ideology. I take the issue further by asking why postfeminism is an appealing discourse and mode of self-representation for young veiled Muslim women, in the face of Islamophobia/Orientalism—which accounts for why postfeminism *seems* empowering but compromises empowerment on many levels. Fourthly, Peterson (2016: 7) argues that Amena empowers her audience by modelling "an affective state—feelings around how to properly act within this neoliberal culture while still maintaining Islamic piety." In other words, Amena's attitude debunks the dominant Western stereotype that Muslims are too conservative and unintegrated to fit into Western culture. However, to suggest that Amena offers a hybrid identity and lifestyle to her followers that is novel or that they do not already inhabit (2017: 17), seems to perpetuate the idea that Western Muslims are in need of such role models to understand how to combine piety and modernity. Instead, I see Amena's content mainly as the marketing of a postfeminist identity to her Muslim niche.

Lastly, Peterson (2017: 251) describes how she avoids celebrating social media for enabling Muslim women to represent themselves on their own terms, as well as avoiding dismissing social media altogether for its neoliberal exploitation of women's digital labour and its reproduction of beauty

standards. Instead, she uses Banet-Weiser's (2012) concept of ambivalence in brand culture, to emphasise "how women produce meaning within these conflicting and ambivalent spaces" (Peterson, 2017: 251). As such, Peterson emphasises hijab fashion bloggers' power in producing positive meaning despite social pressures. The "real political potential of the ambivalences in these images" is, according to Peterson (2017: 262), the use of creative fashion styles to "resist dominant stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed and hyper-sexualized." While Peterson's arguments are valuable, her conclusions could be complicated by engaging with a more intersectional form of critique that examines how, at times, bloggers resist Islamophobic stereotypes *by* reproducing other inequalities.

To support her point, Peterson cites Tarlo and Moors (2013: 20) about Muslim women's inescapable "burden of representation", meaning, the pressure veiled women experience when encountering non-Muslims to come across positively and defy stereotypes about 'their group'. However, Peterson does not discuss how problematic, sexist and conditional this linking together of women's appearances and social acceptance is. After all, this link implies that fighting stigma is the responsibility of Muslim women themselves and can best be done by resorting to the beauty and fashion industry. In fact, this problematic notion is materialised in Muslim women's use of marketing to produce images that are "attractive and desirable" and challenge Islamophobic/Orientalist stereotypes, as found by Gökarıksel and McLarney (2010: 6). In order to examine this notion further, Peterson could have quoted Tarlo and Moors (2013: 241) again: "With fashion strongly linked to modernity, fashionable styles become an indication of the willingness of these women to fit in and to adapt to a mainstream aesthetic" (for further commentary see Chapter 6).

While, overall, existing analyses of hijab fashion content have emphasised its positive and feminist potentials, more critical engagement with postfeminism would complicate its evaluation.

2.7 Conclusion

In this literature review, I firstly explored how the Internet offers unprecedented opportunities for veiled Muslim women to represent themselves on their own terms and create counter-narratives. However, existing literature also demonstrates that many structural factors limit the empowering possibilities of the Internet, social media, selfies, the market, the attention economy and postfeminist media culture, which should be taken into account and recognised in data analysis.

Secondly, although there is a significant body of contemporary literature about women's digital self-representation, and a growing interest in hijab fashion bloggers' self-representation on social media,

these two fields have not been connected yet in feminist media scholarship. I argue that it is essential to situate hijab fashion within a postfeminist media culture, because it could explain why this new way of representing the veiled Muslim self on social media blossomed; how postfeminism is instrumentalised in marginalised contexts; and whether this is empowering from an intersectional and postcolonial point of view. Thus, I combine theoretical approaches in a unique way and will contribute new data to the scholarship on social media, hijab fashion, Muslim women's self-representation, postfeminist digital culture and Islamophobia.

Thirdly, as can be seen from Chapter 1 (Introduction), much has been written on the under- and misrepresentation of Muslims in mainstream media, which could be described as the first phase in the scholarship on Muslim women's representation. As I argued in this chapter (section 2.4), scholarship on Muslim women's representation has entered a second phase, in which Muslim (women)'s new visibility in digital media and fashion is described, appreciated and celebrated as empowering. I propose that scholarship on Muslim women's representation should enter a third phase by expanding in the direction of critically examining self-representation in an intersectional way: what kind of images are produced, and are these a radical departure from Islamophobic/Orientalist and sexist representations as criticised in phase one, and what are their strengths and limits regarding empowerment as celebrated in phase two? Finally, I identify the research gap that I fill as follows: hijab fashion can be understood as a form of postfeminist self-representation that hyper-counters Islamophobic stereotypes.

Although there have been decades of relevant debates about the emancipatory value of the Internet, the market and postfeminism, there is a need of thinking together different research topics: social media, the Islamic culture industry, hijab fashion and postfeminism—which I aim to engage with in the rest of my thesis.

3 Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the research methodology for my qualitative study of the representation of femininity and empowerment in hijab fashion images and their underlying discourses. My main method is a visual media analysis, consisting of compositional, semiotic and discourse analysis, of 161 Instagram posts of the 23 most popular hijab fashion bloggers among a UK Muslim audience (determined by survey). The detailed visual analysis I conduct in this thesis provides a deeper understanding of hijab fashion's "visual discourse" (Waninger, 2015: 18).[11] In order to demonstrate the scope and significance of the images' visual elements and broader themes, I also performed a semi-quantitative analysis of those elements. My main contribution of the visual media analysis is complemented by a small audience study, consisting of semi-structured interviews with young Muslim women in the UK. Their diverse perspectives on hijab fashion content, as well as my discourse analysis of their language use, form a commentary on my visual media analysis, which increases my study's relevance for the target group.

In this thesis, I combine existing theories and concepts in ways that are unique to the study of hijab fashion, as well as the study of postfeminism and the study of Islamophobia. Following a preliminary examination of hijab fashion bloggers' content and my literature review, my hypothesis is that hijab fashion images' emancipatory value is limited by the dominant presence of a postfeminist discourse. To test this hypothesis, I address the following research questions:

1. What femininities do hijab fashion bloggers construct in their images on Instagram?
2. How do these self-representations relate to power?
3. What notions of empowerment are represented and which discourses underlie these?
4. What postfeminist elements can be seen in the images, and how does this rebrand Muslim femininity?
5. How are hijab fashion images received by some Muslim women in the UK?

In what follows, I briefly introduce the fields of cultural studies and feminist media studies, after which I emphasise the intersectional approach of my research. Following that, I provide specific details about the methods I used and how they were applied.

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[11] "The visual discourse represents the messages, ideas, and knowledges that are created and exchanged within the Instagram space" (Waninger, 2015: 18).

3.1 Feminist Media Studies

Feminist media studies is a field that focuses on the role of gender within media production, representation and reception. For instance, it aims to shed light on the ways in which media messages perpetuate or challenge structural inequality (Van Zoonen, 1994: 134; Brighenti 2008: 5). Feminist research is "concerned with issues of broader social change and social justice" (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008: 328). In order to analyse how media content shapes and regulates sexist ideas, as well as exploring audiences' negotiation of meanings, the research methods applied in feminist media studies are usually interpretive and qualitative, or consist of a mix between qualitative and quantitative analysis (Van Zoonen, 1994: 128). Furthermore, feminist media studies is transdisciplinary, which means that there are no clear-cut boundaries that constitute the field within which this research is conducted (McLaughlin and Carter, 2013: 1). The discipline my methodology relies mostly upon is cultural studies, which sees media and culture "as the symbolic sites of social power" (Pickering, 2008: 5).

Cultural studies is concerned with media's political economy, i.e. "the ways in which neo-liberalism, consumer culture, and the markets are fundamentally shaping gender relations" as well as race and class relations, amongst others (McLaughlin and Carter, 2013: 2). These ideas were theorised by the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (led by Max Adorno and Theodor Horkheimer, see p.25) and the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies (led by Stuart Hall). In their cultural critique, the Frankfurt School argued that the majority of media were controlled by an elite (Durham and Kellner, 2006: xvii) that turned culture/art into an industry that provides popular entertainment for the subordinated class (Durham and Kellner, 2006: xvii). The Birmingham School largely subscribed to these ideas (Ruddock, 2001: 120), however, it argued that the idea of technological determinism leaves little space for theories of resistance or negotiation of media messages (Shaw, 2017: 596). Instead, the Birmingham School approached popular culture as an interesting and significant site of meaning-making and power struggle, in which audiences interpret media content in a variety of ways (Durham and Kellner, 2006: 96). The ethos of the Birmingham School continues to play an important role today in the work of feminist media scholars, such as Littler (2019) and Banet-Weiser (2012; 2018), whose work I refer to frequently in this thesis. Whereas I found the Frankfurt School's theories useful for thinking about the (commercialised) relationship between media, brands and audiences, the Birmingham School's theories have been relevant for considering the importance of popular (youth) culture, audience reception, and new identity constructions (Durham and Kellner, 2006: 96).

3.1.1 Intersectionality

Central to my feminist methodology is the concept of intersectionality. Currently, there is a lack of intersectional perspectives in research of hijab fashion: only Lewis (2019) and Peterson (2020) take an explicitly intersectional approach, however, they took the same blogger as their case study: Black Muslim blogger Leah Vernon (@lvernon2000). Harvey (2020) explains the importance of intersectionality: "An intersectional feminist media studies approach is one that accounts for the complexity of lived experience and addresses the interconnected and inseparable character of oppression based on gender, race, class, sexuality, age, ability, religion, nationality, and other social stratifications." This means that, when researching my data, I do not analyse womanhood separately from, for instance, religion (Muslimness) or class (the advertising of an upper-middle class lifestyle).

Crenshaw introduced the term intersectionality as a metaphor in 1989 and in her more frequently quoted work from 1991 (Carastathis, 2014: 306; Yuval-Davis, 2007: 12-13),[12] in order to overcome an additive notion of oppression which was prevalent in academia and activism and did not account for Black women's unique position. Their marginalised experiences fell "into the void between" the White character of the women's movement and the patriarchy within the African-American anti-racism movement (Crenshaw, 1991: 1282; Afshar and Maynard, 1994: 1; Valentine et al., 2014: 401). Methodologically speaking, the difference between the additive model and an intersectional (mutually constitutive model), is that the first assumes that systems of oppression influence inequality separately from each other and can be analysed separately (Demos and Segal, 2009: p. 17), whereas the latter operates "as a more complex methodology" where various forms of oppression are seen as overlapping "and understood as influencing one another" (Salem, 2013). As Yuval-Davis (2007: 14) explains: the notion black is *always already* gendered and classed, and the notion woman is *always already* racialised.

Taking an intersectional approach when analysing hijab fashion representations is essential, since it prevents falling into this void Crenshaw mentions, between separate debates about sexism, Islamophobia, economic class issues, and other structural inequalities. An intersectional approach enables one to unravel in depth the implications of historical, political, economic, cultural, religious,

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[12] Intersectionality as a concept built on earlier insights of American feminist scholars such as Angela Davis (1981), bell hooks (1981), Audre Lorde (1984), Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Sandra Harding (1991), Intersectionality has also been picked up by postcolonial feminists, such as Chandra Mohanty (1984), who combat neo-colonial ideas on the "Third World Woman" (Salem, 2013). British scholars such as Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1983; 1992), Beverly Bryan et al. (1985), Paul Gilroy (1987) and Stuart Hall (1987) also researched the intersections of gender with other categories (Prins, 2006: 278).

and patriarchal power dynamics for young Muslim women in the West or in the Anglophone Islamic online sphere (Demos and Segal, 2009: 78). In my study, I understand axes of oppression as mutually constitutive: Islamophobia should not be merely seen as a marginalisation of religion or race, but is *always already* a gendered problem, since Muslim women are affected differently by it than Muslim men. And Islamophobia is *always already* a classed problem, because it functions to differentiate between citizens.

Intersectionality refers to both a theory and a methodology (Carastathis, 2014: 307), and is alternatively understood as a paradigm, lens or framework (Havinsky, 2014: 2), As Salem (2013) puts it, intersectionality as a methodology "is a process of complicating research." This can be done by asking Matsuda's (1991: 1189) *other question*: "When I see something that looks racist, I ask, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?'." Concretely speaking, the category of gender is generally taken as a starting point, since intersectionality "is premised upon […] 'gender' being analyzed in conjunction with other categories" (Gunnarsson, 2011, cited in Martinez Dy et al., 2014: 458).

Moreover, intersectionality takes into account intra-group differences—based on such factors as skin colour, class, profession or generation—to avoid the erasure of power relations among, in this case, different Muslim women (Salem, 2013). According to intersectional theory, power is not unidirectional, but creates situations whereby individuals can be both marginalised and privileged, or oppressor and oppressed, on an individual or structural level (Knudsen, 2006). The relational understanding of power offered by intersectionality also implies that hijab fashion content may be empowering to some, while disempowering to others. Finally, it is important to recognise that "oppressed people can themselves perpetuate the oppression of others, even as they attempt to challenge structural inequalities" (Harvey, 2020), which is all the more reason to examine hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations, regardless of their (good) intentions in creating these images.

3.2 Visual Media Analysis

In this section, I explain that my core method—namely a visual media analysis of 161 Instagram images of the 23 most popular hijab fashion bloggers—is based on the methods of compositional analysis, semiotics and discourse analysis. Such a critical approach is necessary, because of several reasons: it takes images seriously as having an impact, it thinks about the social conditions and effects of visual objects, and it stimulates reflection on one's own way of looking at images, which is "historically, geographically, culturally and socially specific" (Rose, 2001: 15-16).

3.2.1 Sample

Hijab fashion developed as a niche market on websites and Facebook, and moved nearly completely to Instagram around the year 2012 (Moors, 2013a: 22). Before commencing my research in 2015, I was familiar with the phenomenon of hijab fashion through Facebook and Google Images—but I did not have an account, or spend any time, on Instagram, or watch hijab fashion videos on YouTube. In order to immerse myself more in this subculture, I watched hundreds of images and videos of hijab fashion bloggers over the years. This helped in understanding more about my own reception and attachments to bloggers, however, my analysis does not focus on "the women behind the blogs, but rather the online content and visual discourses created through their blogs," as Waninger (2015: 21) puts so eloquently. For the thesis itself, therefore, I solely included Instagram images in my sample, because—unlike moving image—static/still images allow for a very tangible, simultaneous and flexible semiotic comparison (by printing them out, for example) and presentation of data. More importantly, I focus on images because Instagram feeds serve as a business card for bloggers who create these posts in a strategic, intentional way (Duffy and Hund, 2015). Nevertheless, I do use YouTube videos as background material to inform the analysis of images, since YouTube videos are part of a "media ecology" of hijab fashion (Strate, 2006), in which several media (platforms) refer to and reinforce one another (McLuhan, 1977, cited in McLuhan and Staines, 2003: 271).

Survey

For the sake of determining which bloggers I would include in my research, I explored online articles that listed the most popular bloggers at that moment (2016-2018).[13] These findings were corroborated by then checking the number of followers associated with each of the bloggers listed. After identifying the most prominent bloggers, I compiled an online survey via SurveyMonkey, in which I asked respondents to select the bloggers they follow, like and dislike. In May 2018, I sent around the link to this survey via women's WhatsApp groups of Cardiff ISoc, Keele ISoc and Didsbury mosque (Manchester), which provided me with 41 responses, see Graph 1.

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[13] For instance: Kuruvilla (2016)
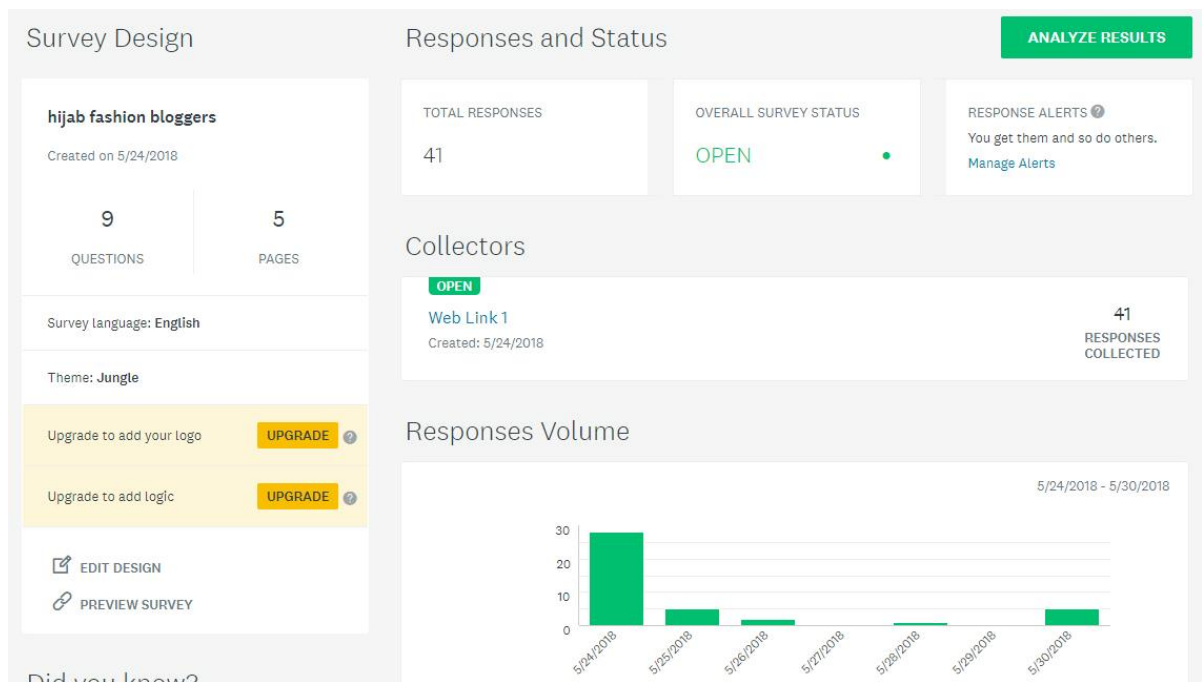
Graph 1 Survey responses

In multiple choice form (multiple answers possible), I asked respondents which bloggers, of the 41 I listed, they followed (which does not necessarily imply that followers consider themselves to be fans), see Graph 2. I divided these per location: UK (79% answered this question); US and Canada (44% answered); and the Arab Gulf, Europe and North-Africa (37% answered).[14] The biggest challenge to getting a complete response was holding respondents' attention until the end. Nevertheless, not all questions had to be filled in for me to be able to construct an impression of the bloggers that matter most to a UK Muslim women audience, since I combined the survey data with bloggers' number of likes. Since two respondents of the survey said to follow Shahd Batal (USA) as well, I added her to my list. Moreover, the interviews I have conducted confirmed that my final selection of bloggers was relevant.

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[14] I excluded Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa because they cover quite different markets/styles/audiences.

Q2

Which of these UK based hijab bloggers do you look at for inspiration? (Select all that apply)

Answered: 32   Skipped: 9
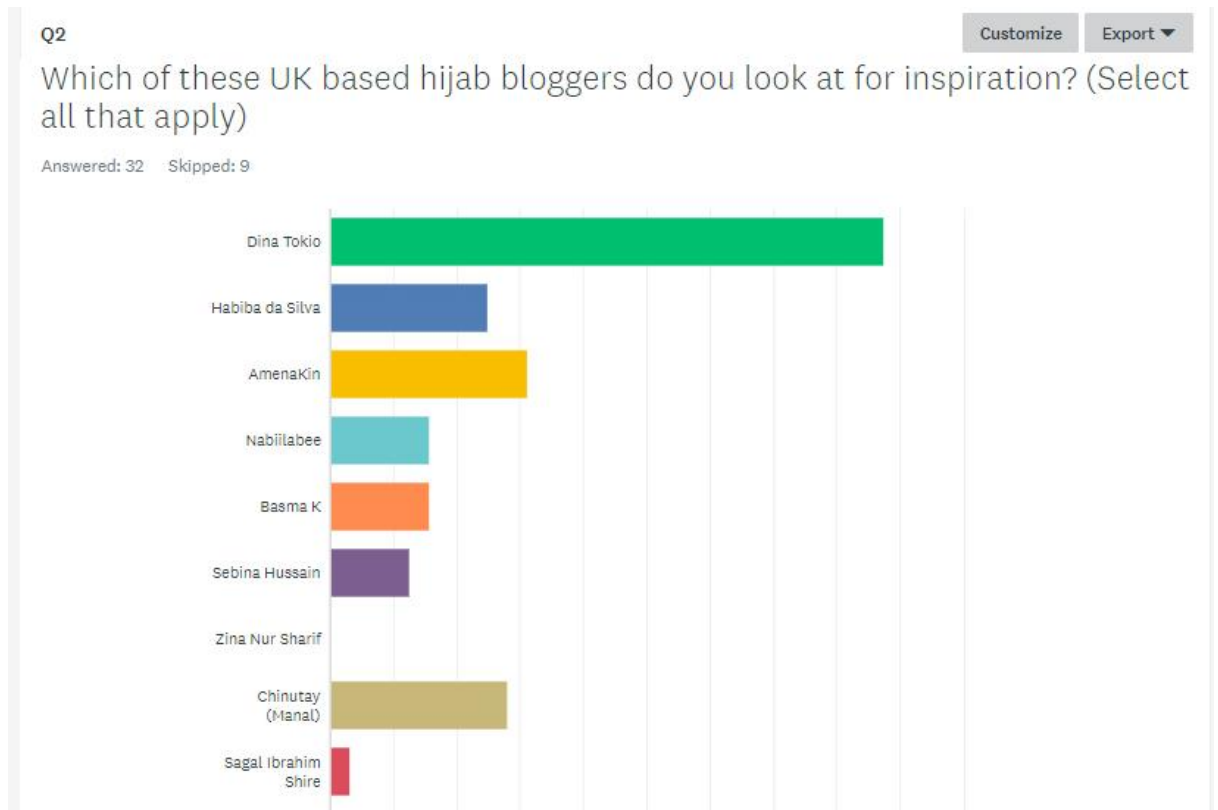
Graph 2 Survey list bloggers

Data Selection Images

Following my survey, I determined that there are 23 hijab fashion bloggers who are clearly most popular among a UK audience (see appendix for full list). Further down the line of my initial list of bloggers, their popularity among my surveyees and their follower count on Instagram drop significantly. In exploring these 23 bloggers' Instagram pages, I ultimately selected seven images per blogger (161 in total), in order to assure a varied, multi-layered profile of each blogger. I selected these images not blind or randomly, but purposely, since qualitative analysis looks at "definitions, meanings, process, and types" (Altheide and Schneider, 2013: 45). Following the examples of Marwick (2015a), Duffy and Hund (2015) and Waninger (2015), my sampling of the images—and their eventual discussion in the chapters—took place according to "how conceptually interesting they are" (Rose, 2001: 73). I chronologically scrolled back on bloggers' Instagram feeds and selected images using two criteria I designed that ensured a systematic approach: the images had to stand out aesthetically (for instance, style or pose) or intersectionally (for example, a display of ethnicity or wealth). In case I found more than seven images interesting, I deleted any duplicates in terms of themes or style, in order to create a diverse collection from which several stories can be told (so as not to search for only one element that supports only one thesis). With regards to the sample's representativeness: it is indicative

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of contemporary trends within hijab fashion blogging, and speaks to theories and concepts within my field. Moreover, if another researcher were to repeat my study, they would select different images and therefore produce different stories about them, but most probably, their stories would still be based on the (postfeminist) themes I identified (empowerment, entrepreneurialism, mommy culture, beauty, confidence, and so on).

Although not strictly necessary when using images that are posted on public social media pages (Piela, 2010: 92), as a part of my research ethics, I have emailed the bloggers to announce which images I would be using for my analysis, and as a courtesy I asked their permission to reproduce them in my thesis—to which 14 bloggers responded positively, while nine bloggers did not reply.

3.2.2 Semiotics

Compositional analysis is relevant in the early phase of analysis, and explains how certain elements in a composition (such as content, colour, position and focus) construct an image and thereby meaning (Rose, 2001: 37-44). Following that, semiotics—meaning "the study of signs"—offers an analytical toolbox that can be used for deconstructing an image's signs and codes, and "tracing how [a code] works in relation to broader systems of meaning" (Rose, 2001: 69). A set of dominant codes form an ideology or a mythology (Rose, 2001: 89; Bignell, 2002). Myth normalises or naturalises gendered ideas, and this process should be made visible by media scholars by questioning the relation between signifier and signified (Rose, 2001: 74). It is important to note here that signs can have multiple meanings (polysemy), which complicates the deconstruction of signs (Rose, 2001: 92).

The following steps can be followed in a semiotic analysis: decide what the signs are; what they signify; how they relate to other signs; their connections to codes and myths; and explaining the signs' roles in articulating ideology (Rose, 2001: 91-92, see also Barthes, 1973 and Hall, 1980). Practically speaking, I explored elements based on Dyer's (1982) checklist of signs and their possible meanings, focusing on body; manner; activity; props and setting (Rose, 2001: 75-77, see Table 1). Added to that, I was inspired by the research done by Döring et al. (2015: 956), who based their method on Goffman's (1979) research on gender representation (see Table 2). Goffman distinguishes five categories of representations that portray women as the weaker gender: (1) the smaller or lower positioning of women as opposed to men (I adapted this into: height, position); (2) the feminine touch of a woman's hand that caresses something; (3) men having an executive role and women an assisting role (I adapted this into: roles, settings) ; (4) women tilting their heads, leaning backwards or lying down; (5) women looking away from the camera or closing their eyes, or hiding their smiles behind objects (Döring et al.,

2015: 957). In addition to that, they used Kang's (1997) category of sexualised body display; see Table 2. Döring et al. (2015: 961) emphasise that there are many more variables related to gender stereotyping, and recommend future studies to include additional categories such as styling and clothing—which are elements that I did implement in my visual media analysis.

body	age, gender, race, body, size, looks
manner	expression, eye contact, pose
activity	touch, movement, positioning
props + setting	advertising, symbolic meaning, 'normal' or exotic

height, position
feminine touch
roles, settings
lying, tilting head
withdrawing gaze, hiding
body display (sexualised)

Table 1 Semiotics list
Rose (2001: 75-77), based on Dyer (1982)

Table 2 Gender representation list
Döring et al. (2015: 957), based on Goffman (1979)
and Kang (1997)

In order to go from a mass of data to meaningful insights, I designed a table with categories based on Nömm (2007: 42) and Rose (2001: 75), with which I semiotically analysed every image from my sample; see Table 3. Constructing these tables ensured that I paid attention to details (category "sign") and looked up plenty of background information on those details (category "frame, connotation", see Rose, 2001: 79-82). I used my entries in these tables to allow themes and threads to emerge during research (category "myth, ideology"), which I used to write the eventual discourse analysis (see section 3.2.3).

Sign (material signifier)	Signified (mental concept)	Code	Frame, connotation	Myth, ideology

Table 3 Semiotic analysis images

I also created tables for reoccurring themes and visual elements (such as certain poses and props), to calculate their occurrence in percentages, in a semi-quantitative way. This indicated the scale of bloggers' incorporation of certain visual/discursive elements, and informed the themes of the three analysis chapters. When determining the main theme of the images, I recognised that the theme of beauty was represented in every image, but generally, I only categorised an image's theme as 'beauty' in cases where other themes were absent. I first looked at specific visual clues and text in captions for elements related to the other categories of outfit, work/hobby, motherhood, travel and religion or halal consumption. See this example of the images' main themes:

Looks/beauty	Outfit	Work/hobby?	Motherhood	Travel	Religion/halal
Aa1, aa2, aa3, aa5, aa7, ak1, ak2, ak4, as2, as5, bk3, bk4, bk5, bk7, ch1, ch2, ch4, dt2, dt3, dt4, dt5, dt7, hs2, hs3, hs4, hs6, hs7, hy1, hy5, le2, le3, ma1, ma2, ma3, ma6, na2, na4, na6, na7, nk6, nb1, nb3, nb5, nk7, rz2, rz3, rz5, rz6, rz7, sb1, sb2, sb4, sb5, sb6, sb7, sf1, sf3, sg3, sg6, sh3, sh5, **sh6, sh7,** su5, su7,	Ak6, as6, as7, bk6, ch3, ch5, ch6, dt1, hs1, hy4, hy7, ib2, ib7, le4, le5, le6, ma4, ma5, na1, na3, nb6, nb7, oz2, oz4, oz5, oz6, oz7, sf5, sf7, sg2, sg4, yz1, yz2, **yz5**	Ak7, as1, as3, ch5, es4, es7, hs5, hy6, ib1, ib3, ib4, ib5, ib6, le1, le6, le7, nb2, nk1, nk3, oz1, rz4, sb3, sh2, sf2, su3, su4, su6,	Ak3, as4, dt1, hy2, hy3, hy5, na5, nb1, nb4, nk4, **nk5**, rz1, sg1, sg4, sg5, sh2, yz4,	Bk1, bk2, dt6, es1, es2, es3, es6, es5, le5, ma7, **nk5,** oz3, sf4, su1, su2,	Aa4, aa6, ak5, sg1, sg7, sh1, **sh6, sh7,** yz3, **yz5**
65 = 40,4%	34 = 21,1%	27 = 16,8%	17 = 10,6%	15 = 9,3%	10 = 6,2%

All images are categorised. Multiple categories possible (**bold**).

Table 4 Quantitative analysis

In my analysis of hijab fashion images and discourses, I included examples from outside of my sample, because of their illustrative value. In order to clearly distinguish the images from my sample, I have added a green mark (✔) beside their source information in the analysis chapters.

3.2.3 Discourse Analysis

In a semiotic analysis, an image is not merely a photograph taken at a certain place and time, but is also accompanied by text (such as an Instagram caption or cultural references) and a digital context in which it is published (Markham, 2016: 12-13). Because of this interplay between image, text and paratext, I treated my semiotic analysis as the first step of a thorough discourse analysis. "Discourse" is often defined as all written and spoken words on a topic in a specific period and place (Prins, 2002: 364). However, discourse is not limited to text, but also applies to images (Van Dijk, 1995: 18), which could be seen as forming a "visual discourse" (Waninger, 2015: 18). A discourse provides a dominant mode of discussing a particular topic (Hall, 1997: 185)—i.e. "ideology" (Pickering, 2008: 151)—which often serves the agenda of certain groups in society more than other groups (Van Dijk, 1993: 250). Building on the work of Derrida (1976), Foucault (1980) and Van Dijk (1995), there are several ways of

conducting discourse analysis (Mogashoa, 2014: 110), which all aim to show "the way in which certain taken-for-granted truths are not universal or timeless but products of specific historical and political agendas" (Saukko, 2003: 21).

FDA, a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, can be used to discover patterns and variations in bloggers' (visual and textual) language (Talja, 1999: 466; Watterson et al., 2019). FDA is also useful for analysing how such ideas are internalised, i.e. "reproduced or resisted by social group members through text and talk" (Van Dijk, 1995: 18), see p.28 of this thesis for an elaboration on Foucauldian theories of power, discourse and language. Besides FDA, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a useful method to critically examine rhetorical and textual techniques and make assumptions behind statements explicit (Van Dijk, 1993: 254). It analyses both the power *within* discourse (content, relations, subjects) and power *behind* discourse (access, myth of free speech) (Fairclough, 2001). As a method, CDA "can be seen as a political intervention with its socially transformative agenda" (Mogashoa, 2014: 107), which fits neatly within a feminist media studies and cultural studies framework.

Practically, I followed Van Dijk's (1993: 272) example of the questions that guide the exploration of patterns as well as inconsistencies in messages: who are the main actors in a discourse; what topics do they (not) address; what is the main argument and how is this argued; what is considered a problem and what a solution? More specifically to feminist research, Gill (2008b: 35) describes the way in which postfeminist discourses can be questioned; namely, by "examining their exclusions, their constructions of gender relations and heteronormativity, and the way power is figured within them." In writing up my discourse analysis, I combined the semiotic analysis with the discourse analysis of the images and the discursive positions of the interviewees. As such, I tackled one of the challenges of discourse analysis, namely managing to present the large set of data clearly and satisfactorily, and to incorporate as many readings of the images as possible (Barker, 2008: 166).

3.3 Audience Research

The second part of my methodology consists of a smaller audience reception study which enabled a discourse analysis of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, for which I received ethical approval from Keele University (ERP 2284, see appendix). Since "both media producers and media audiences construct meaning" (Van Zoonen, 1994: 148), combining the study of images with a study of their reception results in a more layered analysis of hijab fashion content and gives my work more relevance and validity. The decision to conduct semi-structured interviews was also a logical consequence of doing feminist research: I found it important to not merely speak *about* my target group, but to speak

with my target group. As Doucet and Mauthner (2008: 328) say: "feminist research should be not just *on* women, but *for* women"—and I would add to this, *with* women. Feminist research cherishes the method of semi-structured interviews, because it allows women to let their own voices be heard about topics that concern their well-being, needs and experiences (Hesse-Biber, 2007: 113)—which is particularly important in relation to Islamophobic and postfeminist discourses. Although I am part of the target group (located in the UK, relatively young, Muslim, interested in hijab fashion; see section 3.3.2), I found it crucial to check the validity of my initial analysis of the images and messages with the target group through the use of interviews.

3.3.1 Approach

Generally, feminist research questions within audience studies are concerned with "the use and interpretation of gendered media texts by gendered audiences" (Van Zoonen, 1994: 108). One could conduct reception analysis with the aim of finding out the influence of media content, i.e. in which ways women internalise or reject messages. However, this is a much-debated topic, since there is no accurate measure of the internalisation of media content (O'Neill, 2011: 335) and no mechanical one-to-one relationship between seeing images and adjusting one's opinions/behaviour. Nevertheless, media representations do have material effects, so it remains important to study media reception (Gill, 2008b: 434; Fairclough, 2001). One way of tackling this is using Hall's (1980: 134) distinction between audiences' acceptance of preferred readings, their oppositional readings and their negotiated readings. But Barker (2008: 167) warns scholars against celebrating audiences' *resistance* and *negotiation* as the only signs of empowerment and media literacy. One solution is "to move beyond such dualisms as active and passive viewing" (O'Neill, 2011: 335). Another solution is to not measure the extent to which hijab fashion discourses are "taken on" by audiences, but rather demonstrate "different aspects" to the reception of hijab fashion discourses (Meyer, 2008: 83).

In this light, I believe that the following questions are most interesting and suitable for a discourse analysis: how do interviewees navigate and negotiate hijab fashion content? What messages and affordances are valuable to them and which messages form a tension? What alternative discourses do interviewees draw on when negotiating or rejecting hijab fashion discourses? What are their understandings of the key discursive terms involved (e.g. "empowerment")?

I am reflective of the fact that I study audience perception in a rather traditional sense (a message is circulated and then received by the audience) instead of the more contemporary circular sense (social media users consuming content are also often producing content; see Chapter 2 Literature Review

about prosumers). Although social media affordances may allow/require users to be very interactive, the women I interviewed did not indicate that they do more than subscribing, liking and commenting (which can be better studied through a netnography, anyway). They did describe making choices in when, where, how and with which bloggers to interact, yet they are on the receiving end: they consume the content, albeit in an active way.[15]

I approached the interviewees in an amicable and non-hierarchical way, which is not only my personal style but also a way of achieving good interview results (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008: 330). I do not consider my interviewees to have less media literacy than me as a media researcher—but I am aware of some analytic power imbalance between us, as I am differently trained (feminist media theory) and approach them in a researcher capacity (Rose, 1997: 312-316). I took into account that levels of critical views and celebratory views can differ per interviewee and per image that we discussed, and that these differences can exist within one and the same person. Therefore, my interviews were aimed at making visible how women can enjoy *and* reject hijab fashion content at the same time. As Banet-Weiser has rightly pointed out, a feminist analysis should bear in mind that a fashion follower on Instagram and a social justice activist on Twitter, for example, can be one and the same person.[16] This realisation should ultimately lead to the question of what it means to be immersed in a media landscape/ecology in the many roles we have.[17]

3.3.2 Profiles

I interviewed nine young Muslim women in the UK who consume, or have an opinion on, hijab fashion content in the Anglophone Islamic online sphere (see Ahmed, 2019 for "Anglophone Islam"). From a sociological/marketing perspective, this target group could be called "Millennial Muslims" or "Generation M" (Salmani, 2016; Sherwood, 2016; Zogby, 2017). However, I find it more useful to think of them as members of a particular "taste culture",[18] which can be defined as "a collective of individuals grouped on the basis of their preference for a certain content" (Carpentier, 2011: 196). At the time of the interviews, my participants were aged 18 to 27, born in or migrated to the UK, and are from a range of ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds, and some of them have children. They all

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[15] See Procter et al. (2015) and Pickering (2008) for more academic discussion on social media audiences and their implications on research methodologies.
[16] LSE, 24 September 2018, LSE MEDIA & COMMUNICATION: SARAH BANET-WEISER ON AUDIENCE RESEARCH
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPB-oh8QfT8 5:00
[17] Ibid.
[18] Except for interviewee #8 Yousra, who steers away from hijab fashion content on social media.

wear the hijab themselves—although this was no criterion in the recruitment. Following feminist methodology, I did not predict or find a direct relationship between their identity positions and their media perceptions (Ruddock, 2001: 132). However, I do mention some of their identity positions in my analysis, if it adds value or context to their response.

Number	Pseudonym	Age	Ethnic/cultural background	Studies
Interviewee #1	Chaimae	26	Northwest African and Western European roots, grew up in Western Europe	Culture, communication (Mother)
Interviewee #2	Loubna	23	Northwest African roots, grew up in Western Europe	Journalism, sociology (Mother)
Interviewee #3	Faiza	23	South Asian roots, grew up in the UK	Religion, conversion
Interviewee #4	Aissa	27	West African and Western European roots, grew up in Western Europe	Religion, feminism
Interviewee #5	Jenan	19	Gulf Arab roots, grew up in Western Europe	Media, communications
Interviewee #6	Amal	21	From Northeast Africa, studied in the UK	Marketing, media, communications (Mother)
Interviewee #7	Saba	21	South Asian roots, grew up in the UK	Health science
Interviewee #8	Yousra	25	Northeast African roots, grew up in Southern Europe	Health science
Interviewee #9	Asmaa	18	Northeast African roots, grew up in the UK	Medicine

Table 5 Profiles interviewees

My interview pool has three limitations, the first being the fact that they were all students (Cardiff and Keele) or in between studies, while I intended to recruit participants from all walks of life. Secondly, merely one interviewee considered herself a true follower (in the sense of fandom) and did not distance herself from the bloggers in ways that other interviewees explicitly did. It would have been interesting to interview more followers who were immersed in the subculture. Thirdly, in terms of numbers, it would have been better to conduct a few more interviews, but unfortunately several potential interviewees cancelled. Nevertheless, I am very satisfied with the richness of interviewees' opinions and discursive positions—perhaps a greater number of interviewees would have led to repetitiveness of information (Ruddock, 2001: 133). Moreover, interviewees' contributions were incredibly useful, due to their various academic backgrounds: some have expertise in media, journalism, religion, cultures, feminism, anti-racism, fashion and marketing, and others in medicine and health science. On top of that, my interview data demonstrates the plethora of ways in which "a

phenomenon can be seen or interpreted," which is more important in discourse analysis than how many people hold a certain opinion (Talja, 1999: 472; Meyer, 2008: 83).

3.3.3 Recruitment

I met four interviewees in person, when attending (Islamic) events, which led on to two more interviewees by snowball sampling. Additionally, I recruited three interviewees by sending my flyer around in Muslim women's WhatsApp groups in Cardiff and Keele, see appendix. Altogether, this resulted in five face-to-face interviews and four telephone interviews. By email, I sent an information sheet and consent sheet (for recording the interview and for using quotes in my thesis) in advance, to allow them time to read and agree (or withdraw, for that matter). I discussed a summary of the information sheet with every participant directly before the interview so that they could ask questions, and only let them sign the consent sheets at that very moment. Following that, I started the recording. I did not mention their names either in the recording, or in the password-secured transcription documents. To protect interviewees' anonymity, I have not included the transcripts in the appendix either.

I am aware of the possibility that any power inequalities between researcher and interviewees can "continue to shape the research process long after interviews have been completed" (Daucet and Mauthner, 2008: 336), which is why I have undertaken appropriate (feminist) post-interview actions: I have been considerate in the ways in which I have re-told their stances, especially in case my interpretation differs from their understandings; I have sent copies of their consent forms, password-secured documents with their quotes that I eventually used in my thesis (with which they were happy); and more informally, I have tried to keep them informed about my research by sending my research blog and lectures on YouTube and Facebook.

3.3.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were useful in asking women about their social media use and matters related to gender and empowerment, in order to explore which aspects of hijab fashion content are empowering, appealing and off-putting for them as a niche audience. The overarching interview question was: "What does hijab fashion mean to you?" as was also mentioned on the recruitment flyer. The interview questions revolved around the following themes: the participant's style, social media behaviour and (least) favourite hijab celebrity; their views on issues related to class, race,

consumerism, Islamophobia and online shaming; and their definitions and understandings of modesty, beauty, feminism and empowerment. Since discussing materials is likely to stimulate "in-depth discussion about an issue or topic" (Brennen, 2017: 32), I brought hijab fashion images I had analysed myself on a tablet to the face-to-face interviews and sent them by email during the telephone interviews. Although interviewees did not provide me with a detailed semiotic analysis, the images served as conversation starters about their social media use or their cultural critique, and as illustrations of their opinions on a particular blogger. The fact that, for a great part, I had already analysed the images prior to the interviews, provided me with "a better understanding of both texts and consumers' responses" (Meyer, 2008: 83).

3.3.5 Discourse Analysis

The method I used to analyse my interview transcriptions is FDA, a Foucauldian-inspired discourse analysis (Watterson et al., 2019), as mentioned above, which aims to discover patterns and variations in interviewees' language, and understand the ways in which a phenomenon can be interpreted within and outside the boundaries of a discourse (Talja, 1999: 466). Looking at macro-semantics, I mapped out common statements, reoccurring arguments, common themes, and inconsistencies in the interview transcriptions and related these to the hijab fashion (visual) discourses (Harding, 2015; Talja, 1999: 466). I did not make profiles of each individual's opinions and experiences, since discursive "regularity cannot be pinned at the level of the individual speaker" (Talja, 1999: 465). Instead, I mapped out which alternative discourses interviewees draw upon in their answers when accepting, negotiating or rejecting hijab fashion discourses. Noting appreciation or resistance through the use of alternative discourses is crucial in understanding audiences' role in opening up discursive space (Hall, 1992: 291). In the analysis chapters, I do not present interview data separately, but instead use interviewees' quotes as a commentary on my visual media analysis. After all, my interview data were only complementary to the main part that drove my research, which is the visual media analysis.

3.4 Conclusion

The core research questions for this study's visual media analysis required the qualitative method of doing an elaborate semiotic and discursive analysis. To create a rich sample for the research, I carefully selected seven images per 23 of the most popular bloggers (determined by survey). My intersectional

approach facilitated a critical interaction with the images on multiple levels. A limitation of this qualitative method is perhaps related to subjectivity: another selection of images would create a different critique—however, I am confident that such an analysis would also recognise the images' discursive underpinnings of neoliberalism, postfeminism, classism and other relevant -isms. My unique approach of designing semiotic tables for each image allowed me to detect broader cultural patterns as well as forefront each of the images' remarkable symbolism and stories. However, if I did the research again, I would make more use of quantitative analysis to understand the scope of themes and visual codes. Finally, feminist research ideally involves speaking with the women whom the research should benefit, hence, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine young Muslim women in the UK. To establish a significant level of co-creation, I included interviewees' comments on the images, as well as analysed their language use on a more discursive level. That said, my interview method is limited by the small size of the interview pool and discourse analysis. Nevertheless, this method follows other high-profile works in my field, such as Duffy and Hund (2015: 1) who have likewise supplemented their extensive visual media analysis with a smaller number of eight interviews. Moreover, the nine interviews I conducted offered pioneering, strong and much needed insights into the topic.

4 Popular Feminism and Self-Branding

The context of this chapter is characterised by two developments that have been catalysed by social media. Firstly, for decades, popular culture imagined women's emancipation as a box ticked and feminism as a station passed. Empowerment was based on attractiveness and consumerism instead of feminist thought, for feminism was haunted by stereotypes of being anti-men, anti-makeup, too radical, to queer, too White, judgmental and unsexy (McRobbie, 2009: 16; Ahmed, 2010; Householder, 2015: 22; Gill and Orgad, 2017: 31; Scharff, 2019). However, a shift has taken place in popular culture in which feminism is considered by many women as "an appealing and stylish identity" (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 31). This turn to feminism has, together with the rise of brand activism, resulted in many bloggers incorporating feminist elements into their self-brand. Secondly, while the term feminism is tabooed in certain Muslim discourses as a Western imperial concept, a symbol of secularism, or an ideology inferior to Islam, a shift is taking place in which young Muslim women are widely taking up the word 'feminism', in addition to feminist symbols, to describe their own beliefs about gender and women's rights. Muslim women have opened up spaces for themselves in online popular culture in which they can show their strengths with pride and advocate for their own well-being and liberties.

Since hijab fashion is often celebrated as empowering to Muslim women, I explore in this chapter how empowerment and feminism are represented in bloggers' images and what discourses underlie these representations. I examine the emancipatory value of their gender constructions from an intersectional (and postcolonial) perspective. There is a lack of overt or activist feminism in my sample: only a small number of posts include explicit references to feminism, women's solidarity or structural inequality. However, a much larger number of images contain general references to women's strength, empowerment, success, free choice and diversity. Feminism is an important factor of analysis in this chapter since all images create, in visual or textual ways, a model for empowered and independent Muslim femininity. Moreover, feminism is an important analytical factor since the scarcity of explicitly feminist references, yet a very present empowerment discourse, suggests that feminism is being rebranded into something popularised and depoliticised (Favaro and Gill, 2018).

This chapter is structured according to four kinds of feminist discourses that underlie the notions of empowerment as found in my data: postfeminism, fourth-wave feminism, popular feminism and femvertising. There are tensions and overlap between the four categories, mainly related to the interplay between feminism and commercialism. Most images and notions in my data contain a paradoxical combination of feminist and anti-feminist elements, which points at the dominant presence of a postfeminist discourse (Gill, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2017). Although the

growing interest in women's empowerment could be understood as part of fourth-wave feminism, the postfeminist rebranding of feminism is also playing a role in its popularisation (Favaro and Gill, 2018). Hijab fashion bloggers' representation of empowerment could therefore very well be postfeminism in a new guise, which would impact its emancipatory value. In order to test this hypothesis, I use Gill's (2008a: 35) guidelines for analysing feminist(-sounding) phenomena, thereby asking: (1) how empowerment is defined in the sample; (2) if the sample reproduces mechanisms of exclusion; (3) how gender and heteronormativity are constructed; (4) and whether the sample discusses power relations.

Throughout the chapter, I explain the appeal of postfeminism for veiled Muslim women in a stigmatised context, and the importance of analysing postfeminism intersectionally.

4.1 Empowerment and Postfeminism

Empowerment is a term with gendered and temporal connotations. Since the 1990s, empowerment has become a widely used term in popular media culture, feminist circles, business, education and development/humanitarianism (Inglis, 1997). In popular culture, the terms 'empowerment' and 'girl power' are often used as modern substitutes for 'feminism' or 'women's emancipation' (Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015: 158). Although the word 'feminism' has become popular again, I have noticed that the word 'emancipation' has not made a similar re-entrance into popular feminism. Whereas 'emancipation' may sound old-fashioned, historical or radical to some,[19] 'empowerment' is considered trendy and relevant, and can be used in any context without being too politically charged (Tasker and Negra, 2007).

Scholars have tried to theorise this dichotomic use of empowerment and emancipation. Alkhaled and Berglund (2018: 877-881) differentiate between empowerment and emancipation: they define empowerment as individuals' development of capacities to achieve success *within* institutional and structural power dynamics, for instance by developing "entrepreneurial skills such as seeing opportunities to act upon". They define emancipation as "a critical analysis of power that might bring about resistance through which existing systems of power can be subverted," challenged or changed in order to improve collective freedom (2018: 877-881). Similarly, Inglis (1997: 3-4) observes that empowerment discourses are aimed at "personal transformation" and "developing capacities to act

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[19] The word emancipation seems to be outdated and used only for historical events, illustrated by the top results of a Google Scholar search on the term "women's emancipation": top results speak about women in 19th century Greece; in 1886-1899 UK; in 1840-1920 Europe; during the abolition of slavery in the US; in 1935 Istanbul; and during Bolshevik communism.

successfully within the existing system and structures of power, while emancipation concerns critically analysing, resisting and challenging structures of power." Thus, whereas emancipation involves "gaining an understanding of power itself" through critical analysis (1997: 9), popular use of the term empowerment produces "a discourse *of* power rather than an emancipatory discourse *about* power" (1997: 11). However, other scholars do not distinguish between empowerment and emancipation, but instead see empowerment "as including transforming the structures that reproduce inequality" (McLaren, 2019: 109; see also: Kilby, 2011: 34).

Certain scholars thus critique the concept of empowerment as neoliberal, commercial and individualistic, and place it in opposition to a social, activist and collective emancipation (see for instance: Inglis, 1997; Riordan, 2001). The critique of the popularisation of the term empowerment is understandable, given the fact that empowerment is the central trope of postfeminist discourse (Bae, 2011: 30). Fourth-wave activism or emergent feminisms aside (Keller and Ryan, 2018), the new popularity of feminism among a wider audience can not automatically be seen as positive or unproblematic, since some of it "is better thought of as a new iteration of postfeminism" (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 32).

In postfeminism (see Chapter 2 for definition), empowerment is defined as becoming a confident, modern and educated woman, by consuming certain products, enjoying freedoms and celebrating girls' culture. In contrast, such topics as cultural critique, feminist history and role models, a women's rights lobby and queering social categories are avoided. Lazar (2006: 505) noticed that in the popular discourse of the 2000s, anything market-related could be celebrated as empowering to women, such as a return to hyper-femininity: a phenomenon she called "power femininity". Lazar (2006: 513) distinguishes this consumerist and sexualised notion of empowerment from a second-wave feminist focus on (political) feminist struggles. Amongst these are "securing reproductive rights, sexual freedoms and equality in the workplace" (Gill, 2008a: 36).

For a long time, postfeminism "seemed to require a ritualistic denunciation of feminism" (McRobbie, 2013a: 121) in the sense of "a larger cultural cause or movement" (Love and Helmbrecht, 2007: 52). In return, postfeminism offered women a (limited) concept of empowerment based on a rhetoric of personal choice and individual responsibility (Duffy, 2010: 30; Pitcher, 2006: 202). Postfeminist empowerment relies on consumerism, career, disposable income and beauty—which is amplified nowadays on Instagram—and offers women a *sense* of power/empowerment (Duffy, 2010: 26; Bae, 2011: 29; Dosekun, 2015: 967). Moreover, with regards to ethnic or religious minority women, marketplace inclusion is often presented as a relevant form of empowerment (Kymlicka, 2020). Postfeminism presents empowered lifestyles as universally shared and accessible; however,

intersectionally speaking, postfeminism ultimately functions as a mechanism of exclusion that organises inequalities along the lines of gender, sexuality, race, class, age and ability (Gill, 2007b).

Arguably, postfeminism's appeal and invisibility lies in the incorporation of some feminist elements—but not an integrated feminist agenda—into media representations. This creates conditions for gender norms to be heightened while accusations of sexism can be dodged (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 16). As such, postfeminism "masks inequalities while simultaneously claiming to address them" (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 49).

Due to the increased turn to feminist politics, some scholars wonder whether postfeminism is still a relevant or appropriate analytical category in the study of media and culture. Some scholars suggest that "critical notions like postfeminism may no longer hold force," but Gill (2016b: 1) argues that a continued use of the term 'postfeminism' is recommended—which is a standpoint that I subscribe to. There is a general need to re-consider older literature on postfeminism and theorise what postfeminism means in today's (digital) context. Considering the ongoing expansion of the postfeminist paradigm, which is also taking place in relatively new subcultures like hijab fashion, I agree with Gill (2016b: 2) that:

> New cultural trends do not simply displace older or existing ones. A momentarily visible resurgence of interest in feminism should not lead us to the false conclusion that anti-feminist or postfeminist ideas no longer exist. […] Our analyses need to be attentive to both continuity and change, as well as to the 'entanglement' (McRobbie, 2009) of feminism with other ideas. I argue that some of what is celebrated today as feminism is shaped by profoundly postfeminist elements (Gill, 2016a) – particularly those aspects that relate to corporate culture, celebrity and the embrace of feminism as a 'stylish' identity.

Gill and Orgad (2017: 16) see the new popularity of feminism as a postfeminist "remaking of feminism", although this is obscured in the following ways: (1) the main change, according to her, is that feminism is now celebrated instead of rejected in popular culture; (2) popular feminism emphasises inclusivity, which at the same time makes it quite difficult to highlight women's differences or critique the level of inclusivity; and (3) popular feminism gives more visibility and preference to positive attitudes and gives far less space to outrage and political feelings.

Postfeminism used to be studied mainly in relation to White, middle-class women, but Dosekun (2015: 961) and Milestone and Meyer (2012: 18) illustrate how "incorporation", one of the strategies of postfeminism, facilitates a constant renewal and diversifying of femininities while reinforcing the dominant postfeminist paradigm. It involves the inclusion of alternative and competing ideologies in

postfeminism, which broadens the appeal of postfeminist ideology and avoids resistance from all kinds of groups (ibid.). Because of this flexibility of postfeminism, not only are mainstream postfeminist representations diversifying, but postfeminist rhetoric is also easily applied within subcultures such as hijab fashion. That said, although hijab fashion bloggers seemingly provide religiously and ethnically alternative femininities, they may, in fact, reinforce a dominant postfeminist paradigm through their self-branding.

4.2 Fourth-Wave Feminism

As previously mentioned, "feminism has achieved a new luminosity in popular culture" (Gill, 2016b), in contrast to earlier postfeminist times. Feminist thinking has received an increasing amount of attention in popular (mediated) discourses, with newspapers, glossy lifestyle magazines, music, fashion and social media covering topics about women's empowerment, equality and diversity. Celebrity feminism has further catalysed the popularisation of women's empowerment and feminist agendas (Keller and Ringrose, 2015). Despite having just entered the fourth wave of feminism, some scholars and others have already attempted to describe and theorise this wave. Arguably, the year 2011 marks the beginning of the fourth wave: social media technology fuelled the revival of feminist activism, Beyoncé and Emma Watson promoted their celebrity feminism, and feminist productions premiered in popular media (Baumgardner, 2011; Cochrane, 2013; Penny, 2014; Favaro and Gill, 2018; Mendes et al., 2019).[20] Bate (2018: 150) names the following catalysers of the fourth wave: Caitlin Moran's book (2011), Lena Dunham's TV series (2012), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk (2012), Laverne Cox's appearance on *Time* magazine's cover (2014), and the kick-off of SlutWalks (2011) and Women's Marches (2017). Bate also highlights the importance of hashtag activism ("hactivism") on Twitter, such as her own project #everydaysexism (2012) and the well-known #metoo campaign (2017). Bate (2018: 150) adds "the Black Lives Matter movement was started on Facebook," by the Black/queer Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi. Examples of recent fourth-wave feminist publications are Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) and Rebecca Solnit's *Men Explain Things to Me* (2014).[21]

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[20] For more information about online feminism, see Martin and Valenti (2012).
[21] To date, there is no overview of fourth-wave feminist scholars, and most of the scholars that have published recently have also produced literature that predates the fourth wave, for example: Rose M. Brewer, Jo Littler, Jessalynn Keller, Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, Akane Kanai, Hester Baer, Prudence Chamberlain.

That said, it is crucial to realise that the start of fourth-wave feminism is defined by the popularisation of feminism in the mainstream, mainly after Trump's 2016 election, since that triggered awareness among White women of the ongoing presence of sexism. For most Black and Brown feminists and grassroots organisations, however, there has been a continuous need for the struggle for recognition, justice and safety, while this has often been ignored by the majority. Therefore, I would argue that the fourth wave started with the increasing visibility of feminism on social media, without tying the fourth wave to specific people/celebrities.

Bate (2018: 151) sums up the key concerns of fourth-wave feminism as follows: "Representation in places of power, intersectionality, transgender rights, reproductive rights, violence against women, supporting refugee women, empowerment, giving women tools to sustain economic independence, the adoption of paternity leave and equality in the workplace, sexual assault on college and university campuses, gender fluidity, climate change." I would add to this list body positivity, Black activism, and proud media performances of raced and queer identities (visibility politics). Martin and Valenti (2012) and Mendes et al. (2019) examine case studies of girls and women fighting for these causes, using social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogs. With the online "resurgence of feminism" amongst women from multiple generations and locations, feminist activists can easily collaborate and their content can reach large audiences (Pruchniewska, 2017: 810). According to Munro (2013: 22), feminism in the fourth wave is more visible, but also more fragmented or decentralised, and is characterised by a growing interest in feminist history. One of the most significant changes brought on by the current visibility of feminism is that feminism is no longer defined by anti-feminists in the public sphere; instead, feminists have been able to reclaim its (plural) definitions and values (Bate, 2018: 179).

4.2.1 Fourth-Wave Expressions

Statistically, fourth-wave feminist images are not significantly represented in my sample. Despite the fact that much is happening nowadays around feminist activism on social media, the most popular hijab fashion bloggers seem to lag behind. Nevertheless, compared to the moment at which I collected my data (2018), I have noticed that the amount of typical fourth-wave feminist content in hijab fashion is increasing. Bloggers do discuss certain themes that are typical of the fourth wave, but they tend to discuss this in their (temporary) Instagram Stories instead of their (more portfolio-like) Instagram feed. Although none of the bloggers in my sample produce explicit feminist activist content regularly, a handful of them do a substantial amount of everyday taboo-breaking work on Instagram and YouTube.

An example is Leena Snoubar's (@withloveleena) casual discussion of menstruation and fertility.[22] This is often embedded in glamour, authenticity or humour, since most bloggers say they want their accounts to be a positive escape from reality,[23] and only show the best parts of their lives.[24] Usually, bloggers combine elements characteristic of fourth-wave feminism with femvertising, see section 4.4.

Generally, feminist activity is represented in my sample by UK-based blogger Amena (@amenakhan) who fights for her place in the mainstream beauty industry; UK-based Dina Tokio (@dinatokio) who fights for her own (and her peers') interpretations of modesty; Kuwait-based Ascia (@ascia), who fights for her right to deviate from the mainstream Muslim and Arab communities; US-based Ibtihaj Muhammad (@ibtihajmuhammad), who fights racism, Islamophobia and bullying; and US-based Shahd Batal (@shahdbatal), who fights for Black women's recognition in the beauty industry and promotes street styles within hijab fashion. To demonstrate how fourth-wave feminist expressions within hijab fashion are co-constructed by religious and ethnic markers of identity, I discuss in this section examples of Islamic/Muslim feminism and Black feminism alongside the more mainstream feminist expressions in my data. I separated the categories of Islamic/Muslim and Black feminism for analytical purposes, although they may overlap.

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[22] With Love, Leena, 14 March 2020, TELLING OUR FAMILIES I'M PREGNANT! *EMOTIONAL*
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UaymvHkhKHw 3:15
[23] For example, With Love, Leena, 17 May 2020, SPEND THE DAY WITH ME!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zVcsWVNKdE 1:45
[24] For example, Shahd Batal, 10 March 2017, MY STRUGGLE WITH BODY IMAGE & SELF LOVE
 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zn2TDot2Yfg 2:46

✅ @amenakhan / previously @amenaofficial, 10 March 2018

One of the few bloggers who consistently produces feminist content at the time of my data collection (2018) is UK-based Amena Kahn (@amenakhan). Writing about women's freedom of dress, for example, she states: "Woman dressed in a mini skirt = provocative. Woman wearing a hijab = provocative. The message here? Dress how YOU want to dress – their being provoked is their own problem […] Update: Dear ladies who try to shame other ladies in their lifestyle or choice of dress. I will 100% stand by women's freedom of choice – grown women making choices for themselves is absolutely nobody else's business but their own. Nobody deserves to feel unworthy or belittled for who they are. […] Particularly where it comes to clothing, this is a toxic mentality that spirals quickly into victim blaming women who've been assaulted. And that is NOT ok by me. My page is a place of tolerance, understanding and uplifting women – if you have a problem with that, feel free to unfollow me" (10 March 2018). This particular caption speaks to fourth-wave issues in general, but certainly also to her followers' multicultural and religious issues in particular.

The following image is not included in my sample, but is relevant nonetheless, because it combines a feminist symbol with an activist text, which is illustrative of fourth-wave feminism and shows an increase in visibility of fourth-wave feminism in hijab fashion. In this post, Amena (@amenakhan) marks International Women's Day 2019 by commemorating the legal rights women in the West fought for, such as "the right to equal access to employment, education and training (The Sex Discrimination Act, 1975). Marital rape was only recently recognised as illegal (in 1991)." The first few rights Amena mentions are taken for granted by most girls and young women in Western neoliberal societies. It is, therefore, interesting that she is raising awareness by pointing out that these rights are quite precarious, have not been in place very long and were fought for very hard. This notwithstanding, there is racial and sexual discrimination on the labour market, so equal access to work (which is linked to economic class) is a relevant issue in the fourth wave, especially for Brown/Muslim women like Amena. The latter remark she discusses relates to fourth-wave feminist campaigns against sexual violence, such as #metoo. Amena speaks about women's rights in the West, but acknowledges "various countries around the world", which makes it particularly relevant to her followers who may live in or come from different places.

@amenakhan, 7 March 2019

so many of us come up against constant challenges that deny us REAL equal opportunity and access to safety, success, stability and liberation. Today, tomorrow (and always), I celebrate our shared determination to overcome these challenges… WE CAN DO IT. ❤️🙏🏽👯👯👯👯👯👯👯👯👯👯👯👯

In the image itself, Amena (@amenakhan) showcases a hijabi interpretation of Rosie the Riveter, an archetype that originally appeared on a US wartime poster to get women to work. Amena looks fiercely into the camera while striking the biceps pose, wearing red lipstick and a red polka dot headband. The categories of fourth-wave feminism and popular feminism overlap in this particular example, due to the popular Rosie the Riveter symbolism (see section 4.3.2). She invokes the symbol of Rosie the Riveter (biceps) regularly in other posts as well, for example when speaking about her struggles to get accepted in the beauty industry (see Chapter 5). In this kind of content, Amena's notion of women's empowerment is collective or communal. This is evident towards the end of her caption for the above post where she stresses the importance of continued and collaborative activism: "so many of us come up against constant challenges that deny us REAL equal opportunity and access to safety, success, stability and liberation. Today, tomorrow (and always), I celebrate our shared determination to overcome these challenges… WE CAN DO IT."

Interestingly, Amena reposted her River the Rosie style photo on 8 March 2020, this time with the caption: "Happy #InternationalWomensDay my sisters […] Remember: you are absolutely worthy of everything your heart desires. You're royalty, baby! […] Hold your head up high, fight those (outer and inner) demons, and don't let anyone EVER tell you that you can't do it. Because you can, and you WILL." Compared to her earlier caption containing (intersectional) feminist language, this post has a different tone to it: one of motivational speech, of cultivating confidence and of purusing individual goals ("everything your heart desires"), thus it represents a more corporate and popularised notion of empowerment (see section 4.1). Interviewee #8 Yousra (of North African/South European background) draws on postcolonial and religious discourses when saying that although Amena's Rosie the Riveter poster is "very creative," its source is American culture. "We try so hard to fit in Western society, or appeal to the Western… […] In our culture, in our religion, we've got so many more empowering stories for women, it would be better if we shed light on these things instead of copying the Western societies."

It is noteworthy here that Amena's feminism does not consist of just a one-off post about women's empowerment. Amena regularly speaks about feminist issues such as equal pay, for example in a YouTube video in which she promotes her headscarf with the word 'empowered' embroidered on it (see

screenshot). She discusses the fact that female entrepreneurs get 2% of all investment which "includes women who are from marginalised communities, women of colour, even less of that funding is given to us. And so this is something that has to change, and I think that change will come when we all start to stand by each other."[25]

4.2.2 Islamic and Muslim Feminism

Muslim women scholars have been publishing feminist literature throughout the third and fourth wave of feminism.[26] Mainly due to its online visibility, there is an increased uptake of feminist conversations among Muslim women in popular content and products. With regards to scholarship, Islamic feminists—often women but sometimes men—re-interpret Islamic scriptures and highlight stories of female role models in Islamic history (Badran, 2009). Contrary to atheist feminism or Islamophobic narratives, Islamic feminists are of the stance that in its divine meaning, "Islam is a force of empowerment rather than of disempowerment" (Jeenah, 2003: 4, cited in Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012: 101). They perceive the fight for gender justice not merely as a feminist duty, but an Islamic command (Midden, 2010: 240). Some often-named scholars in the Islamic feminist canon may not necessarily self-identify as Islamic feminists, but instead identify more with the term Qur'anic hermeneutics, such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas (see Barlas, 2016). Popular Muslim bloggers show that being a Muslim feminist is not an oxymoron, and that Muslim women can display empowered archetypes without *White saviours'* celebratory claims (see Spivak, 1988). They demonstrate that feminism as a conversation or movement should be ethnically and religiously diverse and inclusive.

Hijab fashion may not necessarily be a feminist movement, but it is valuable to think of its emancipatory contribution to Muslim women's lives, confidence and sense of community. Since Muslims are often affected by mechanisms of exclusion in Western societies, and sometimes patriarchal cultural codes, certain Muslim women audiences may feel empowered by seeing positive and relatable media representations of themselves. As interviewee #5 Jenan said:

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[25] Amena, 18 June 2019, WOMEN IN BUSINESS, BEAUTY UPDATE & EVENING ROAST | AMENA'S FAMILY VLOG 102 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x4QaG_djiE
[26] Well-known Islamic feminist or social justice scholars are: Homa Hoodfar, Lila Abu-Lughod, Asma Barlas, Azizah al-Hibri, Riffat Hassan, Asma Lamrabet, Amina Wadud, Leila Ahmed, Heba Raouf, Kecia Ali, Qasim Amin, Abou Elfadl, Fatima Mernissi, Sayyidah Shaikh and Farid Esack. Additionally, there is new scholarship emerging from Faizul Redhwan Karim and Shadaab Rahemtulla.

I definitely think it's hard to be of a different religion in the West. And then with all these Muslim bloggers coming out and then being stylish and modest at the same time, going to the gym whilst wearing headscarves, traveling, you know, doing all these things, in my opinion, is very encouraging. And it just encourages Muslim girls to go out there, to feel confident in their skin, despite all this negativity coming, you know, from, like what was happening in New Zealand with the terrorist attacks.

She also found it important for (young) Muslim women to:

[…] feel like they have the right to be a certain way, to act a certain way, to be proud of who they are, and to challenge these really selfish ideas of women having to stay at home or women not being able to have a family and a business at the same time, so I feel that this is really good. At the same time, I feel like it's really important for non-Muslims to see that Muslims are not just what the TV portrays them to be. Muslims can be fashionable, they can be pretty, they have much more to them than the standard idea. They're fashionable, they're modest, they have a family, they're successful in life, they've achieved a lot.

Research has shown that not all Muslim women identify with feminism in general or Islamic feminism in particular (Cheruvallil-Contractor, 2012: 101). For instance, Chan-Malik (2018b) observed a disidentification with the word feminism among the Muslim women in her sample; instead, they asserted their power using other words. Disidentifying with feminism is not exclusive to Muslim women: multiple groups may feel excluded historically by a dominant feminist discourse that has mainly benefitted White, secular, middle-class women (Mahmood, 2005)—although conversations are becoming more diverse and inclusive (Scharff, 2019). The interviewees in my study, generally, support women's concerns, but their identification with feminism would depend on the kind of feminism exhibited (such as interviewees #1 Chaimae and #8 Yousra). Interviewee #7 Saba supports gender equality, but said that she does not know much about feminism yet and learns from the bloggers in that respect. The youngest interviewee, #9 Asmaa, describes feminism in (neoliberal) terms of education, ambition, independence and confidence: "Every day I'm working on being more independent, whether that be through my education or just personality-wise. The feminist movement just makes people more aware of more independence and makes me strive toward being more independent and more confident in myself every day." Some interviewees (#2 Loubna, #5 Jenan and #9 Asmaa), celebrate hijab fashion bloggers as feminist role models for shattering Islamophobic stereotypes and traditional cultural gender norms. Other interviewees (#3 Faiza, #4 Aissa and #6 Amal) see themselves as Muslim feminists and evaluate the emancipatory value of bloggers' content according to individualism vs. collectivity and authenticity vs. commercialism, and with an awareness of race, religion, class and body size. Overall, interviewees' notions of empowerment were framed in

terms of free choice, not being held back, independence, confidence, combining modesty with style, being created and loved by Allah, and having it all (career and family).

Although hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations generally revolve around empowerment, Islamic feminism is a type of content that is discussed very sporadically by the bloggers. Their representations of empowerment seem more aligned with mainstream popular feminism (see section 4.3). The only post in my sample that speaks from an Islamic feminist standpoint, is UK-based Sebinaah's (@sebinaah) post, shown below. While she does not normally produce feminist content, in this post, she marks International Women's Day 2017 by explaining why Khadija bint Khuwaylid, first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, is her female role model. Khadija's story is one of the most mentioned examples of women's rights in Islam, and she is therefore a fairly standard Islamic role model for women. Khadija's story is not only told by Islamic feminists, but also incorporated in various other discourses such as in Islamic apologist and missionary (*da'wah*) subcultures. Interviewee #8 Yousra suggested: "There is, of course, Aïshah, and someone called Sumayyah [who] was one of the first martyrs in Islam." She added that it is a shame that bloggers do not use their platform to promote these figures and stories more, since "we [North Africans] have got a very rich heritage, even the [South] Asians, they have got a much richer heritage than what can be seen in the West." Sebinaah's mentioning of Khadija's story could indicate a (collective) lack of knowledge of other role models than some of the wives and companions of the Prophet Muhammad.

✔️ @sebinaah, 8 March 2017

sebinaah • Follow

about: we were given rights to education and rights to inheritance 1400 before the rest of the world; a woman has a right to work and a right to keep all her income. And contrary to popular belief, there is no duty in Islam which states that a woman must do the cooking and cleaning! The first woman to embrace Islam had her own (very successful) business, she turned down many marriage proposal and she asked the Prophet to be his wife (although he was 15 years her junior!) I can't think of a better example of an empowering woman, so next time someone tries to curtail the rights that your Lord has given you, make sure you put them straight! Every day is Womens day 😌 #internationalwomensday

Load more comments

Furthermore, in the caption, Sebinaah expresses gratitude to her mother and grandmother for the sacrifices they made and the opportunities with which they provided her, before asking her followers to tag their role models in the comments. Many girls and women mark International Women's Day by stating that their mothers are their feminist role models, which is a beautiful thought in and off itself. However, including this message in feminist posts frames motherhood (instead of political action) as the ultimate facilitator of societal change, which is quite gendered and depoliticised.

Although Sebinaah does not mention the word 'feminism' literally in this post, she implicitly acknowledges that its work is still relevant: "We live in a world where a woman unfortunately is still not equal to man." Moreover, she emphasises that, contrary to often propagated in Islamophobic rhetorics, Islam as a religion is a source of empowerment and status for women. In Sebinaah's words: "As a woman, Islam gave us a right to life […] We were given rights to education and rights to inheritance 1400 [years] before the rest of the world: a woman has a right to work and a right to keep all her income." She also attempts to counter patriarchal practices by asserting that "there is no duty in Islam which states that a woman must do the cooking and cleaning!"

It is important to note that these topics of education, inheritance, work, income, household tasks and entrepreneurship are all relevant to neoliberal femininity. Sebinaah strengthens her own position as entrepreneurial blogger by mentioning that Khadija bint Khuwaylid was a successful business owner and that she was the one who proposed to Prophet Muhammad, an employee of hers at the time, to marry her: "I can't think of a better example of an empowering woman, so next time someone tries to curtail the rights that your Lord has given you, make sure you put them straight! Every day is Womens day 😌 #internationalwomensday".[27] The example of Khadija is very dear and relevant to many women, especially in the domains of marriage and career. However, her story fits neatly within a neoliberal ideal of wealth, entrepreneurialism and women as productive citizens. Sebinaah models here to her followers what an empowered Muslim woman could or should look like: stylish (enhanced by the makeup on her dresser); relatable (bedroom selfie); married (see rings); appreciating her cultural background (*henna/mehndi* tattoo); and smiling instead of being a "feminist killjoy" (Ahmed, 2010). In terms of gender, this constructs a heteronormative image of empowerment. Moreover, it is

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[27] All spelling and grammatical errors found in cited captions and websites throughout this thesis are quoted verbatim from the original text. Since these errors are visually visible to the reader in the images/screenshots used in the thesis, they are not therefore signalled using [sic].

remarkable that in this post in which she discusses Islam, she wears her headscarf in a way that covers her neck instead of leaving it visible as in most other posts. These visual signs either suggest that a combination of normative femininity and religiosity lead to a happy, empowered life, or show that Sebinaah anticipates hate comments from an anti-feminist Muslim angle.

Similar to Islamic feminism, another term that is relevant to discussing (fourth-wave) feminism is "Muslim feminism" (Chan-Malik, 2018a: 31; Bøe, 2019). Muslim feminism is not a much-theorised term, but it should be, since it is useful for describing Muslim women's feminist activities and body of literature that do not necessarily refer to Islamic scriptures but nevertheless fight sexism, misogyny,
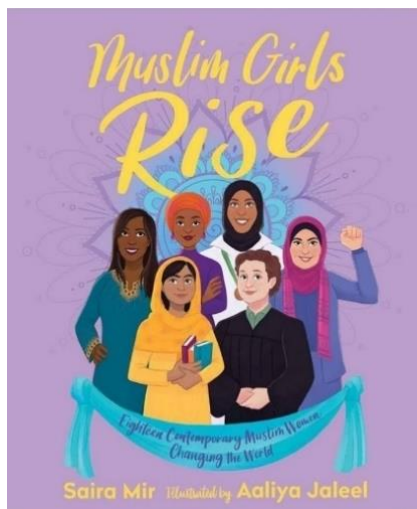
Islamophobia and racism from a Muslim position. The term also encompasses initiatives that amplify Muslim women's voices and empower women with a myriad of skills. Although not canonised or listed in academic literature yet, there is a growing number of scholars that are important in this field, such as Suad Joseph, Saleema Burney and Azeezat Johnson.[28] An example of popular literature in this category is *Muslim Girls Rise* by Saira Mir (2019), which is a book about "extraordinary Muslim women of our time." It includes feminist buzzwords such as "not your token hijabi", "intersectional feminist" and "girl power" (Mir, 2019).

Although I see this book as an activist feminist product, one could interpret it as a popular feminist product (see below), mainly because of its appealing visuals and buzzwords. However, categorising something as activist or popular should not be the main exercise in researching feminist products, especially considering Gill's (2016b) argument that researchers should appreciate that "multiple and contradictory ideas can co-exist in the same moment." More importantly, some fourth-wave feminist campaigns and products are simplified or commercialised to make them accessible and convincing for a wider audience, thus popularising it. This popularisation does involve stripping away some of the complexities of a social issue in the initial stages, but should not always be understood as an attempt

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[28] A non-exhaustive list of other (established and emerging) Islamic feminist scholars includes: Mariam Khan, Fauzia Ahmad, Salma El-Wardany, Heidi Safia Mirza, Veena Meetoo, Khadijah Nicole Lehmann, Saleema F. Burney and Khadijah Elshayyal. Additionally, there are well-known Muslim feminists such as Linda Sarsour, Sherin Khankan and Aisha Al-Adawiya. Examples of other relevant Muslim feminist activists or women involved in empowering projects are: Latifa Akay, Naima Khan, Wasi Daniju, Tamsila Taquir, Dervla Zaynab Shannahan and Halima Gosai Hussain from The Inclusive Mosque Initiative; Selina and Nafisa Bakkar from *Amaliah.com*; the work of the Muslim Council of Britain and the Muslim Women's Council; Muslim Women's March protesters around the globe such as Berna Toprak; writers like Sana Saeed; Instagram bloggers such as Leah Vernon (@lvernon2000); YouTubers like Tazzy Phe; and rappers Neelam Hakim (@neelam_) and Mona Haydar (@themostmona).

to depoliticise or commercialise messages (as is more often the case with such categories as popular feminism and femvertising).

4.2.3 Anti-Racism and Black Feminism

During the spring of 2020, global protests against racism took place, despite the Corona-virus lockdown, both on streets and online, to tell the world that #blacklivesmatter. Many bloggers from my sample, such as Ascia, have shown support to the movement, mainly on Instagram Stories and some on their Instagram feeds. One blogger, Sebinaah, even apologised in a YouTube video for her racial insensitivity in the past.[29] I selected my data sample long before this period, when race was seldomly discussed on social media. In my sample, selected before the protests of 2020, I found merely one Brown blogger, Sebinaah, who once posted about racism/colourism. And I found merely one Black blogger, the African-American influencer Ibtihaj Muhammad, who regularly posts Black Muslim activist content—and is known for it by my some of my interviewees. In this section, I discuss how strong Black Muslim femininity is represented through visuals and concepts that are, as I argue, largely inspired by Afrocentric symbolism and the American music industry. Although the incorporation of Black femininity in media and music is a source for empowerment, its gender constructions should be critically evaluated, says hip-hop feminist Brown (2009). In what follows, I discuss anti-racism, Black feminist activism, the Black queen archetype, and Beyoncé's empowerment discourse.

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[29] Sebinaah, 20 June 2020, I WANT TO APOLOGISE... https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCNPsXmuVkI

✔️ @sebinaah, 3 August 2017

In this post's caption, Sebinaah (@sebinaah) addresses racist or colourist attitudes within the Pakistani and Muslim communities: "It normally worked on a scale with certain races such as African/bengalis/South Indians being the most disliked (because of their dark skin complexions)." In this progressive, critical, much-needed statement, she asks of the British Muslim communities to stop this attitude: "We're becoming more accepting of inter racial marriages and cultural differences, but the offhand comments and remarks are still too common! Why is it that we still haven't learnt a simple lesson that the prophet taught to us over 1400 years ago?!" The critical stance Sebinaah is taking here positions her as anti-racist and pro-diversity, backing this up with a religious principle. Some other bloggers have spoken about this as well, such as Habiba da Silva (@lifelongpercussion) who pointed out in a YouTube video the issue of racism/colourism in the (online) Muslim community, after she received many comments noting she looked too dark in a photo: "I have loads of African and Black followers on my

social media, and I find it so disturbing that Arabs and South-Asians, Middle-Eastern people in general, find it OK to be so racist, and most of you are Muslims. I am getting comments with the n-word."[30]

Strikingly, Sebinaah's caption creates a tension with the visuals of this selfie: she is wearing blue colour lenses (which is one of the last times she wore them after having done so for more than a year). Given she has spoken previously about racism/colourism, about feeling affected by it and how she grew up considering herself too dark,[31] Sebinaah's colour lenses may be a sign that she is/was not immune to colourist beauty standards in both the Pakistani community and influencer industry.

In the following repost of an earlier manifesto, posted under her previous Instagram handle (@cheeseandxalwo), Dutch blogger Hodan Yusuf (@hodan.ysf) speaks out about racist beauty ideals and exclusion of dark-skinned women in hijab fashion. Hodan states: "How do you think we as women feel when we don't see any resemblance of ourselves on these pages? And when we do see resemblance 9/10 its a girl with heavily contoured nose, face and light eyecontacts so that she looks more 'eurocentric'." This post coincidentally speaks to beautifying practices like Sebinaah's coloured lenses referred to above. Hodan's entire caption speaks volumes, but here I quote the part that shows that Hodan is considered a pioneer and role model by many: "I'm amazed at how many times I get a comment of happiness that they finally see someone with dark skin in this hijabi social media world." In the image itself and its caption, Hodan encourages others to join her in the effort to increase the online visibility of dark-skinned Muslim women and create social change.

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[30] Habiba da Silva, 30 August 2015, #HABIBATALKS: 'YOU'RE TOO DARK', ON RACISM & BEAUTY WITHIN ONLINE MUSLIM COMMUNITY https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RsluPZBYoU 2:35

[31] Sebinaah, 6 April 2016, SKIN LIGHTENING | #SEBINAAHSPEAKS https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRz0F652kTk 2:15

cheeseandxalwo It's so sad too see the underrepresentation of dark skin women in the muslim/hijabi bloggin world. All you ever see is the same light skinned models/bloggers who have the same features. In general dark skin women already have to go trough colorism or prejudice/racism in western society and as a muslim you face it twice as bad within the muslim community. I can now say that the level of discrimination is even worse within the muslim community even though islam says we are equal it's obvious that you get treated as if its not. And please do not comment against me about this issue if you are privileged (meaning you are not black so you don't know what im talking about) How do you think we as women feel when we don't see any resemblance of ourselves on these pages? And when we do see resemblance 9/10 its a girl with heavily contoured nose, face and light eyecontacts so that she looks more 'eurocentric' Just looking african is not likeable i guess. I'm amazed at how many times i get a comment of happiness that they finally see someone with dark skin in this hijabi social media world and as happy i am hearing about it, it's just sad cause how many African muslims do we got!? Exactly.. I hope more women will join me to try change this game 😊 tag em below if you know someone who needs the recognition 💖

hodan.ysf • Follow

hodan.ysf I wrote this almost 2 years ago and its still accurate asf cause look at current events. And I'm not even surprised at all cause when you grow up like that, you get used too it. However- we can make a change. Go support @darkskinnedhijabis 🏿

Load more comments

guidemeback2u_allah @sabrina_koch_1 👏👏👏👏👏👏👏👏 baaraka Allahu feiki

sabrina_koch_1 @_iheartislam_ yes so true.. also so sad what's happening... if she was doing something good I am the first to support her.. but not male up and fashion.. where it has nothing to do with our faith.. I know I am not here to judge her.. that's her life and she can do whatever she wants and whatever makes her happy... as I said u

♡ ○

6,291 likes

DECEMBER 10, 2017

Log in to like or comment.   ...

@hodan.ysf, 10 December 2017

Another blogger who fights tirelessly for Black (Muslim) girls and women's inclusion and empowerment is Olympic fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad (@ibtihajmuhammad). The two photos featured below, in which Ibtihaj can be seen beside the world-famous Rihanna and pioneer hijabi model Halima Aden, stood out during my data selection, because they depict three popular icons of modern Black femininity. In the first photo, Ibtihaj poses with Rihanna on a Fenty Beauty (makeup) launch, and in the caption she celebrates Rihanna's makeup brand for finally catering to Black and Brown women. Fenty Beauty is not only popular among Black Muslim bloggers, but practically all hijab fashion bloggers in my sample. Although Rihanna is one of the world's most famous contemporary sex symbols—hence her bra-less outfit (Pimentel, 2017)—any tension between her sexuality and hijab fashion's modesty seems to fade in the light of promoting ethnic diversity. By associating herself with other celebrities in these photos, Ibtihaj positions herself as an important player in this kind of empowerment as well (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 6). Ibtihaj's use of the buzzwords "melanin beauties", "making queening look easy" and "#BlackGirlMagic" is characteristic of a Black women's discourse of self-affirmation (I discuss the figure of the Black queen below).

In the photo below, Ibtihaj poses with Halima Aden at the same Fenty Beauty launch, against the backdrop of a Fenty Beauty advertisement featuring Halima. Ibtihaj's caption speaks about veiled Black women as beautiful, contrary to dominant Western opinions: "I'm so proud of you @kinglimaa for showing the world that we too are beautiful and will never be defined by the restraints of society's standards. We are reDEFINING what it means to be American & Muslim and no one can stop us. Let's get it 👌⚡❤️ #blackgirlmagic #fentybeauty." The importance of these posts lies in the fact that Ibtihaj uses her platform to make Black Muslim women visible, both vis-à-vis White privilege and Arab privilege in Muslim communities. As Chan-Malik (2018b) explains: "In the narrative of American Islam, there's this complete omission of these black Muslim women who are so critical to its making."

✅ @ibtihajmuhammad, 8 September 2017

Interviewee #2 Loubna, with North African and European roots, highlighted Ibtihaj's achievements in shattering Islamophobic rhetoric. In some parts of Europe, "obviously they think you can't practice sports and be Muslim, but she really showed the world that 'no, that's fine, you can be champion, wear hijab and be fine. Be religious, be what you want'." In a similar vein, Black/mixed-race interviewee #4 Aissa said: "I love her. I absolutely love her. It was so cool. […] I was writing about her and her organisation and looked at the social impact of that. […] But I really like her just because she is or was in the Olympics as a Black hijabi and like, proper wearing the hijab, not some version of it but properly wearing it. She is unapologetic about being Muslim and doing sports." It is clear that Ibtihaj is a celebrity in her own right, and uses her social media platform for activism. However, the question remains: why is emancipation primarily tied up with inclusion in the beauty industry and celebrities' lobby in these posts? Perhaps because images of strong Black femininity in beauty and music "sell well in a segmented political economy" and easily gain visibility in the attention economy (Banet-Weiser, 2007: 214). Chapter 6 discusses in more detail the entanglement of notions of empowerment with the beauty industry.

My data shows that Black feminism or Black empowerment is displayed in several ways that can be thought of as belonging to the "Strong Black Woman" archetype (Parks, 2010). The Strong Black

Woman is not a new figure: if anything, it could very well be that the bloggers in my study emulate their Black American peers and predecessors in displaying power poses and *badass* attitudes (for a definition of badass, see Chapter 5). When faced with a multitude of exclusion mechanisms such as sexism, anti-Black racism and Islamophobia, and the lack of or essentialised representations flowing out of that, the Strong Black Woman archetype is a way of reclaiming "acceptance and respectability" (West et al., 2016: 394) or simply "celebrat[ing] the beauty, power and resilience of Black women" (Wilson, 2016).

To illustrate, Saufeeya's photo on the left resembles Nefertiti's pose and is interesting because of its short, symbolic caption: "#helloagain, #marvel #blackpanther #feeeeya #wlyg". The hashtag #marvel semantically organises her in the superhero category; #blackpanther refers to Black activism in the 1960s; followed by her old Instagram handle and a modelling agency's handle. The veiled Black Muslim rapper @neelam_ comments: "The Queen is back". In my data, the figure of the queen plays an essential role in representing Black Muslim empowerment, whether the word is mentioned by bloggers or followers or merely through visual references. This Black queen is different from the non-Black, fairy-tale queen mother discussed in Chapter 5. The Black queen is an Afrocentric female archetype who is (ought to be) strong and chaste. Although controlling and patriarchal in some other cases (Williams, 2017: 219), in my study this figure represents Black empowerment and the modest practice of veiling.

@saufeeya, 29 January 2018

In the above profile portrait on the left, simply captioned "#african", UK-based blogger Sagal (@sagaleeyaa) is wearing a colourful African *kitenge* headwrap and neckband, and an earring with the shape of the continent. Dedicating this image to her East-African heritage shows the pride Sagal takes in being Black and African, which is exceptional given that many (diaspora) Somalis disidentify with other Black African ethnicities.[32] Followers' comments on this post—"Mama Africa" and "The queen of Africa"—show that Sagal's power pose with an African headwrap and raised chin speaks to follower's ideas of what a modern African queen archetype looks like. Interviewee #6 Amal, of Northeast African origins, appreciates the Afrocentrism of Sagal's self-brand: "I think it's very nice that she kind of stayed in touch with her roots, especially for Muslim hijabi bloggers, because they are already categorised into their own box, because they already appear to be different. It would be very easy for her to try to conform and to stick to Western clothing and to whitewash herself. So, the fact that she's still staying in touch with her own roots and she's showing people 'this is who I am, this is my culture,' I respect that a lot and I find that very inspirational."

In the profile portrait beside it, geotagged in the North African city of Agadir, Sagal is wearing a pashmina headwrap and big accessories, holding her baby bump covered by a high street jersey dress, all set against an outside scene with trees and a stone wall. In her caption, she uses a fragment of Lauryn Hill's 1998 song EVERYTHING IS EVERYTHING: "more powerful than two Cleopatras.. Bomb graffiti

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[32] Rawdis, 28 July 2018, TALK: SISTERHOOD & ARE SOMALIS CONSIDERED BLACK? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnF7LEtFBkg 11:00

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on the tomb of Nefertiti."[33] Not only does Sagal refer here to Lauryn Hill's hip-hop legacy of powerful femininity, anti-racism and cultural critique (see section 6.2.1), but she also claims power by semantically associating herself with two iconic ancient Egyptian (African) queens.

This iconography of Nefertiti, Cleopatra and other ancient (North) African queens is also deployed by singer Beyoncé, to create a self-brand of beauty and power.[34] Beyoncé's—and Sagal's—reclaiming of Black African icons of beauty and power is much needed after the 1960s Hollywood whitewashing of Nefertiti, played by such actresses as Jeanne Crain and Barbra Streisand, and Orientalist displays such as in Christian Dior's 2004 show.[35] Arguably, in the intersectional context of sexism, racism and Islamophobia, veiled Black women refer to "the imagery of Nefertiti to restore [their] power in the face of destruction" (McDonald, 2018). Nefertiti is a powerful but also easily Instagrammable beauty icon: "Nefertiti, the romantic black queen with the enviable neck, is particularly appealing to young

Black women, mainly because she existed […], was a great beauty and is remote enough to be worshiped" (Morrison, 1971). Nevertheless, this is not completely unproblematic, and in fact quite gendered, as women are often "viewed as the custodians of African American cultures" (Bibi Khan, 2012: 86). Perceived as such, they are not merely expressing Afrocentric creativity in such images, but are burdened as "cultural transmitters as well as cultural signifiers" (Yuval-Davis, 1993: 621).

Beyoncé in a Nicolas Jebran design, 2019[36]

Similar to Nefertiti's headwrap is Sagal's emulation of Erykah Badu's signature style wrap, see below, which resembles certain "gele crown" styles in West Africa (another reference to the queen archetype). She captioned it with words from one of Badu's songs: "and it goes on and on like Erykah Badu". Badu, and her Afrofuturistic music, "is a representation of all things prideful, spiritual, and empowering" and anti-mainstream (Hartman, 2011: 240; see also: Steinskog, 2017: 242). But not much remains of Badu's subversive messages in the attention economy, while something material and aesthetically pleasing like the headwrap is easier replicated. This process of aesthetic depoliticisation

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[33] Ms. Lauryn Hill, 24 June 2010, LAURYN HILL - EVERYTHING IS EVERYTHING
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3_dOWYHS7I
[34] See, for example, the lyric: "Burroughs speaks of Sheba, Nefertiti, Zaiditu, and Cleopatra" (McDonald, 2018).
[35] WFW, 2 June 2016, CHRISTIAN DIOR HAUTE COUTURE SPRING/SUMMER 2004
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwRpl6Yttko&t=27s (Including Beyoncé's music in the background)
[36] https://en.vogue.me/fashion/beyonce-wears-nicolas-jebran-homecoming-live-album/

is the fact that Sagal mentions the lyric "On and On" to associate herself with Badu's style but perhaps not with the politics behind the song, which is the doctrine of the Five Percenters/Nation of Gods and Earths (Bibi Khan, 2012: 80).

@sagaleeyaa, 30 September 2015   Erykah Badu, 1997, NEXT LIFETIME
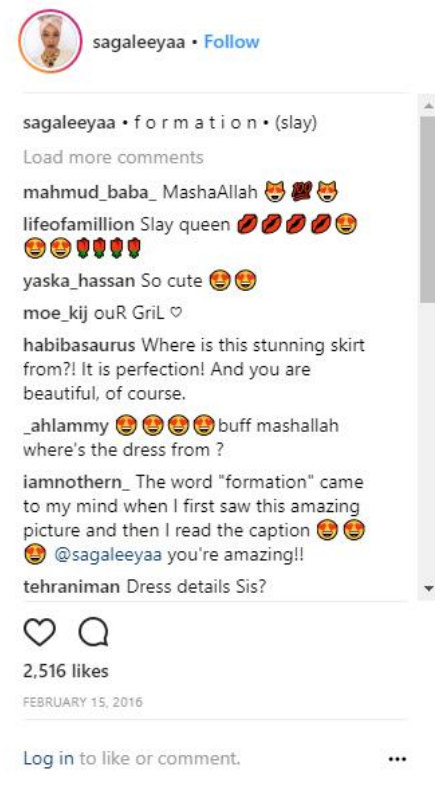
✔️ @sagaleeyaa, 15 February 2016

In this particular post, Sagal directly refers to Beyoncé's Black feminism, both with her image and caption: "• f o r m a t i o n • (slay)". In a timely manner, Sagal posted this image one week after Beyoncé's Superbowl performance of FORMATION.[37] Sagal's black dress and power pose visually refer to the Black

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[37] BEYONCE Paris, 12 August 2019, BEYONCÉ LIVE AT SUPER BOWL 2016 - FORMATION - FULL PERFORMANCE - FULL HD
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hZFz3bHUAg

Panthers-inspired outfits of Beyoncé's backup dancers (see above). One follower comments: "The word 'formation' came to my mind when I first saw this amazing picture and then I read the caption", and another follower responds with "Slay queen". Beyoncé had previously popularised the word 'queen', just as she has inspired an Instagram hype of the word 'slay' (as used in FORMATION), and thus popularised trendy visual symbols of Black (and Brown) feminism. This is emblematic of the fact that popular Black feminism, including in hijab fashion, is embedded in a history of popularisation and mediatisation of Black culture. Although such critics as bell hooks and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are sceptical of the empowering value of Beyoncé's commercialised and sexualised feminism (Waring, 2016), she is a role model to many Black women, as can be seen from Sagal's post. I asked Black/mix-raced interviewee #4 Aissa about her thoughts on Beyoncé's feminism and she negotiated the public debate around that question as follows:

> I think I used to be a bit more critical about it. But I'm not anymore. Because White people are allowed to band behind someone who is doing kind of superficial feminism. So, I think Black people are allowed as well. So, I don't care anymore. Even though I think the whole kind of idolisation has gotten to a level that is really unhealthy *slash* un-Islamic, really, I don't participate in that. I don't even like Beyoncé's music that much. But I do like following the hype, especially on Twitter, it's fun to read. So, I don't mind it at all. And she is doing it really well. […] that video of FORMATION, the symbols are really powerful, and also, to justify the superficial-ness, they're actually doing [charity for Black people].

✅ @shahdbatal, 25 June 2018

The lexicon and visual discourses of 'slay' or 'queen' femininity are also present in this image of Shahd Batal (@shahdbatal). She geotagged her post in her city LA and captioned it "🖤". Follower @aisha.ayanboade comments: "Uhhh ohhhh the queen's back again 🖤" and @ayla_yuyu says "SLAYINNNN'". Her black heart emoji is emblematic of her Black pride (although interviewee #4 Aissa argued that Shahd's content has a mainstream "Insta-glam" to it). Shahd has spoken out a few times about the marginalisation of Black Muslim women in the hijab fashion industry.[38] Shahd and Ibtihaj are the only bloggers in my sample who regularly wear Black headscarves, instead of the more common pinky-nude colours. Because of the dominant nude-coloured, romantic style in hijab fashion, Shahd has tried to develop a more urban hijab style, as symbolised by her black OFF WHITE binder clip handbag with yellow industrial belt in this image. The importance of Shahd's distinctive Instagram presence is reflected in interviewee #4's comment: "I don't even really like her style because I think it's quite 'out there', and sometimes she pairs things like really weirdly, but I follow her based on that

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[38] Shahd Batal, 11 December 2017, THE TEA ON THE MODEST FASHION COMMUNITY | SHAHD BATAL https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=30&v=oHIYbKpJJ3Y 7: 13 "I think that the modest fashion community are the least progressive community, sorry, and I'm not going to beg to be included, I don't think any of you should either"

she is a Black Muslimah, and in the recent years that is something that I've been looking for because that was really not a thing *at all*, a couple of years back, *at all*."

Shahd's army-print trousers and chunky boots construct a more covered version of the militant outfits in Destiny's Child's SURVIVOR video.[39] These visual codes of gender are possibly recognisable to audiences because they stem from a shared cultural memory of Beyoncé's performances. Moreover, although Shahd's parents are from Sudan, her images are often based on a more general African-American/hip-hop style, which is nearly postracial. This can be explained by Banet-Weiser's (2007: 214) observation that the representation "of *diversity* that has the most economic potential in the current climate is one that relies on a hip, cool, urban, 'postracial' style." Interviewee #4 Aissa adds that: "in terms of borrowing from African-American culture, I feel like that's almost become a thing for all Black people to do that, because that almost seems to be the common denominator to recognise 'oh that's Black'. I've seen a criticism about it, but again, I'm someone who is also not African-American but that's what I look for, that is what I feel comfortable with culture-wise." The criticism interviewee #4 Aissa refers to here is something that Northeast African born interviewee #6 Amal was indeed critical of, namely the lack of Sudanese culture in Shahd's self-representation: "it doesn't inspire her clothing, she doesn't talk about it, it is not something that she appears to be proud of, it is something she appears to hide. And she was criticised a lot during the protests in Sudan." Nevertheless, Shahd's performance of Black femininity can be interpreted as a fourth-wave feminist effort of moving Black femininity from the margins to the centre of hijab fashion.

African-American pop culture is a significant source of inspiration for the femininities and feminism displayed in this section. Although Smith (2017: 239) argues that "disregarding the (hip hop) feminist sentiment of the album or dismissing 'Bey feminism' as not feminist enough is an unproductive and alienating act," I end this section with a critical note written from a standpoint that takes the phenomenon of postfeminist "incorporation" into account (see for example, Chatman, 2015). Although Beyoncé uses incredibly powerful symbolism in her work, and even supports her vision on empowerment by quoting such Black activists/theorists as Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, W.E.B DuBois and Alice Walker in her film HOMECOMING (2019), this does not outbalance or nullify her frequent equation of power with money, and her strategic incorporation of any elements that speak to her audience's lifestyle, experiences, wishes and emotions. Beyoncé's notion of female power as displayed

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[39] Destiny's Child, 25 Oct 2009, DESTINY'S CHILD - SURVIVOR (OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO) FT. DA BRAT
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmc8bQoL-J0

in her film often involves not just feminist ideas but also "self-promotion, self-interest, self-surveillance" (Wonglar, 2015), let alone the revealing outfits, explicit language, sexualised movements and many more elements that contrast with her more feminist/post-colonial lyrics. For instance, her performances do not seem to problematise, let alone bridge, the dichotomy of dancers' political Black Panthers uniforms and their dancing to sexualised, aggressive and money-centred lyrics. Some of Beyoncé's work may be very feminist-informed and impactful, but her performances first and foremost create an empowered self-brand that contributes to her distinction as an artist. Her use of feminist and anti-feminist elements, in commercialised and aestheticised ways, is typical of postfeminist media culture and undermine the emancipatory quality of her performances.

The hijab fashion bloggers discussed in this section portray empowered Black femininities in their own unique ways, which stand in contrast with Beyoncé's on several levels. Nevertheless, it is hard to say whether these bloggers use certain words and symbols *because* they are hyped by the singer, or if the slaying queen archetype may has bigger than Beyoncé and is embedded in popular language. Regardless, my data indicate that bloggers use imagery and symbols that are popularised or co-opted by Hollywood celebrities or the US music industry. There are hijabi microcelebrities on Instagram who are performing alternative empowered Black femininities, such as rapper Neelam (@neelam_), whose 'formation' is inspired by the Nation of Islam marches (see below) and who also models for hijab fashion brands (see Chapter 6). However, beside her conversion to the Nation of Islam sect (Fishman and Soage, 2013), Neelam began operating within elite, Black supremacist circles inspired by the Nation of Gods and Earths/Five Percenters sect.[40] Hence, although her representations of empowerment and femininity are unique and politically powerful, these representations' ideological sources may not be very liberating for the average Muslim follower.

@neelam_, 23 August 2018; 19 February 2019; 15 October 2018

These affiliations matter, because when popular styles, slogans and symbols are circulated and copied on Instagram because they are beautiful or badass/slay, the politics behind those visual signs becomes

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[40] She performed with Erykah Badu during the BET "cypher" awards, and was signed by Jay-Z's (Beyoncé's husband) record label (Pullum, 2019; Adams, 2018).

invisible—while it might still be at work in the background. Visual signs of empowered femininity begin to have a commercial life of its own, which may work for fourth-wave Black Muslim feminists; however, it is just as possible that it works in the interest of Instagram and of elites' market-homogenisation, mass-production and plutocracy (Littler, 2017: 2). On the one hand, looking for inspiration in Hollywood's direction is understandable, given the role that popular media play in shaping young people's identities. It is interesting to see the ways in which hijab fashion bloggers shape these archetypes in their own unique ways using Instagram. On the other hand, when communities emulate celebrities, it legitimises the celebrities' cultural hegemony. Littler (2017: 14) explains that elites uphold their plutocracy by presenting themselves as "just like us"; by playing "the benevolent custodians of society"; and by flaunting their luxury and "material excess"—which are three ingredients of Beyoncé's performance, but also of successful bloggers' self-representations. The question remains to what extent bloggers' Afrocentric or Hollywood-centric representations are empowering. Ultimately, through celebrity feminism, some values and archetypes of empowerment become canonised and privileged (Seaton, 2018: 14), while other feminist values, religious values, cultural values may be marginalised, or simply become uncool.

4.3 Popular Feminism

In the previous section, I discussed hijab fashion content that implement or lean towards feminist thinking/activism. In this section, however, I illustrate the ways in which hijab fashion bloggers advocate and celebrate women's empowerment in popular and everyday manners. My data show that, just as in wider popular culture, there is a turn towards feminism and progressive speech in hijab

fashion. The bloggers under study regularly post popular feminist expressions, such as the motivational quote "It's always a good idea to empower other women" (@chinutay, Instagram Story, 12 October 2018). In my sample, 31 out of 161 images (19.3%) contain references to women's strength, empowerment, success, free choice and diversity. However, all images celebrate, in one way or another, womanhood and empowerment. Following feminisms' popularisation, a shift has taken place in which feminism is "incorporated and instrumentalised" in representations of "youthful femininity" (Kanai, 2017b: 244-254). In other words, "it became cool", and nearly standard

or expected, to associate oneself with feminism (Bate, 2018: 151).[41] This may be fuelled by the "unification of feminism and femininity," see introduction to Chapter 6 (Bae, 2011: 29). Although popular feminist content usually remains surface level, such expressions can still contribute to an increased overall representation of women's issues, which is valuable (Pruchniewska, 2017: 812). In this section, I analyse how popular feminism is manifested in visual and textual ways in my data.

Feminist scholars define popular feminism in several ways, depending on their particular examples and case studies. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017: 884) define its 'popular' aspect as a broad accessibility of feminist content across several media platforms; as a topic shared among popular people such as celebrities (whereby certain people are included or excluded from the conversation); and—based on Stuart Hall's (2002) notion of popular culture—as a terrain of power struggle between different interpretations of feminisms, which deserves scholarly attention. In other words, "'the popular' is a site where 'the political' happens" (Rodman, 2016). In these struggles for power, it is often corporate definitions of empowerment that dominate, hence, Lazar (2006: 505) argues that "[p]opular (post)feminism is a media-friendly, consumer-oriented discourse." Similarly, Banet-Weiser (2018b: n.p.) describes popular feminism as primarily consisting of an "unthreatening, capitalist-friendly kind" of feminism that follows a postfeminist repertoire.

Keller and Ryan (2018) define popular feminism, which they call feminism's "new visibility", as a positive phenomenon, similar to or part of fourth-wave feminism instead of postfeminism. Keller and Ryan focus less on commercial and depoliticised feminist representations, and more on novel women's activism and "emergent feminisms" online. They mention the importance of celebrity feminist articulations such as Beyoncé's 2014 MTV Awards performance in which the word 'feminist' was lit up, and examine women's initiatives in the "feminist blogosphere" (ibid.). By introducing the term "emergent feminisms", Keller and Ryan (2018) aim to show that the (digital) media landscape has developed regarding feminist tendencies, and that the mediated visibility of (young) feminists' activism challenges earlier ideas about media as predominantly postfeminist. They do so without dismissing postfeminism as an important analytical term, and without suggesting that a postfeminist era is over or that feminism has completely taken over popular culture.

Keller and Ryan's case studies are illuminating—as well as Keller's more recent study about online feminist activism which was co-authored with Mendes and Ringrose (2019)—in terms of highlighting

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[41] Popular feminism and anti-racism are met with online harassments, threats and popular misogyny, not only by men but also by women (Baker, 2010: 186; Martin and Valenti, 2012: 3; Banet-Weiser, 2018a). Muslim women who are prominent on Instagram and are vocal about these issues also experience backlash from certain Muslims (according to @lvernon2000, 29 December 2019), and even by Instagram itself (according to @neelam_, 18 April 2019).

(young) feminist developments in online and popular contexts. It is exciting to many that women's representations and public discourse about social justice are shifting, and feminist ideals are finally recognised and widely discussed. With social media as a catalyst, the popularisation of feminism contributes to an atmosphere in which people or groups that have been fighting for justice for decades, are finally heard and actually thrive. In a political landscape that alarmingly welcomes the mainstreaming of misogyny and right-wing populism (Dzodan, 2018), the visibility of diverse politics and popular feminism are a hopeful sign of people's progressive attitudes and are an opportunity for pedagogical work.

The difference between Banet-Weiser's and Keller and Ryan's views of popular feminism is expected, since they have different case studies. Nevertheless, they both study popular feminism: "[t]he new cultural visibility of feminism includes many versions of feminism—some of which are antithetical to each other" (Gill, 2016b: 2). To my knowledge, however, most feminist scholars focus on researching the problematic sides to popular versions of feminism. As analytical categories, postfeminism differs from popular feminism in that it rejects or eradicates feminism, while popular feminism highlights a part of feminism albeit in a neoliberal way (Banet-Weiser, 2018c: 154). Nevertheless, the boundaries between these two categories are blurred, because when feminism becomes popular, it often gets transformed into a postfeminist "media-friendly, consumer-oriented discourse", which is the object of much scholarly criticism (Lazar, 2006: 505). Gill (2016b: 2), for example, observes that current feminist expressions "operate in an attention economy that is deeply shaped by patterns of exclusion and domination. Some of the newly celebrated feminisms have a neoliberal understanding at their core and have little in common with other circulating feminisms, being exponents of an individualistic, entrepreneurial ideology that is complicit with rather than critical of capitalism." Hence, tensions that previously existed between academic/activist feminism and postfeminism continue to exist in contemporary popular feminism.

In the context of this chapter, I understand popular feminism as something that is inspired by but is more simplified than most feminist activism and critical theory. One effect of the popularisation of feminism is that people in certain industries are jumping on the bandwagon to capitalise on the movement. Despite some problematic manifestations of popular feminism, one can also find valuable and transformative expressions of feminism, diversity and empowerment within popular culture. Martin and Valenti (2012: 5) argue that "multiplicity is not only okay, but healthy and inevitable. The more radical versions of feminism will continue to push the feminist center, the center will continue to push the margins to be more strategic, those of us who dance in between will continue to be challenged and nurtured by it all." Given that many girls and women grew up having little knowledge of or interest in feminist history (Love and Helmbrecht, 2007: 49), popular feminism is a way of

reconnecting and articulating one's relationship to feminism, empowerment and inclusion. As Love and Helmbrecht (2007: 50) argue: "we find popular culture an important pedagogical tool for (re)engagement with feminism." Interviewee #7 Saba says it helps her when bloggers post popular feminist content: "When they do promote it, it is really helpful, because obviously my knowledge on it isn't really good. If they do promote it, then obviously I learn something from it […] so it's beneficial as well for followers."

That said, to be palatable for a wider audience, popular feminism is often stripped of certain important and 'upsetting' information about social injustice while highlighting feel-good phrases or pointing out issues that reflect well on the person who speaks. When feminism becomes popular, bloggers may incorporate feminist messages because they look or sound good; that is, because they are 'Instagrammable'. This is feminism as heteronormative glamour, which takes different guises: it may be "women supporting feminist issues but rejecting the label," because they do not want to sound too political (Siegel, 1997: 55). It might be removing the queerness out of feminism in order not to upset the heterosexual status quo (McNicholas Smith and Tyler, 2017). It means displaying a wealthy lifestyle in order to claim transcendence beyond perceived class and real poverty that strikes Muslim communities. It might be disregarding the Blackness and Muslimness of activism when implying that feminism is trending when White circles validate it. It might be promoting and stressing how empowered veiled Muslim women are, while feeling the pressure to avoid conversations that sound too (stereotypically) Muslim, such as patriarchy among Muslims or the threat of Islamophobia.

PicsArt, 5 March 2020

In what follows, I explore the role of popular feminist expressions in my sample. Currently, there is a trend noticeable on social media consisting of popular feminist products and visuals, of which the above example from photo editing app PicsArt is illustrative. In this trend, feminist, body-positive and anti-racist buzzwords and symbols are amalgamated with such visuals as makeup, lip pouts, eyelashes, lingerie, and the colour pink. This trend signifies a notion of empowerment that celebrates proud and progressive womanhood, yet is traditionally girly/feminine and commodified. Although this visual symbolism is also used in online activist content, its popular use can be best described in McRobbie's (2009: 158) words, namely as a "pro-capitalist femininity-focused repertoire". The ways in which this kind of postfeminist aesthetics and materialism promotes empowerment and a feminist vocabulary, yet undoes some of the feminist work, needs to be analysed critically. In the coming sections, I discuss

how feminism is popularised in my data, through 1) a pro-women celebration; 2) slogans and symbols; and 3) neoliberal mediatisation.

4.3.1 Pro-Women Celebration

✔️ @basma_k, 8 March 2016

For the occasion of International Women's Day (2016), blogger Basma K (@basma_k)—a UK pioneer in hijab fashion—is featured in the image above dressed in a baby-pink and white outfit while holding eye-catching, pink, heart-shaped balloons. Arguably, the colours and aesthetics of this photo fits Basma's image of a 'Muslim Barbie,' which is how she was described on the magazine cover of *Hijab in Style* (June 2019—see image on the left), and how followers compliment her (for example in the comments section of her Instagram post on 6 June 2020).

Basma's hyper-feminine use of the colour pink could either be interpreted as reinforcing traditional gender identity or as reclaiming and celebrating feminine space and power. In any case, her post does

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construct the idea that a feminist day can best be marked online with plain glamour. Lazar (2009: 381) argues that the colour pink is a typical postfeminist symbol of "such qualities as fun, independence and confidence". In an "outright flaunting of the colour," it reproduces women's gender identity as unambiguously heteronormative (Lazar, 2009: 381-382). Interviewees in my study generally appeared not to be very impressed by the marking of International Women's Day using pink balloons. For instance, interviewee #4 Aissa argued that most bloggers would post something eye-catching related to empowerment on 8 March, because it is expected of them culturally, "and then for the rest of the year they are quiet." Banet-Weiser (2007: 222) describes a trend that relates to Basma's post: "a strong, smart, female character, is clearly a product of a culture that recognizes the importance of 'positive' gender representations yet does not call attention to any kind of feminist politics other than the politics of representation." As Gray (2005: 2) explains, the politics of representation is limited here to visibility "itself as the primary site", instead of, for instance, educating followers or discussing social change with them. Arguably, Basma's pink balloons are a return to traditional femininity in roles, tastes and appearance, to assert that women are powerful but not any less feminine. As Dosekun (2015: 968) says, "[t]his is precisely the post-feminist 'undoing of feminism'" (see also: McRobbie, 2009).
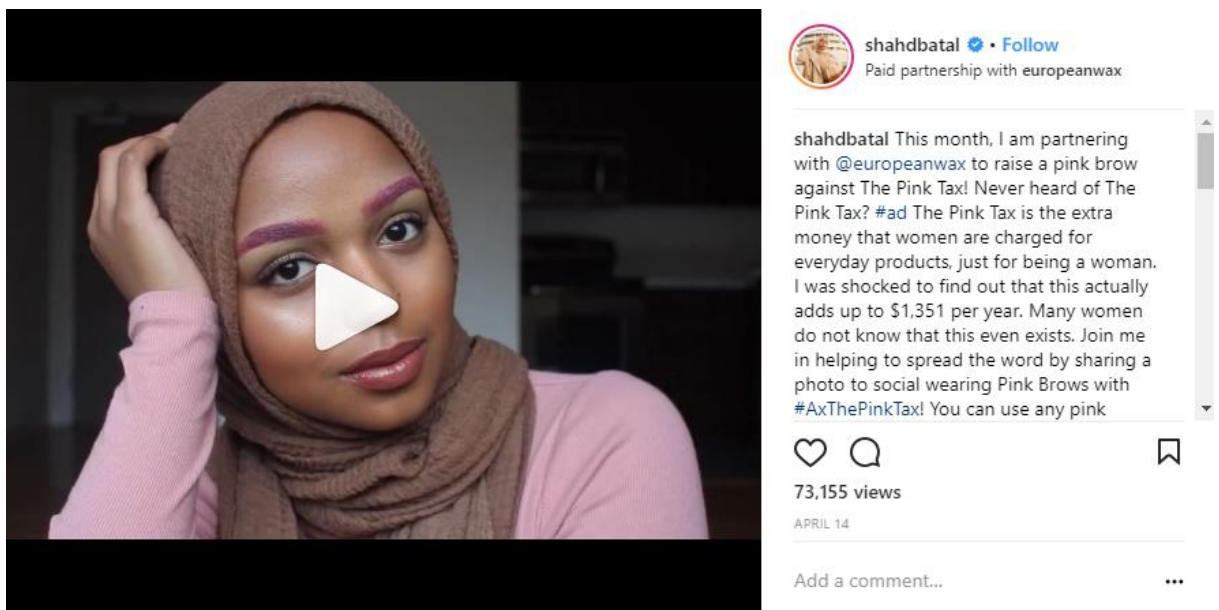
@shahdbatal, 14 April 2018

In the above image, the colour pink is used by Shahd (@shahdbatal) to raise awareness for a feminist activist cause. After taking a closer look, the link between the colour pink and feminism in this post is based on mixed massages: Shahd incorporates pink symbolism (popular feminism), a campaign for #AxThePinkTax (fourth-wave feminism) and a paid

partnership with a hair removal salon(@europeanwax), all without explicitly mentioning the word "feminism". Do her eyebrows "pink-wash" women's activism (Hunt, 2017: ii)? Or does the feminist activism promote the wax salon? These mixed messages are illustrative of the popular feminist expressions in a hijab fashion context that are mostly based on postfeminist ideals.

✔️ @lifelongpercussion, 8 March 2018

Depicted here is, what could be called, a "capitalist-friendly" pro-women celebration of International Women's Day (Banet-Weiser, 2018b: n.p.). In this photo, models are hugging the UK-based Habiba da Silva (@lifelongpercussion) in a sisterly style, which is an often-used modelling arrangement nowadays in hijab fashion brands' visual marketing (see section 6.3.2.2). Habiba's nude headscarf line is inclusive of different skin tones, which is reflected in the models and in her caption by the Rosie the Riveter emojis in all skin colours. The emancipatory politics of this post revolves around celebrating ethnic diversity and womanhood, reflected in its message "we are powerful ❤️." Portraying women of colour as powerful, and tailoring products to their needs, is (unfortunately) already a controversial and therefore much-needed statement in the current climate. Nevertheless, this post contributes to the circulation of a feminism in which "theories of power are absent, replaced by a celebratory notion that women 'own' their power" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006: 263).

Some argue that popular feminism is "a kind of haute-feminism that is more about inspiration and support networks than securing women's rights" (Bennett, 2019). For instance, in their case study about the rebranding of feminism in women's glossy lifestyle magazines, Favaro and Gill (2018: 44) argue that, in its popularisation, the definition of feminism became quite emptied of content and politics. Banet-Weiser (2018b: n.p.) explains this depletion by arguing that popular feminism stimulates women to take up certain parts of feminism that appeal to them, such as feeling confident and powerful, while not complementing that with a radical challenge of patriarchy, racism and other inequalities. Interestingly, female editors of women's lifestyle magazines claimed to be obviously "all feminists," for the simple reason that they inspire, celebrate and support women to become stronger. Other editors criticised those magazines for merely being "pro-women" rather than feminist activists (Favaro and Gill, 2018: 44). Arguably, Habiba's post can be perceived in the same light.

4.3.2 Slogans and Symbols

Ideally, feminism is not a label, but an action, something that one does (Love and Helmbrecht, 2007: 44). Feminist T-shirts and simplified labels can rob feminism of its radical politics. However, when feminist phrases, practices and recognisable symbols are taken up by generations of girls, and circulated across the media landscape, it makes solidarity easier and contributes to an atmosphere in which women's empowerment is increasingly celebrated and discussed using a more expansive vocabulary. This section shows that slogans and buzzwords such as *the future is female*; symbols like the Rosie the Riveter arm; and outfits like the power suit and slogan T-shirts, are a quick and eye-catching vehicle for promoting messages about equality, diversity and inclusion. However, for buzzwords and symbols to hold revolutionary power, its politics needs to extend beyond the visual. Because without a shared conceptualisation of power structures, slogans and symbols will fetishise feminism, merchandise girl power, and probably alienate many Muslim women in the process (Bae, 2011: 29). Because of Instagram's visual and commercial medium specificities, popular feminism is usually a combination of (identity/visibility) politics and commodity feminism, which offers audiences a consumer identity and microcelebrities a type of self-branding (Goldman et al., 1991; Senft, 2013).

@nourka92, 5 Jan 2017; 21 Jan 2017

The first slogan I discuss in this example is Dubai-based Saufeeya's (@saufeeya) the "future is female 👊⚡ • #thailand #feeeeyatravels #feeeeya #futureisfemale @tourismthailanddxb", posted around International Women's Day 2018. This second-wave feminist literal T-shirt slogan has become a contemporary popular feminist (T-shirt) slogan and social media hashtag. Freely interpreted, the slogan means: "The future better be female!" (Norris, 2019), because "men built the systems and the systems are failing women."[42] Saufeeya's post, however, is not necessarily about feminist activism, but more about promoting Thailand's tourism and positioning herself as a modern, empowered Muslim woman who is committed to ('non-modern') young girls' empowerment. At times, microcelebrities' use of empowerment language merges with a humanitarian, developmental language of empowerment. In these instances, empowerment is often treated as transactional and becomes a form of "girl powering of humanitarianism," aided by education and economic productivity (Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015: 159). This image illustrates the faces involved in this story: the Western, already empowered, Saufeeya and the Asian schoolgirl who is on her way to empowerment. The schoolgirl functions as an alternative for the poor Southern girl or child bride (Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015:

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[42] https://thewomenscode.com/the-future-is-female/

161). This post puts the veiled Muslim woman on the "already empowered" side of the equation, as Dosekun (2015: 967) calls it, instead of the "still in need of feminism" side. Although Saufeeya's post shatters several stereotypes, the power inequalities between Saufeeya and the schoolgirl remain unproblematised. This illustrates how a second-wave feminist, lesbian, anti-racist slogan from the margins, can be detached from its history and politics, and is instead used in a popular, lucrative, heteronormative and privileged context, in order to brand Saufeeya as progressive.

In the next image, blogger Ascia (@ascia), dressed in a slogan T-shirt, is a clear indication of the relationship between slogans and visibility politics. Ascia's T-shirt says: "STRONG WOMEN SUPPORT OTHER WOMEN". In the caption, Ascia explains that women's acts, such as fashion blogging, are often dismissed as "frivolous or pointless", while displaying 'girly' representations persistently is, in fact, a form of fighting for the right to self-representation.

✅ @ascia, 27 March 2018

rebellion against the mentality that women
& their bodies are owned & in need of
control. We fight that everyday & though
some may deem what we do as frivolous or
pointless…it's a daily reminder that women
are a force when we band together.
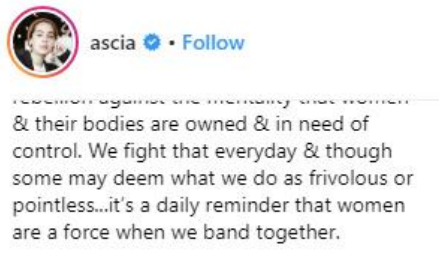
Against the backdrop of Lebanese valleys, where Kuwait-based Ascia works as a judge for a competition show for social media influencers, Ascia takes a power pose, tilting her head slightly while looking directly at the camera. Her yellow suit is a balanced combination of masculine and feminine qualities, which constructs a bold and executive look. The English part of her caption reads: "Strong women support other women. And it's the absolute truth. It's the only way to change the society we live in for the better. To support other women that are making positive waves on this platform & on many others. Our persistent presence is our rebellion against the mentality that women & their bodies are owned & in need of control. We fight that everyday & though some may deem what we do as frivolous or pointless…it's a daily reminder that women are a force when we band together."[43] This is a feminist message about the collective struggle of (Arab Gulf and other) women to own their bodies, coming from a bicultural woman who is both insider and outsider to Gulf culture. Her power pose, power suit, tattoos and message contribute to her edgy image and her status as one of the most important social media influencers in the Arab world and globally.

At the same time, the idea of women supporting other women may be primarily relevant to and not be extended outside the realm of (social media) entrepreneurship—and to the online interaction between women, such as the relationship between a microcelebrity and her followers. The slogan "strong women support other women" symbolises a relationship between followers and bloggers that is not just based on aspiration, but also on a sense of duty to cheer on one another. Related to the latter, interviewee #9 Asmaa said the following about supporting hijabi bloggers: "There are two sides to it: there is people who say, 'that's very powerful, you're amazing, you're a very independent woman, you're a role model.' But then there are also people who comment and start bashing them." She clarified this as follows: "As Muslims we want to sugar-coat how there is a very judgmental side to becoming a hijabi blogger, because there is always gonna be people who find you wearing a bit too much makeup or showing the front of your hair as being haram or wearing tight jeans.[44] […] The whole aspect of women uplifting women at the minute, instead of judging and micro-analysing everything they do: this is uplifting them." In response, I commented that that sounds quite feminist, in a way, and she answered: "Yeah, 100%." This indicates that in this social media environment, feminism is mainly understood as female bloggers promoting each other and followers cheering bloggers'

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[43] Her Arabic caption says "support each other" instead of "band together".
[44] This is also narrated by bloggers themselves. For example, see: Sebinaah, 23 April 2016, WHY ARE MUSLIMS MEAN? | #SEBINAAHSPEAKS https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUefnBA-xOM

representations in the comment section, to outbalance the hate comments of (sexist, self-righteous) trolls (see Banet-Weiser, 2018a for the link between popular feminism and popular misogyny).

Moreover, since interviewee #9 Asmaa did not criticise any of the photos in my sample, I wondered if this discourse of supporting women creates a taboo for audiences to negotiate bloggers' gender representations critically and in a plethora of ways. Although kindness, respect and support are important manners online—and form a stark contrast with the 1990s/2000s postfeminist 'mean girl' competitiveness (Ringrose, 2006)—this support-based definition of feminism remains one-dimensional. It is limited to the entrepreneurial realm of bloggers supporting each other and the aspirational realm of followers hitting the like-button, without much political dimension. My observation here does not criticise Ascia's post or interviewee Asmaa's media reception, but pertains to the popularisation of the slogan in the online community (for which Ascia posted this).

✔ @ascia, 11 April 2018

In this photo, Ascia (@ascia) is leaning on a Cadillac, wearing a beige turban, black round sunglasses and a street style black jeans from feminist brand Monki Taiki (H&M group) with the text "GIRLS TO THE FRONT" and "U CAN SIT W US" on it. The slogan "GIRLS TO THE FRONT" has a third-wave feminist connotation, stemming from the 1990s feminist punk movement Riot Grrrl that encouraged women and girls to stand close to the stage during performances (Ali, 2012). The movement's messages about

empowerment were very grassroots and distinctive from the commercial, postfeminist concept of girl power that was popular in mainstream media at that time (Riordan, 2001). The other slogan on Ascia's jeans stems from feminist politics as well: "U CAN SIT W US" is about changing the postfeminist 'mean girl' narrative into female solidarity and sisterhood.[45] Not every feminist slogan is understood or appreciated by followers: "some quotes, like, feminist quotes would annoy me, but some things make sense. [...] 'Support other women': I like that. That makes sense, really. And 'Girls to the front,' that one doesn't speak to me" (interviewee #1 Chaimae). While Monki Taiki and Ascia may know the politics behind these slogans, Ascia does not elaborate on it and instead uses the (English) caption to talk about juggling motherhood and career. Although subliminal messages can be valuable, the slogan's visibility alone does not lead to a transmission of values to wider audiences. Without any background information, meanings can be reduced to popular symbolism. Followers would easily confuse the third-wave words "girls to the front" with the more popular/postfeminist "girl power": two concepts that were opposites historically. So, in popular feminist content on Instagram, feminist concepts can be mixed with postfeminist concepts without apparent contradictions. It seems that, in popular feminism, feminism is in the eyes of the beholder.

Ascia's slogan jeans primarily contribute to her self-brand as a young, cool, edgy and successful mother and entrepreneur. Its feminist politics may also be limited class-wise by Ascia's promotion of a luxury car and with that, a privileged lifestyle. Banet-Weiser explains in a talk that slogan T-shirts can be powerful products because for some women, wearing them is a "radical announcement" of identity.[46] However, Banet-Weiser (2018b: n.p.) also warns that a slogan's visibility should not become the politics in itself and end there. Even though most of my interviewees generally appreciate seeing feminist slogan T-shirts, they lose interest when slogans are used in an overly popular or commercial way by bloggers. Interviewee #9 Asmaa, who mostly draws on a feminist discourse, said: "Right now, empowering women is quite important, but there are many ways you can do that, it's not just all advertising. If I see a YouTuber or a blogger on Instagram who constantly plugs advertisement and doesn't talk about themselves, doesn't mention their daily life, doesn't talk about anything relatable, then it is quite frustrating, because I know that they're kind of driven by money and less by their social message." For interviewee #3 Faiza, the extent to which Ascia sells products in her content was a reason to unfollow her, despite admiring her products and style. Moreover, interviewee #4 Aissa sees feminist T-shirts as a superficial hype that was introduced by such celebrities as Emma Watson, after which people followed that trend without having a deeper understanding of "what it means or what

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[45] https://coconutsandkettlebells.com/you-can-sit-with-us
[46] IWL Rutgers, 13 May 2019, Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AG4I1hepm1k 14:30

kind of work it entails, it's literally putting on that next slogan and be like 'I'm a feminist now', and that's a popular thing to do."

That said, a good and consequent display of feminist messages contributes to bloggers' feminist self-brand. Additionally, followers' regular encounter with feminist messages may contribute to awareness and increased vocabulary for public debate. When I asked interviewee #1 Chaimae about Ascia's slogan jumper (see above) and what she liked about it, she said: "'Girls unite.' Yeah, that's unique. That's not why I picked this one, it's just her trousers, but it's a nice message. She always has quite nice messages anyway, for women's emancipation." Additionally, interviewee #3 Faiza liked the "Strong women support other women" T-shirt, because "we don't have enough of it. It's not just about supporting other women, it's political T-shirts, and subliminal messaging is really powerful, especially when you're on a platform which has millions of followers. And even though it's not like, 'oh, I'm giving a lecture/giving a speech' like, 'you should support other women', it does have an impact and I think social media in that sense is really powerful. Through fashion, you're able to give or hint at this messaging, which I think is really good."

Thus, on the one hand, slogans are easily commercialised and aestheticised in the market and attention economy, turning it into a tool for rebranding the self as empowered, whereby perceived authenticity and revolutionary value may be lost. On the other hand, slogans may serve an important role in promoting and sharing feminist ideas among a wider audience.

4.3.3 Neoliberal Mediatisation

Another aspect of the popularisation of feminism in my data is the role of the beauty industry, glossy magazines and entertainment media in creating what I would describe as 'a mediatised empowerment industry'. Mediatising feminism and empowerment—whether through mass media or social media—means that mainstream celebrities, companies and institutions have a certain power to define feminism and empowerment. Mediatisation, therefore, implies that grassroots movements and feminist interactions "are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media's influence" (Hjarvard, 2008: 114). On the one hand, certain print media and online blogs make feminism more accessible and empowerment more enjoyable. On the other hand, however, this industry can also cloud feminism with neoliberalist interests (Favaro and Gill, 2018). Feminist scholarship has aimed to capture this commercialisation by using such terms as postfeminism, neoliberal feminism, consumer feminism, corporate feminism and cosmopolitan feminism (Dosekun, 2015: 972). In this section, I discuss how bloggers draw on women's magazines and TV characters and personalities in their gender constructions.

aaliyah.jm Khaleesi or what

Load more comments

nurulhid4yat Cantiknyaaaa

vertilace Cant deal with your gorgenousness seriously

dear_dija Mother of dragons 😁

hristina.pash 😍😍😍😍

leyla.sultanova1997 Boo 😱😍

sariittaa_96 Masha Allah so beautiful 😍 ❤️

yourstrulyshadae Gorgeous 😍😍

lxabx You're a goddess😍😍⛎

zarka_k You look stunning MashaAllah ❤️

aasifnawaz07860 How beautiful u r...... just looks like a "JANNAT HOOR"

t.urbanise 😍😍😍

13,601 likes

1 DAY AGO

Log in to like or comment.

✅ @aaliyah.jm, 12 June 2018

Popular notions of feminism and empowerment seem to be often connected to celebrities in mass media, and to the aesthetic labour required to emulate them (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017). I found examples that support this view in my data, of which I discuss one in this section. In the caption of her post, "Khaleesi or what", UK-based Aaliyah JM (@aaliyah.jm) invites followers to comment on her bleached, braided hair that resembles Khaleesi, a fictional character from the hit series GAME OF THRONES (2011-2019). In the series, Khaleesi means 'queen', and represents a strong and powerful femininity (London, 2019). Aaliyah's followers comment on her post by mentioning Khaleesi's title "Mother of dragons", "You're like a goddess" and "like a JANNAT HOOR" (dark-eyed maiden in paradise). Although Khaleesi became a feminist icon to many women, critics argue that the character is anti-feminist since she does not critique the sexist and violent norms in her society after she rose to power (Del Valle, 2019).

Khaleesi also became a style icon, illustrated by the Instagram hashtag #khaleesihair that hosts over 5000+ posts of women who dyed their hair blonde to emulate the character's wig. This focus on the body—a blonde wig, dark eyebrows and full lips—as the symbol of feminine power, is typically

postfeminist (Gill, 2008a). It makes one wonder if this aesthetic aspect, combined with Khaleesi's badass attitude, was the primary reason for her popularisation as a role model of empowerment, instead of examining the character's development and politics. Aaliyah does not elaborate on the aesthetic labour she performed to achieve this particular look. The amount of self-transformation and beautification needed to perform this particular empowered and heteronormative femininity is minimised by the postfeminist narrative that women can freely choose to become this empowered and attractive, and that it is readily available to anyone—while in fact very raced and normative (Seaton, 2018: 10).
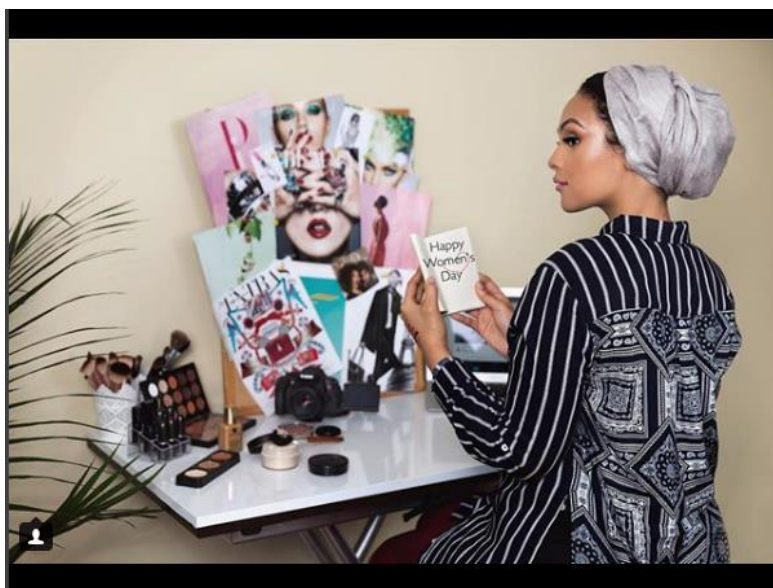
✔️ @chinutay, 8 March 2017

Another example of neoliberal mediatisation can be drawn from this photo, in which UK-based Chinutay/Manal (@chinutay) is sitting at a white glossy desk on which her makeup, brushes, a camera, laptop and glossy magazines are carefully displayed, symbolising the industries in which she works (beauty, fashion and social media). She is holding a little book on which she digitally wrote "Happy Women's Day". The photo is shot by photographer @nabilshash who normally portraits women to show their unique personality. However, this photo focuses more on Chinutay's tools for empowerment, than on Chinutay herself. Magazines are included in this photo because of their leading role in discussing the industry's trends, but also, it seems, to position magazines as a feminist medium. This surprised interviewee #4 Aissa and she ironically remarks: "What is this, I don't know? O, Women's Day! Of course! In front of like, what?! Women's magazines like *Vogue* and stuff? They are literally the ones that make women feel bad and they're presenting a certain image, like… wow!" Magazines are primarily a form of (neoliberal) entertainment and may showcase, at best, a PR-friendly feminism (Renninger, 2018). As such, they are often an object of feminist criticism. Essentially, Chinutay's post

exemplifies the tension between the pleasure that women take from popular entertainment and the feminist problematisation of aesthetic labour in that entertainment (Duffy, 2010; Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017—see also Chapter 6).

Favaro and Gill (2018) have analysed the ways in which women's magazines incorporate feminist values in their content, and found that their popularisation of feminism makes feminism entertaining and accessible. Positively, this de-stigmatises feminism, but problematically, it depoliticises feminism in that process, as mentioned in section 4.3.1. Editors felt frustrated about being criticised as failing feminism, instead of being acknowledged as feminists (Favaro and Gill, 2018: 44). After all, some of these women's magazines offer a large audience a set of relevant tools, information and an empowered identity to emulate. A parallel could be drawn here with bloggers such as Chinutay. However, these editors' remarks *and* Chinutay's post normalise aesthetic labour and suggest that feminism is dependent on the consumption of fashion/beauty or a career in that industry. Thus, this neoliberal mediatisation of empowerment is emblematic of the compliance of popular feminism with the beauty and fashion industry, instead of a feminist deconstruction of gender norms.


@shahdbatal, 31 March 2018

In this paid #ad, Oprah Winfrey's book *What I Know for Sure* (2014) can be seen alongside *Salt.* by feminist Instagram poet Nayyirah Waheed (2013) and the entrepreneurial book *In the Company of*

Women (Bonney, 2016). Characteristic of popular feminism/postfeminism, Shahd's (@shahdbatal) caption revolves around the word 'empowerment', while the implied concepts of feminism and postcolonialism are not mentioned explicitly: "Nothing more empowering than reading the stories & words of women who exemplify resilience, passion & grace all at once. What makes you feel #empowered as a woman? #ad". Typical of Shahd's representation of empowerment and her journey into adulthood are her references to Oprah Winfrey as her role model.

Lazar (2009: 373) has pointed out that Oprah Winfrey (and nowadays Beyoncé, Michelle Obama or Jada Pinkett Smith) is often celebrated as someone who "attempts to empower women by making feminist ideas accessible to a wider popular audience." This strategy, however, rests on the proposition that feminist ideas can only become accessible by selling it as a lifestyle through popular media and the market—i.e. neoliberal mediatisation—instead of learning about (Black/postcolonial) feminism directly through talks or books by such scholars/activists as Toni Morrison, bell hooks or Sara Ahmed.[47] Although Shahd's post includes inspirational books, they are mediated through Instagram. The image's middle-class aesthetics presents feminist work as part of a lifestyle genre: complete with a lit-up candle and camera on her coffee table. This primarily contributes to Shahd's self-brand as an inspirational blogger who speaks about empowerment, self-care and the LA lifestyle.

Admittingly, any post that highlights Black feminism, in one way or another, in a fashion context that privileges White (mainstream) or Arab (Muslim) viewpoints is already a small revolution. Nevertheless, Shahd's frequent celebration of Oprah Winfrey is not completely unproblematic, given the fact that Oprah is a big player within the mediatised empowerment industry. Oprah's concept of empowerment is built on neoliberal self-governance, a postfeminist makeover culture, and the meritocratic American Dream. Her motivational self-help genre is critiqued for upholding the idea that women should improve their lives by focusing on self-change before, or instead of, campaigning for social change (Peck, 2008: iv). Scholars also criticise Oprah for repeatedly stating that she is the living proof of the American Dream and framing empowerment in terms of individual social mobility (Peck, 2008: iv; Jenicek, 2009). Scholars refer to the theories of the Frankfurt School when pointing out that popular culture tends to serve the (economic) interests of those in power (Milestone and Meyer, 2012). Eventually, the sources of structural inequality remain unquestioned and unchanged in popular feminist posts such as Shahd's.

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[47] Admittedly, since the Black Lives Matter movement gained more visibility and support during the 2020 lockdown, Shahd did in fact refer briefly to Toni Morrison on 28 May 2020.
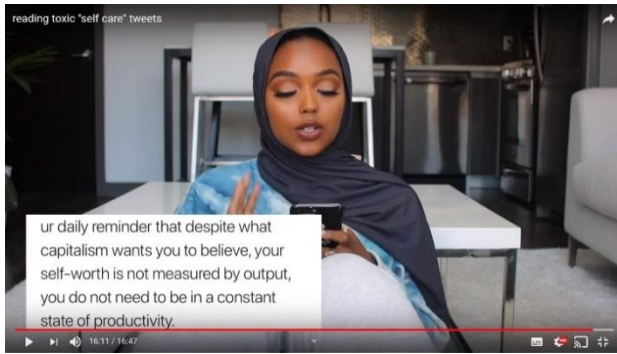
However, it is not a straightforward process to critique Shahd's image for promoting Oprah's neoliberal notion of empowerment, since Shahd has also critiqued neoliberal capitalism at other (very brief) moments. For instance, she expressed her agreement with the following comment of one of her followers: "I love this one: 'ur daily reminder that despite what capitalism wants you to believe, your self-worth is not measured by output, you do not need to be in a constant state of productivity.'"[48] This double-edged nature of content makes analysing popular feminism complex. As Gill (2016b: 2) proposed: "We need approaches that can offer subtle and complicated appreciations of the way that multiple and contradictory ideas can co-exist in the same moment, plane, field." Arguably, Shahd's critique on capitalism here is an integral part of her notion of empowerment. Opposing neoliberal productivity by promoting self-affirmation offers her followers a *sense* of empowerment, which can be understood as part of "a broader trend towards self-help culture […] in contemporary neoliberal capitalism," in which such topics as "self-esteem, body positivity, confidence" are discussed alongside consumerism (Gill, 2017: 618). In other words, cultural critique sells because it is part of a self-help and self-care discourse. In this way, Shahd can operate within a neoliberal system while simultaneously criticising it, without threatening the status quo. Banet-Weiser (2012: 49) explains this paradox:

> [T]he logic of market capitalism is that it often masks inequalities while simultaneously claiming to address and alleviate them. This masking is never complete; its contradictions are visible in the context of other social and cultural forces, such as social activist movements, consumer advocacy, and self-empowerment.

Arguably, with her motivational content, Shahd does not sell the feminist idea of social change, but of constant postfeminist self-transformation and a mediatised *sense* of empowerment. Shahd's popular display of empowerment adds to her self-brand as a progressive *hijabi*. This use of feminism to sell a product or identity hints at femvertising, which I discuss next.

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[48] Shahd Batal, 3 August 2019, READING TOXIC "SELF CARE" TWEETS
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFhnphvtsk8

4.4 Femvertising

This section examines hijab fashion blogging primarily as a form of advertisement, embedded in the aesthetic and commercial platform of Instagram. It explores the impact of 'femvertising', which is a marketing technique, on the representation of femininity and empowerment. In hijab fashion blogging, women's empowerment has become key in positioning oneself as a relevant influencer to other women. For instance, Chinutay/Manal (@chinutay) announced on Instagram that she was interviewed for a magazine's series on inspiring Muslims. She was quoted: "I feel like what I do really empowers women and builds confidence in women and builds a community with Muslims and non-Muslims" (see below).

"I FEEL LIKE WHAT I DO REALLY EMPOWERS WOMEN AND BUILDS CONFIDENCE IN WOMEN AND BUILDS A COMMUNITY WITH MUSLIMS AND NON-MUSLIMS."

– MANAL CHINUTAY
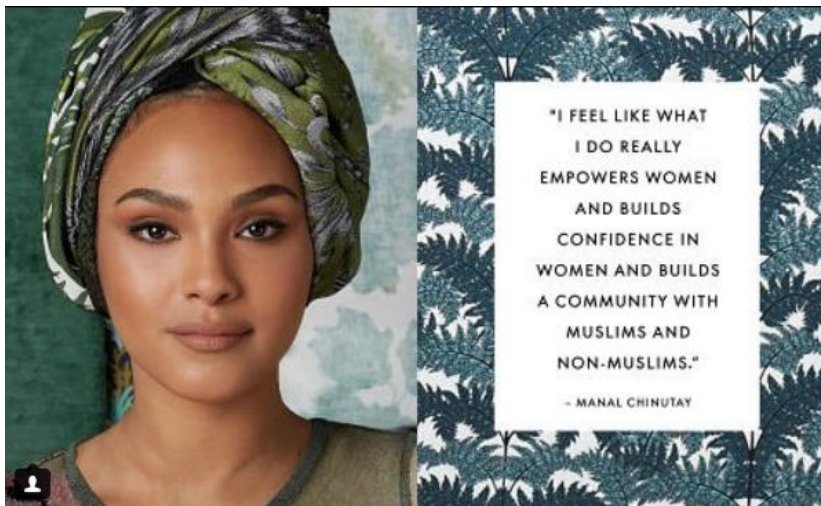
@chinutay, 19 April 2017

Since roughly 2012, many brands attempt to improve and diversify their representation of women, partly due to the pressure of consumer activism (Banet-Weiser, 2018b: n.p.). They do this by incorporating women's empowerment in advertising, which is a technique called "femvertising" or "fempowerment".[49] Early and often-named examples of femvertising are Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" and "Always' Like a Girl" campaign, but countless others have followed (Hunt, 2017: ii). Femvertising corresponded with the already present neoliberal conversation about girls'/women's confidence gap and the idea that the solution lies in media "encouraging girls to be more confident in their bodies and self-image" (Banet-Weiser, 2017: 268). Femvertising is generally applied to appeal to a female demographic: statistics show that female consumers aged 18-24 are twice as likely to support

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[49] Jessica Bennet in SHE'S THE CONSUMER: FEMINISM & MARKETING, 7 AUGUST 2017
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_uHvcDLf_4&t=399s 20:30

brands that show female empowerment.[50] Messages about confidence and achievement usually consist of a mix between intersectional feminist buzzwords and a postfeminist notion of empowerment. SHE Media defines femvertising as "advertising that employees [sic] pro-female talent, messages and imagery to empower women and girls,"[51] and states that "femvertising is the idea that advertising can empower women while also selling products." [52] Moreover, according to Dan (2017) of *Forbes* magazine, femvertising means "harnessing feminism in advertising".

Femvertising can be problematic because, as Banet-Weiser (2018b: n.p.) warns, "advertising wants a certain kind of feminism, not a feminism that actually challenges capitalism or patriarchy." In fact, femvertising is less about empowering women *while* selling products, and more about selling products *by* advertising empowerment. In line with McLuhan's (1964) phrase "the medium is the message", Iqbal (2015) therefore argues that the discussion on femvertising should not be solely focused on the message, but also on the medium, which is advertising. Or in my case study, the conservative medium or vessel of progressive messaging is Instagram, which is an advertising-style platform. Feminist marketing expert Martell explains that femvertising offers "an illusion of progress" and argues that it is rather fauxminism or "faux-feminism: the exploitation of feminism by advertising".[53] Her critique on femvertising is three-fold: (1) brands are feminist when convenient, regard feminism as an afterthought and an answer to their question: "how can we sell more to women?";[54] (2) femvertising is not part of a feminist movement, but a marketing campaign in a movement's clothing;[55] (3) what femvertising does is "pink-washing", it is the construction of a "soft-feminism", it takes the edge off feminism.[56]

Audiences of femvertising, including my interviewees, often evaluate displays of empowerment in terms of authenticity, commercialisation, co-optation and appropriation (Becker-Herby, 2016). Authenticity is an important concept for viewers because it expresses their resistance to the over-commercialisation of content. An audience might receive femvertising enthusiastically when it is related to their aspirations or to their daily lives (Murray, 2013), however, they may receive it as inauthentic in other cases, especially when it is obvious that the brand merely wants to sell a non-gendered product (Banet-Weiser, 2018b: n.p.). The question of authenticity is legitimate, since,

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[50] Ibid.: 21:00
[51] SheKnows, 26 September 2017, #FEMVERTISING WINNERS 2017
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tg2I4V9WkX4
[52] SheKnows, 22 April 2015, FEMVERTISING ON THE RISE https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZTwKbQ2Dxk&t=8s 0:15
[53] Women in Digital, 6 December 2017, CALLING BULLSH*T ON FAUX FEMINISM AS A MARKETING COMMODITY
 https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=13&v=J0JsPDYZucE 20:40
[54] Ibid.: 16:20
[55] Ibid.: 19:15
[56] Ibid.: 23:00

hypothetically, companies or bloggers could apply femvertising techniques primarily to dodge consumers' criticism. To conclude, although bloggers are usually perceived as more authentic by consumers than companies (Kestenbaum, 2017), it is crucial not to view bloggers as separate entities from the beauty industry: they are (role) models, microcelebrities, brand ambassadors, marketeers and perhaps brand owners.[57] Mediated authenticity is part of how bloggers relate to their followers (Genz, 2015), which ironically makes their advertising quite successful (Kestenbaum, 2017).

4.4.1 Selling Feminism

Arguably, hijab fashion bloggers use femvertising not only to sell products, but also to sell the idea of a rebranded, empowered, feminine, Muslim archetype. Canadian-based NourKa's (@nourka92) self-representation in the example below holds special significance in a context in which negative stereotypes about the hijab circulate. Her selfie—smiling at the camera and posing with one arm behind her head—suggests that feminism makes women happy, fabulous and beautiful, and conveys the message that Muslims can be feminists too and are therefore modern and progressive. She captioned it: "Feelin' this look with my @nourkaco feminist black edge scarf👏🏽 👏🏽".

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[57] Omaya Zein and her husband speak about how they both obtained marketing degrees, are both currently working in marketing and that Omaya's collaboration with many brands demonstrates her success as marketeer: "We both graduated with business marketing degrees, and we're pretty much applying it, I mean I'm marketing pretty much myself and our lifestyle, and he does marketing also with his job." 16 August 2019, READING YOUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT US | OMAYA ZEIN https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb8u3KXxHqE 5:00

✅ @nourka92, 23 May 2017

Hunt (2017: ii) says that femvertising challenges "restrictive beauty standards and damaging rhetoric", but pink-washes feminism by "shying away from the feminist label". However, NourKa's post complicates this observation, since she does, in fact, use the word feminism literally in her femvertising. NourKa has produced a hijab line with feminist and activist phrases on them, such as "Feminist", "Girl Power", "Love Wave", "Equality, Palestine, Freedom", and "The future is female".[58] This hijab line could be interpreted as strategic virtue-signalling, nevertheless, NourKa is unique in my sample as she is the only blogger in my study who published her definition of feminism online: "It's the conscious effort to empower and lift up women regardless of the color of their skin or the god they worship. It's the coming together of men and women for the purpose of breaking down that glass ceiling and destroying barriers that restrict women from achieving everything a man can and more!"[59] This shift to a feminist language complicates the evaluation of the emancipatory value of femvertising.

Although NourKa's definition and the buzzwords on her girl power items are all characteristic of fourth-wave feminism, I do discuss her post as an example of femvertising, because she aims to sell something in this instance. She aims to empower women *while* and *by* selling products that appeal to customers because it offers them a material sense of empowered identity. The activist "designs quickly proved to be a customer favourite. It became clear that a lot of people were just as passionate about their beliefs

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[58] https://nourka.com/collections/expressive
[59] https://nourka.com/blogs/nourkaco-blog/what-it-means-to-be-a-feminist

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as we are."[60] Although these products may resonate with NourKa's audience, my interviewees tend to reject or negotiate this kind of posts in terms of authenticity, thereby drawing on a feminist or anti-consumerist discourse. Interviewee #6 Amal argues:

> It is advertising: but because feminism is now something that is coming to trend and it's this topic that people are talking about, then it works for them because they'll be able to sell more products and make more money. So… Yeah, as much as they might have good intentions, I don't think it comes across that well. […] I would like the feminist messages, but they're using those feminist messages to sell a product. And that could almost be called unethical. I'd say it's a form of manipulation […] because they're definitely going to add tags with the place where they got their clothing from and try to sell it to you. But if it's just a photo with an inspiring message, then I'm all for that, but it's usually not necessarily the case. […] She is self-advertising her own product. So yes, as much as she believes in feminism and is a feminist, and believes in women's equality, you shouldn't necessarily use that to monetise your own product.
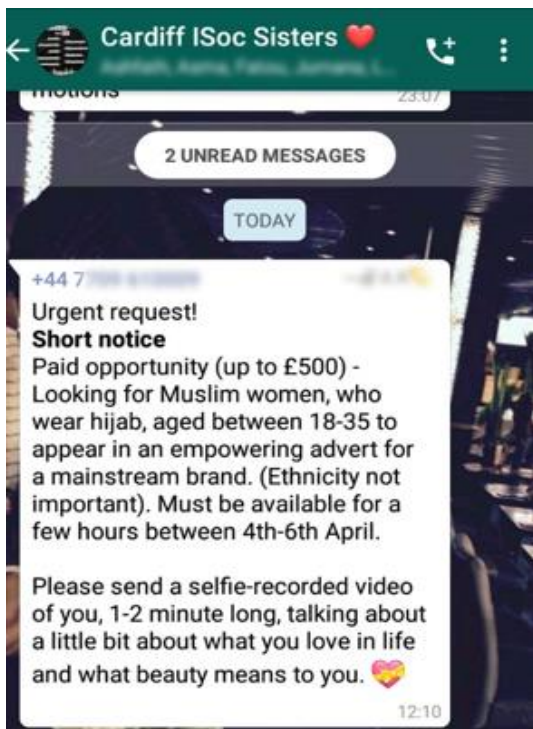
I asked her if it makes NourKa's message less authentic, and she answered: "Yes, definitely." The concept of authenticity is evidently important here, however, it is not always the most useful concept to examine. Banet-Weiser (2012: 48-49) argues that dichotomising commercial culture and political citizenship with binaries as consumer vs. producer, or brand manager vs. activist, may not be productive. Instead, as Banet-Weiser (2018b: n.p.) argues, femvertising should be analysed in a balanced and grounded way: "Advertising consumer culture is where we have hopes and desire and fears and anxieties. I think we need to take it seriously, but we also have to recognize that it is about a profit." Ultimately, advertising does have the potential to "facilitate recognition for previously marginalised groups [and help] disrupting taken-for-granted gender norms" (Maclaran, 2015: 1735).

Chamberlain (2017: 15) is interested in the meaning of "feminism and capital within a neoliberal context" and asks: "To what extent must feminism be complicit with corporations?" She answers that, although relying on brands for social change is not helpful as activists, as consumers we could use our "buying power as leverage against sexism and misogyny." Furthermore, it is important to consider how the beauty industry is changing in response to the increased role of bloggers/influencers and the kinds of empowerment and diversity discourses that are circulating currently. Femvertising is best comparable to the eco/sustainable trend: once it became rewarding/profitable for businesses to jump

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[60] https://nourka.com/pages/about-nourka

on the *green* bandwagon and tap into this market, it became slightly easier for environmentalists and conscious consumers to get sustainability on the legislative and commercial agenda.

Increasingly, Muslim women are recruited by (mainstream, probably non-Muslim-owned) brands for advertisements that might claim to empower the community but in fact jump on the *diversity* bandwagon. With regards to Muslim's inclusion in diverse femvertising, the issue is to understand where activism/advocacy ends, and the milking of the Muslim pound begins. For example, these brands do not account for their use of postfeminism to create a new caricature of the veiled, empowered and beautified Muslim woman. An illustration of this is a casting message for "an empowering advert for a mainstream brand" in which the empowerment is conceptually connected to beauty (see screenshot on the left of a Muslim girls' ISoc WhatsApp group, 26 March 2019). This recruitment message lacks any elaboration on the brand, product, mise-en-scène and other models in the advertisement, or how they deal with privacy in relation to the requested "selfie-recorded video". Of course, this advertisement could contribute to positive representations of Muslim women, however, more probably, it implies tokenism, whereby their identity is reduced to their veil ("Ethnicity not important") in order to appeal to a more diverse market. This may not be the kind of empowerment that benefits Muslim women, since there is a clear power imbalance between Muslim consumers or models on the one hand, and financially strong companies on the other. Banet-Weiser explains in a talk that the dominance of capitalist logic conditions what kind of feminism gets seen and heard most, at this moment.[61] Muslim audiences can interpret and negotiate media messages, but they do not have the same market power as brands. Thus, as McRobbie (2009: 49) already noticed in the 2000s, women may be "disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism."

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[61] IWL Rutgers, 13 May 2019, EMPOWERED: POPULAR FEMINISM AND POPULAR MISOGYNY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AG4I1hepm1k 12:45-13:30

Bloggers with feminist agendas have to navigate tensions in online environments that "are increasingly formed as branded spaces, structured by brand logic and strategies, and understood and expressed through the language of branding" (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 5). The key difficulty with feminism in this digital environment is the neoliberal promise that anyone can become an online activist "as long as she or he is willing to shift from social to commodity activism, and as long as brand culture supports and sustains that activism" (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 48). Thus, even if hijab fashion bloggers would explicitly identify as feminists or perceive their work as empowering, they will most probably be conditioned or limited by the rules of the attention economy and postfeminist culture. Because of this entanglement of progressive and commercial forces, argues Banet-Weiser (2012: 48), "contemporary culture [should] be understood as a compromise rather than a dichotomy or binary."

Although feminist activism and scholarship are traditionally or ideally thought of as authentic and unspoiled by commercialism, Banet-Weiser (2012: 5) and Pruchniewska (2017: 810) argue that it may be unhelpful to differentiate between an authentic activist feminism and a commercialised popular feminism, since these can be overlapping. Feminism is far from immune to the workings of commercial logic; instead, feminist activists and organisations often make use of popular marketing visuals and rhetoric to present feminism as a relevant and appealing concern to a broader audience.[62] Pruchniewska (2017) analysed feminist activists' online self-branding, and their continuous search for more online visibility and impact and found that authenticity and commercial interests are not mutually exclusive (see also: Marwick, 2013b). Femvertising could therefore be perceived as an online self-presentation technique that supports activism. This section examines whether this applies to my data.

Pruchniewska (2017) has mapped out the experiences of feminist content creators in branding themselves as authentic feminists in a digital context of postfeminism. She explains that, in order to advance their careers online, feminists apply techniques such as self-branding, self-promotion and audience building, which they negotiate "in tandem with their commitment to collectivist feminist goals" (2017: 811). She asks the following questions: "What happens when the promotional practices required of feminist cultural producers to succeed in their careers stand in opposition to their values, their identity, and, oftentimes, the content of their writing? How does one build and promote an authentic, successful personal brand that incorporates the values of feminism?" (ibid.). She found that

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[62] For example, Yes She Can (a US Democratic online community)
https://www.facebook.com/YESSHECAN2020/

feminist values are negotiated through three strategies: (1) bloggers incorporate a concept of "authentic feminism" into their self-brand; (2) they "redefine feminism to more closely match the values of post-feminism"; (3) and they develop some "collective goals in their creative communities" (ibid.). In what follows, I evaluate if these strategies apply to one of Amena's posts. By way of experiment, I assume that she is primarily a feminist activist, who happens to be a beauty blogger.
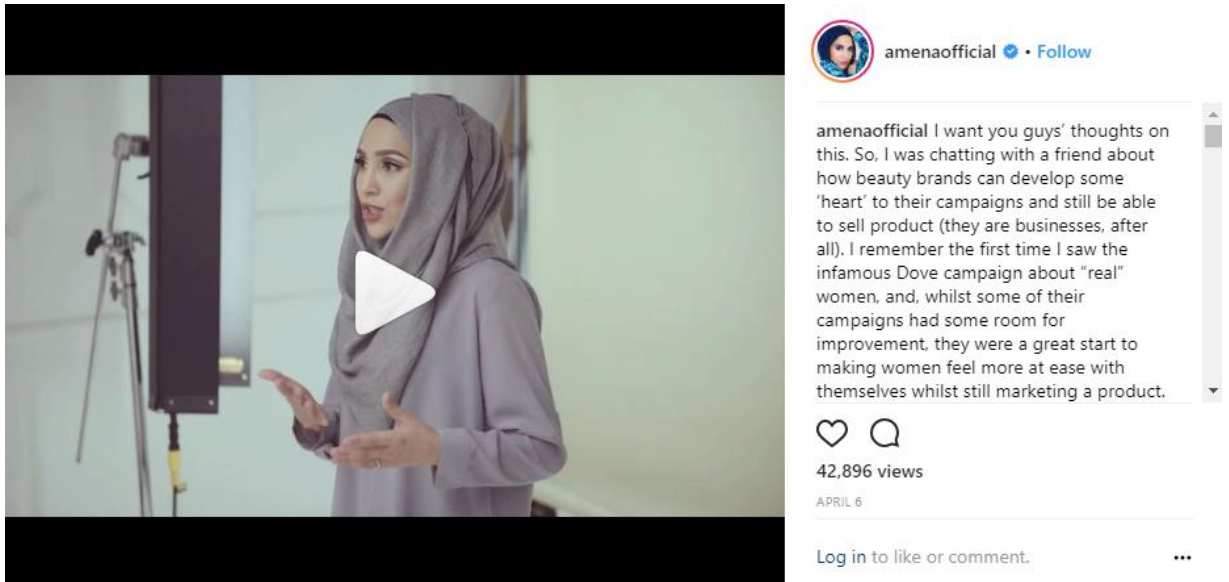
@amenakhan / prev @amenaofficial, 6 April 2018

Amena (@amenakhan/prev. @amenaofficial) posted this screenshot of a Holland & Barrett video in which she featured as a brand ambassador. Although this is an advertisement for chemical-free skincare, Amena draws parallels with femvertising. Essentially, Amena opens up to her followers and asks them how to best apply a femvertising technique and sell products in an authentic way. This corresponds with Pruchniewska's earlier point about authentic feminism. However, Amena does so without educating followers on the marketing technique of femvertising. She does include her

followers in the discussion and tries to build a community with them.[63] This corresponds with Pruchniewska's point about collectivity and community. However, Amena does not address the fact that she works as a brand ambassador *and* owns multiple brands herself. Instead, she minimalises her role: "Just some of my thoughts." She discusses the importance of brands taking social responsibility "in how they sell us stuff," but this means empowerment is still mediated through consuming beauty products—which corresponds with Pruchniewska's point about matching messages to postfeminist ideals.

Ultimately, Amena should probably not be seen as primarily being a feminist activist who brands herself in a postfeminist way, but rather as a beauty influencer/brand ambassador who implements femvertising to create a loyal Muslim customer base for Holland & Barrett. For if it were about the community's interest, the online discussion initiated by Amena would not be "Do you think strengthening womens' self-esteem can still sell product?" but, for example: "what do you think of the relationship between social media, beauty advertisements and self-esteem issues, and how can bloggers take responsibility in this esteem crisis?" Admittedly, it could very well be that certain Millennial and Gen Z women do not experience activism and a commercial interest in feminism as opposites, especially if they are primarily in search of stylish archetypes of female strength to emulate through consumption.

4.5 Empowerism

Generally, my data is filled with popular feminist-sounding references to women's strength, girl power, empowerment, success, free choice and diversity. Since they are embedded in the advertising-style platform of Instagram and a fashion genre, these representations are heavily aestheticised, simplified and commercialised. Despite a turn to feminism, the overall representation of empowerment throughout my data is characterised by a postfeminist rebranding of feminism into something more popular (Favaro and Gill, 2018). The bloggers in this chapter create images of strong veiled Muslim femininity, and with that, rebrand Muslim women as empowered (vis-à-vis the oppressed Muslim woman stereotype).

Branding oneself as empowered or progressive has become part of normative expectations: not only is it a social media trend, it also has a central meaning in a marginalised context. As mentioned in the

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[63] Whether user participation is per definition empowering is questioned by scholars, see Duffy (2010) and Banet-Weiser (2012).

literature review, non-Muslim media, audiences and brands are eager to see veiled Muslim women to whom they can 'surprisingly' relate, in stories that are told using a language of feminism, beauty and happiness (McDonald, 2006: 19). It is not surprising then that hijab fashion bloggers position themselves as empowered, progressive and free. Since postfeminism revolves around free choice and evading any victimhood (Lazar, 2006; Gill, 2008b; McRobbie, 2009; Baker, 2010), it may resonate with hijab fashion bloggers' efforts in explaining that they wear the hijab out of free choice, and that they feel empowered by it—instead of it being a sign of oppression and sexism (see Dina Tokio's documentary YOUR AVERAGE MUSLIM).[64] Perceived as such, postfeminist rhetoric holds specific meaning and value for Muslim women who are confronted with Orientalist/Islamophobic attitudes and systems.

In this unique minority context, it may be valuable to describe this hyper-countering of Islamophobia through empowered self-branding with a new term: 'empowerism'. After all, hijab fashion bloggers' self-brand is not feminism, but empowerment. Empowerism is about rebranding Muslim women into positive opposites of negative stereotypes; empowerism is thus a postfeminist rebranding technique used in a marginalised context. The 'ism' suffix in empowerism signifies an ideology, movement, theory or narrative: it suggests that empowerism is more about self-branding and self-transformation, than it is about emancipation, rights, social change, collective interests, identifying key issues and voicing lived experience. Notably, an empowerment discourse in a racialised context is an understandable yet problematic response to inequality. It "may not be the solution to the missing discourse" of modern Muslim womanhood, "but may in fact be a technology of discipline and regulation" (Gill, 2008a: 35), because it places the responsibility on Muslim women to change the image of hijab.

Analytically speaking, why would such terms as popular feminism or postfeminism not suffice in this case to refer to hijab fashion bloggers' representations? Because those terms mainly describe the rebranding of feminism (Favaro and Gill, 2018), whereas empowerism refers to the uptake of this rebranded feminism to rebrand Muslim femininity itself, vis-à-vis Islamophobic stereotypes. The usefulness of this term is not limited to hijab fashion: it could also be applied to other case studies in which minority/postcolonial women use an aestheticised empowerment discourse to counter stereotypes about them, while (inadvertently) reproducing other inequalities or erasing part of their own value systems. Thus, in summary: the term empowerism is useful in cases in which: (1) the images studied are created by marginalised, stigmatised or postcolonial women; (2) empowerment is a part of women's self-branding; (3) these women counter negative assumptions and stereotypes about

them; (4) other inequalities are reproduced, or their 'own' value systems are erased in the rebranding process.

4.6 Conclusion

Since hijab fashion is often celebrated as Muslim women's empowering way of countering Islamophobia, this chapter explored hijab fashion bloggers' turn to feminism, their representations of empowerment and underlying discourses. As evident in my data, hijab fashion bloggers present empowerment as something that is reached and celebrated through popular feminism. This chapter has shown that popular feminism consists of many overlapping feminist discourses but is ultimately dominated by a postfeminist discourse that rebrands feminism. As is characteristic of postfeminism, bloggers include feminist elements into their self-branding in aesthetic and paradoxical ways. In order to grasp the emancipatory value of bloggers' popular feminist expressions, I engaged with the struggle or interplay between activist and commercial forces that pull popular feminism in different directions.

Positively speaking, the popularity and depoliticised character of popular feminism allows hijab fashion bloggers to speak out about gendered and raced issues and construct an empowered self-brand, without being frowned upon as "too political". The accessible and mediatised nature of popular feminist images is also appreciated by followers who are still learning about feminism. Critically speaking, to be palatable for a wider audience, popular feminism is often a feel-good, Instagrammable and glamorous pro-women celebration that is depleted of deeper politics and not always beneficial for Muslim women, intersectionally speaking. Moreover, affected by Islamophobia and inspired by a postfeminist evading of victimhood, there is a push for Muslim women to identify as empowered in order to be seen as modern and not to be perceived as oppressed. This results in the display of an empowerism discourse, and a limited range of feminine archetypes that are normative, more mainstreamed, and privileged in certain respects. Emblematic of this mainstreaming is also bloggers' widespread use of popular feminist symbols and slogans, and a lack of Islamic feminism in my data.

There seems to be limited space in the beauty industry for bloggers to use their social media platform to campaign for social change, in the way that Ibtihaj Muhammad does (and even she mixes her empowerment content directly with makeup content). To stay commercially interesting, bloggers display a depoliticised and marketable form of feminism, of which some of my interviewees were critical. Admittedly, times are changing and bloggers do increasingly display social justice awareness (for example on Instagram Stories); however, this was not the overall tendency in my sample (selected

in 2018). In my analysis, I demonstrated that merely a handful of bloggers explicitly include feminist ideas and language, such as Amena, Ascia, Ibtihaj and NourKa. Their semiotic or discursive references to feminism are embedded in discourses of fourth-wave feminism, Islamic/Muslim feminism and Black (Muslim) feminism. They address structural inequality and encourage women's solidarity by discussing issues such as gender roles, education, equal pay, freedom of dress, diversity, racism and women's rights—and their references to feminine archetypes such as Rosie the Riveter and Khadija bint Khuwaylid. However, these posts generally also contain postfeminist elements, such as a consumerist and heteronormative emphasis.

Black feminism in my data is particularly interesting for its Afrocentric references to the (Strong) Black queen archetype, Nefertiti, Cleopatra, Marvel and Black Panthers—and its centring of celebrity figures Rihanna, Halima Aden and Ibtihaj Muhammad herself, as well as references to Beyoncé, Erykah Badu and Lauryn Hill. This shows that Black feminism on Instagram is embedded in a history of popularisation and mediatisation of Black culture, and understandably so, because those visual codes are recognisable for a wide audience. However, on Instagram, these gender representations are primarily aesthetically pleasing instead of educative. They form a lucrative way of catering to niche markets, while pushing other interpretations and traditions of Black feminism to the margins.

This chapter has further discussed how popular feminist slogans (e.g. "the future is female"), symbols (e.g. Rosie the Riveter arm) and outfits (e.g. power suits and slogan T-shirts) promote feminist messages in eye-catching ways. However, popular feminism's caveat is the fetishizing and commercialisation of feminism, without its politics reaching beyond semiotics. Whereas some Instagram posts in this chapter seem to use feminist slogans for awareness-raising purposes, other posts incorporate it to promote such things as tourism or a headscarf line. When depleted of any background information, feminist slogans can easily be reduced to popular symbolism and can even be used in combination with anti-feminist elements. My analysis has also highlighted the role of the fashion and entertainment industry in creating a mediatised engagement with empowerment, whereby bloggers refer to the fictional character Khaleesi, women's glossy magazines and TV personality Oprah. Reflective of neoliberalism and postfeminism, this type of content presents feminism as a consumer lifestyle, which implies a focus on transforming one's appearance (Khaleesi) and mindset (Oprah) through consumerism (glossy magazines), before or instead of challenging systemic inequality. Although mediatisation may make feminism more accessible and entertaining, mainstream media also have a power of definition that silences other feminisms. Moreover, even when cultural critique is incorporated in this kind of content, it is embedded in a trendy and lucrative self-care discourse.

Finally, postfeminist culture has indeed shifted from avoiding to incorporating feminist language, which has resulted in content that may explicitly include the word 'feminism', as seen in NourKa's femvertising, while primarily using this to sell a product, to sell the idea of an empowered Muslim femininity and to brand the self. As seen in Amena's Holland & Barrett advertisement, femvertising is not used by bloggers in my data to support feminist activism, but the other way around: feminism is being used in sales. Even when hijab fashion bloggers create explicitly feminist content, they are conditioned or limited by the workings of online brand culture. Most of my interviewees negotiate this type of content by drawing on feminist, anti-consumerist, postcolonial and religious discourses. Interestingly, I also found that some followers may not experience feminism and commercialism as conflicting opposites, especially if they are interested in looking for stylish archetypes of female strength to emulate, in which case they are more accepting of the postfeminist hijab fashion discourse.

Whereas this chapter has examined discourses of empowerment, in the following chapter, I elaborate more on some of the feminine archetypes as found in hijab fashion bloggers' entrepreneurial content.

5 Entrepreneurialism as Empowerment

In the previous chapter, I have examined hijab fashion bloggers' use of feminist language and symbols in their representations of empowerment. In this chapter, I take a deeper look at how entrepreneurialism is represented as a tool for empowerment. In Western (middle-class) imagination, women's emancipation is often linked to economic independence and having paid work (Meulenbelt, 2019). However, whereas people could generally rely on the welfare state or employers for job stability and social security,[65] the continued neoliberal (post-Fordist) flexibilisation of labour has resulted, in many countries, in a gig economy and subsequent endorsement of entrepreneurship as women's primary gateway to empowerment (Littler, 2017: 39; Rottenberg, 2019: 1079). Popular forms of entrepreneurship include setting up an online business or pursuing a career as a social media influencer. Entrepreneurial narratives promise women (financial) success and status, liberation from occupational sexism, and flexibility as a solution to child-rearing issues (Littler, 2017: 15, 201; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017: 845; Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018: 878). Hence, the entrepreneurial side to blogging is associated with empowerment and upward social mobility.

This rhetoric is frequently reproduced on social media; and more than that, the idealisation of entrepreneurialism is dependent on the logic of the attention economy (Marwick, 2013a: 10, 2015a: 138; Lopatko, 2018). Through a "carefully curated" display of glamorous lifestyles, bloggers uphold the idea that entrepreneurialism is aspirational and empowering (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 1).[66] However, far from being ideal, this narrative can ironically disempower people by normalising individual risk and legitimising a state's lack of providing social securities (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 2; Rottenberg, 2014: 421). The entrepreneurial discourse extends way beyond actual self-employment, as there is an imperative to approach all kinds of areas in life in this way, such as motherhood (Genz, 2015: 546; Duffy and Hund, 2015: 3; Littler, 2017: 198; Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017: 843).

In popular culture and media, this entrepreneurial discourse produces femininities based on neoliberal hallmarks such as ambition, productivity, education, entrepreneurialism and work-life balance. Duffy and Hund (2015: 3) call this "entrepreneurial femininity": a self-branding discourse that focuses on feminine achievement (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 1). Arguably, entrepreneurial femininity is a

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[65] Examples include pensions, maternity pay, sick pay, health insurance, trade unions, etc.
[66] It is disputable whether content creators are self-employed or produce mainly for the benefit of social media platforms (see Chapter 2). Unsurprisingly, many bloggers in this study (have) set up their own businesses. Setting up a business in the creative industries is generally more empowering than modelling and blogging to endorse other brands.

manifestation of a postfeminist discourse. Discourses are constructed through text and visuals, especially on Instagram (Hall, 1997: 185; Marwick, 2015a: 138). Hence, in section 5.2 I analyse the aesthetic ways in which bloggers display entrepreneurial femininity in their images. Examples include being photographed in their work environments or holding devices (15 images, 9.3%); striking a power pose (23 images, 14,3%); or wearing power suits (13 images, 8%). In section 5.3, I analyse their textual references to entrepreneurialism (17 images, 10.5%, that mention this explicitly). Therein, I also compare entrepreneurial archetypes described in older feminist literature—such as the "can-do girl" (Harris, 2004: 13) and "top girl" (McRobbie, 2007: 718)—to contemporary equivalents in my data: the kick-ass girl boss/lady boss; the royal princess/queen mother; the badass mom; and the mumpreneur who can "have it all" (Newman, 1991: 250). In this chapter, I also evaluate how bloggers' glamorisation of entrepreneurialism and reproduction of the meritocratic myth obscures the social media pressures and gendered labour expected of women (see Duffy and Hund, 2015: 2).

5.1 Neoliberal Meritocracy

The context to this chapter about entrepreneurial femininity is shaped by the meritocratic myth, which is a neoliberal narrative that promises upward social mobility to anyone who deserves it, based on one's merit acquired through hard work and self-transformation (equality), instead of privilege and inherited class positions (inequality). A well-known classic example of the meritocratic myth is the American Dream, and its modern version is arguably the "digitally enabled meritocracy" of social media (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017: 843). One way in which the meritocratic myth is upheld on Instagram is a glorification of wealth and elite lifestyles, and the idea that anyone can 'make it' on social media. The meritocratic myth obscures the factors that constitute different economic classes in society, such as sexism, racism, heteronormativity, poverty, Islamophobia, ableism, etc. (Littler, 2017). It functions as a smokescreen for and the normalisation of plutocracy, which is the dominant global system in which the wealthy get wealthier and the poor get poorer (Littler, 2017: 1). People are covertly blamed for their own situations and are expected to empower themselves, while being deprived of power by governments and corporations. Upholding the meritocratic myth is thus a way of denying systemic exclusion and steering away from a social justice debate (McRobbie, 2009: 75).

Somewhat unsurprisingly, an increase in media representations of entrepreneurial femininity typically occurs when socio-economic inequalities are worsened, accelerated by global financial crises and austerity (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 1). People are expected to find creative ways to earn money (online), while social securities are obliterated. Meanwhile, entrepreneurialism is presented as a source of

empowerment, instead of a neoliberal technique for advertising the self that is deployed in the hope to survive the system (Thorpe et al., 2017: 373-374; Genz, 2015: 546; Rottenberg, 2014: 422).

In a meritocratic narrative, Muslim women are considered individually responsible for their success and achievement. But while Muslims have been part of the UK and other Western countries for centuries, they are still (covertly) regarded as outsiders who need to prove that they are deserving of jobs, success, wealth and powerful positions. Veiled Muslim women are thus encouraged to constantly transform themselves to become more educated, professional, entrepreneurial, successful, classy and confident. In this marginalised context, the meritocratic myth is problematic on multiple levels. Firstly, it functions as women's coping mechanism to navigate and comply with systems that marginalise them and, with that, conversations about structural exclusion are avoided (Littler, 2017: 195; Newman, 1991: 241). Secondly, the meritocratic narrative addresses veiled Muslim women in particular. Littler (2017: 172) observes, "it is often people who face significant disempowerment in terms of their resources and available choices who are most intensely incited to construct a neoliberal meritocratic self." Muslim women are expected to empower themselves through consumerism, entrepreneurialism, and increasing their online visibility (Thorpe et al., 2017: 374; Rottenberg, 2014). Thirdly, popular culture ironically assigns (micro)celebrities—instead of mainstream media and the state—the task of addressing social and economic problems in creative ways (Hamad, 2014: 223-224). This is, however, often done by a focus on individual courage and ambition, instead of a focus on the elephant in the room, which is systemic inequality.

With regards to Muslim immigrants in the West, the meritocratic myth is reproduced by mainstream media through success stories, praising Muslims' achievements and level of education, cultural assimilation or liberation. These representations are "dominated by personal narratives, and by colourful 'self-biographies' […] which emphasise talent [and] determination" (McRobbie, 2009: 75). Similarly, successful hijab fashion bloggers on social media serve as a living proof of the endless meritocratic possibilities for minority women. They embody meritocracy, and meritocratic success becomes their self-brand. Although success stories are inspirational and crucial in terms of visibility politics and role modelling, this mode of self-representation does seem to revolve around the implicit question: who deserves success? Did this particular Muslim woman work hard enough and does her headscarf look acceptable enough to merit such status? Perceived this way, entrepreneurial femininity serves as a route to becoming a "model minority" (Nakayama, 1988, cited in Kawai, 2005: 109). Although this seems positive at first, it instead plays into the Islamophobic rhetoric of the "successful immigrant" discourse (Rigouste, 2005, cited in Navarro, 2010: 105).

5.2 Entrepreneurial Aesthetics

Developing ambition and a professional appearance are crucial to the concept of entrepreneurial femininity (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 2). In a marginalised context, entrepreneurialism can be seen as an escape from poverty, racism, sexism and as a way of proving stereotypes wrong.[67] Positive, powerful, entrepreneurial femininities are important and motivating to a significant part of bloggers' Muslim audience. Reflecting on this point, interviewee #8 Yousra remarks:

> I do think it's very important for people to understand that hijab is not a barrier, you can do anything in the world, you can do anything you want. So, I totally agree with the message. It's very important that people understand that. I come from the Arab world, from the Middle East, so I think this is also a message we have to implement in our society, not just in Western society. […] And not held back because I cover my hair, it's just a piece of cloth, it's as simple as that. It doesn't cover my brain or my mind, I can still have an opinion and do whatever I want. So, I would applaud these women for doing that, for giving that message.

The bloggers thus model what female Muslim independence looks like in the current entrepreneurial climate. Interviewee #1 Chaimae considers this type of content most aspirational and engaging: "For example, [when bloggers] just post pictures online and go to events […] it doesn't send to me any strong message or anything, but when I see influencers *really* doing things and having several areas to their life, whether it be family and modelling and enterprising, that sends this message [of empowerment] to me." Interviewee #9 Asmaa avers that displaying powerful entrepreneurial femininity is central to her concept of feminism, since, in a context of marginalisation and stigmatisation, such as that of Islamophobia, these entrepreneurial femininities can function as subversive assertions of power.

In this section, I explore the visual ways in which hijab fashion bloggers create and celebrate independence and ambition. In my analysis, I detected six main themes in hijab fashion images: looks/beauty (65=40,4%); outfits/fashion (34=21,1%); work (24=14,9%); motherhood (17=10,6%); travel (15=9,3%); and religion/halal consuming (10=6,2%).[68] The category of work follows right after beauty and fashion, which reflects these bloggers' core business. They display a romanticised image of the entrepreneurial lifestyle by, for example, showing themselves using technology and captioning these posts strategically (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 5). With regards to the aesthetic construction of

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[67] See for example: Pharrell Williams, 21 august 2020, Pharrell Williams - Entrepreneur (Official Video) ft. JAY-Z
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTOoY5MIkvM
[68] Images sometimes contained multiple themes, so their sum exceeds 100%.

entrepreneurial femininity, "magical femininity" is a key concept, which is the idea that if women wear the right outfits, have the right attitude and use some feminine authority, they will make their way to the top (Ticknell, 1991: 262, cited in Littler, 2017: 196). In this section, magical femininity is a mix between hyper-feminine glamour, power suits and power poses.

5.2.1 Women at Work

✅ @saufeeya / prev. @feeeeya, 24 April 2018

Social media influencing is portrayed as a comfortable yet professional career option, in images that show bloggers working from their own living room. Saufeeya (@saufeeya/prev. @feeeeya) is working on her Apple Macbook—a laptop that connotes status and creativity—while drinking coffee. The background, which looks homely and neat, signifies a social media entrepreneur's freedom to work anywhere. Whereas her purple turtleneck jumper and cup of coffee signal the cosiness of working from home, her glasses and laptop signify a certain level of sophistication and professionalism. Her beige turban, plum makeup and nail polish suggest she puts effort in upholding a certain standard of beauty, despite being at home. In the words of Duffy and Hund (2015: 5), this photo is "carefully staged to ensure adequate lighting and a clean aesthetic, underscoring the labor required to display the working subject." Saufeeya's Arabic caption reads "*Sabah al-khair Dubai*", or "Good morning, Dubai" in Arabic

writing, which could communicate a number of things, such as: "Good morning, I started my work at my Dubai home, just like the rest of you", so that fellow residents, creatives and entrepreneurs can identify. Or: "I have the luxury of working from home, who else would like this for themselves?", which creates a glamorous myth about what life as a fashion blogger is like. She is in charge, she is her own boss. As a (staged) behind-the-scenes fragment of content creation, these kinds of device-photos

appeal to followers, as can be read in the comment section of Dutch blogger Hodan Yusuf's (@hodan.ysf) device-photo, here on the left. Follower @zainabnajafii cheers her on with a "YAS GURL!" and @elmoraelmora praises her as a "BOSSSSSS LADY". My interviewees tend to negotiate this glorification of bloggers' entrepreneurial lifestyle, especially interviewee #4 Aissa who finds these device photos too "done on purpose, staged" and aspires to be employed, "having a stable income".

✔️ @hodan.ysf, 3 November 2017

✔️ @summeralbarcha, 4 June 2018

Another visually strong example of a behind-the-scenes photo at work is US-based Summer Albarcha's (@summeralbarcha) mirror selfie, taken in Summer's (former) studio where she is filming her next YouTube video in which she discusses such fashion trends as the power suit (see section 5.2.2).[69] Summer wears a white and pink outfit that matches the modern, Instagrammable design of the studio. Her sister, also depicted, wears a T-shirt with the text "Be the change you wish to see in the world", which contains the entrepreneurial ingredients of style, a motivational message, ambition and passionate work. Unlike Saufeeya's post that contains an Arabic caption, and Hodan's post that displays a bakhoor (frankincense) product, Summer's image is devoid of any subcultural or religious elements. Instead, this post reproduces modern Instagram trends that have a quite standardised, global/Anglophone, "post-racial" aesthetic (Goldberg, 2015, cited in Littler, 2017: 65). In such images, hijab fashion is 'lifted' into this post-racial aesthetic and, with that, incorporated into mainstream (influencer) culture. It may signify a wish to normalise the hijab in the influencer world and show that Muslim women are just as entrepreneurial as other influencers—which pertains to being subjected to a corporate gaze (Wissinger, 2012). Alternatively, the use of familiar Instagram aesthetics may function as a compensation for the hijab's 'strangeness'—appealing to a mainstream White gaze (Wissinger, 2012).

✔️ @amenakhan / prev. @amenaofficial, 30 January 2018

Another way in which entrepreneurial femininity is constructed and romanticised is through, what Duffy and Hund (2015: 2) call, "staging the glam life". Amena (@amenakhan/prev. @amenaofficial) poses in front of her new vanity table in her renovated dressing room, captioning it as "another dream

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[69] Summer Albarcha, 16 June 2018, MOST INSTAGRAMMED TRENDS OF SUMMER 2018 FT. SUZI & SARA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=celJn-IcvBQ

come true". Amena's display of new furniture and a $1425 Gucci handbag romanticises entrepreneurial femininity and the glamorous life she built for herself through blogging. The nude colours of her outfit and background make the blue bag and blue eyeshadow pop out. She does not display this level of luxury daily: it marks a point in her career (online business and blogging) where she has become so successful that she can afford specific products and realise her interior design dreams. These—and the makeup brushes in the background—are not just products, but also her tools for creating even more content, and thus capital, on social media. She hints at this in her caption: "hit 'like' if you want another tour so soon".

This image is interesting because it is exemplary of the ways in which entrepreneurial femininity fades multiple boundaries. First, the line between work and leisure is blurred, because the makeup, designer items and interior design that she can afford or gets gifted, signify the pleasurable and rewarding sides to being a blogger. Secondly, the boundary between the home and workplace is blurred: she poses in her home office, so she is with her family (whom she also mentions in her caption) but at work at the same time. Lastly, it is exemplary of the amalgamation of women's late-capitalist roles as both consumers *and* cultural producers (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 9). Amena models here what the life of a 'professional consumer' looks like: a vanity room, a vanity mirror, an abundance of products. To a certain extent, it does show the capital and tools needed for reaching the postfeminist ideal, but it is done in a relatable way, so that it becomes an aspiration, a realistic goal for followers to emulate (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 5). Amena poses by touching her face, wearing a serious expression, which could be interpreted as a professional look. Professionalism, in this photo, is constructed as an appearance and an interior style that is acceptable to mainstream culture. Its glamour is free of any clues to ethnicity or location. Arguably, by posting a flattering photo, Amena upholds an ideal of "entrepreneurial glamour," and with that, reproduces class privileges and reinforces beauty standards (Duffy, 2017: 185). All in all, this image reproduces the narrative that entrepreneurial self-branding based on wealth and celebrity leads to neoliberal success, and thus, to empowerment—for veiled Muslim women as well.

5.2.2 Power Dressing

✅ @lifelongpercussion, 11 February 2018

In this photo, Habiba da Silva (@lifelongpercussion) celebrates one of her milestones as entrepreneur, namely the launch of her second skin-colour-inclusive headscarf line. She geo-tagged her post at Syon Lounge, a sushi and shisha lounge on top of a Hilton hotel. The image's caption "current situation 🎩 [...] #habibadasilva SKINllLaunchParty" signifies her status as a businesswoman, claiming a traditionally male position as entrepreneur. The top hat in the caption is part of men's formal wear and symbolises being a boss or being wealthy. Habiba's executive-looking suit, assembled by her stylist, might look merely hyperfeminine at first because of its pink colour and tight waist, but is nevertheless a combination of feminine and masculine elements. This outfit indicates a practice called "dressing for success", which was "part of a wider discourse in the 1980s through which a new type of feminine identity, 'the career woman', was produced" (Hollows, 2000: 158). Power dressing allows for women to strengthen their professional identity through their outfits (ibid.), which follows the postfeminist logic of self-transforming one's outward appearance to develop the inward quality of entrepreneurial

femininity (Gill, 2008b). In my sample, I found 19 images (11.8%) that display power suits—and other forms of power dressing, such as (street wear) tracksuits or (feminist) slogan hoodies.

Her choice for posting this photo can be explained by the concept of self-branding (Genz, 2015). As mentioned in Chapter 4, self-branding is a self-presentation strategy whereby a (micro)celebrity positions her persona as a consumer product and sells her image to others (Marwick, 2015a: 140). As Williamson (2016: 12) says about celebrities, "[t]he image they construct and the persona they produce are central to their value as commodity, that is, as a figure that can help to sell" products. In other words, Habiba is not only selling her headscarf line through advertisements, but also through her aspirational persona. It positions Habiba as a role model to other coloured, Muslim, veiled, curved or entrepreneurial girls and women that aspire "class mobility, ethnic identification, and professional achievement, many of which, in one way or another, are linked to a discourse of modernity" (Moors, 2009a: 192). The image's mise-en-scène—a black venue decorated with pink flowers—corresponds with her pink suit and black headscarf. Its composition puts her in the centre of the picture. Her pose—leaning backward on the table, one leg slightly lifted—could signify power on the one hand (she is taking over the headscarf production scene), while it could also be considered as overly feminised on the other hand. Habiba's pose of leaning in a feminine way is fairly common in my sample: 33 images (20.5%) include a pose with a feminine touch of the environment (such as a table, in this case), body, clothes or props (Goffman, 1979; Dyer, 1982). The combination of leaning on something and wearing a power suit is also a key ingredient in the following post by Maria Alia (@mariaalia).

✅ @mariaalia, 25 April 2018

For this post, New York-based Maria Alia (@mariaalia) is photographed in an upward angle, while looking sideways and striking a power pose. She is leaning on a yellow cab, which is iconic to New York, against the backdrop of high buildings of Manhattan's financial district (see the post's geotag). This denotes a powerful statement: as a fashion blogger, Maria is taking over New York, the Big Apple, the iconic setting of fashion shows and *Sex in the City*. Maria's status as social media influencer is vastly less powerful and wealthy than that of the bankers and big corporations of Manhattan, however, the visual association this photoshoot creates upholds the entrepreneurial myth of fashion blogging as the ultimate way to success.

Maria is not only taking a power pose but also wearing a power suit. The caption reads: "I created a 'Cool-Girl Guide to Styling Suits' for The Edit x @express and it's pretty epic. This is 1/3 of the looks: 'Twisted Power Suit'." She takes power dressing to a higher level by creating a guide on how to wear power suits, which reads: "There's something so commanding and bold about an all white suit […] This is the perfect boss lady look, it's what I'd wear to meet a client or even for a professional and formal

evening event."[70] She further explains the power suit trend: "Traditionally, the occasion suit has been reserved for the likes of corporate settings, professional meetings, events and interviews. More recently, we've seen this boss-lady's wardrobe staple transcend these boundaries in the most interesting of ways".[71] Transcending boundaries here can signify more than just occasions to wear a suit: it could be interpreted as shattering the glass ceiling (feminist), or the expansion of the number of areas in life in which a woman is expected to think and dress entrepreneurially (anti-feminist). On another note, this pose is far less gender-typical than her poses in some other photos, such as in a photoshoot for a luxury brand (see left) in which she is leaning glamorously in a convertible car, which looks more sensual or hyper-feminine (Goffman, 1979; Dyer, 1982). Nevertheless, semiotically, the

yellow cab pose does not only denote power and coolness, but also sexiness, of which her turban could be its 'modest' negotiation. Maria's images follow a long advertising tradition of women posing in and on cars (Thornborrow, 1998: 254). Remarkably, 12 images (7.5%) in my sample involve posing in or on a car, which indicates a postfeminist return to traditional posing. In my sample, cars are mainly used by bloggers to create a *badass* femininity (see section 5.3.3) in order to promote drinks and sports (brands), see images below.

✅ @mariaalia, 4 June 2018

✅ @hijabhills, 9 April 2018   ✅ @omayazein, 27 June 2018   ✅ @ibtihajmuhammad, 24 June 2018

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[70] https://www.express.com/blog/style-solve/guest-dressed-maria-alias-cool-girl-guide-to-styling-suits (This page was taken offline after my analysis).
[71] Ibid.

@saufeeya / prev. @feeeeya, 27 August 2017

In this photo, geotagged in her home country, Saufeeya (@saufeeya/prev. @feeeeya) stares into the camera with a confident gaze. She wears a white executive blazer, draped over her casual-chic outfit consisting of a trendy tight top, white jeans and turban. Her styling radiates a cool, can-do/top-girl femininity (Harris, 2004: 13; McRobbie, 2007: 718). Her casual way of wearing this blazer is reminiscent of traditional (film) images in which a man offers a woman his coat to drape around her as a cloak, or of images of a queen wearing her cloak. The use of power suits or blazers in entrepreneurial content is interesting because it shows that some bloggers, including Saufeeya but also Summer Albarcha and Leena, treat the power suit nearly as a uniform of entrepreneurial femininity. Saufeeya's post here pictures a quite literal reference to one of the most glamorous forms of entrepreneurial femininity in popular imagination: "Instafame" (Marwick, 2015a: 137). With self-irony, Saufeeya describes herself in the caption as Instafamous: "your @instagram gotchu feelin' famous 💅 💁 ♀ 💁🏾". Marwick (2015a: 140) explains, "[i]n the broadcast era, celebrity was something a person was; in the Internet era, microcelebrity is something people *do.*" In this case, this consists of posing and performatively affirming the status of being Instafamous. Her self-irony nearly makes one forget the enormous amount of labour required for professionalising and aestheticizing her Instagram feed with spectacular photoshoots. This is what entrepreneurial femininity does, according to Duffy and Hund (2015: 2): it

obscures the discipline, professionalism, creativity and money that women have to invest in reaching the aesthetic standards of postfemininity.

5.2.3 Power Pose

Having highlighted work environments, devices and power dressing as visual translations of entrepreneurial femininity, in this section I take a closer look at the role of the power pose, which I found in 23 images (14.3 %). This number could be higher when using wider criteria, such as powerful facial expressions (see Ascia's photo depicted on the left), but this display of confidence has become too standard to count separately. In their study of popular feminism, Gill and Orgad (2017: 17) argue that power posing is part of "the confidence culture". Since "our posture can influence our experience of power", power posing is recommended in all kinds of motivational programs and content about women's empowerment (Rennung et al., 2016). The physical self-transformation creates a change of attitude, Amena (@amenakhan) explains: "it has a positive effect on the mind and even our sense of worth. Feeling physically strong in our body is empowering and uplifting."[72]
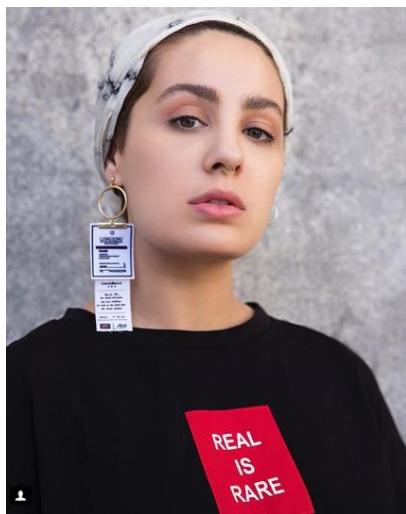
✅ @ascia, 19 February 2018

Speaking to interviewee #9 Asmaa revealed that to some followers, the power pose is key to their idea of what empowerment or badassness (see section 5.3.3) looks like visually. To interviewee #9 Asmaa, representing oneself visibly and proudly as a young Muslim woman, involves the following: "I like the more intense power pose, that you see on *Forbes* magazine, where millionaires pose, where they are really confident in themselves, their chins are raised, they look like they can conquer the world, I think that is, to me, my most preferred pose." Thus, a great part of displaying entrepreneurial femininity consists of fearless, confident and sexy posing, as opposed to the more romantic, innocent and smiley poses. Perceived this way, bloggers act as role models to followers that aspire success and class mobility. On the one hand, this display of power is a progressive development compared to sexist expectations of girls and women as staying humble, approachable, likeable and mild, and Islamophobic

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[72] Amena, 2 March 2018, CELEBRATING STRONG WOMEN | #FORSTRONGWOMEN | AD | AMENA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBiKL1506kU 6:15

expectations of Muslims to internalise inferiority. On the other hand, the centralisation of the visual aspect of power sometimes leads to defining empowerment/feminism in quite a one-dimensional way, relying heavily on "the confidence culture" (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 16) and a discourse of feminine achievement (Ringrose, 2007).

✔️ @amenakhan / prev. @amenaofficial, 5 February 2018

Beside Sagal's (@sagaleeyaa) FORMATION-pose in Chapter 4, the most obvious example of a power pose in my sample is Amena's (@amenakhan) image seen here, captioned "Power pose 💪". This is an advertisement for UK-based Desi (South-Asian) fashion brand @bibildn and Amena's own brand @pearldaisyltd. She invites her followers to relate to the strength it requires to be an entrepreneur: "to the powerful women out there (every single one of you) – surviving and thriving every day." Her power pose is formed by a serious glance into the camera lens, lifting one leg to the side and resting her hand on it. Amena's power pose is somewhat feminised by the elegant evening gown she is wearing, and the furry rug she is standing barefoot on. This photo could be Amena's visual translation of her wish to be an amalgamation of a superhero and a princess, which she included in the caption: "side note: voicing a Disney superheroine character is a dream of mine. Seriously". Elsewhere, during a Disney-themed photoshoot, Amena has also expressed that she has "always wanted to dress up as a

fairytale princess, but an empowered one"[73] or "badass"[74]. This post shows that a superhero-princess-archetype is Amena's ideal kind of empowered femininity. Mediated by an elegant power pose, she turns this archetype into her self-brand.

✔️ @saufeeya, 28 December 2017   ✔️ @nuralailalov, 28 April 2018   ✔️ @withloveleena, 26 February 2017

I encountered a number of other power poses in my sample. Interestingly, most of these photos use a black-and-white colour scheme, rather than, say, using nude colours or flower patterns. In the photo above, Saufeeya (@saufeeya) is posing with one hand in her side, wearing a black-and-white power suit and a white t-shirt saying "the suitable woman", which is designed by Dubai-based Arwa Al Banawi. She designs "for the empowered woman" and focuses on "women's strength and independence".[75] In the next image, blogger Nura Afia (@nuralailalov) is promoting an Arab keffiyeh printed hoodie cardigan that is sold by a charity for Palestine. Given the decades-long situation of, what has been described as, apartheid politics, this type of subtle activism can be empowering to see for Muslim and Arab followers. Blogger Leena (@withloveleena) can be seen in NIKE sportswear, striking a sporty pose, to which a follower comments: "goals". Her pose and focus on working out contribute to a visual discourse of female strength, assertiveness and achievement. Whereas she usually represents herself in elegant, soft and flowery outfits, wearing a sports outfit in a gym seems to function as an occasion to perform a different, cooler presentation of femininity. This transformation is ascribed to the shoes she promotes: they "make it feel like I'm running on clouds." Owning space and posing powerfully can be empowering for Muslim women, since hijabs are still too often banned from sports, and since some ultra-religious voices try to shame women's (sport) movements. These bloggers suggest that there are

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[73] Amena, 12 September 2017, MY BELLE TRANSFORMATION | #YOUTUBERFAIRYTALE PHOTOSHOOT WITH LINDA BLACKER | AMENA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LkjM9NN0iU 2:37
[74] Ibid., 3:23
[75] https://www.theboxboutique.com/collections/arwa-al-banawi

specific reasons for striking a power pose: promoting a feminist designer label, a charity/activist hoodie, and sports shoes. Other motives for the power pose are given in the following posts.

✔️@shahdbatal, 1 May 20   ✔️@nourka92, 12 November 2017   Nina Simone, 1969, by Jack Robinson

On the left, Shahd is posing in a Californian palm-tree-filled street that could be the found in a 90s hip-hop video, despite the selected location she says that she is "Just here to show off my shoes." Follower @a.alwadii responds with: "Girl you make this pose look so easy […]". In the middle photo, NourKa seems to explain herself for taking a bold pose, by saying: "My legs were hurting so I made it a pose […] Describe your favourite pose, mine is looking down with one leg crossed over the other […]". By this caption, NourKa implies that she is experimenting with this bold pose which is the opposite of her preferred humble pose. Contrary to Shahd whose default pose, about half of the time, is a power pose, NourKa frames her pose as an incidental exception; as a blessing in disguise that came with wearing painfully high heels.

Some of the poses above have something feminised, sexualised or spectacular to them, whereby bloggers take up space with their legs; their curves may be accentuated by their pose or outfit; they may pose in a flattering feminine way (i.e. a male model would probably not show trainers in the same flexible pose as Leena's, but rather tying his shoe laces, lifting a dumbbell or posing at a starting block). Does this mean that in visual representation on Instagram, feminine power is inescapably situated in attractiveness, in sexuality, or in flaunting a beautifully lean or curved body? To put the power poses from my study in perspective, they could be compared with Black activist singer Nina Simone's power pose above. This difference is as subtle as it is important: her folded hands signify that she means business, her stare into the camera hints that she has a story to tell (instead of 'check me out'), her nearly androgynous squat does not sell clothes or exhibit beauty but connotes resistance through physical presence. Arguably, by striking a power pose, Nina Simone advertises Black female power and freedom, attained through resistance—thereby implying that empowerment means social change/justice. The hijab fashion bloggers advertise modern, empowered, visible Muslim

womanhood, attained through a lifestyle of consumerism and entrepreneurialism—thereby implying that empowerment means achievement and social mobility. This confirms Genz's (2015: 549, 556) observation that social media promise freedom and creativity in self-representation, yet its unwritten rules stimulate women's self-disciplining. These rules tend to privilege the hyper-stylized, heteronormative, fashion-forward forms of power posing.

5.3 Entrepreneurial Language and Attitude

In this section, I examine whether the postfeminist archetypes described in earlier literature still apply, in what sense they evolved and what role neoliberal factors such as education, self-employment and social media presence play in the creation of new entrepreneurial femininities. Entrepreneurial archetypes are seen as empowering to many followers, since, in interviewee #7 Saba's words, they display the idea that "if you want to do something, you shouldn't hold back, you should have strength and confidence to accomplish your dreams." I demonstrate that the entrepreneurial discourse rebrands Muslim women as 'kick-ass' and 'badass' top girls or 'lady bosses' (see section 5.3.3), by combining elements of style and glamour with ambition, confidence, consumer lifestyle and motivational messages. Nevertheless, as Banet-Weiser (2007: 222) notes, it is often the case that one stereotype (in this case, 'the hijab looks unprofessional') is countered by introducing a new archetype (e.g. 'the stylish hijabi professional') that in fact reproduces other stereotypes (e.g. gendered, raced, classed and ableist ideas). Although this makes the new archetype then marketable to a wider audience, this process is problematic from an intersectional perspective.

5.3.1 Can-Do/Top Girl

In the 1990s, 'girl power' became a popular term for discussing and celebrating women's empowerment (Currie et al., 2009). In the 2000s, feminist scholarship started conceptualising girl power as a postfeminist notion. This created feminine archetypes in popular culture who were empowered through beauty, independence, education and entrepreneurial endeavour: the "can-do girl" (Harris, 2004: 13) and the "top girl" (McRobbie, 2007: 718). Harris (2004: 16) describes the "can-do girl" as a postfeminist figure that embodies a neoliberal idea of success for young women. They have exceptional careers, believe in their capabilities and exhibit a consumer lifestyle (Harris, 2004: 14). Harris's term resonates with McRobbie's (2007: 718) figure of the "top girl", who embodies an

ideal of female success in a competitive meritocratic context. The top girl is a highly motivated young woman who is either studying or has a successful career (McRobbie, 2009: 75). Her success is not defined anymore by her care-giving role in life, but through earning a (disposable) income and enjoying a consumer lifestyle (McRobbie, 2009: 72-73). Nowadays, this lifestyle can be pursued through self-employment or a social media career (Duffy and Hund, 2015). Although nowadays the terms can-do girl and top girl have been replaced by other keywords, popular gender representations are still based on these archetypes, which I demonstrate in this section.

✔️ @summeralbarcha, 20 May 2018

A contemporary example of a blogger who built her brands around the can-do/top girl archetype is Summer Albarcha (@summeralbarcha). This triumph photo shows her posing foot-popping for her educational milestone, wearing a pastel outfit and black graduate cap, in front of the university where she completed her business degree. Although Summer seems dressed for the occasion, the smart-casual dress code is her usual signature look. This post is characteristic for Summer in the sense that her self-brand is primarily built around modelling top-girl femininity. This post might be empowering for certain followers since Summer demonstrates that veiled Muslim girls/women can take up space

successfully in a majority-White academic environment.[76] But it also plays into the narrative of the good, successful immigrant (Rigouste, 2005, cited in Navarro, 2010: 105) or model minority (Nakayama, 1988, cited in Kawai, 2005: 109).

One day before posting this photo, she posted two other photos of her graduation, captioned "business school ✔️💼🏆" and "Another thing off my to-do list this summer! ✔️🎓❤️🙂 #graduation #albarchasisters", whereby the green check mark signifies the idea that successful top-girl femininity can be reached by ticking certain important yet classed boxes such as graduating. Notably, the photo above is captioned with a completely different theme: "When did you start following my blog? Curious to know who's been here the longest! 💝💝💝". This caption aims to humbly distract followers from her educational accomplishment, by focusing on her followers and asking them to comment. It is a subtle example of how meritocratic competitiveness is not just embodied by Summer, but also encouraged among her followers. It becomes a competition of loyalty, social media engagement, and perhaps also an invitation to emulate her career as a blogger and (aspiring) businesswoman. Essentially, Summer's caption does match her photo, since they address both her success in education (business) as well as her success as a blogger who built a large follower base. These are the entrepreneurial ingredients for the representation of a veiled, Muslim top girl that counters (the internalisation of) Islamophobic stereotypes about Muslim women as uneducated, unprofessional or invisible.

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[76] https://datausa.io/profile/university/saint-louis-university#admissions

This post by Dutch blogger Ruba Zai (@hijabhills) is exemplary of the meritocratic display of such qualities as ambition and passionate work: "Working day and night on my new blog! Coming soon😊 #mydubai". In this photo, Ruba displays the traveling she does for her blogging career, to luxury and business destinations such as Dubai. Ruba is captured walking down a majestic marble hotel staircase, holding a purse in one hand and with her other hand holding the Parisian-style railing. Perhaps this photo symbolises a stairway to heaven and is therefore the epitome of her biography on Instagram: "living my dream" (see screenshot, 1 April 2020). She constructs successful entrepreneurial life as a mix of work and pleasure, of ambition and style, of being both the relatable girl-next-door and the top girl/microcelebrity who has the world at her feet (Hill, 2015: 37).

✅ @nabiilabee, 30 May 2018

UK-based blogger NabiilaBee (@nabiilabee) poses in the powder room of an exclusive members club.[77] Although Nabiila's outfit looks basic compared to her surroundings, the pink floral wallpaper, marble side table, mirrors and flowers give her photo an allure of glamour. She crosses her legs and supports her chin, which is elegant but obviously posed. The luxurious setting stands in contrast with the affordable high-street fashion brands she normally promotes in her YouTube videos. Thus, this post says more about the places she visits in her capacity as an Instafamous blogger, than about her self-brand. The photo is captioned: "I had an amazing time at the #diorbackstage Event last night. Thank you for inviting me @diormakeup ✨". The caption narrates that she was invited for an exclusive beauty event (by Dior), that she promotes a new celebrity product (by supermodel Bella Hadid) and that she is wearing a celebrity brand makeup (by singer Rihanna). By associating herself with "established celebrities" and players in the beauty industry (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 6), NabiilaBee promotes herself to brands as a relevant influencer who is high-profile enough for potential collaborations. This post functions as a confirmation of the idea that roaming elite places and socialising with elite players is the ultimate marker of successful femininity; it addresses the middle-class veiled Muslim woman as a marketing niche that is a welcome addition to the luxury market (beside the already present upper class (Arab Gulf) Muslims); and NabiilaBee as a pioneer at this

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[77] NabiilaBee tagged her location incorrectly, it should be Loulou's members club, Mayfair, London, which is known for its original Art Nouveau design.

borderland between Muslim and mainstream, between lower and higher class, and between brands and consumers.

@nourka92, 14 September 2016

In this image, NourKa (@nourka92) is wearing a grey sweatshirt with the slogan "GRL PWR" on it (which she promotes for @nakdfashion, as can be seen from another post on the same day), paired with a smart pair of glasses, and is tucking her thumb in her pocket in a cowboy pose. The word "girl power" means several things such as being straightforward, taking up space, being loud and proud, being sexy, "kicking butt" and being rebellious (Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz, 2009). Whereas the term girl power is criticised by some as a rebranding of feminism that commodifies and depoliticises feminist values (Favaro and Gill, 2018), others claim that the concept positively shaped third and fourth-wave feminists' concept of empowerment (Mackenzie-Smith, 2016). As can be seen from NourKa's reference to girl power, it is still a relevant word in current representations of female empowerment. Arguably, girl power is a "desirable, even compulsory, self-identification" for bloggers nowadays (Favaro and Gill, 2018). NourKa's caption can be seen as her definition of girl power: "Here is to all my strong women out there! May we continue to be awesome each and every day. How many of you are #womenpreneurs?".

Arguably, this post displays a contemporary version of the can-do/top-girl archetype, mainly for two reasons: firstly, it frames entrepreneurial femininity as the climax of girl power. As mentioned earlier,

Harris (2004: 13-16) describes the "can-do girl" as a postfeminist figure that embodies a neoliberal idea of success for young women, consisting of career, confidence and consumerism. Secondly, this post is interesting because it frames girl power as a necessary ingredient for constructing an entrepreneurial self. On the same day, NourKa posted another photo of this same shoot and captioned it "This is how I get things done." Moreover, the combination of her slogan sweatshirt with her caption's hashtags semantically organise and associate girl power with several words for female entrepreneurship: "womenpreneurwednesday #businesswoman #girlpower #hijabihustle #hijabfashion #fashionblogger". Thirdly, these hashtags are followed by makeup brands' hashtags—"#urbandecay #sephora #inglottoronto #bobbibrown #toofaced #milanicosmetics"—in a bid to attract sponsorship. The combination of girl power, entrepreneurialism and the mentioning of makeup brands in this post indicates that the concept of entrepreneurship as empowerment is part of a common marketing language between bloggers/influencers, followers and brands. Thus, NourKa invokes a language of empowerment and entrepreneurialism here, in order to make herself, a veiled Muslim woman, relevant in the influencing industry.

As mentioned in the introduction of section 5.3, Banet-Weiser (2007: 222) has analysed the construction of archetypes in relation to multicultural or minority niches in the market. She explained that to attract a broader audience, the simultaneous challenging of certain stereotypes goes hand-in-hand with reinforcing other stereotypes and norms. In NourKa's case, this means that in order to hit the right tone in the attention economy, she fights the marginalisation of female entrepreneurs (sexism) and counters stereotypes about Brown or Muslim women as inferior (Islamophobia), while at the same time, reinforces the popular notion that women's empowerment should be pursued through the market logic of consumerism, entrepreneurialism and an aesthetic social media presence (neoliberalism, classism, heteronormativity and ableism).

5.3.2 Girl Boss/Lady Boss

NourKa (@nourka92) is the only blogger in my sample who, every now and then, posts feminist quotes/memes on Instagram. When scrolling through her feed while exploring her slogans during my data selection, I stumbled upon this meme with the slogan "#GIRL BOSS".[78] With this slogan, Nour celebrates young female entrepreneurship and positions herself within an Instagram community of hijab fashion bloggers and entrepreneurs. This slogan's design is similar to those printed on notebooks

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[78] NourKa deleted this post in the time between my data analysis and writing up.

and other popular girls' items (Hollis, 2017). The caption reads: "When you think [like] a boss you work like a boss. 😎 Breaking down barriers! Who's with me? #girlboss #womanpreneurship Tag the girl bosses you know 🙋". NourKa herself tags some fellow blogger entrepreneurs, like Habiba da Silva (@lifelongpercussion). Followers @slaycollective and @shassantalks respond to this by tagging other bloggers, including Dina Tokio (@dinatokio), Ibtihaj Muhammad (@ibtihajmuhammad), Omaya Zein (@omayazein) and Leena Snoubar (@withloveleena), whom are all bloggers from my sample, and thus constitute that community of female entrepreneurs in hijab fashion.

@nourka92, 21 June 2016

'Girl boss', 'lady boss' and 'boss lady' are trending keywords that refer to the entrepreneurial archetype, similar to "boss babe", which is less commonly used in hijab fashion.[79] Academic literature is yet to define the concepts of girl boss/lady boss. However, in my data, it is an entrepreneurial archetype that is modern and hip—the opposite of the corporate stereotype of an older, executive woman, who is no fun, sexless or ruthless. Rather, she is stylish, feminine, young, free, relatable and supportive. According to popular books on the topic, being a girl boss/lady boss is about cultivating confidence (Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, 2014), "leaning in" (Sheryl Sandberg, 2013), "kill[ing] it in your career" and "rock[ing] social media" (Aliza Licht, 2015), being badass (Jen Sincero, 2013), staying

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[79] See for example: Sam Ozkural, 6 GIRL BOSS HABITS TO ACHIEVE GOALS IN 2019// GOAL DIGGER "My lady boss mug appears in all of my girl boss videos" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lR1rOhEmHJI 0:20

cheerful (Tina Fey, 2011) and perhaps owning a business in fashion (Sophia Amoruso, 2015).[80] In other words, textually, the lady boss has or develops a good entrepreneurial attitude, and visually, she is glamorous. These descriptions indicate the similarities between the contemporary archetype of the girl boss and the earlier can-do/top girl (Harris, 2004: 13; McRobbie, 2007: 718).

On NourKa's company website, one of her employees describes her using a combination of the words "kickass", "girl boss" and "badass mom", which indicates that the girl boss/lady boss archetype is closely related to the badass/kick-ass archetype (see 5.3.2) and badass mom archetype (see 5.4.2): "GIRLBOSS SPOTLIGHT […] Be productive; stay productive. Nour Kaiss, founder of Nourkaco, is a badass mom and girl boss. I interviewed Nour to get a behind the scenes look of the kickass woman we see on instagram. Read about the importance of a work/life balance and Nour's business tips for anyone starting out."[81] This quote also shows that these archetypes are about productivity and self-transformation, and can thus all be categorised as entrepreneurial femininities. Despite seemingly "attacking the sexist problems in this world by giving women powerful statuses," the terms girl boss and boss lady are criticised by some for being heavily gendered (Evans, 2016; Hollis, 2017). Others carefully negotiate the concept of girl boss (and girl power), such as interviewee #6 Amal, who sometimes draws on a feminist discourse:

What do you think of the term 'girl boss'?

> I like the term. […] I don't really feel any way towards it. It's a nice thing but I think it should be normalised, female entrepreneurship. We shouldn't make such a big deal out of it.

And "girl power," is that a term that you would use yourself?

> Yes, actually, I have a bag that says 'girl power'.

What does that mean, girl power?

> It just means being unapologetic, and just doing my own thing, and not letting anybody push me down.

Would you say it's about feminism? Do you use the term feminism?

> I do, I do consider myself a feminist. But when I bought the bag, I didn't buy it with the intention because I'm a feminist. And I think, just the term girl power and girl boss, it's just

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[80] See also: https://www.lifehack.org/598736/10-empowering-books-that-every-woman-should-read-for-valuable-career-advice and http://www.alttraveladventures.com/2018/04/21/boss-lady-books/
[81] https://nourka.com/blogs/nourkaco-blog/girl-boss-spotlight-nour-kaiss

been used to sell things and to sell products. I don't think it really added to the feminist agenda. It didn't take away, but it didn't add any value, it was just something fashionable.

✅ @dinatokio, 8 March 2018

UK-based Dina Tokio (@dinatokio) poses in her "MY OWN BOSS" sweatshirt, to celebrate feminism with her caption "Happy International Women's day", hence equating empowerment with entrepreneurialism. Some months after I selected the photo for my sample, Dina had printed her photo in cartoonised form on a sweatshirt (see below) for her own merchandise line, which indicates that the "MY OWN BOSS" slogan is crucial to Dina's self-brand. Although this slogan sounds less gendered than girl boss, her post is feminised in a different way; namely, through visual clues such as a pink faux fur stole, her pose with her hand on her hip, and her wardrobe in the background that symbolises fashion as women's tool for success. Remarkably, Amena (@amenakhan) also combined this same sweater with the colour pink (in her hijab and luxury handbag), see image below. These posts glamorise fashion blogging and entrepreneurialism as women's way to success and empowerment.

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Screenshot YouTube, 2 Dec 2018[82]   @amenakhan, 10 August 2018

5.3.3 Badass/Kick-ass

Whereas the can-do/top girl's empowerment is based on ambition, education and career, the complimentary 'badass' archetype is empowered through a display of strength and developing resilience. This resilient feminine archetype is very similar to what Gill and Orgad (2018: 477) describe as "the bounce-backable woman". Hoby (2015) noticed that, since 2015, the term 'badass' became popular (meaning: picked up by White mainstream culture) and is widely used "by women, for women" in the context of a mediatised "feel-good feminism", to celebrate female strength and to compliment each other for displaying strength. For some decades, the term badass applied exclusively to men and meant "bully" or "tough guy", however, rooted in African-American subcultures, "bad" now signifies positive and admirable qualities in popular culture (Scheidlower, 2015). In my sample, a substantial amount of posts (41 images, 25.5%) display 'badassness', consisting of one or multiple elements: (1) a cool/tough pose, edgy outfit or fearless expression; (2) a concern with cultivating confidence, showing strength and having an impressive story; (3) or using the words cool, badass and 'slay' (see section 5.4.2) or related words—and followers would usually comment with these same words or the fire emoji 🔥. A badass pose not just means looking cool/tough, but increasingly also means looking attractive, sassy or sexually confident. I found that the hijab fashion bloggers in my sample represent themselves almost exclusively in two opposite but very mainstream manners; namely, elegant and badass, and move between these two looks or adopt a hybrid look (Hollows, 2000: 156).[83] Some bloggers primarily stick to one type, such as Shahd (@shahdbatal) who often poses in a badass or sassy

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[82] Dina Tokio, 2 December 2018, MY MERCH LINE IS FINALLY HERE!!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56jY4OwC7cA
[83] At times, some of them, like @sagaleeyaa, display an ethnically/culturally traditional femininity. However, there is a near-complete lack of pious, nerdy, hippie, queer, emo and corporate looks, for example.

manner, or Eslimah (@eslimah) and Leena (@withloveleena) who usually perform more girly or innocent femininities.

@shahdbatal, 13 February 2020; @shahdbatal, 14 April 2020; @eslimah, 14 February 2010; @withloveleena, 30 January 2020

Sassy posing can be understood as badassness in this context, because it "transgress[es] conventional morals" of femininity (Kopak and Sefiha, 2015: 99). The badass breaks with patriarchal expectations of veiled Muslims as being elegant, modest, weak or humble, and is a more racially inclusive type of femininity because of its emulation of African-American culture. Hip-hop feminist Johnson (2014: 20) defines it as "a performance that eschews notions of appropriateness, respectability, and passivity demanded of ladylike behavior in favor of confrontational, aggressive, and even outright offensive, crass, or explicit expressions of a woman's strength." It is important to recognise that badass femininity represents concepts that are important to many women and girls, including being proud of who you are despite being marginalised; not letting yourself be held back by racism and sexism; space for less respectability politics and more ethnic pride; and lastly, (online) sisterhood. Badass poses also celebrate the hijab proudly in the face of Islamophobia. To many women, badassness may therefore be the ultimate reflection of their notion of empowerment. As touched upon 5.2.3, interviewee #9 Asmaa's comments have shown that certain followers equate feminism with the badass archetype. To them, feminism is defined (fairly one-dimensionally) as being badass, hence, they appreciate confident body poses and facial expressions the most. And badassness (just as girl power, see section 5.3.1) is fundamental for the construction of entrepreneurial femininity, in this discourse.

Beside the fact that badass femininity relies heavily on a confidence discourse and a discourse of feminine achievement (Ringrose, 2007; Gill and Orgad, 2017; Duffy and Hund, 2015), it is also shaped by the postfeminist imperative to remake the soul (Gill, 2008b: 441) or the neoliberal imperative to self-regulate and become resilient (McRobbie, 2015: 10). In a motivational advertisement for The Body Shop, named CELEBRATING STRONG WOMEN, Amena (@amenakhan) walks us through the traits of this resilient figure, namely strength, dignity, courage, persistence, mental strength, ambition, hard work, physical strength and self-worth:

Life is a beautiful, precious journey filled with heart-expanding experiences and so many moments to be thankful for… and it's also really hard sometimes. That's when we have to tap into our inner strength. And sometimes that means to draw inspiration from people who show dignity and strength. After all, courage is contagious. […] As she grew up, she didn't see her disability as a barrier to hold her back. Instead, it was something that trained her to become mentally stronger. […] she is relentlessly ambitious, nothing will hold her back. […] She knew it would take commitment and wasn't afraid of putting in the work. […] it's important to spend time to strengthen your body.[84]

The badass archetype's resilience to face hardship has a meritocratic component to it. The badass archetype is made up of an attitude, an appearance and performance, and according to Hoby (2015), women develop this in order to survive structures and institutions that socially and economically marginalise women. This is exemplified by the following: one of NourKa's (@nourka92) employees wrote a blog on *nourka.com* titled "You can do (and have) everything you want".[85] She discusses the desire to become successful ("who doesn't?") but being held back by fears related to her headscarf. But, she states, "Every opportunity we miss is no one else's fault but our own. We are the only things holding ourselves back from awesomeness. This all sounds cliché, but it's the hard truth." In the last part of her blog, she recommends a book by Jen Sincero (2013) that empowered her to change her mentality, titled *You Are A Badass*. With this reference, she connects the idea of entrepreneurial femininity with the contemporary notion of badass femininity. The explicit mentioning of the term badass in this blog signals the term's significance to the meritocratic myth. It echoes the meritocratic idea that hard work will pay off, regardless of structural exclusion. This creates a condition in which Muslim women are expected to fend for themselves, and racial or religious discrimination remains unacknowledged. Speaking up about their experiences with discrimination may lead to being dismissed as not working hard enough. Hoby (2015) criticises the meritocratic/postfeminist ideology behind most uses of the word badass: "All, however, boil down to the same blunt—and intolerable—message: that it's women's behaviour rather than the structures and systems that need to change." Bloggers' modelling of entrepreneurial femininity may contribute to an internalisation of this rhetoric.

The myth of meritocracy does not leave much room for realistically discussing the ways in which structural inequalities may shape people's lives more than what ambition and passionate work can overcome. Often, meritocratic content takes the form of motivational speech that encourages women to develop ambition and a positive mindset. Dubai-based blogger Saufeeya Goodson (@saufeeya/prev.

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[84] Amena, 2 March 2018, CELEBRATING STRONG WOMEN | #FORSTRONGWOMEN | AD | AMENA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBiKL1506kU
[85] https://nourka.com/blogs/nourkaco-blog/you-can-do-and-have-everything-you-want

@feeeeya) says in a promotional video: "My passions lie within empowering women and showing them by example through my work, that anything is possible if you put your mind to it."[86] On the one hand, this encourages Muslim girls and women not to be held back by anything, but to follow their dreams and ambitions. On the other hand, it may contribute to the Islamophobic idea that Muslim women are responsible for their own acceptance and marginalisation, depending on the effort they put into self-transformation (Merali, 2016).

Moreover, when meritocracy is internalised, the gravity of Islamophobia may be downplayed. Blogger Leena (@withloveleena), for example, discusses the anxiety wearing a headscarf in the US causes, whereby she turns her gaze inwards by making it an issue of self-confidence and ambition: "As a Muslim American, it was really difficult for me when I made the decision to start wearing a hijab. […] After a while, I realised that all of the negativity I was feeling was all in myself. […] I knew that hijab wasn't going to stop me from doing everything I wanted to do in my life […] I am confident." Although this encourages followers not to internalise Islamophobia, this message is embedded in the beauty industry and attention economy. This kind of motivational speech may, therefore, be a way of attracting followers and brands for collaborations. This motivational speech often involves having to leave beliefs and cultural critique out of the picture (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Jarrett, 2014; Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017). It is questionable whether entrepreneurial femininity is empowering for Muslim women, if parts of their experiences are silenced (online). Such representations could alienate a large segment of the Muslim women demographic.

That said, being cool, edgy, badass or having 'swag' holds significance in American culture in terms of national identity, generation, ethnicity and class, which is emulated by people globally in a shared (online) culture (Green, 2016). This component is relevant to studying hijab fashion, especially

because it concerns young people's identity: "The new urban Islamic culture, strongly inspired by popular American aesthetic standards, has produced specific products that contribute to the performance of a "cool Islam"" and the "ambition of this new Islamic culture […] is to give a positive image of the success of the new Muslim elites" (Boubekeur, 2005: 12). Illustrative of this is the Mipsterz video, see screenshot on the right,[87] in which American Muslim women display their hobbies, style and hipness, constructing a kind of "Muslim cool" (Khabeer, 2016). The video shows that hijab fashion

[86] Tryano, 11 June 2017, #TRYANOYEAROFGIVING WITH SAUFEEYA GOODSON l RAMADAN 2017
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqubjDQWdL0
[87] Sheikh Bake, 20 November 2013, SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA #MIPSTERZ
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68sMkDKMias

constructs a Muslim identity that is equally modern and religious (Lewis, 2013: 3), by incorporating several contemporary styles, such as elegant, sensual, professional, street, and—most importantly—badass. Besides showcasing a fashionable style that fits into American popular culture, the video accentuates female ambition by featuring empowering role models such as fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad and journalist Noor Tagouri.
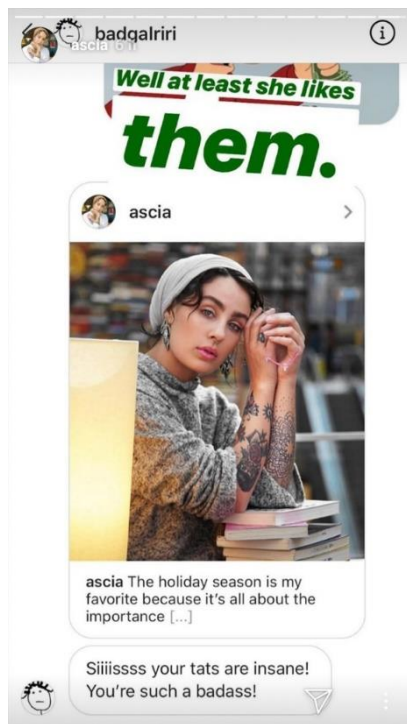
The badassness displayed in the Mipsterz video has caused a Twitter storm among Muslims, mainly for two reasons: first, some Muslims criticised the idea that a badass attitude is compatible with female modesty in Islam (Jha, 2013). In patriarchal and multicultural contexts, women are often seen as "cultural transmitters [and] cultural signifiers", and symbolise collective honour (Yuval-Davis, 1993: 621, 627). This discussion—and misogynistic backlash—is something that bloggers in my study also deal with, such as blogger Ascia, depicted here on the left, who implies that her edgy look is not appreciated by some Muslims, but it is by singer Rihanna who compliments her with the word badass. Second, some Muslims wondered whether a gendered display of badassness is an effective way of getting accepted in an Islamophobic or prejudiced society (Saeed, 2013).

@ascia, Instagram Stories, 24 December 2018

The Mipsterz video serves as a vehicle for discussing the role the badass figure has in representing Muslim women in an overly positive way—namely hip, stylish, Western, attractive and badass—to hyper-counter Orientalist/Islamophobic stereotypes about them. Nonetheless, since badass femininity is usually associated with non-Muslim women in dominant culture, it can be empowering for Muslim minority women to claim that femininity for themselves in a bid to move from the margins to the centre. For interviewee #9 Asmaa, presenting oneself as successful and liberated is part of anti-Islamophobia efforts: "I think that showing that hijabis *are* independent, we do have a say, we can do everything every other person does, we can live by ourselves, we can have our own jobs, we can major in philosophy or dentistry or medicine, and choose our own path, while at the same time being modest and humble and religious: it breaks all these stereotypes that people think of when they think of hijabis." Especially in situations where interviewee Asmaa might be the first veiled Muslim people encounter, she likes to be able to refer to Muslim bloggers to show non-Muslims that "we are also independent and we're more than just the fabric we put on our heads."

As can be observed from a variety of minority groups that seek social acceptance or inclusion through visibility politics (such as women with disabilities on Instagram), the near-standard strategy of de-stigmatising is to "dispel stereotypes and show that people with disabilities can be fun, beautiful and playful" (Kemp, 1997 cited in Ali, 2018). This says something about the way badassness is valued in Western popular cultures, as opposed to qualities that may be valued in other (sub)cultures such as piety, wealth, self-sacrifice or intelligence. And since badass femininity is the ultimate opposite of the oppressed stereotype, Muslim women become interesting for mainstream audiences when they represent themselves as empowered, because that forms an exception to the fictional rule (McDonald, 2006). Hence the many online articles that celebrated hijab fashion as stereotype-breaking: "Young Muslim women are debunking the stereotypical image of Islam by making a symbol of modesty look cool" (Angelini, 2014). However, observing from African-American history, it may be seen that minority women are often expected to be badass only to the extent that it sells on camera and on the labour market—i.e. as long as they are not too strong, too opiniated, too political, too radical, too smart, too successful, too critical or too religious and so on, because that would be in need of controlling. Badass femininity has a built-in self-monitoring aspect, I argue, since it is channelled by the aesthetic and commercial parameters of social media. One could also wonder whether badassness is only perceived as authentic when it is performed by those who have already acquired a certain level of social status or privilege. It is therefore questionable whether the badass archetype is as empowering and available to women as it may seem. This is not to deny the importance of this archetype to the self-actualisation of young (veiled) Muslim women of all kinds of (non-Western) backgrounds, such as interviewee #9 Asmaa, who explains that these bold self-representations elevate her from the traditionally gendered expectations that her (North African) mother and grandmother had to deal with and were sometimes put on her.

Johnson (2014: 25) describes badassness in her hip-hop case study as "strong, fierce, powerful feminine performances" and "alternative public performances of femininity". However, in my hijab fashion case study, badass femininity remains quite gender-typical and relies heavily on style and beauty, probably because displaying confidence is aspirational and works well in selling fashion. Although these gender representations shatter some Islamophobic stereotypes, they do not break with traditional femininity because they stay within the boundaries of what is heteronormatively accepted. In my study, badass femininity can therefore be summarised as a heteronormative and aesthetic performance of strong and entrepreneurial femininity, that is used for navigating marginalised structures, and fits neatly within a popular/postfeminist discourse of empowerment.

✅ @shahdbatal, 25 May 2018

In this autobiographic advertisement for @netflix and @teenvogue, Shahd (@shahdbatal) mentions her personal struggle with anxiety and public speaking. It fits within a broader popular trend of discussing anxiety on social media, and is characteristic of Shahd's self-brand as an independent young woman on her path to inner strength and wisdom. Shahd's caption reads: "I actually have pretty bad social anxiety & public speaking is one of my biggest fears but I'm really big on doing things that scare you and not letting your fears win." It is positive to notice that women's badassness does not involve emotional stoicism, as it often does for men, but rather an emotional vulnerability and intelligence (Scheidlower, 2015). However, this post's discussion of anxiety also involves a strong message of overcoming it. In relation to her case study of bloggers' representation of disability on Instagram, Hill (2017) explains that in popular discourse, certain adversities can be culturally acceptable, celebrated and even marketable, as long as one overcomes it and glamorises it. Shahd's cheerful pose in Oprah-interview-style functions as the proof for her current happy state, in which her anxiety is overcome. She is sitting cross-legged, smiling abundantly. She is wearing a black headscarf and long blue dress which make her look humble and authoritative at the same time. Interestingly, this is completely different from her cool/badass outfits and poses that prevail in her content. Although this post does

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not include a badass-style outfit, it can nevertheless be studied as a construction of badass femininity, but then regarding attitude.

Read from this post, having a badass attitude means overcoming adversity by changing your mentality, presenting this as an empowering process, while looking good and turning it into a (badass) self-brand that attract likes and other forms of social media attention. This post upholds a meritocratic myth, by representing badass femininity as a coping mechanism that is needed for putting up with struggles that are part and parcel of entrepreneurialism—or sexism, classism and racism, for that matter (Littler, 2017: 182). Although the regulation of feelings is a common and positive thing in psychological self-development and self-actualisation, the imperative of self-transformation is heavily gendered and is not appropriate in relation to structural inequalities. In fact, it is not just life that throws barriers at you, but ideologies and social constructs that cause some people to be marginalised and others to be privileged. The same counts for (veiled) Muslim women, who supposedly deserve success (merit) as long as they do not speak up about Islamophobia but rather be motivated enough to play by the status-quo rules of the market and the beauty industry. The personal issue is a motivational issue, instead of a political issue. Since bloggers "must be seen as both motivated and motivational" (Hill, 2017: 1), they become motivational speakers instead of radical role models. As a result, feminism becomes a discourse of self-help and self-branding instead of social justice politics.

✅ @nourka92, 18 April 2017

NourKa's (@nourka92) post here also demonstrates that admitting and discussing bloggers' hardships is a tool for constructing a badass self-brand. NourKa can be seen working with pen and paper on the floor of what looks like a photo studio (white vinyl photography backdrop, clothing rack, steamer, power cables, a phone on a side table) while working on the launch of new products from her headscarf line. In the caption, NourKa mentions that she experiences hardships as an entrepreneur: "Being a business owner isn't easy - and I really don't think anyone can coach/train you to properly deal with the obstacles and hardships you face while running a business. It's worth it though when you see your product coming to life and you know that your hard work is paying off!" It is an inspirational message about how entrepreneurship is a trial-and-error practice with rewarding results. The last part of her caption discusses future plans, which signals that she overcomes entrepreneurial challenges: "can't wait to introduce the many collections I'm working on #launchingsoon #nourkaco". In the attention economy, the display of entrepreneurial struggles at calculated moments and in aesthetic ways contributes to the glamorisation of entrepreneurialism. Struggles will pay off, so it goes, since entrepreneurialism "promises even more freedom to climb the ladder of meritocracy as long as you put up with the substantial difficulties. 'Now you are the boss'" (Littler, 2017: 182). In this narrative, hardships are a necessary evil, and persisting through them (while looking beautiful) attracts such compliments as badass, slay or lady boss. However, mentioning entrepreneurial struggles is not the same as taking a critical stance towards the entrepreneurial discourse and discussing structural obstacles. If anything, it adds to the status of social media entrepreneurs.

A term closely related to badass is *kick-ass*. It is considerably less used among women online, so it is more an analytical category and a marketing term with older postfeminist roots. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, kick-ass means being tough, aggressive, powerful or effective,[88] and the Oxford Dictionary uses a male example: "he's a kick-ass guy who takes no prisoners".[89] So just as with the word badass, kick-ass used to be associated with men's attitudes, but nowadays it refers to female strength, assertiveness and achievement: fighting to accomplish something; to fight barriers; to take initiative and show courage; and to be an example to other women. In my data I found that kick-ass is also a contemporary version of the can-do/top girl (Harris, 2004: 13; McRobbie, 2007: 718). This archetype is about being active and productive; the ability to move mountains; to cross boundaries of systems of inequality; to win battles (Hamilton and Curran, 2013: 1567); to work hard in an effective, no-nonsense, powerful way. At first, this seems empowering and promising with regards to the ability to radically challenge power mechanisms. However, the role of voyeurism in displaying kick-ass femininity should not be overlooked. As is noted in feminist scholarship: women can only "kick some

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[88] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kick-ass
[89] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/kick-ass

ass as long as she herself has a nice one" (Schut, 2006: 112, cited in Roberts and MacCallum-Stewart, 2016: 136). Bloggers in my study usually do not represent themselves in an overtly sexualised way, however, kick-ass femininity is treated as an aesthetic "bodily property" as much as it is an attitude (Gill, 2007b: 149). Its productivity mainly concerns neoliberal and consumerist goals, which may undermine the emancipatory value of this female display of power.

✅ @ibtihajmuhammad, 25 March 2018

In my study, Ibtihaj Muhammad is unique, since she is primarily an athlete, before being a social media personality and fashion label owner. According to Jones (2016), she is a kick-ass woman because she is "the first U.S. Olympian to compete in hijab, challenging stereotypes about what an Olympian should look like." She is an empowering role model for anti-sexism, anti-Islamophobia and anti-racism to many, such as interviewee #3 Faiza and #4 Aissa, because not only has she broken down barriers related to Islam, "she has also contended with racial discrimination, competing in an overwhelmingly white sport" (Jones, 2016). In this post, kick-ass femininity is symbolised by physical performance or strength, her fencing suit and sword, and her confident stare into the camera lens. In the caption, she mentions being a role model for young people and being a style icon: "I'm up for two awards: 'QUEEN OF SWAG' (best dressed and most stylish off the court) and 'DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME' (athletes who push the boundaries)".

Ibtihaj constructs her kick-ass image in a dignified and de-colonised way, compared to how other Black female athletes are often portrayed in mainstream media: they are either sexualised (McKay and Johnson, 2008: 212; Leonard, 2014: 209) or racialised and *othered*, just as happened to Ibtihaj's role models Venus and Serena Williams (McKay and Johnson, 2008). Ibtihaj regularly profiles herself as a Black Muslim activist, for example by mentioning her African-American athletic role models or

motivating her followers to feel proud of their faith and ethnicity through learning about their history and voicing their opinions.

That said, the combination of achievement, beauty and celebrity in her content does construct kick-ass femininity in a postfeminist—and thus somewhat normative—way, see Samie and Toffoletti (2018: 87) for an elaboration on Ibtihaj's sport identity in relation to postfeminism and nationalism. Her kick-ass self-brand is not limited to sports, but is extended to consumerist areas of popular culture, for example by the creation of an 'feminist' Barbie doll in her likeness (Renee, 2017), see below post on International Women's Day.

@ibtihajmuhammad, 8 March 2018

Moreover, in a postfeminist manner, Ibtihaj has turned her eyeliner into her number one kick-ass trademark, for example by endorsing Sephora eyeliner;[90] or mentioning her eyeliner in above post (25 March 2018): "you know my eyeliner game is strong annnnd #blackgirlmagic"; or in below post (6 January 2018) that shows the text "winged victory" in Allure magazine. The fact that Ibtihaj connects her entrepreneurial femininity, and even her activism, to a beauty product, signals that kick-ass femininity, even an Olympic femininity, is ultimately framed through the lens of the beauty industry. It makes one wonder if the language of politics (in this case, Black Muslim activism) is only accepted or heard in mainstream media when it is couched in the language and aesthetics of the marketplace (Giroux, 2000: 434). It seems that Ibtihaj does not only construct kick-ass femininity as heroically fighting the sexualisation, dehumanisation and Islamophobia that she is faced with, but also as being a beautiful, sporty, exceptional, glamorous and relatable exception to the oppressed Muslim woman stereotype.

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[90] https://www.allure.com/video/watch/olympic-fencer-ibtihaj-muhammad-favorite-liquid-eyeliner

@ibtihajmuhammad, 6 January 2018

In the following photo, Amena (@amenakhan) sits in her renovated dressing room, in front of her vanity table, looking into the camera lens. She is wearing a beige headscarf wrapped in her signature style ('hoojab'). Her facial expression and pose communicate a confident look, which portrays her as a role model, proud of what she accomplished and how that inspires others. Her caption reads: "I'm always struck by how diverse my viewers(? I prefer calling you all sisters) are - from lawyers to bloggers to MUAs [makeup artists, sic] to doctors to SAHMs [staying at home mums, sic] to engineers to students." In this phrase, Amena provides a profile of her audience as ambitious and educated girls and women, which challenges the Orientalist/Islamophobic idea that Muslim girls and women are backward and oppressed. She addresses her audience primarily as talented and hard-working here, and it is this audience that Amena aims to inspire with her content in general and motivational posts in particular. "So many of you say that seeing a hijab wearing woman of colour pursue the beauty business - with its rigidly narrow perception of beauty - gives you the motivation you need when the barriers in your fields need breaking. Of course most of us love a bit of lippie, too, but I love that this community has such high aspirations and is so kick-ass." Kick-ass refers here to minority women's ambitions and achievements.

Kick-ass femininity is entrepreneurial in this example, in the sense that it activates and motivates to be self-governing and thrive within the system. Amena briefly speaks about the struggles she experiences as one of the pioneers in hijab fashion and the (online) beauty industry, and the marginalisation she faces as a veiled Muslim woman with Indian roots: "In the beauty world, it's not easy to thrive when you look 'different' to the established norms - trust me, a lot of brands still don't spread the net wide enough to include women like me. But that's no different to any other situation in our lives where not 'fitting in' leaves us carving our own path." This describes a possible reason of why postfemininity or entrepreneurial femility is appealing in an Islamophobic and neoliberal context. It rewards individuals

who learn the rules of the game and navigate mechanisms of exclusion by carving their own path, in other words, by taking individual responsibility and take on an entrepreneurial attitude.

Amena refers to feminist activists of the past (which suggests she aspires to be on that same level) and the everyday struggles women have to deliver (which makes her seem more ordinary and near): She continues by explaining that her way of rebelling against her family was by dying her hair pink, marrying a man of her own choice, dressing in hijab and fighting her way into the industry to build a career. Amena speaks simultaneously about the right to be included in the mainstream (beauty industry) and the right to rebel or deviate (from cultural expectations). This contributes to distinguishing herself as an empowering, feminist, inspirational blogger who speaks out about structural mechanisms of exclusion. That said, the caption in combination with the photo's visuals signal that her story is ultimately about persisting and achieving neoliberal success despite the odds. And while she tries to shift the focus from makeup ("a bit of lippie") to kick-ass achievements, her content is ultimately embedded in the beauty industry. Therefore, kick-ass femininity seems to function primarily as a way of branding the self as a role model and add some depth to beauty content.

5.4 Mommy Culture

Whereas the first parts of this chapter discussed bloggers' careers, this part centralises their motherhood or a combination of motherhood and career. Once hijab fashion bloggers enter the pregnancy and maternity phase in their lives, they usually start (temporarily) posting content of a mommy culture genre (Lagerwey, 2017). After beauty, fashion and work, a major theme in my visual data set is pregnancy and motherhood (17 images=10,6%).[91] In relation to the question whether mommy culture is empowering, I found that some scholars, such as Petersen (2015), see mommy blogging as a form of women's activism whereby mothers are encouraged to act as rebels and community builders. Other scholars, such as McRobbie (2013b), argue that modern motherhood is problematic since it is no longer treated as something private, a break from your career and from social pressures.

In the social media age, women are increasingly incited to centralise motherhood to their self-branding. According to Lagerwey (2017), mommy culture is a type of (online) self-branding that is influenced by postfeminism and celebrity culture. Mommy culture creates perfect domestic

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[91] At the time of writing, a handful of bloggers were/are pregnant or became first-time mothers, so a similar sample would now contain even more motherhood content.

motherhood shots on Instagram, and encourages "a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the 'good life'" (McRobbie, 2015: 9). The incorporation of children into "a mother's self-presentation strategy, allow[s] them to show they are capable and competent mothers" (Collett and Childs, 2009: 693). Mommy culture is entrepreneurial in the sense that it incites a professionalisation of motherhood and "installs notions of female perfectability within the field of maternity" (McRobbie, 2013b: 141-142). Mommy bloggers "represent an ideal" as "successful postfeminist, self-branded entrepreneurs" and consumers (Lagerwey, 2017: 17). They show their followers ways of navigating the ideal of "having it all": a career, a family, beauty, lifestyle and fame (Lagerwey, 2017: 3). In my sample of hijab fashion bloggers, mommy culture results in the representation of three main archetypes: the royal princess/queen mother, the badass mom and the mumpreneur (Littler, 2017).

Lagerwey (2017: 5) observed that with the rise of social media, pregnancy became a public spectacle. On Instagram, this spectacle manifests itself in, for instance, pregnancy announcements, baby bump

outfits and baby showers (see NabiilaBee's overview of 2018 here). On YouTube, bloggers post videos with titles as: WE'RE PREGNANT!!!, gender reveal, sonogram footage, unboxing children's products, toddler/morning/night time routine, life with a newborn, my son/daughter does my makeup, family vlog, Q&A (marriage, motherhood), our work-life balance, and more. From the videos' comment sections, it can be read that the maternal bloggers are admired by many (young, heterosexual, cisgender) Muslim women for living women's dream of successfully settling down, having kids and building an ideal (suburban) life.

@nabiilabee, Instagram Stories, 29 December 2018

Some scholars question whether mommy culture is empowering to women, and critique the self-representation of mommy bloggers for its "power to cast women into a domestic sphere online" (Chen, 2013: 514) and for certain social pressures that it upholds and creates (Wolf, 2016). Although mommy culture among hijab fashion bloggers is significantly less gendered, sexualised, disciplined, classed and materialistic than in, for example, Netflix's YUMMY MUMMIES (Delaney, 2017), it does encourage women

to look, behave and spend time and money in certain ways, and be competitive in that, as if new motherhood ideals are constantly formed, developed and repeated. "Aesthetic labour" has become a central focus in mommy culture (De Benedictis and Orgad, 2017: 101). On Instagram, motherhood becomes a normative project achievable through consumerism (#goals), producing recognisable and standardised pictures organised by "fantasies of feminine sameness" (Kanai, 2017a: 293). Arguably, these self-representations build a sense of community—or "virtual ummah" (Varisco, 2010: 157)— with fellow (Muslim) mothers on YouTube and Instagram.

Mommy bloggers do not, however, exclusively create content in which they aim for flawlessness: rather, they make appearances without makeup, wearing sloppy clothes and being worn-out from a lack of sleep.[92] By addressing and embracing the difficulties of pregnancy and labour and showing *flawed* maternal images, instead of showing merely perfect images, bloggers such as Sebinaah, NourKa and Ascia challenge ideas about the ideal mother.[93] That said, I have noticed that bloggers usually keep their Instagram feed strategically filled with carefully curated images in order to attract brands (and maintain an aspirational image for followers), whereas they tend to show their flawed and realistic images in Instagram Stories and YouTube videos, where mediated authenticity attracts followers (Genz, 2015). Interviewee #9 Asmaa confirms this: "I think the majority of their posts are as a brand deal or some sort of promotion that they have, so I think their InstaStory, SnapChat Story […] show what they really do on a day-to-day basis. […] You get to know the person more from their Stories, and you get to know their message more through their posts."

Some of the motherhood struggles discussed by bloggers are caused by pressures related to their social media careers, yet the bloggers do not address or critique these as such. On top of that, mommy culture encourages women to think about motherhood mainly through consumerism and the beauty industry, but bloggers do not critique the disproportionate expectations of beauty placed on women/mothers (if anything, they benefit from it). NabiilaBee discusses how impossible it is to film a "day in my life" video: her baby wants to be held a lot, her "house is an absolute mess" because she cannot manage to tidy unless someone is watching her baby, or she mentions how difficult it is for her to put makeup on, but still does for her videos.[94] Bloggers frame their creation of glamorous motherhood representations as a form of coping with the difficulties of motherhood or getting used

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[92] Dina Tokio, 6 August 2018, LIFE WITH A NEWBORN | VLOG https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kewFT7wLVds 24:00

[93] Sebinaah: feeling low https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rppuQYu8Tts
NourKa: labour struggles https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUBhPBuHrOw
Ascia: difficulties photoshoot with children https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dNTILIe1rU

[94] Nabiilabee, 10 January 2019, GRWM MUM EDITION - HOW TO HAVE A HEALTHY MINDSET ON SOCIAL MEDIA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xa85kOc5Ro&

to their new maternal identity (Heisler and Ellis, 2008). NabiilaBee describes her beautiful photoshoots as a nice escape for her as a new mother.[95] She describes followers' engagement with this content as "support" that helped her to feel better about being a new mum.[96] Yet, the ability of bloggers' glamorous motherhood representations to counter-balance difficulties cannot be seen separately from the role that social media plays in rewarding consumerism, visibility and self-disclosure. On top of that, motherhood content might also be rewarding because women with children are often regarded culturally as more important than child-less women, so their new status might heighten their self-esteem (Douglas and Michaels, 2004: 26).

Mommy culture on Instagram upholds a gendered, classed and heteronormative representation of motherhood as essential to or a climax of womanhood. This echoes a politics of reproduction that a great section of feminist scholarship from the 1960s/70s onwards were critiquing and hoping to change: consisting of domestic labour (dividing household chores), childcare, gender stereotyping, idealisation of motherhood and consumer culture.[97] For instance, Friedan (1963: v) coined the term "the feminine mystique" to describe how US postwar society expected women to stay at home and perfect themselves as mothers, wives and housemakers. Mothers were unfulfilled and marginalised by the low status of the housewife, the waste of her potential, biological essentialism and the economic dependence on a male breadwinner.[98] With regards to issues such as fathers' involvement in parenting, mommy culture in my sample seems to present a greatly developed and emancipated picture (such in the case of Ruba, Amena, Dina, Chinutay and Ascia's husbands). The representation of maternity has thus improved, and motherhood is increasingly respected as another professional or contributing status. However, McRobbie (2013b: 141) explains that this professionalisation of motherhood should be understood in relation to postfeminist media culture and a neoliberal market by which women's production as well as reproduction are governed (see also: De Benedictis and Orgad, 2017: 102; Littler, 2017: 187). I suggest that this professionalisation is strikingly visible during late pregnancy or early post-partum period, when bloggers continue to create and edit content and upload this on Instagram and YouTube,[99] whereas other women might be on (paid) maternity leave, see below

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[95] Nabiilabee, 20 January 2019, NEWBORN PHOTOSHOOT https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dP3kIO7DMAE
[96] Nabiilabee, 10 January 2019, GRWM MUM EDITION - HOW TO HAVE A HEALTHY MINDSET ON SOCIAL MEDIA https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xa85kOc5Ro& 11:22
[97] ANGELA MCROBBIE - FEMINISM, NEOLIBERALISM AND FAMILY: HUMAN CAPITAL AT HOME https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bv8a4V8CE6c& 15:15
[98] Ibid.
[99] For example, a week post-partum: Dina Tokio, 6 August 2018, LIFE WITH A NEWBORN | VLOG https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kewFT7wLVds 2:00

reply on a comment on Sebinaah's video.[100] This is illustrative of the neoliberal glorification of entrepreneurialism and the dismantling of the welfare state.
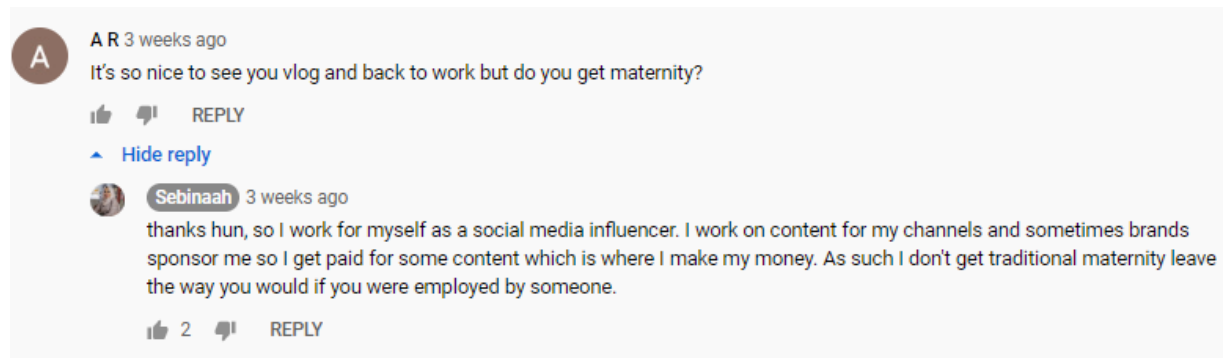
Due to the ability to spend more time with one's children as a blogger than in full-time employment, the entanglement of motherhood and self-branding is framed as necessary and "worth it" (Littler, 2017: 201). The presence of bloggers' children in their content goes quite unquestioned (think of issues such as oversharing, privacy and children's rights). Interviewee #3 Faiza negotiates this commercialisation by drawing on elements of postcolonial and anti-Islamophobia discourses: "I mean, it's their business. But it's really like what the mainstream are doing; showing your family, vlogging your family life online, that's literally like, you're giving people an intimate look into your life, that's your business. Personally, I wouldn't do it. However, the fact that they want to do it, it's what everyone is doing… maybe it's normalising Muslims. People are seeing that Muslim families are normal. But why do we feel the need to do that? And to capitalise on your children. But everyone does it, so…" Her comment relates to Gill's (2007b: 155) observation of the postfeminist "emphasis on self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline".

Mommy culture also relates to Gill's (2007b: 149) point about postfeminism's "makeover paradigm" and "femininity as a bodily property". Women are incited to consume products and display them online in order to discipline themselves and followers into a more "modernised and upgraded selfhood" (Gill, 2007b: 156). Such social media platforms as Instagram and YouTube provide the ultimate environment for creating and watching content that inspires women to transform and modernise, illustrated by the buzzword and Instagram hashtag #goals. The makeover paradigm in mommy culture is classed since it "sets new horizons for middle-class status on the basis of aspirational lifestyle" (McRobbie, 2013b: 142). In this case, class is less based on "categories as occupation or social location" but increasingly

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[100] Sebinaah, 2 February 2020, Vlog - Cook with me, A day of events & Normal Mum Life
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tW90oglSOuc

"play[s] out on the women's bodies, homes, cooking skills and ability as mothers, through notions of good taste and cultural capital" (Gill, 2007b: 157). According to McRobbie, neoliberalism not only centres the "middle class" (and obscures working class struggles), but also channels this through such categories as gender and maternity: "New norms of middle-class life directed especially towards young women require a more intense investment in marriage, motherhood and domestic life, as a benchmark of successful femininity" (2013b: 141).

This can be complicated by adding a layer of religion and race in this matrix, and understanding what this middle-class project means for hijab fashion bloggers. If "the whole life of the middle classes has to be seen as a moral force for good", and if "notions of family and good housekeeping" can be used for defying stereotypes (McRobbie, 2013b: 141), then motherhood may be crucial in bloggers' self-branding as normal, caring and respectable vis-à-vis Islamophobic stereotypes. This is comparable to African-American women's respectability politics in which domesticity was emphasised, consisting of "cleanliness, religiosity, and efficiency" (Wolcott, 2001: 22).

The next section discusses the ways in which hijab fashion bloggers raise the aesthetic bars of motherhood on Instagram.

5.4.1 Royal Mother: Princess/Queen

✅ @nabiilabee, 15 April 2018

In this polished baby shower photo, NabiilaBee (@nabiilabee) is dressed in a yellow and white gala outfit, posing in front of a flower wall, holding her baby bump. Some other elements such as a white vintage doll carriage, rattan chair and chalkboard give the photo a romantic, classic and lavish look. Her caption promotes a decoration company, Muslim photographer and dress designer: "Exactly how i wanted it felt like a real princess […] #queenbee". This communicates that her stylish baby shower made her feel like a princess, and her pregnancy like a queen. This photo's performance of gender and maternity conveys a notion of motherhood as a royal (classed) and fairy tale-like (gendered) status, and that this royal fantasy (reigning like a queen) can be acquired and celebrated with the right accessories and attire. In a way, it sends the message to followers that fairy tale femininity and status are just as accessible to veiled women as other (mainstream) women on Instagram with similar mommy culture photos.

Notably, the figure of the traditional princess has been critiqued in feminist literature for being gender normative and confining. Even more contemporary and widely celebrated Disney princesses are described in literature as "a postfeminist, contradictory combination of attributes that both reinforce and challenge gender stereotypes" (Streiff and Dundes, 2017: 2). Besides being gender normative, this trend of throwing baby showers, doing baby bump photo shoots and newborn photoshoots also has a meritocratic and classist undertone to it: every mother (to be)–and especially (micro)celebrities–deserves this type of attention and lifestyle. While realistically speaking, this level of aesthetic labour is not affordable or possible (or even wanted) for many women, whether due to issues of income, location, sexuality, fertility or spirituality (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017: 29).

Similarly, in this photo, US-based YazTheSpaz (@yaztheEspaz89) incorporates references to princess-like motherhood. She is standing in a park, striking a pose that resembles Disney's Princess Belle (see left), dressed in a white Edwardian style dress (which connoted complex meanings of class, Whiteness and chastity in the Edwardian period). In the caption, she says she is "Feeling like a princess in this @rasitbagzibagli dress from @modanisa […] As a mom, I find it difficult to take care of myself on a daily basis, especially when you are caring for two babies under two! So when I put on this dress, you better believe I felt like ME again haha! How many moms feel the same when they finally get dressed up for once? If you want to feel as magical as I did in this dress, then click the link in my bio […] #fairytaledress".

Why is 'magically feeling like a fairy tale princess' connected to 'feeling like oneself', and in turn, why does 'becoming oneself' require dressing up? A possible answer can be found in Hollows' (2000: 156) explanation of narratives of self-transformation, in which "the idea of revealing a 'natural' feminine self" is often emphasised—which is exemplified by Yaz's comment "I felt like ME again". This is surprisingly connected to feeling like a princess and feeling magical, which could be explained by the idea that the way in which women represent themselves, changes them in the act: "women can be thought of as both active in producing a feminine self while their consciousness of themselves is also

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transformed by this activity" (Hollows, 2000: 158). In other words, a woman has her *mommy side* in which self-sacrifice and caring for children is prioritised, and her *original side* of which its princess-like character is recognised *and* constructed through the experience of dressing up.

Ultimately, this concept of magically feeling like oneself is characteristic of postfeminist and neoliberal narratives in which 'being oneself' is connected to 'pleasing oneself'. Gill (2007b: 153) observed that "notions of choice, of 'being oneself', and 'pleasing oneself' are central" to postfeminist media culture, whereby nowadays, pleasing oneself could be translated as or has evolved into notions of self-care (see section 6.1.3). In mommy culture, hard work and (motherhood) stress deserve to be rewarded with royal treatment and consumer products, even if that reward is something you give yourself, such as dressing up or self-care (e.g. pamper routine). The self-sacrificing busy mother deserves to feel like herself every once in a while, by consuming and self-adorning, and staying relevant to the beauty and fashion industry (Lazar, 2011).

✔️ @amenakhan / prev.@amenaofficial, 22 March 2018

This photo of Amena (@amenakhan) crowning her daughter, who is wearing what looks like a princess costume, symbolises a queen mother and a princess daughter. It is captioned with an inspirational feminist message: "Because empowerment – both individual and collective – only comes when each of us helps the other put her crown back on", followed by emojis of crowned women in several skin colours. In this photo, crowning stands for empowering the next generation,[101] consisting of both her daughter and her (younger) followers, whom are addressed by the caption. Amena could be the queen in this picture, who wears her hijab as a metaphorical crown. In hijab fashion (and other online Muslim subcultures), the hijab is often proudly described as a crown, see YazTheSpaz's bio on the left: "Hijab is my Crown" (July 2020). Similarly, in another Instagram post (30 April 2017), Amena wears an actual crown, and textually connects the figure of the queen to alternative beauty standards in the caption: "I especially want all women of colour to know that in a world of narrowly defined beauty ideals, we are ALL beautiful, fierce queens."

YazTheSpaz89
Public Figure
- Cuban/Turkish | FL ☀️
- Wife, Mama to Sulaiman & Nura
- Faith, Family, Fashion, Fitness
- Hijab is my Crown👑

2,215 Posts 270K Followers

This post thus portrays the figure of the queen mother as the feminist who transfers her power to future generations. Whereas the caption's mentioning of collective empowerment and solidarity hints at activist feminism, the photo treats female empowerment as something royal, but also generational, domestic, maternal and classed. Via the queen archetype, motherhood and feminism are integrated. But in the context of Instagram, this post could also be understood as a demonstration of hijab fashion as a neoliberal project (McRobbie, 2013b: 142). In enacting the transfer of power from her to her daughter, it is as if Amena also promotes *the way* in which she acquired this power, which is through beautification, self-transformation, entrepreneurialism, and a life in the spotlights.

5.4.2 Badass Mom

Whereas the archetype of the princess/queen mother is quite stereotypically feminine, its opposite is the *badass mom*. A badass mom is a matriarch who could be seen wearing very feminine outfits, but more often is wearing *cool* clothing or street wear. Badassness is represented on social media through

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[101] See also Amena's quote: "This Mother's Day, I'm working with The Body Shop to celebrate all the strong women who have inspired us. I have plenty of them in my inner circle; I want to be one, and I hope to raise one." 2 March 2018, CELEBRATING STRONG WOMEN | #FORSTRONGWOMEN | AD | AMENA https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBiKL1506kU

language, attitude and aesthetics. In the section about the girl boss/lady boss, the term badass mom was already mentioned briefly: "Nour Kaiss, founder of Nourkaco, is a badass mom and girl boss."[102] In my sample, the word badass is mentioned once directly by Sagal (see below), the word "slay" is used twice (by Sagal and Hodan Yusuf), and the word "bish" twice (by Chinutay and Hodan Yusuf). Other words that can be categorised as badass are "kiss your ass goodbye" (Aaliyah JM), "raw" (Ascia), "coolest hooyo" (Hodan Yusuf) and "Cool-Girl" (Maria Alia). Four of those posts are related to motherhood. At other times I interpreted a blogger's style or pose as badassness (as opposed to princess-like/romantic).

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed badass femininity as a heteronormative and aesthetic performance of strong and entrepreneurial femininity that is used for navigating through marginalising structures. In this section, I look at the meaning of badassness in the context of mommy culture. There is a lack of academic studies on the notion of badass motherhood, but examining some popular books, articles and mommy blogs reveals that being a badass mom means being: (1) good/successful, (2) tough/strong/self-sacrificing, (3) happy/self-fulfilled, and (4) attractive (weather flawed or flawless), despite the stress that comes with motherhood. Mothers call themselves and each other badass in an uplifting way and give each other credit for their hard work and maternal qualities, relating to McRobbie's discussion of "the rhetoric of heroism" (2009: 80). Badass motherhood seems to counter ideas of traditional motherhood, but remains quite gendered, because it is a coping mechanism for all kinds of labour women are expected to do. So, badass femininity is first and foremost an aspirational self-brand embedded in the attention economy.

The badass mom subversively pushes the boundaries of femininity by moving away from elegant and respectable motherhood conventions, since badass motherhood is about self-care as much as self-sacrifice. It resists religious/cultural conservatism with its visibility of feminine beauty and families' private matters. For veiled Muslim women, branding oneself as cool or slay despite or due to motherhood, hijab, ethnicity and so forth, could relate to: belonging to their generation; fitting in as a mother; participating in a bourgeois Instagram culture; being a modern consumer; normalising the hijab and countering stereotypes; and inspiring other women.

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[102] https://nourka.com/blogs/nourkaco-blog/girl-boss-spotlight-nour-kaiss
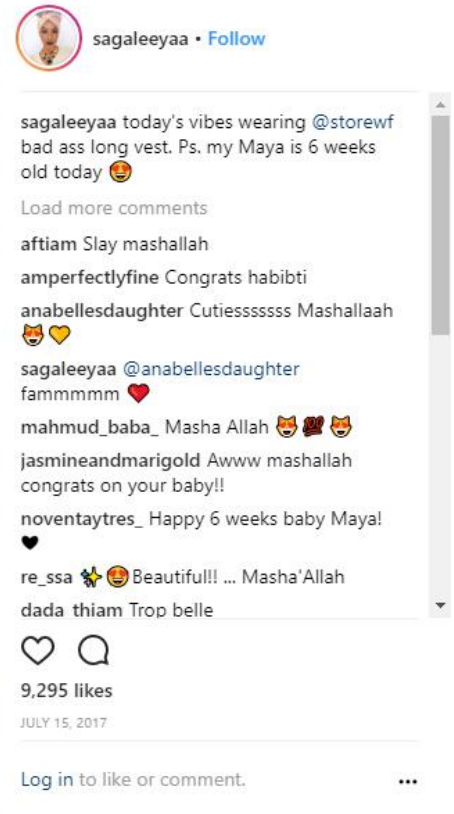
✔️ @sagaleeyaa, 15 July 2017

In this display of new motherhood, Sagal (@sagaleeyaa) poses in a stylish outfit in what looks like a residential area. She is wearing a navy sequined long vest, black bell sleeve top, shiny handbag, sunglasses and red lipstick. She crosses her legs and holds her pram loosely. The caption announces: "today's vibes wearing @storewf bad ass long vest. Ps. my Maya is 6 weeks old today 😍". Posting this picture within a few weeks postpartum, raises questions about the ways in which women are (disproportionally?) rewarded on social media for looking glamorous or badass so soon postpartum, and creating social media content featuring modern maternity products. With regards to sexuality, hijab fashion differs from other subcultures on Instagram, and earlier postfeminist cultures, especially concerning their focus on regaining and displaying a 'sexy body' as soon as possible after childbirth. However, Sagal's post demonstrates that postfeminism is still a dominant paradigm in gender representation: "being a successful mother now requires as much effort being expanded on the self and on body image as on caring for and bringing up the children, indeed, the latter depends on the former."[103] Perceived as such, Sagal's display of stylish badass motherhood creates a new standard for modern femininity and reinforces "norms of respectable middle-class life" (McRobbie, 2013b: 142).

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[103] Angela McRobbie, 24 April 2012, ANGELA MCROBBIE - FEMINISM, NEOLIBERALISM AND FAMILY: HUMAN CAPITAL AT HOME https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bv8a4V8CE6c 34:30

One of Sagal's followers commented on her outfit by using the word 'slay', which is a widely used word on social media at the moment of writing, and is similar to badass. Its literal meaning is "to kill", but when used in popular culture it means being "extremely impressive, stylish, or successful", according to Oxford Dictionary.[104] Some argue the word was popularised on social media after singer Beyoncé used it in her song FORMATION (see 4.3.2), in which it refers to Black women's power in the face of racist violence (Johnson, 2016). In popular use, the word slay has been detached from its political context, and is mainly used by women to compliment each other's impressive style or attitude. Similar to the term badass, in the context of motherhood, the term slay is used to express admiration for mothers' hard work, for example in the following way: "You are slaying the mental load of motherhood every single day, mama."[105] It is also used for branding the self as a beautiful and resilient mother, such as in the following post.

✔️ @hodan.ysf, 26 July 2017

Dutch blogger Hodan Yusuf (@hodan.ysf) captioned this Instagram selfie: "Slayyin mumlife since '08". Arguably, Hodan powerfully opens up notions of the ideal family by claiming space within the beauty, fashion and mommy blogosphere to represent single, Black, working class, veiled, Muslim motherhood. That said, most followers in the comment section praise Hodan's beauty, thus their focus is not on Hodan's accomplishments as a mother or her children as persons, and neither on the anti-

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[104] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/slay
[105] https://www.mother.ly/life/you-are-slaying-the-mental-load-of-motherhood-every-single-day-mama

racism work she does, but more on how her daughter reflects on her (Collett, 2005): "Masha Allah walaalo you and your daughter are both beautiful", comments her follower @aisha_tarah. In contemporary discourses of motherhood, "the modern woman is not 'that name' unless she is in possession of a well-dressed toddler or 'mini me'" (McRobbie, 2013b: 142). In this light, it could very well be the case that being praised as beautiful is the ultimate compliment, because it stands for social recognition. However, the emphasis on beauty in bloggers' motherhood pictures is rooted in the postfeminist belief that maternity should not affect beauty, something which can be shown and enhanced through consuming the right products.

hodan.ysf • Follow
90's Kid

hodan.ysf Coolest hooyo from the block. #bershka

View all 37 comments

lifelongpercussion Coolest hooyo in the world

makeupbysamiraa THE COOLEST!!

golden.illy Slaying everyday

jamila_habib @lifelongpercussion awh schattig

zamzam_abd.ul @ashan.loki i needa sweater like this

somalikidsclothes You got that right!

rayasloom Bershka

rukiaalim Gorgeneous Hooyo mashaallh

mwah.mee I love the fact that she put Hooyo in there n not mom

neasevba You look so beautiful mashaAllah

6,164 likes

APRIL 23

Log in to like or comment.

✅ @hodan.ysf, 23 April 2018

In this photo, Hodan (@hodan.ysf) poses in a track suit with text, white sneakers, sunglasses and big hoop earrings, with her jacket slid off her shoulders and her body slightly turned away from the camera, against a green garage door. In The Netherlands, these garages are typical found in working-class blocks of flats, which gives the photo a street-fashion look. Caption: "Coolest hooyo from the block. #berschka". This post is drawing on a famous line from Jennifer Lopez' song JENNY FROM THE BLOCK (2002), in which Lopez sings about staying humble and close to her Bronx roots, despite her fame.[106] Working class here does not mean anything derisive, on the contrary, it is mainly a positively connoted

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[106] Jennifer Lopez, 3 October 2009, JENNIFER LOPEZ - JENNY FROM THE BLOCK (OFFICIAL MUSIC VIDEO) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dly6p4Fu5TE

aesthetic that signals badassness. Hodan's reference to her "block", combined with her performance of a 90s African-American or Latina femininity (track suit and hoop earrings) and the Somali word for mother ("hooyo") create a type of badass motherhood that can thus be situated in Black working class and celebrity culture of Hodan's generation. However, posing in a track suit could simply be a way of relating to a younger demographic that likes this current trend of street wear.

In my sample in general, and Hodan's images in specific, badass motherhood is not represented in a singular way: instead, bloggers switch between classed, ethnic and generational styles. This supports earlier observations that popular fashion "does not present women with a single definition of femininity but a range of feminine 'looks'. Furthermore, women are often encouraged not only to select a feminine look, but also to move between feminine looks" (Hollows, 2000: 156). This sounds quite diverse, however, the keyword here is "feminine": most cool, slay or badass outfits still stay within the normative boundaries of what is considered heterosexually attractive.

✔️ @dinatokio, 21 June 2017

A 37-weeks pregnant Dina (@dinatokio) is posing with her "mini me" daughter,[107] wearing a twinning outfit that is more of a badass than typically feminine aesthetic, consisting of baggy black sweat suits, white sneakers and black/grey flowery backpacks: "Me and Hana matching with our @tibaandmarl bags! Mine is a changing bag ready to put to good use when the little one arrives and Hana gets to match with mama making her feel involved and special amidst all the baby talk at home! I strongly suggest you check them out for more epic changing bags, making mums feel like themselves for a change! @tibaandmarl […] #37weeks". This post defies gender norms, since it features non-stereotypical outfits for women/girls, does not display a carefully styled baby-bump, and aims to support other (second-time) mothers. Having said that, this post does normalise creating content when 37 weeks pregnant, and moreover, suggests that motherhood is a more pleasant experience when having the right changing bag, and being able to dress your child in a twinning outfit. It demonstrates a link between motherhood and consumerism whereby "[s]hopping for commodities is, in this scheme, an act of love" (Landsman, 2004: 105). There is a simultaneous loosening of beauty norms and tightening of motherhood norms. Thus, according to this post, badass motherhood still requires a certain amount of labour.

I demonstrated the ways in which mommy culture facilitates women's exchange of motherhood experiences, whereby women may give each other credit for enduring motherhood challenges but may also emulate and compete in middle-class taste. On Instagram, mommy culture produces maternal archetypes such as the princess/queen mother and the badass mom. As a continuation of the can-do/top girl, badass/kick-ass and lady boss figures, these maternal archetypes model postfeminist combinations of language, attitude and appearance. Mommy culture forms the context in which mumpreneurs operate, which is discussed in the following section.

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[107] This is her own formulation on Instagram, 22 February 2018.

5.4.3 Mumpreneur

Certain bloggers in my sample can be described as mumpreneurs, for instance NourKa (@nourka92) who describes herself in her Instagram Bio as "Mompreneur", pictured on the left (although at the time of writing it has been changed into "Mom • Entrepreneur"). According to a report in 2014, there are around 300,000 mumpreneurs in the UK whose (online) businesses bring about £7.4 billion to the economy on an annual basis (Richomme-Huet and Vial, 2014: 19). Whereas some of these women self-identify as mumpreneurs, other women argue that the term is unprofessional or sexist, especially since men are not called "dadpreneurs" (Richomme-Huet and Vial, 2014: 19; Littler, 2017: 187; Newhouse, 2018: 119). Some mumpreneurs were blogging/enterprising first and then got children, some started a business when they entered motherhood because they recognised a lucrative opportunity in the mommy culture niche, and yet others see enterprising as a solution to the challenge of combining career and family demands—in other words, the gendered division of labour (Jean and Forbes, 2012: 115; Richomme-Huet and Vital, 2014: 19; Newhouse, 2018: 149).
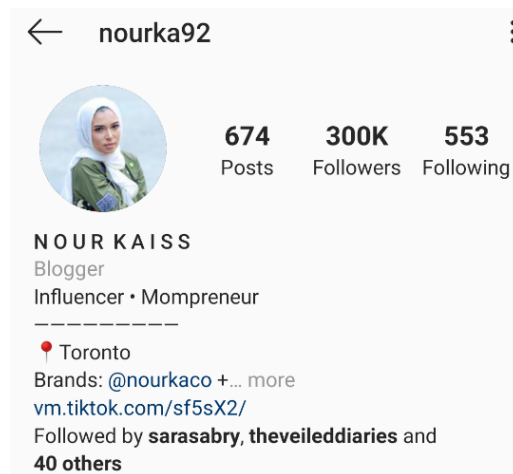
@nourka92, 9 April 2020

In any case, many mumpreneurs find their lifestyle empowering, because it enables them to "have it all" (McRobbie, 2013a: 130; Krueger, 2015: 28; Duffy, 2017: 187). However, entrepreneurialism is often disproportionally glamorised and romanticised in bloggers' online content, as part of creating an aspirational image. The promise of having it all has postfeminist roots, and could add to women's pressure of performing an ideal femininity: "they are expected to be well-educated, pursue a successful career, catch the perfect romantic partner and effortlessly combine paid work with motherhood" (Robinson, 2008: 139, see also: Negra, 2009). While mumpreneurship seems to provide women with more options in life, working long hours in a precarious job and having an "always-on career" makes "achieving a work-life balance […] elusive—if not beyond reach" (Duffy, 2017: 205, 214; see also: Littler, 2017: 187). In bloggers' online content, a discussion about these issues seems to be lacking. I only came across Amena's critique: "One of the ideas that I never want to propagate, and I realise perhaps I do, is this idea that I am some kind of superwoman, or that women can be in a position where they are able to do everything, particularly if they're mums […] I don't think we have to cap off

our ambitions, but I feel like the idea that women can do everything, is really harmful to us as women, because we can't."[108]

Moreover, the mumpreneur archetype is, beside postfeminist, of neoliberal capitalist character. Although the term mumpreneur first appeared in the late 1990s, its use grew exponentially after the 2008 financial crisis, which is indicative of the ways in which women are resorting to social media to cope with structural economic problems. The myth around the mumpreneur treats work and consumerism (market logic) as the main vehicles for progression (Vandenbeld Giles, 2014; Littler, 2017: 198). Littler (2017: 187) states that the mumpreneur archetype fits within the neoliberal trend of "extend[ing] markets into previously unremunerated zones" such as leisure and domesticity. Mothers are expected to self-optimise in the career-realm and self-sacrifice in the private realm (Vandenbeld Giles, 2014). Mothers are represented as ideal entrepreneurs—"high-achieving, flexible, creative, multi-tasking" (Krueger, 2015: 2)—and these qualities are "presented as an inevitable result of motherhood" (Krueger, 2015: 42). This echoes Vandenbeld Giles' (2014) observation that "[t]he more mothers become integrated within the market, the more do essentialist maternalist conceptualization of mothering predominate." The trouble is, neoliberalism is not a "mother-centred" paradigm (Vandenbeld Giles, 2014), but a system in which mothers are assumed to "fill the gaps" caused by the "off-loading of responsibilities" by states (Wilton, 2017: 196). The postfeminist figure of the mumpreneur functions as an attempt of juggling these conflicting demands instead of protesting them collectively (Lagerwey, 2017: 3).

Wilton (2017: 191) observes that mumpreneurship is one of three options that Western women have discursively, with the other two options being "leaning in" and "opting out". Positively speaking, mumpreneurship means not having to compromise career-wise (or income-wise) and family-wise; leaning in means not being held back by your reproductive status; and opting out means the freedom to choose motherhood (Wilton, 2017: 191). However, in reality, due to such factors as class, age, sexuality, ethnicity, location, economy and family structure, these three options are not freely available to all women—and if women do have a choice, they may be judged and shamed for whatever they choose (Wilton, 2017: 193; Lagerwey, 2017: 7). To illustrate, interviewee #5 Jenan reflects on gendered online shaming: "even though [*Ascia*] is very much liked by most of the people, she gets a lot of criticism about traveling, and leaving her sons in Kuwait all the time [...]. I remember once, she had a breakdown, you usually see the positive sides of blogging but then she just couldn't handle it, she was crying, she was in tears, she was just asking people: 'why do you make it harder for me?'"

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[108] Amena, 16 May 2019, FEELING DOWN AND WHY THAT'S OK | AMENA'S FAMILY VLOG 73
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNP4J7P9U-4 5:15

Sørensen (2017: 297) explains that social pressure creates an ideal "choice" discursively: "the 'exceptional career mother' is construed as desirable, but risky in that it easily morphs into a 'failing career mother', thus leaving the 'part-time-working, good mother' as the least controversial subject position."

In this section, I explore what the mumpreneur archetype means for the self-representation of hijab fashion bloggers, such as having a career in the spotlights and displaying a stylish, middle-class, maternity aesthetics.

✔️ @sebinaah, 17 May 2018

This photo pictures Sebinaah (@sebinaah) in a black headscarf and smart pink blazer, who is tending to her 4-month-old baby: "Took Noah to his first PR event today". Compositionally, they only cover the lower half of the photo, while the upper half of the photo overlooks London's business district. While the photo's background represents the idea that fashion/beauty blogging gives her access to exclusive places, her focus on her child positions her as a good mother. With this post, Sebinaah essentially introduces her followers to her new work-life balance. She also sends a message to (mainstream) brands that she continues to be available for content creation: "we had an amazing time with all the lovely ladies from @elizabethardenuk – learnt all about their #prevage #antiaging range whilst taking

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in amazing views of #london ❤️ ". In order to stay relevant to brands and the Instagram algorithm, bloggers need to keep attending and blogging this kind of events, irrespective of their maternity status. Such issues are obscured by the way in which this photo's caption and background are glamorising the life of a blogger.

With regards to countering stereotypes and rebranding Muslim femininity, Sebinaah's post shows a number of things: that (veiled) Muslim women are not just stay-at-home mums; that they can also be good mothers while having a career; that hijab fashion is immersed in the neoliberal market and Muslim women are thus productive citizens; and that veiled Muslim women are relevant to the mainstream beauty industry and are thus good consumers. This kind of content can be inspiring for certain followers, such as interviewee #1 Chaimae, as they find it empowering to see that bloggers do not give up their career, despite the fact that "motherhood can be so time-consuming and mind-consuming, but their dream or their thing was to be a social media person [...] and they carried on and I think that's good." However, interviewee #2 Loubna negotiates this idealisation of entrepreneurialism by saying that Sebinaah gave up her office job when she became a mother, thus could not literally have it all; and that this furthers Sebinaah's precarity, despite her success, because she does not have a guaranteed salary; that the influencer industry could die out; and that she depends on family's support as she has to travel and attend events. Bloggers' family content is often a response to the neoliberal imperative to make private life profitable (Littler, 2017: 187). By including her baby, Sebinaah capitalises on her maternity so as to make her content more entertaining to followers, as reflected by interviewee #1 Chaimae: "I like it because I'm nosy, I like seeing what other people do, but to me it's almost like reality TV, you know. It's just watching people's lives [...]."

As discussed in the Literature Review, the digital context of content creation in which mumpreneur bloggers operate is often framed by the e-commerce industry itself as liberating and empowering (Jarrett, 2003; Fuchs and Fisher, 2015: 4). However, Web 2.0 creates "value-generation for the industry" from often unpaid and therefore exploited immaterial labour (Jarrett, 2015: 8). Therefore, scholars such as Jarrett (2015: 5) draw a parallel between women's digital labour and older Marxist feminist writings about the naturalised and unpaid domestic/reproductive labour of the housewife. This body of scholarship deconstructs discursive language that frames women's labour as natural, passionate and inevitable (Duffy and Hund, 2015). Duffy (2017: 134; see also: Abidin, 2016) reveals how expectations in the influencer industry discipline women more than men, illustrated by the "highly gendered forms of self-disclosure" of one's personal life, and having to focus "on commodities that adorn the (female) body". Having to represent oneself as entrepreneurial and empowered while also returning to traditional femininity/attractiveness, is a postfeminist phenomenon that Duffy and Pruchniewska (2017: 845) call "a digital double bind", based on McRobbie's (2009) concept of the

postfeminist "double entanglement". Beside adhering to a traditionally masculine definition of entrepreneurial success, women entrepreneurs were expected "to assume additional risk and engage in invisible labor" to maintain an online presence and self-promote (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017: 845).

Despite the fact that mumpreneur microcelebrities may benefit money-wise from a life in the spotlight, they do give up a great part of their privacy because of the online confessional culture (Harris, 2003, cited in Duffy and Hund, 2015: 7), and engage in digital labour that often remains unpaid or underpaid. Women's digital labour consists of aesthetic labour, emotional labour (see below) and relational labour, which are online (self-)branding strategies aimed at gaining followers' loyalty (Jarrett, 2015: 8; Duffy, 2017: 72).

Thus, mommy bloggers and mumpreneurs seem to operate within this unique and gendered context in which their digital labour (content creation or online business) intersects with their maternal domestic/reproductive labour, intensified by social media exposure (keeping the house tidy and creating motherhood content), glamour/aesthetic labour (maintaining bodily appearance and social media accounts), and emotional labour of self, family and of followers (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Wissinger, 2015; Kanai, 2017a; Wilson and Yochim, 2017; Newhouse, 2018: 133). Both unpaid domestic work and unpaid/underpaid digital work are exploited *and* at the same time socially meaningful to the ones labouring, which makes it all the more "important for this work to be understood and valorised using concepts that come from women's experience" (Jarrett, 2015: 14). That said, what often stays invisible or undiscussed as well is that some of these bloggers, such as Ascia, are in a position to do digital labour because they are incredibly privileged in certain other respects: whether they come from wealthy households/countries, are able to hire nannies and maids, have supportive families, or are ethnically privileged. That does not take away from the fact that they work hard for their success, but it does illustrate the meritocratic myth of equal opportunities.

The emotional labour of mumpreneurs often centres around the postfeminist topics of confidence, ambition and persistence. In her research on mumpreneurs' relational support, Newhouse (2018: 122) found that mumpreneurs do emotional work by building confidence through dealing with fears and accepting their "own discomfort and shifting emotions". They also do emotional labour by supporting themselves and each other emotionally (online) by discussing anxiety issues or posting "confidence boosters" that shape their "mindset to get them through challenges" related to motherhood and entrepreneurship (p. 133). This boost in self-esteem, in turn, boosts their businesses, according to the mumpreneurs themselves (p. 124). The following post by Ascia (@ascia) shows that emotional labour

is part of the mumpreneur's self-brand of being authentic, caring, passionate, hard-working, kick-ass, empowered and empowering.

✅ @ascia, 8 April 2018

In this studio setting, decorated like a desert tent, Ascia (@ascia) is carrying her second son in a baby sling from her own brand. She used the caption to relate to her followers by discussing such motherhood issues as the postpartum body and emotional wellbeing: "Three week old Noah for our @desertbabykuwait shoot left unretouched because so many women messaged me after my last post to ask when they're going to feel normal again after birth. […] Give yourselves time. Your body made a HUMAN BEING. A little weight, a little (okay a lot for me) of acne is normal, and so are some baby blues. Talk with your partner, go on walks, get some headspace. You're just as much a priority as your new little one". It shows that promoting mommy culture products goes hand-in-hand with offering maternal followers support and motivation. The image connects caring for her baby with caring for her followers. Visually, this photo contains elements that represent Ascia's traditional culture, such as the Sadu weaving details, and elements that represent traditional motherhood, such as lovingly carrying a baby in a sling, smiling and staring down, wearing a dressed-down outfit (instead of drawing attention

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to herself). These elements symbolically connect traditional culture to traditional motherhood, in order to create an ambience of authenticity that, ironically, constructs her as a modern entrepreneur. It depicts an ideal of successful and modern motherhood yet with a caring and traditional feel to it. Ascia's—and Sebinaah's—posts are exemplary of the mumpreneur genre, because they curated their photos in such a way that they represent themselves as "the perfect combination of the liberated woman and the nurturing mother figure" (Wilton, 2017: 198). The mumpreneur archetype is thus postfeminist in the sense that it represents empowerment as a combination of progressive, entrepreneurial femininity and a (re)turn to traditional, maternal femininity.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed hijab fashion bloggers' presentation of the self as professional and their romanticising of entrepreneurial life. The display of entrepreneurial femininity makes up a significant part of my data, and is all about female ambition, strength, resilience, independence, and juggling gendered labour. The bloggers' equation of empowerment with entrepreneurialism relies heavily on postfeminist discourses of confidence and achievement. The feminine archetypes they portray bear a resemblance to the earlier postfeminine archetype of the can-do/top girl, and the decades-old concept of girl power.

Entrepreneurial femininity is an important archetype to Muslim women for countering both cultural/patriarchal and Islamophobic ideas of veiled Muslim women as being held back by their hijab, less deserving of success, or simply low-class. In that sense, entrepreneurial femininity is a proud and subversive display of power in a marginalised context, aimed at navigating societal inequalities successfully. Veiled Muslim women showcase their achievements with which they demand respect and an upper/middle-class position in Western societies. Although entrepreneurial content is most inspiring and motivating to some of my interviewees for these anti-Islamophobic reasons, its underlying neoliberal discourse does tend to turn feminism into a unidimensional, meritocratic and postfeminist project that centres on achievement.

My data indicates that an entrepreneurial concept of empowerment is part of a common marketing language between bloggers/influencers, followers and brands—and applying this discourse would enhance bloggers' relevance in the influencer industry. In the attention economy, bloggers are often expected to become (corporate) motivational speakers, instead of feminist role models for social change. As a result, feminism may be turned into a motivational self-help discourse and a component

of self-branding, instead of social justice politics. This entrepreneurial self-branding is aided by visual displays of entrepreneurialism, consisting of photos of women at work (devices); striking confident and attractive power poses or returning to posing with cars; and constructing magical femininity by wearing power suits. Images also contain motivational speech; a graduation scene; such buzzwords as kick-ass or girl power; and such archetypes as the top girl, badass, lady boss or mumpreneur. In order to demonstrate the idealisation of entrepreneurialism, I discussed the role of post-racial aesthetics in mainstreaming the hijab (@summeralbarcha); blurring the boundaries between work and leisure (@amenakhan); displaying entrepreneurialism when selling products (@lifelongpercussion); overcoming struggles as badassness (@nourka92, @shahdbatal); travelling to luxurious destinations (@hijabhills); and presenting oneself as effortlessly Instafamous (@saufeeya).

The paradoxical challenging of some gender norms while reinforcing others forms a pattern throughout my data and is typical of a postfeminist double entanglement of feminist language and anti-feminist sentiment, and of seeing feminism as common sense while repudiating it at the same time (McRobbie, 2009). For instance, through the archetype of kick-ass femininity, Muslim female entrepreneurs are celebrated (which helps counter sexism, racism and Islamophobia), while the norm of achieving success through consumerism, entrepreneurialism and an aesthetic social media presence is reinforced (which reproduces neoliberalism, classism, gendered labour and heteronormativity). A kick-ass archetype is a powerful exception to the oppressed Muslim woman stereotype, as she has the potential to lead social change. However, in my data, this archetype is ultimately used to tell stories about reaching neoliberal success. Moreover, because this figure is embedded in Instagram's beauty community, kick-ass femininity is also represented as a bodily property (@ibtihajmuhammad).

In section 5.4 about the mommy culture genre, I noted that the celebration of aesthetics and a sense of community can support women in their future/new motherhood roles. However, I also demonstrated how the professionalisation of motherhood and the glamorisation of entrepreneurialism obscure the social media pressures that affect (maternal) bloggers. The forms these pressures take include: a competition in middle-class taste; self- and peer-surveillance; digital labour and emotional labour. This genre is normative in that it encourages women to think about motherhood—the 'climax' of womanhood—through consumerism and visibility. Although bloggers do show flawed or realistic images of themselves, I suggested that there is a split in their use of social media platforms. That is, bloggers display perfect motherhood pictures on Instagram to attract brands and uphold an aspirational fantasy to followers, and more realistic images on YouTube to increase their perceived authenticity among followers. These motherhood aesthetics thus raise the bar even further with regards to the expectations veiled Muslim women are expected to live up to, given the already existing pressures of sexism, racism and Islamophobia.

In this chapter, I also discussed the royal mother archetype, who offers a postfeminist fantasy of magically feeling like oneself through consumerism, amidst all the child-rearing (@nabiilabee, @yazthespaz89); or an entrepreneurial matriarch who empowers the next generation (@amenakhan); and the slaying badass mom, who goes fiercely against some traditional notions of motherhood (@hodan.ysf). Women compliment each other with the term badass or incorporate it in their self-brand, to signal how well they are juggling their responsibilities and how well they look while doing that. Badass femininity is represented in a multitude of classed, ethnic and generational ways, yet stays within the normative boundaries of what is considered heterosexually attractive—due to the digital double bind (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017: 845). For instance, I discussed the paradox of dressing in progressive gender-neutral outfits that, for a change, do not show off the usual baby bump (@dinatokio), while normalising content creation in a period in which one would ideally receive paid maternity leave. Inadvertently or not, this raises the bars of motherhood and complies with the demands of microcelebrity. Glamorous images obscure the fact that badassness is often adopted as a way of navigating marginalising structures.

The commercialisation and surveillance of private maternal moments and spaces, and the resulting amalgamation of work and family life, is normalised by the mumpreneur archetype. Mumpreneurs combine entrepreneurship with motherhood in a myriad of ways in their lives, which is presented as the closest a woman can get to 'having it all'. As shown in the chapter, bloggers idealise the mumpreneur by modelling an exemplary work-life balance and taking babies to work (@sebinaah); or taking care of children while also doing emotional labour for followers (@ascia). The mumpreneur combines an empowered entrepreneurial femininity with a traditional maternal femininity. Although some interviewees appreciate this content or find it relatable, some reject this content as a neoliberal discourse of female entrepreneurship. Mumpreneur content obscures the fact that entrepreneurialism may be a necessary form of coping with the (unpaid) roles that are put on women and are not alleviated by men, governments and the neoliberal market.

Although feminism is gaining more visibility and women's/mothers' wellbeing is being discussed in bloggers' content, the images examined in this chapter primarily reflect postfeminist notions of empowerment, meritocratic understandings of success (the American Dream), and consumerist and classed approaches to maternity. The entrepreneurial femininities in my data serve to cope with the demands for upward social mobility, but may simultaneously alienate Muslim women who are more affected by structural inequalities than what hard work can overcome. This results in a divide between *successful* Muslim women who embody a meritocratic idea of endless possibilities, and other Muslim women who are held individually responsible for their own marginalisation. Within this entrepreneurial discourse, meritocratic myths, therefore, undermine conversations about structural

inequality and discrimination. Instead, they shift attention from the Islamophobic exclusion of the hijab to personal courage and ambition to wear it and become successful in spite of it.

Ultimately, I complicated existing literature about entrepreneurial femininity by acknowledging the axis of religion in the intersectional matrix. By representing themselves as entrepreneurial, hijab fashion bloggers rebrand veiled Muslim femininity as ambitious, successful, integrated, productive, independent and upper/middle-class, which are all markers of modernity (Moors, 2009a: 192). Motherhood is an important factor in rebranding Muslim women as authentic, caring, passionate, traditionally feminine and badass. As McRobbie (2013b: 141) highlights, "marriage, motherhood and domestic life [are] a benchmark of successful femininity" in dominant discourses. Entrepreneurial, maternal and badass femininities thus form the ultimate opposite of the oppressed, confined and low-class Muslim woman stereotype. Perceived as such, hijab fashion becomes less about style and visibility, and more about respectability politics, class politics, functioning in the attention economy and hyper-countering Islamophobia.

In the chapter that follows, I examine how a general return to hyper-feminine beauty is framed as a progressive and empowering development.

6 Beauty as Empowerment

In the preceding chapters, I have demonstrated that hijab fashion bloggers in my case study primarily draw on popular feminism and entrepreneurialism in their representations of empowerment and femininity, which indicates the underlying presence of a neoliberal, postfeminist discourse. In this chapter, I explore the role of beauty in empowerment discourses and in rebranding Muslim femininity. Characteristic to the genre of hijab fashion, most images I collected revolve around beauty, makeup and fashion. Out of 161 images analysed, 65 images (40,4%) mainly showcase bloggers' beauty/makeup (of which two images show a no-makeup look), and 34 images (21,1%) specifically revolve around their outfits or fashion.

This chapter sets out to address the question of how beauty/femininity relates to feminism/empowerment in hijab fashion images. For decades, beauty and feminism were seen by multiple parties as mutually exclusive. Second-wave feminists have pointed out the ways in which the politics of beauty oppresses women (Holliday and Taylor, 2006: 180; De Beauvoir, 1949: 550; Bordo, 1993: 23; Bartky, 1991; Lazar, 2011: 37; Brownmiller, 1984: 158). Feminists were therefore stereotyped in popular culture as makeup-hating, too radical and too queer (Gill, 2008a: 37-38). However, many third-wave feminists conceptually unified makeup and feminism by validating (certain) beauty practices as a feminist practice of reclaiming and celebrating femininity on women's own terms (Bartky, 1990; Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Snyder, 2008: 180; Stuart and Donaghue, 2012: 99). Beside third-wave feminism, postfeminism also contributed to the unification of feminism and beauty through the notion of "empowered beauty" and other borrowings from feminist language (Lazar, 2014: 737, 2006: 508). Furthermore, the recent normalisation of feminism as a glamorous identity, as discussed in Chapter 4, led to more (media) platforms discussing and supporting feminist agendas. As such, younger generations experience the unification of feminism and beauty as a self-evident reality rather than a historical shift (Duffy, 2010: 29).

Given this renewed interest in feminism, one would expect widespread conversations and self-representations that—based on earlier feminist waves—radically rethink femininity and reject a focus on women's appearance. However, although many women do challenge beauty norms and promote body positivity, remarkably, progressive concepts are met with normative beauty practices that are continually reinforced, invented, exploited and shared in popular culture. This paradox is described by Banet-Weiser (2017: 266) as follows:

> [T]here is a seeming contradiction between initiatives that claim to empower girls and women to *resist* unrealistic and exclusionary standards of beauty, and media productions that instruct

or discipline them along these same lines, offering tutorials on how to precisely *achieve* these very same standards. Yet, I argue in this essay that corporate confidence campaigns and beauty vlogging together produce a gendered logic that is not contradictory but rather complementary. This gendered logic centres the 'empowered' feminine body as the source of aesthetic labour.

As Banet-Weiser (ibid.) explains, the crux of the matter is that these progressive and normative trends do not merely exist simultaneously, instead, they are two "complementary" sides of the same postfeminist coin. Beauty and (entrepreneurial) empowerment form a "double entanglement" with a heavy presence in conversations and representations in the beauty community (McRobbie, 2009: 6). Typical of the postfeminist double entanglement, bloggers create "new femininities" that are progressive yet excessively feminine (McRobbie, 2007; 2009)—or in Cvajner's (2011) words, "hyper-feminine". Hyper-femininity is defined by Allan (2009: 145) as "sassy, sexy and successful", but I primarily understand it to mean beautification, a bodily focus, and an emphasis on feminine traits.

A central fascination within gender studies has been the question of why "women willingly comply with a structure of expectation" that revolves around "hyper-femininity" as a means of constructing "new femininities" (Cvajner, 2011: 358). Some consider this "an erasure of earlier efforts of feminism" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006: 263). A return to hyper-femininity is especially ironic in my case study, since Muslim women (finally) have the tools to take their representation into their own hands and create (modest) gender constructions independently of the mainstream beauty industry. Traditionally, scholars explained women's (re)turn to hyper-femininity with theories about false consciousness and the male gaze (Cvajner, 2011: 358). However, contemporary scholars have offered more complicated views, such as pointing out that technological and ideological changes have resulted in women's peer-surveillance, which is also called a "girlfriend-gaze" (Winch, 2013), a "gynaeopticon" (Winch, 2015: 231) or "surveillant sisterhood" (Elias and Gill, 2018: 67). More often than not, the female gaze reproduces (hetero)normative ideals of femininity, and should therefore remain a feminist concern (Gill, 2016b: 4).

Nevertheless, there are other ways of understanding the return to the body as the site of (Muslim) femininity. For example, Stuart Hall (2005: 473-474) invites us to see minorities' bodily presentations in a different and useful way: "think of how these cultures have used the body—as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation. [...] since we were excluded from the cultural mainstream, [these] were often the only performative spaces we had left." In section 6.1.2 I discuss additional ways of understanding this (re)turn to the body as the site of femininity.

With the above in mind, I discuss in this chapter an overall return to traditional feminine beauty in hijab fashion, consisting of a heteronormative return to hyper-feminine beauty practices (section 6.1), a classed return to classic beauty icons (section 6.2), and a raced return to Orientalism (section 6.3). Naturally, these categories of gender, class and race overlap in the data, but separating them analytically in the respective sections shows their central role in hijab fashion images.

6.1 Return to Hyper-Femininity

An example of the contemporary unification of feminism and femininity can be found in Ascia's Instagram Story below, in which she asks her followers: "Film my preventive Botox for YouTube? Heck yea/ew no". The next slide in her Instagram Story zooms in on the newly tattooed text on her hand, which reads: "GRL PWR". The very visual combination of her feminism and her botox treatment seems like a strong paradox since to some, botox signifies a return to monitoring women's beauty. For others, however, botox symbolises free choice and self-expression (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006: 261). The postfeminist double entanglement of feminism and beauty is embodied by the beauty blogger who operates between progressive discourses of femininity (in order to stay relevant for followers) and normative femininity (in order to stay commercially interesting for brands).
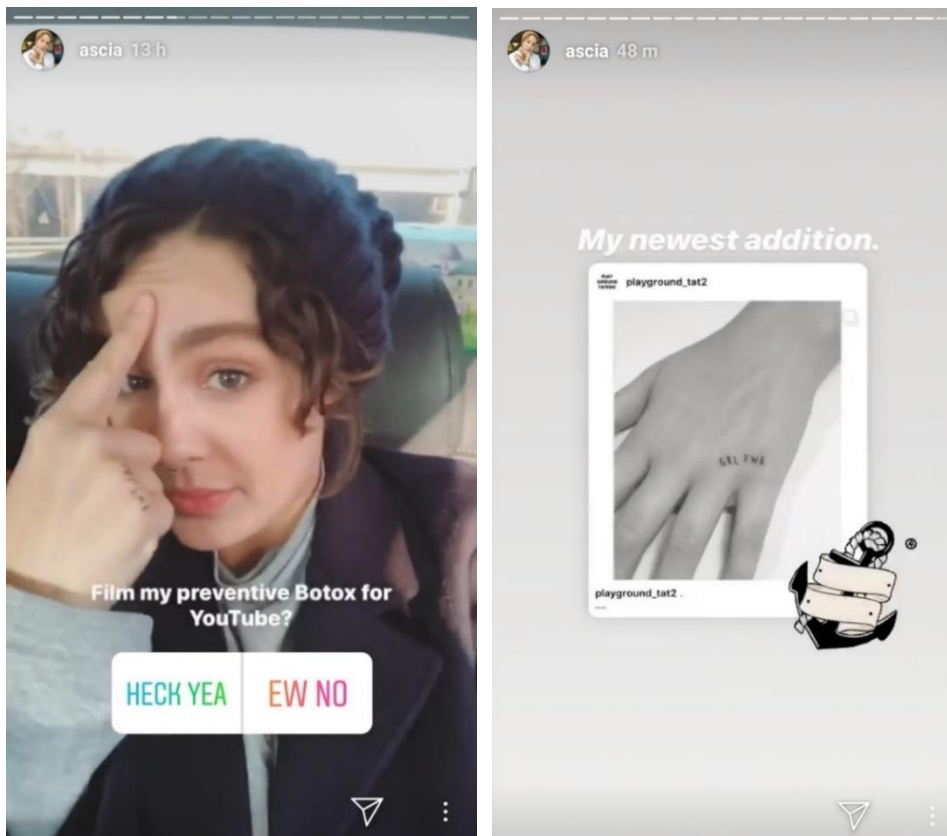
@ascia, Instagram Story, 20 December 2018

This section shows how beauty is centralised to bloggers' representation of empowered femininity. Enabled by a conceptual unification of feminism and femininity, the return to hyper-femininity is embedded in and justified by a feminist language of body-positivity (section 6.1.1), confidence (section 6.1.2), self-care (section 6.1.3) and choice and transparency (section 6.1.4).

6.1.1 Body Positivity

The beauty industry has undergone several changes due to technological developments and the body-positivity movement. Body positivity is a relatively new (social media) discourse in which feminist language and values are incorporated to celebrate women's diverse bodies and encourage self-acceptance (which is similar to messages found in femvertising, see section 4.4). Body-positive self-representations on social media celebrate diversity in body type, size, skin colour, ability, age, religion, taste, sexuality, gender queerness and more (Cwynar-Horta, 2016: 2). Not just feminists, but journalists, consumers, influencers and beauty brands all contribute to body-positive conversations that challenge beauty standards and promote self-love (Cwynar-Horta, 2016: 8; Cohen et al., 2019). The body-positivity movement popularised a feminist vocabulary of 'intersectionality', 'collective action', 'social change' and 'challenging established norms'—which in turn rapidly changed the beauty industry's marketing language and images. An online cancel culture or call-out culture of accountability also transformed the interaction between brands, influencers and consumers (Ahmad, 2015; Clark, 2020).

Body-positive representations are extremely necessary, given the fact that modern technologies enable a culture in which people are expected to be camera-ready at all times, to edit and fix their flaws in apps, and to scrutinise each other's pictures online (Elias and Gill, 2018: 59). They are also needed after an earlier postfeminist period in which thin, White (often American), upper/middle-class, able and sexualised bodies were preferred as the beauty norm. Arguably, body-positive messages and visibility politics are important to minorities and women who got excluded from traditional beauty ideals, such as veiled Muslim women. Some argue that "telling people they are beautiful when they need to hear it" gives such groups confidence and recognition as opposed to negative messages.[109] However, the body positivity discourse is often used in commodified contexts. When marginalised women gain visibility in popular culture, they often become "the target for corporate America in terms of cultivating specific markets" (Banet-Weiser, 2007: 215). Moreover, although (consumer) activists

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[109] Jackie Aina, 1 December 2018, WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT SKIN BLEACHING... | JACKIE AINA https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YhxShoeIz4 8:40

positively influenced gender representations, body positivity only became a mainstream trend when industries realised it is lucrative. Commenting on these developments, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006: 260) argue that:

> [I]t is in fact true that media representations of women are more 'positive' in the contemporary climate, but it is equally true that these positive representations are part of aggressive new market strategies rather than indications of social and political changes within dominant gender relations in the US.

The question is whether the current body-positivity movement and diversity and inclusion trend will be able to radically change gender constructions. Although the body-positivity trend brings about positive changes to many women, it is worth pointing out that, firstly, sexist beauty standards were fought many times before but have been reinforced repeatedly.[110] Secondly, in body-positive and diverse representations, the focus is still on bodily appearance—albeit presented as a form of celebrating the body, rather than policing it. Thirdly, while body-positive and self-love messages sound positive, many mixed messages are being circulated online, usually by one and the same person, or within the same conversation. For instance, some bloggers state that "Instagram is ruining body standards," while raising the bar of beauty standards in their content.[111] Similarly, bloggers speak about the importance of inner beauty rather than outer beauty, but accompany this with a photo that shows off a makeup look—such as in Amena's (@amenakhan) image below, captioned: "Beauty is not only about visual aesthetics. It's about living your truth and growing as a human being."

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[110] See for example, Susan Orbach (1978), Naomi Wolf (1990) and Susan Faludi (1991)
[111] Jackie Aina, 24 April 2019, Unpopular Opinions About INSTAGRAM | Jackie Aina
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XC5N133B204 4:45

Many body-positive conversations take place within online beauty spaces, while ironically, bloggers also rely on this same industry to maintain their business. The beauty industry essentially "promotes hegemonic ideals of beauty" so there is limited space for a body positivity trend to provide radical critique (Murray, 2015: 75). In fact, by borrowing from a feminist lexicon, media content *sounds* feminist, therefore it is harder to critique its anti-feminist elements. When body positivity is included (superficially) in content, the critique on oppressive hyper-femininity is seemingly dealt with, thus women can then frame beautifying practices as motivated by individual choice, inclusivity, self-love and power (Bae, 2011: 28). As Lazar (2009: 371) noted, "[t]he ambivalence, it is argued, contributes to fostering a culture of post-critique, which numbs resistance and deflects criticism."

Concerningly, it thus seems that when body positivity is discussed in popular content, it serves more as a marketing tool for hyper-femininity than a tool for challenging hyper-femininity. Bloggers' self-representations are shaped by social media's unwritten rules on how to gain exposure, to compete, to feed trends and gain social and financial rewards. Beauty standards are intensified on social media: the online beauty community encourages constant self-work, which entails spending money and time (Gill and Orgad, 2017: 11). This postfeminist beauty politics is described by Thorpe et al. (2017: 374) as "entrepreneurial body-work"; by Wissinger (2015: 3) as "glamour labor"; and by Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017: 39) as "aesthetic labour" or "aesthetic entrepreneurship".

On a more positive note, tutorials that show women's step-by-step transformation approach beauty in a way that Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006: 364) have named "beauty-as-effort". They explain: "while the level of physical beauty is largely entrusted to luck, being a 'woman' is largely the result of will and competence [...] any of us could be beautiful if we commit ourselves to creating our own beauty" (ibid.). This approach is also embedded in progressive diversity and inclusivity trends that say, "we are all beautiful".[112] This discourse perhaps presents beauty in a manner that is more democratic, accessible, achievable and inclusive. Similarly, Cvajner (2011: 364) observed that, "[i]n this sense, the status of a 'woman who looks nice' is a status to which every woman should aspire, but most importantly, it is a status that cannot be denied to anyone: any of us could be beautiful if we commit ourselves to creating our own beauty." Further, some (minority) women experience "sisterhood" in celebrating femininity and complimenting each other's outfits and hairstyles.[113] Cvajner (2011: 365) described this as a "generative mechanism of beauty": women gain recognition for their womanhood from a beauty "community of women sharing the same ideal" and "who understand your efforts".

However, the fact that aesthetic labour heightens beauty standards on Instagram is quite evident. It manifests itself in certain practices and ideals. For example, hijab fashion content that adheres to the latest beauty norms receives likes and is commented on by followers with such words as "perfect", "stunning" and "mashallah", or trendy words as "flawless", "slayin'", "on point" and "on fleek".[114] Admiration for someone's beauty is expressed by the words "I'm obsessed" and "let's appreciate her beauty," or emojis as 😍 and 🔥. On Instagram and YouTube, an endless list of beauty ideals are linked to the appropriate products and treatments required: a mask exfoliates, a toner tightens pores, hyaluronic acid regenerates, serum radiates, primer smoothens, concealer brightens, foundation covers, contouring minimises, powder bakes, blush warms up, bronzer tans, highlighter glows, mascara defines, eyes charm, brows are on fleek, spray sets, lips pop/pout, teeth shine, and preferably some volume should be added to a headscarf.[115] Many of these makeup techniques were designed for celebrities to look good during photoshoots and filming, but in the age of influencers and smart phone cameras, beauty routines are extended to the expectation of everyday women in everyday life

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[112] https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2020/02/beauty-today-celebrates-all-social-media-plays-a-role-feature/

[113] Essence, 12 April 2019, BLACK WOMEN IN BEAUTY CHANGING THE INDUSTRY | UNCOVERED | ESSENCE https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1qvuofsW2M 3:00

[114] Often appropriated from African-American slang.

[115] I am leaving out ideal bodily features here since the hijab fashion bloggers from my sample do not very much emphasise these in their blogs, although I must note that body ideals do play a role in their lives and some of them have open-heartedly discussed (past) body image issues. In some cases, covering or modest dressing has been their way of resisting these societal pressures.

(Wissinger, 2015: 3; Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017: 38). This is also noticeable in makeup products' names, such as "Revlon Photo-ready Instafix" and "No 7 Airbrush Away Primer".

Certain images from my sample, see below, exemplify this relationship between makeup and cameras, respectively captured: "Yes to mirror selfies […]"; "Mandatory 'I'm feeling my makeup' selfie […] Photo taken with my @fujifilm_northamerica X-A3 cam"; and "Those Hotel Bathroom pictures before an Event". The relationship between beauty and technology is amplified by the selfie's ability "to underscore authenticity; it even draws attention to its own production, often for instance, taken in a mirror" (Williamson, 2020).

✅ @basma_k, 3 May 2016   ✅ @nourka92, 21 December 2017   ✅ @nabiilabee, 5 March 2018

As mentioned, beauty norms are upheld linguistically by "[t]he construction of conformity with beauty ideals as easy and normal [,] as relatively unproblematic and effortless" (Stuart and Donaghue, 2012: 118). In the instances when bloggers *do* speak of makeup as something that takes effort, it may be to highlight their own skills and expertise. Alternatively, bloggers speak about effort in relation to a part of aesthetic labour that they wish to reject, such in the case of Aaliyah (@aaliyah.jm) below: "I thought oh this holiday I'm going to make an effort with my eyes and put on eye shadow and I can't bring myself to it […] does anyone else hate wearing eyeshadow or am I just weird." At first instance, Aaliyah seems to protest the norm of wearing eyeshadow as a woman/blogger. However, she frames her action as caused by her laziness and deviance, which in fact, is a way of confirming the same norm.

Most of my interviewees reflect on their own vulnerability to Instagram's beauty standards and aesthetics and speak about measures they take, in terms of social media use, to protect their self-esteem. For instance, interviewee #1 Chaimae says about Leena (@withloveleena): "I know her. I don't really watch her videos, 'cause her life is too perfect, you know, she is too rich, her life is too perfect, she is too beautiful. There is no point in watching them. It's like, you know, drooling, like: 'I want her house, I want this, I want that,' so I don't follow her." Some interviewees distance themselves discursively from younger women in terms of vulnerability to media messages. For example, interviewee #3 Faiza says: "I don't think I'm that vulnerable to that anymore. I can just see it and appreciate it rather than see it and want to buy it for myself. But for younger girls, or people who perhaps aren't as comfortable in themselves, they might feel persuaded and I acknowledge that." Interviewee #8 Yousra endorses a complete steering away from hijab fashion on Instagram (and instead, looks up outfits on Google when she needs inspiration): "You don't have to try that hard to fit in, you have nothing to prove as a Muslim woman. You don't have to prove that you can wear the hijab and be fashionable. I don't understand the urge to do that […] I just don't think that that is what hijab is about. […] They just give this idea to young girls that you have to try to look very good and look very

fashionable. […] It puts an extra pressure, for sure. It's hard enough to wear the hijab, you don't need to prove anything else more."

Beside the body-positivity trend, my data reveal further concepts that frame a postfeminist reinforcement of beauty standards as empowering, which I discuss in the next section.

6.1.2 Makeup: Confidence and Empowerment

An additional concept that borrows from feminist language yet legitimises a return to hyper-femininity, is the notion that beauty enhances self-confidence and is therefore empowering. Within hijab fashion, this tendency is evident in the many representations of strong femininity that connect beauty with confidence. In a Sephora advertisement, Ibtihaj Muhammad (@ibtihajmuhammad) says: "I find makeup to be really empowering. When you look good, you feel good. I love putting on liner. I feel like it's this suit of armor, and I feel like I'm ready to take on the day. I'm ready to take on my next opponent."[116] And Dina Tokio (@dinatokio) says in a tutorial: "I tried to make this resolution […] which was a promise to myself to make just more of an effort with myself, purely to feel good about myself, because *God damn*, that really works, 'looking good, feeling good,' it really does."[117] Lazar (2011: 37) notices that a common advertising technique is to "link the normative practice of beautification with an emancipated identity," whereby outer beauty serves as a reflection of inner strength, confidence and uniqueness. Lazar (2014: 737) refers to this discourse as "empowered beauty" or "power femininity". Similarly, Favaro (2017: 286) observes that in advertising messages, "beauty is all about confidence". But whereas in earlier postfeminist discourse the end-goal of confidence was sexiness, this is now linguistically replaced by empowerment (ibid.).

Postfeminist discourse promotes "a celebration of all things feminine, including the desire for self-aestheticization", by stating that it is women's own free choice to do so and a sign of their power (Lazar, 2006: 505). Through a (visual) language of empowerment, women are not seen as being ruled by beauty standards, "but seemingly do what they love" (Thorpe et al., 2017: 370). Aside from the possibility that many women may experience makeup in this positive manner, the point is that it normalises aesthetic labour. If beauty is "emblematic of a confident, powerful femininity […] that is 'out and proud'" (Jackson and Scott, 2004: 241), does that imply that a woman without makeup is considered less feminine and powerful? The idea of beauty as empowerment relies heavily on products

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[116] http://allure.com/video/watch/olympic-fencer-ibtihaj-muhammad-favorite-liquid-eyeliner 00:48
[117] Dina Tokio, July 2019, HOW TO GET BIG VOLUME HAIR https://youtu.be/_n1Ui6jJiGo 1:50 (This video was taken offline early 2020, but it has been saved as part of my research).

and services provided by the fashion and beauty industry (Elias, Gill and Scharff, 2017: 11). Beauty also requires a growing amount of technology to be captured, such as vlog cameras, lighting equipment and filters. Together with social media's circulation of content, its addictive algorithms and (peer-)surveillance, beauty brands legitimise a simultaneous (re)turn to traditional gender roles and beauty standards (Lazar, 2009: 371), while positioning themselves as "providers of women's empowerment" (Lazar, 2006: 507).

Why does beauty play such a significant role in confidence and empowerment narratives? Murray (2015: 76) argues that "since the early twentieth century, consumer culture has encouraged women, regardless of race/ethnicity, class, or dis/ability, to beautify themselves as a means of social mobility." Similarly, Stuart and Donaghue (2012: 100) state that "[t]he cultural privilege attached to beauty creates a compelling reason for women to engage in beauty practices." Beautification is an investment that enhances women's social status within a market-driven, neoliberal society. Women who are conventionally beautiful, for example, have higher incomes, and this privilege is called the "beauty premium" (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994). Moreover, conventionally beautiful people "are considered more intelligent, more trustworthy, more likeable and more desirable" (Stuart and Donaghue, 2012: 100). Beside feminism (Chapter 4) and entrepreneurialism (Chapter 5), beauty seems the ultimate road to privilege, respectability, acceptance—and thus empowerment. Thus, it is not surprising that beauty is one of the ingredients in the rebranding of Muslim femininity on Instagram. However, due to the privileging of light skin, sexualised bodies, wealth and secularism, it is particularly challenging for certain Muslim women to meet dominant Instagram beauty standards. The incentive to nevertheless participate in this beauty culture, is rooted in postfeminist notions of empowerment. Thorpe et al. (2017: 370) point out that "[d]rawing attention to a postfeminist sensibility within culture helps us to see the pervasiveness of the language of self-responsibility to find a solution to [beauty] demands." There is more at stake (and thus more incentive) for veiled Muslim women here: if they reject dominant beauty ideals, there is generally more *merit* to lose than in the case of a non-Muslim or White woman of the same class, age and location.

It is hard to deny the ability of clothes and makeup to change people's (self-)perception, or the importance of it for many people in lived experiences. Beauty blogger NikkieTutorials describes what makeup meant to her after having been bullied: "it's like this armour of confidence."[118] This notion of beauty-based confidence as a form of empowerment may hold a similar importance to veiled Muslim women: if the hijab is marginalised, and beauty is valued highly in society, then hijab fashion and

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[118] NikkieTutorials, 20 December 2016, RECREATING + REACTING TO MY FIRST VIDEO EVER! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yyXUKniyKR8 1:49

makeup supposedly increase confidence. Kaw (2002) points out that, in an ethnic/religious minority context, beautifying practices may not be so much about achieving perfect beauty, as it is about trying to reach a point of normality and social acceptability. For example, Sebinaah (@sebinaah) opened up about her reason to wear makeup: although she knows that God created her and everyone beautifully in their own right, she admits wearing makeup to be socially acceptable.[119] And as interviewee #2 Loubna mentioned, hijab fashion bloggers play a role in making Muslim women feel more beautiful and therefore confident to wear the hijab: "I think it was brave for the pioneers when they started doing that because obviously they gave the way to the Muslim women to feel like: 'oh, I can dress nicely as well' […] Yeah I think I've been empowered by them in that way." Confidence would then stem from self-acceptance, meeting beauty standards or impressing people with new (hijabi) versions of those standards.

Cvajner (2011: 372) found that, for minority women, hyper-femininity is often a "compensative performance" and may "become one of the very few scripts available that make it possible to detach oneself from a degrading condition and claim one's right to social worth." Beauty would then be used, nearly subversively, to counter (women's internalisation of) Islamophobic narratives of Muslim women as powerless and ugly. Perceived this way, intensified beauty routines and empowerment are not opposites in these women's experiences, but ingredients of the same end goal: creating archetypes of female respectability and strength. Whereas earlier discourses of respectability might have focused on class mobility through hard work, current representations focus on achieving a higher status through style, dress and mannerism (Wolcott, 2001: 5). Contemporary Instagram aesthetics incites both working *and* middle-class women "to yearn for norms of middle class respectability and consumer culture", a tendency that can be found in many expressions of popular culture (McRobbie, 2013b: 141). In this story, beauty stands for taste, and taste stands for class (Lazar, 2014: 737).[120]

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[119] Sebinaah, 6 April 2016, SKIN LIGHTENING | #SEBINAAHSPEAKS https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRz0F652kTk 3:30

[120] The French sociologist Bourdieu offers a sociological theory that explains how taste and style are used to classify people and mark social distinctions between cosmopolitans and provincials, for example (Ponzanesi, 2014: 21; Bourdieu, 1984), or traditional and modern Muslims, for instance.

@withloveleena, 20 April 2018

In this advertisement, US-based Leena (@withloveleena) instrumentalises beauty/makeup to counter Islamophobic prejudices: "I #Liveboldly by wearing hijab in a place where it's not the norm. I love being able to clear up misconceptions and allow people to see that Muslim women are just like everyone else! I used [...] Lipstick in 'Certainly Red' for a bold lip. How do you live boldly?" These accounts suggest that empowerment is equated with being acknowledged in society as conventionally attractive. In other words, through ads and collaborations with beauty brands, Muslim women's empowerment is represented as being recognised in the fashion/beauty industry as consumers and influencers—and by proxy, being acknowledged as equal citizens in society. Kumar (2018) comments on this link between neoliberalist consumerism and inclusion in the national imagination: "Many Muslim women, especially those who grew up post-9/11, may find inclusion as consumers to be a reprieve from everyday Islamophobia. However, [c]ertain Muslim women who conform to expectations of patriotism and consumption are granted visibility, while others, like black Muslim women, are erased from the narrative [...]." This is also true for women who are excluded from such consumption based on class, ability and other reasons.

I argue that a continued focus on appearance of marginalised women problematically shifts the empowerment discourse from (marginalised) women's rights to equal treatment, equal opportunities, fair representation, protection against sexism/racism and so on, to "the right to be beautiful" and to be acknowledged as such (Lazar, 2011: 37). This shift is characteristic of the postfeminist depoliticisation of women's issues. The idea that Islamophobia can be countered and the hijab normalised through physical beauty is problematic from a feminist standpoint. This idea not only raises

questions pertaining to the actual impact fashion has in fighting Islamophobia, but also to the fact that it is sexist and conditional to expect Muslim women to look a certain way before accepting them.

From a marketing perspective, presenting beauty-based confidence as empowerment is a trend among bloggers that keeps them relevant as influencers (Wissinger, 2015: 14). It provides bloggers with a way of superficially addressing social media's role in perpetuating insecurities,[121] without acknowledging their own contribution to social media-induced insecurities. After all, they promote makeup as a tool for confidence and empowerment, and model what confidence looks like (Banet-Weiser, 2017: 272). The women I interviewed negotiate beauty images by reflecting on their own receptivity to and experience of the confidence discourse, and on the societal expectations and political economy surrounding bloggers' content. I mention a few of the many examples in my interview data:

#6 Amal

> I think that people address you how you are dressed, and they have certain perceptions of you, and also, when I look good, I feel good, I have a better day, so I just want to look nice, most of the time.

#1 Chaimae

> Empowerment *should* come from our inner beauty. What does empowerment mean to me? I don't know, it's confidence, it's just feeling like you can do anything, you can act however you want. And that's so sad that now it comes from makeup, or… to me as well, like, from fashion, from makeup, being well-kept, looking fashionable and yeah… it's sad but I'm a victim of that. […] We should feel empowered by our inner beauty, by even our outer beauty; by the way that God made us.

#4 Aissa

> Empowered… I don't know if empowerment is maybe too big of a word. But I do get it, I don't want to shame people for doing things that make them feel better, because I do it. I think makeup is a two-sided thing, on the one hand it's participating in consumerism and trying to look a certain way, but at the same time it can make you feel better. Maybe not empowered, that's a super heavy word to use for freaking makeup. But I do feel like makeup can make you feel good and then you feel ready for the day and you can go out and you know you look good.

Generally, my interviewees do experience makeup and fashion as strengthening their self-confidence. However, not all interviewees agree with bloggers using this message in their content, because to

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[121] For example, Shahd Batal, 10 March 2017, MY STRUGGLE WITH BODY IMAGE & SELF LOVE
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zn2TDot2Yfg 3:00

them, confidence and empowerment should ideally come from inner strength. Moreover, interviewees assert that too much exposure to beauty content on Instagram can exacerbate their and other girls' and women's insecurities.

Closely connected to the confidence discourse is the skincare trend, discussed in the next section. As several interviewees, such as #8 Yousra, indicated, this discourse plays into the idea or experience of confidence as dependent on having a smooth skin: "I put makeup because I have imperfections and I'm trying to make them less obvious. But if I had a really good skin, I wouldn't put makeup [sic]." Thus, women's interest in skincare is arguably at least as big as their interest in makeup—it is just embedded in a different discourse, as discussed next.

6.1.3 Skincare: Self-Care and Authenticity

Skincare is popular among bloggers because "makeup goes on smoother and better on better skin," according to Shahd.[122] Chinutay says the same (Instagram, 14 June 2018): "Seriously when you take care of your skin your makeup will always look flawless!". Skincare videos are standardly requested of bloggers by their followers and so they usually film a morning routine and a night-time routine, often using gifted products.[123] Bloggers frequently embed skincare in their self-care routine in which they destress, relax and pamper themselves, or in order words: "me-time" (Winch, 2013: 28). See for example this screenshot on the right of Shahd's drawer full of skincare products that she opens for her self-care day video, in which some candles, tea, reading and yoga also feature.[124] I see self-care as a discourse that is inspired by body positivity, wellness and mindfulness, and revolves around caring for and restoring the self, which is represented in particularly gendered ways on Instagram.

The social media trend of speaking about skincare as a form of self-care shows many resemblances with an earlier postfeminist focus on "pampering" and "pleasuring" as a form of "female entitlement" (Lazar, 2009: 396). In this narrative of indulgence, every modern woman deserves some self-care,

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[122] Shahd Batal, 29 January 2017, SKINCARE ROUTINE | ACNE PRONE, DARK MARKS, SENSITIVE & TEXTURED SKIN, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGwT15AmecQ

[123] Exceptions are Ascia (@ascia) who owns a skincare company, thus promotes their own products. Some bloggers, like Dina Tokio, do not post much about skincare.

[124] Shahd Batal, 11 September 2019, SELF CARE DAY: HITTING THE RESET BUTTON, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzbuVMeQTbE

preferably linked to beautification. For a long time, skincare advertisements were dominated by a (visual) language of seduction and pampering (Lazar, 2009: 369). Currently, the social media discourse surrounding these products has replaced seduction with a more mindful-inspired language of self-care. Self-care often results in "feeling good" about oneself, following this logic: if you do a proper skincare routine, you are taking care of your skin—and with that, you are taking care of yourself, which makes you look and feel better (or feel and look better). Bloggers' skincare content differs from brands' skincare advertisement in the sense that the former frame skincare as pampering, while the latter frame skincare as science, nowadays. See for instance this skincare advertisement: "glowing skin starts from the inside: for 24 years, researching ingredients, debunking the myths, following the facts."[125] Perceived as such, the pampering self-care narrative in bloggers' skincare content counter-balances the brands' clinical narrative of science and expertise.

✔️ @sebinaah, 6 September 2017

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[125] Paula's Choice Skincare, 6 May 2019, EXFOLIANTS | PAULA'S CHOICE, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_cPRhScBXiI
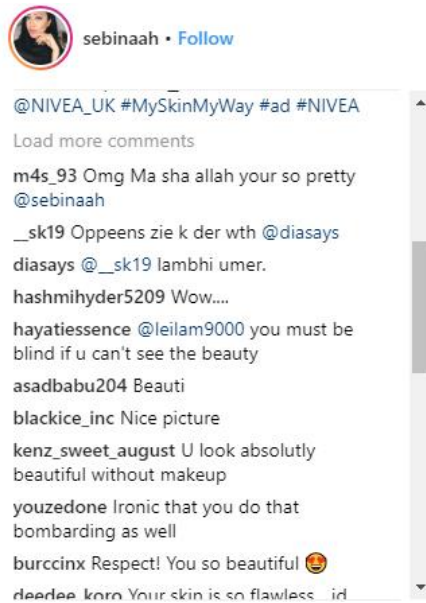
In this selfie, promoting a NIVEA day cream, Sebinaah (@sebinaah) wears a white headscarf and white knitted jumper, has no makeup on, and pouts her lips. Her white clothes signify purity and cleanliness, her bare face communicates confidence, and the bedroom-like setting creates a sense of relatability. Inconsistent with her natural no-makeup look, she is wearing colour lenses for this photo. In the skincare genre, bloggers often show themselves with little to no makeup, their bare faces framed by a towel, applying products in the comfort of their own bathroom or bedroom (or perhaps a hotel room), preferably wearing a bathrobe. This peak into their intimate settings communicates an exclusive reveal of beauty secrets and creates "an immediacy that constructs a sense of authenticity" (Nathanson, 2014: 147). Skincare is the step before or after makeup: it is pure, authentic, back to nature. Hence skincare seems to counter-balance any critique on makeup as inauthentic or unhealthy.

In the caption, Sebinaah links the body positivity discourse with the self-care discourse by speaking about body image issues—and she proposes skincare as a solution: "whenever I begin taking care of my skin [...] I always feel better, which then gives me the confidence to rock whichever look I want – and in this case the no make-up look". This idea of skincare as self-care invites followers to try out her (and NIVEA's) road to beauty, which ironically requires specific products and effort: "many narratives of transformation [...] present looking 'natural' as something which must be achieved: intensive skincare is demanded for a 'natural' complexion" (Hollows, 2000: 156).

Sebinaah further discusses the omnipresence of beautiful images of women on social media: "We are constantly bombarded with images of 'perfection' that often it can make us feel insecure in our own skin." Because this remark stands in contrast with her own "images of perfection" on Instagram, one user in the comment section (@youzedone) replies: "Ironic that you do that bombarding as well". Sebinaah does not address how her content may contribute to followers' insecurities and consumerism. Instead, she writes a message about transforming attitudes and appearance: "Over the years, I've learnt that part of looking good, is feeling good, it's more about how you view things rather than how things actually are. If you begin to take care of yourself, of your skin, and of your body, then you'll feel more confident to bare it all. No one is born perfect and everyone has something they wouldn't mind changing or improving, but it's down to you to take control, decide what is best for you, and feel good whilst doing it".

With regards to body positivity, it may be empowering and liberating for women to accept their (natural, unretouched) selves as beautiful, but as Murray (2015: 16) points out, this message is promoted by the beauty industry, and therefore does not contain a thorough critique of beauty norms. Sebinaah's post conceals how NIVEA's instruction and payment inform her decision to write a body-positive-sounding caption. Instead, she positions herself as an authentic, supportive and empowering microcelebrity. Being authentic here refers to a commodified and branded kind of authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012), or a mediated authenticity (Genz, 2015), that works in a context in which beauty standards are (re)created, negotiated, expected and rewarded, especially when wanting to stay visible and relevant to followers, "to garner sponsorship and act as role-models" (Thorpe et al., 2017: 370).

✔ @withloveleena, 14 May 2018; ✔ @hijabhills, 19 Nov 2016, "Glam time";   Sophia Loren, 1966;   Audrey Hepburn, 1961

The most well-known visual symbols for pampering, and thus skincare, may be the towel draped around the head. In my sample, this sign is used, for example, to represent a lazy morning (@withloveleena) and a glamming-up night (@hijabhills), as shown above, but more often to signal purity in skincare photos (@mariaalia, @shahdbatal, @chinutay), as shown below. Sometimes bloggers alternate a towel with a white headscarf (@sebinaah), or a skin-colour turban (@hodan.ysf). The towel is not a new signifier: Hollywood actresses Sophia Loren and Audrey Hepburn, pictured above, wore it in famous movie scenes in the 1960s. Thus, to replace the headscarf with a towel is a clever way of covering the hair in skincare photos.

✔ @mariaalia, 28 Dec 2017; ✔ @shahdbatal, 2 April 2018; ✔ @chinutay, 14 June 2018; ✔ @hodan.ysf, 30 Sept 2017

Remarkably, skincare posts are often commissioned by brands: Sebinaah's posted the NIVEA ad, Maria Alia below is promoting @neutrogena ("so fresh and so clean"), Shahd promotes @AllWomensProject ("to celebrate self love and empower women of all sizes, ages & colors") and @BABORUSA ("looking fresh and rejuvenated to help me feel better in my skin"), Chinutay has a paid partnership with @pmdbeauty ("The night before every Eid, I always pamper my skin […] so I can glow the next morning"), and Hodan Yusuf promotes @qasilorganics ("Its a must have when ur Somali #naturalface"). This makes one wonder what the role of brands is in popularising the skincare-as-self-care genre, in the use of props such as the towel, and in promoting increasingly expensive products.

Some of my interviewees have mentioned negotiating or rejecting bloggers' self-representations in the skincare genre. Especially interviewee #3 Faiza's comments addressed the staged character of the bathroom-and-towel-scenes, the commercial side of this trend, and its role in perpetuating girls' and women's insecurities:

> So, this one stands out again as well, because I've thought about, that you've got your hair tied in a towel and you're in a really nice hotel room and you're putting a face mask on… so many bloggers do this exact photo. And every time I see it, I'm like: 'This is so unrealistic.' No one looks like that, no one wakes up and they've got… no one applies face masks like that as well [*laughing*]. I just think, it's like a trend to post certain shots.

What do you think of the self-care movement or trend?

> It's a capitalistic movement, 100%. There is no transparency, in terms of like, 'I'm being paid this much to promote this face mask to you.' It is not really about empowering women, I don't think. It's about playing on their insecurities and making them want to look a certain type of way. Everyone's got different types of skin so a £100 face mask that works for you is not going to work for me, but you're literally playing on the fact that young girls with bad skin, they want to have skin like yours. Which, by the way, is not good because of your face mask, but really good because you're doing all these treatments on the side.

I further noticed that there is a strong connection between cameras (social media) and the need for a *good* skin, as exemplified by Shahd's wish to brighten the skin around her upper lip: "I'm just gonna see if it works the natural way […] and if not, I'll go see what my dermatologist can do. I only care because I am always looking at myself […] you know, editing a video or looking at pictures and stuff to edit, stuff like that. So it's just something I just wanna fix, it's not a big deal. By any means, I don't mean that you should go fix every insecurity of yours, but I definitely think: if it's something you can fix, why

not?"[126] Of course, there are some real body issues some women of diverse skin colours deal with, like hyperpigmentation, thus, seeking and sharing advice on social media can be helpful in those instances. But the connection between cameras and good skin should be denaturalised, to make visible the women-*un*friendly sides to social media culture and surveillance. Moreover, It should be pointed out that, at times, the beauty industry stimulates and benefits from internalised colonialism by circulating terms that are seemingly neutral but attract audiences of colour, such as "brightening", "radiance" or "complexion correcting" (Tate, 2017: 199). In addition to that, it should be questioned and made explicit in what ways the beauty industry—including bloggers—pushes through some standardised, harmful, overpriced, unsustainable, unnecessary, unrealistic solutions and rationalises it with scientific knowledge (see also Ringrow, 2016: 81).[127]

Not every blogger in my study always takes skincare very seriously. Dina Tokio (@dinatokio) produced a satirical sketch of her 100-step skin-care routine, using all the unopened PR products she had at home: "It's a micro-algae pore-purifying cleansing bar. Basically, it's SOAP, right. They always say: 'you should never use soap to clean you face because it will dry you,' but this is an *Estee Lauder* one." And about a sheet mask she says: "That looks like a soggy pantyliner!" Although Dina's (self-)irony could add to her perceived authenticity, a video like this probably results in less collaborations with brands. It therefore remains quite unique to see such subversive content on skincare.

[126] Shahd Batal, 3 July 2017, WEEKLY VLOG #1: 48 HOURS IN NYC | SHAHD BATAL
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnP2OvnG32o 0:50
[127]

✅ @hijabhills, 24 March 2018

Ruba Zai's (@hijabhills) post promotes a lip-enhancing device, which is a temporary solution to plump one's lips without the use of botox. She captioned it: "In love with @pmdbeauty 's Kiss device. Makes your lips super plump and it works anti-aging too. Perfect way to get a beautiful pout without going through any pain 💋". Her caption, and her bedroom setting, frames a lip plumper as easy and unproblematic compared to lip fillers. Nevertheless, interviewee #3 Faiza was highly critical: **"**Do you know what it looks like? It looks like advertising. But that's what social media is, right. I don't think Muslim social media is any different. Like this photograph, I don't know what she is holding there? Oh, it's a lip plumper! Wow, fantastic... The whole Kylie Jenner BS [*bullshit*]. Unbelievable." Essentially, Ruba is making use of her naturally plump lips to further the hyper-feminine trend (popularised by the Kardashian/Jenner family) to either have or create a perfect pout. It "affirms a contemporary post-feminist ideology about individual transformation and the pleasure that eventually comes from constructing the perfect feminine body" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006: 265). The modification of lips without the use of botox is framed as fun or easy in popular culture, however, this "politics of pleasure" does not come without consequences (Lazar, 2009: 374; see also Banet-Weiser,

2007: 266): it is an imperative to have fun in adhering to beauty norms *despite* the nearly mandatory character of it (Stuart and Donaghue, 2012: 101).

@marwaatik, Instagram Story, 5 June 2019

Increasingly, criticism of beauty norms is addressed in direct combination with promoting (new or more far-stretching) beauty routines. These beauty routines are then couched in a feminist vocabulary on which I elaborate in this section. In addition to a discourse of beauty as fun and easy, beauty standards are normalised in a choice and transparency discourse. In the Instagram Story above, Marwa Atik (@marwaatik) promotes facial wax strips and she tells her followers that "peach fuzz" removal improves her makeup application—followed by a contradicting text in which she criticises the no-hair beauty standard. Her protest sounds body-positive, but is quite puzzling: "We need to normalize hair on women! EVERY GIRL GETS HER UPPER LIP DONE AND IF SHE DOSNT THATS HER CHOICE TOO. I'm so sick of society putting crazy pressure on women to have no hair, no wrinkles, hourglass bodies and be PERFECT." What she probably means is that both women's facial hair *and* its removal should be normalised in society. Thus, she uses a choice discourse to promote the right to beauty (treatments), and a transparency discourse to ensure the right to show/talk about it publicly. Transparency, in this instance, breaks the taboo of facial hair (removal), which could be experienced as empowering to many women—however, it also has a marketing purpose of driving up sales of hair removal products.

Non-surgical beauty procedures, such as lip fillers and botox, are seen as a more serious affair than makeup and beauty treatments, and are therefore not downplayed as fun or easy, but embedded in a choice discourse instead. Women are encouraged to speak of such beauty treatments as a well-considered choice or a free choice, instead of a consequence of such factors as social pressures. Within postfeminist culture, choice (or claiming volition) is a key concept for women to show how liberated and empowered they are and for denying any victimhood (Baker, 2010). Although women should ideally have free choice to decide over their own bodies, feminist scholarship has addressed a few issues with the discursive claim to free choice in relation to beautification. One problem lies in the fact that content about feminism/social justice can coexist unproblematised with content about, say, lip fillers. By way of illustration, on *dinatokio.com*, an activist article about the marginalisation of Black Muslim women was posted directly beside an article with information about lip fillers. The article provides women with specialist information that helps them to make their own choices in lip fillers and is therefore considered empowering. A woman's choice to undergo a procedure itself can become a sign of her liberation, empowerment and strength, due to the postfeminist idea of "the right to be beautiful" (Lazar, 2011: 38). Another problem is that when "a woman's actions or circumstances are considered a result of her own choices, no further analysis or problematisation of them is welcome or warranted" (Stuart and Donaghue, 2012: 99), which allows for an unproblematised acceptance of beauty standards. A feminist vocabulary is applied to justify beautification, instead of questioning it. As such, women's beauty procedures are conceptually unified with feminism and empowerment. Consequently, bloggers that undergo procedures are then also able to dodge any critique of it being disempowering.

Blog *dinatokio.com*, posted on 13 February and 18 July 2019 (this website was taken offline in the spring of 2020)[128]

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[128] https://web.archive.org/web/20191022142808/http://www.dinatokio.com/beauty/lip-fillers-everything-you-need-to-know/
https://web.archive.org/web/20191222175648/http://www.dinatokio.com/life/being-black-and-muslim/

The women I interviewed are generally quite critical of beauty enhancements, are concerned about the direction these trends are taking, and the speed with which it is spreading in the (hijab fashion) blogosphere. Bloggers copy each other with opting for botox and fillers and present this as normal or positive. While some followers may aspire to the same, my interviewees experience a clash with their own value system based on feminism, faith, modesty, self-acceptance and spending. However, they are careful not to (morally) judge the bloggers for their enhancements, because they respect everyone's personal choice. The most important concern to my interviewees is whether bloggers are transparent about their treatments and procedures.

One of the reasons bloggers mention for opening up about procedures, and why followers appreciate transparency, is to show that beauty is a construction. Both bloggers and followers regard this better for followers' self-image: if followers find themselves less beautiful than bloggers, they need to remember that bloggers' beauty is enhanced, so that they can adjust their expectations to realistic standards. However, my interviewees also mention that transparency can add to the persuasiveness of social media in establishing beauty norms. According to them, transparency performs two normative functions: firstly, by discussing treatments/procedures, bloggers are normalising them by removing the taboo and leaving it unproblematised. Secondly, by showing that beauty is a construction, it becomes attainable to followers, if they are prepared to undergo the same treatments/procedures.

I would add to this a third point: due to voyeurism, this type of content is highly entertaining and can be enjoyed guilt and judgment-free by saying: 'At least she is honest about it.' I argue that audiences' expectation and appreciation of transparency may surprisingly contribute to the normalisation of these far-reaching beauty ideals. The appreciation of transparency is namely shaped by how the blogosphere itself addresses the audience: in return for bloggers' transparency and perceived authenticity, followers play the role of a 'friendly and non-judgmental audience' (demonstrated for example by interviewees' worry that they were backbiting if they critiqued bloggers' practices).

That said, it is not always possible for followers/audiences to have a complete picture of whether bloggers are transparent. For instance, sometimes my interviewees spoke of a particular blogger as being transparent while I had a different impression. Interviewee #4 Aissa reflects:

> It's kind of two-sided. On the one hand, I think it's better if they're honest about it, because then all of these young girls who look at these people, […] especially if they are without makeup and they look perfect, and they think 'why do I not look like this?'—which just makes them feel crap. In that sense, I think it's better if they're being honest, like 'the reason I look like this is because I have done this and this and this.' But at the same time, I am worried that

this is normalising it, like: putting on highlighter and stuff, like: 'I'm going for a botox session' or whatever. And I remember Dina, she said that years ago, at the moment she is not considering it, but if she ever feels like she wants to do it she will do it. I didn't know she [recently] said something about this topic, but I feel like, again, she is someone who is honest about it.

Arguably, a choice and transparency discourse is in direct opposite here of body positivity and self-acceptance: it conceals and enables a culture of social media-induced body dysmorphia. Bloggers send off the (postfeminist) message that women are in need of constant self-transformation appearance-wise, because their old selves are inadequate, not as happy and do not make as much money.

A transparency discourse is used even in cases in which there is relatively little transparency. For instance, Dina (@dinatokio) waited months before discussing her botox, did not specify the period she has had it for, and has since taken the video offline, and only spoke about her botox and fillers again in February 2021.[129] However, Ascia (@ascia) has uploaded her botox treatment to YouTube, see screenshot on the right, after her Instagram Story announcing it, as mentioned above.[130] The highly staged nature of Instagram content is usually not addressed by bloggers (unless in separate posts/videos or mentioned fleetingly).
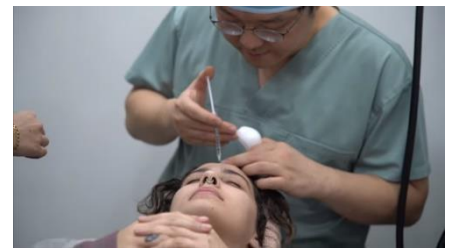
Transparency is not just constructed conceptually but also visually and technically. Regarding the normalisation of botox, the qualities of the medium may be more important than the content itself. The specificities of the medium of Instagram Stories—which I would say are proximity, temporariness and near-liveness—add to the perception of bloggers' content as relatable, authentic and transparent. When Ascia represents empowered femininity as a combination of botox and a GRL PWR tattoo, the medium of Instagram Stories make this idea accessible and aspirational. Her Instagram Story functions as, what Jerslev and Mortensen (2016) call, a "phatic" way of keeping in touch with followers, purely to signal presence and to update them, without getting into depth about a topic (see also: Williamson, 2020). This "visual economy in which keeping in touch is more important than what is said" causes a climate in which botox is shown but not discussed or problematised (Williamson, 2020).

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[129] Dina Tokio, 12 February 2021, TRUE OR FALSE? LIFE UPDATE.. COME CHILL WITH ME HTTPS://WWW.YOUTUBE.COM/WATCH?V=SLMQXAWAQK0 15:15
[130] The Hybrids / Ascia, 27 December 2018, VLOG: SABOTAGE IN SOUTH KOREA https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naLUSH2kUKU 6:31-7:50

Furthermore, because of the medium specificities of YouTube vlogging, Ascia's video of the actual clinic with the botox specialist has a documentary-feel to it, which adds to her mediated authenticity and transparency (Enli, 2014; see also: Marwick, 2013b). Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer's (2006) analysis of reality TV is useful in understanding transparency is appreciated by vlogging audiences: firstly, because it "demystifies the ideal female body by showing *how* it is produced" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006: 265). Secondly, the YouTube video capturing Ascia's botox treatment functions as a "physical evidence of transformation" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006: 265), which adds to the persuasiveness of beauty images. Thus, the medium specificities of Instagram and YouTube, and bloggers' performance of authenticity, naturalise the idea of certain beauty procedures as empowering.

When I discussed Ascia's Instagram Story about botox and the GRL PWR tattoo with interviewee #4 Aissa, she responded: "No way! Wow, that's just a lot! My god. I mean, really, this whole girl power, empowerment, is very like… popular feminism." However, interviewee #1 Chaimae prioritises transparency: "She says: 'I'm gonna do that.' It's not as if she was doing it and without saying nothing and saying 'look how good my forehead looks,' you know." Interviewee #5 Jenan, of Gulf Arab-European background, also thinks Ascia is popular because of her proximity to Whiteness, but appreciates Ascia for the fact that her use of botox is more natural-looking than other Gulf bloggers who would influence younger generations negatively: "she is *very* natural, and even though she uses botox and stuff like that, it's not excessive, it's not visible. Whereas [Zori] Askhanani, […] whenever she does something, she is like: 'I'm paying for it, it might as well be noticeable.'"

The remarks by interviewees #1 Chaimae and #5 Jenan, regarding transparency about and the results of beauty procedures, form a bigger theme in my data. Using these two factors, interviewees have discussed Ascia and Habiba and often juxtaposed them, as I discuss in what follows.
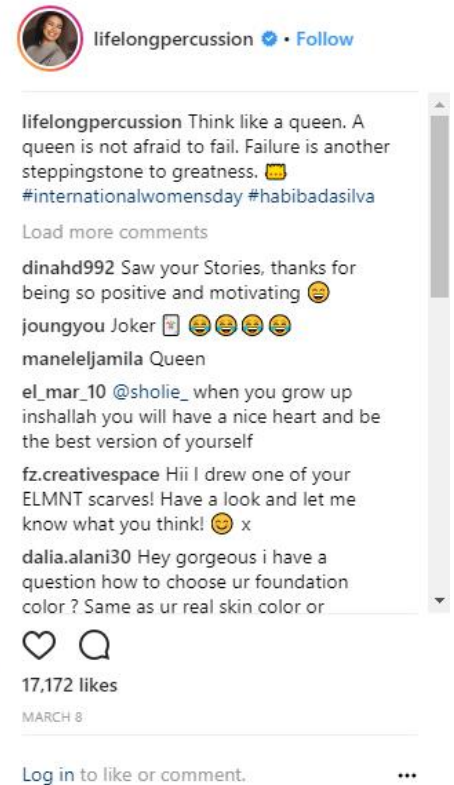
✔️ @lifelongpercussion, 8 March 2018

Habiba da Silva (@lifelongpercussion), pictured above, has arguably undergone quite visible transformations over time, but has waited years before discussing her lip fillers with her audience. She mentioned it fleetingly in 2019, while minimising it: "recently I got rid of most of the filler, I don't see the hype anymore, I feel like the natural look is my style."[131] However, she continued using lip fillers and only discussed it in detail eight months later, when she was happy enough with the result, she claimed, so that she could help others with their lip filler journey.[132] Conveniently, it was then trending and lucrative to make lip filler videos. Her claim that her video is "educating" women and her lip filler was an informed decision, is compromised by her story about feeling self-conscious about her natural lips as the rest of her family has more voluminous lips.[133] This indicates that the pressure to have full lips is increased *for* bloggers and *by* bloggers.

Habiba is the only blogger out of 23, whom my interviewees criticised repeatedly, drawing on a transparency discourse. The participants reported feeling put off by the result of her fillers and her

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[131] Habiba da Silva, 16 June 2019 READING YOUR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ME
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8GhPS9F2rY 6:40
[132] Habiba da Silva, 10 February 2020, MY LIP FILLER JOURNEY PART 1
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YN64tTEmSuU
[133] Habiba da Silva, 10 February 2020, MY LIP FILLER JOURNEY PART 1
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YN64tTEmSuU

lack of transparency about it. Note that my interviews were conducted two months before Habiba mentioned it fleetingly and one year before she uploaded her elaborate lip filler video. Interviewee #3 Faiza says she stopped following Habiba because "I didn't really like what she stood for in the sense that she wasn't really open about any cosmetic things that she'd had done, and I find that quite problematic in the sense that there is a lot of young, fashionable followers and you're not admitting to something, and you're seeing something online and you think someone's naturally developed into looking like that and I find that quite wrong."

The data in this section show that appearance is centralised in the representation of empowered femininity: it forms bloggers' core business. By borrowing from a feminist language of empowerment, beauty standards are intensified on several fronts: makeup is connected to confidence, skincare is framed as self-care and botox/fillers are discussed in terms of choice and transparency. At times, bloggers do challenge beauty norms, but more frequently, a body-positive discourse is used to make their content more relevant, authentic and feminist-sounding to followers. Thus, body positivity becomes a postfeminist tool to market a return to hyper-femininity.

Beside the fact that postfeminism is a marketable and lucrative discourse, I argue that there are more reasons why postfeminism is a dominant paradigm in hijab fashion. Both Islamophobia and the pressure of beauty standards make it harder for women to wear the hijab, which is why a postfeminist narrative of beauty-based confidence as empowerment is appealing. Beauty plays a key role in veiled Muslim women's self-affirmation and their rebranding as beautiful, stylish and confident, instead of unattractive, threatening or old-fashioned. The acceptance of Muslim women's dress is often (problematically) linked to how modern or aesthetically appealing their outfits are in relation to societal norms (Moors, 2009b: 403; Tarlo and Moors, 2013: 241). Thus, beauty helps women to meet their "desires for normalcy, recognition and generality, or sameness" (Kanai, 2017a: 297; see also: Berlant, 2008).

Poignantly, journalist Aziz relates: "Younger Muslim women have said to me they feel under pressure to appear in an over styled, hypersexualized way in order to fit in—to wear flawless make up, a certain style of clothing and a certain style of hijab" (cited in Malik, 2017). And writer Malik (2017) illustrates these pressures: "The grotesque prejudice and violence against Muslims has created a counter push where only positive, stylized, aspirational, attractive, overly feminized, bourgeoisie Islam has flooded the zone." Adamson and Salmenniemi's (2017: 302) contextual analysis may explain why: "women are encouraged to invest time and energy in aesthetic labour in the hope that mastering 'the art of femininity' will allow them upward mobility in a context where channels for mobility are increasingly

constrained," not only for economic reasons nut also Islamophobic reasons. This development creates problematic gender constructions in hijab fashion blogging.

6.2 Return to Classic Beauty Icons

In this section, I analyse hijab fashion content that contains visual or textual references to classic beauty icons from the past. Bloggers primarily use two elements in these self-representations: classic turban styles and classic feminine poses. This theme runs through a surprisingly large part of my data, however, it is not straightforward to capture this theme in statistics, since many references to classic femininity remain very subtle or implicit. Nevertheless, these resemblances are significant and are made visible in this section by discussing many examples from within and outside of my sample that, together, form a pattern of returning to classic Hollywood notions of beauty. This return to traditional femininity, in combination with a turn to feminism (Chapter 4), is exemplary of the postfeminist double entanglement (McRobbie, 2009). This paradox is discursively bridged through the notion that beauty as classiness is empowering.

6.2.1 Turban Chic

Wearing a stylish turban is a popular trend among hijab fashion bloggers and is prominently represented in my sample: in 71 images (44.1%), bloggers are wearing a scarf that leaves the neck (partly) exposed. Some bloggers wrap their turbans in edgy, laid-back styles, such as Aaliyah JM and Maria Alia, and others in voluminous (East) African models, such as Sagaleeyaa. At times, bloggers including Chinutay, Basma K and Dina Tokio even wrap it in a 1940s Rosie the Riveter-manner or pin-up style. However, most bloggers in my data sample style their turbans in a 1950s—1970s way that resembles the glamourous turbans of royals and Hollywood stars, such as Grace Kelly and Sophia Loren. Chinutay's post on Instagram (17 June 2018) about the book *The Art of the Scarf* (Grant, 2016) demonstrates that some hijab fashion bloggers take inspiration from classic, Eurocentric, fashionable ways of wrapping a headscarf. The book's subtitle reads: "From classic knots and chic neckties, to stylish turbans, makeshift bags and more". A turban signifies glamour, as demonstrated by Omaya Zein who says in a turban tutorial on YouTube
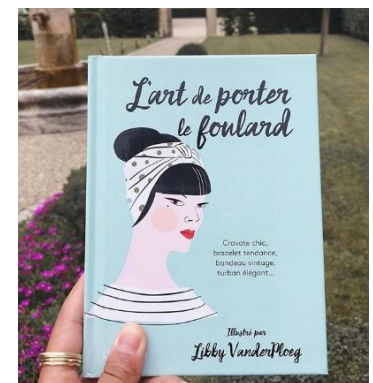
that one can create a glamorous look by creating volume and accessorising with earrings and necklaces.[134] In tutorials on YouTube, hijab bloggers describe turbans as classy,[135] chic,[136] sophisticated and bold.[137] A follower commented on Omaya Zein's turban photo below: "So classy mashalh [sic]". YazTheSpaz captioned her photo below: "Felt so regal last night wearing the 'Chinoiserie Cobalt' turban," which links the turban to royal and Oriental connotations. A turban can also signify urban hipness and modernity, such as in Dina Tokio's photo below.

✔ @nabiilabee, 24 Apr 2018   ✔ @yazthespaz89, 29 Mar 2015   ✔ @omayazein, 10 Apr 2018   ✔ @dinatokio, 24 Aug 2017

The turban is part of long cultural traditions around the world and worn by men and women for aesthetic, religious, cultural or practical reasons. Europe became familiar with Asian and African turbans in colonial times, and later on, in the early 20th century, the turban was further popularised among European women by haute couture designers who created Orientalist turban fashion. Consequently, the turban became a glamorous item for royals and classic Hollywood stars (Judge, 2018). In contemporary Western contexts, a turban is often described in more positive terms than a 'conservative' or 'full' hijab. Perceived as such, the turban is turned into a signifier for empowerment, femininity, modernity, accessibility and classiness, which is more palatable in secular, commercial and postfeminist contexts. In contrast, a 'full' hijab is often seen as more conservative and a barrier. Keeping Orientalist/Islamophobic stereotypes of Muslim women's hijabs in mind, this binary may explain the appeal of the turban trend among fashion bloggers on social media in constructing a modern, empowered Muslim self. As Moors (2013b: 241) explains about Islamophobic contexts: "With fashion strongly linked to modernity, fashionable styles become an indication of the willingness of these women to fit in and to adapt to a mainstream aesthetic."

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[134] Omaya Zein, 11 August 2016, TURBAN TUTORIALS https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-TMJCdJQgs
[135] Zaina & Muhammed, 17 June 2019, LOW BUN TURBAN TUTORIAL - SHEIKHA MOZAH INSPIRED | ZAINA MOUSSA https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T_UVM2tePs
[136] Chinutay A., 28 March 2017, CHIC TURBAN UPDO! - CHINUTAY & CO. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlJtz2um8p8
[137] Yasmine Simone, 16 September 2018, HOW TO TIE A TURBAN PERFECTLY NO SLIP| CULTURE HIJAB F/W COLLECTION| YASMINE SIMONE https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgINYaw6Lpc

Not every interviewee of mine appreciates the turban as a trend, whether for personal or ideological reasons. Interviewee #4 Aissa says that, unfortunately, seeing a full hijab on a blogger "is not a given anymore" and sees bloggers wearing certain turban and hijab styles that she would never wear herself. Interviewee #2 Loubna noticed how some bloggers, such as NabiilaBee, changed from wearing a 'full' hijab to turban and says that this is due to pressures within the beauty/fashion industry on Instagram. And interviewee #3 Faiza draws on a postcolonial or anti-Islamophobia discourse to protest this:

> Why do we need to be more accepting to non-Muslims? Why do we need to be fashionable in order to be accepted? And why does our hijab need to be 'compromised'? I went to the NCBB Women's annual conference last week and they were talking about the 'turbanisation of hijab', and there was a study [saying] that some will stop wearing 'full hijab' in their words and start wearing turban hijab because they're going into a White area and they want to seem more palatable to the White gaze. And that is how women are feeling they need to be.

Most interviewees did not necessarily find the turban trend problematic because of reasons to do with modesty or piety—as most of them do not support the idea that you can judge modesty by the amount of covering—but mainly because of persisting Orientalist and Islamophobic narratives in society and the beauty industry that link together the amount of skin showing with liberation and empowerment. Most interviewees see the turban trend on Instagram as a response to societal pressures and media representations that frame the hijab as conservative and backwards. It is understandable that in this context, my interviewees hope for better and more diverse representations—especially proud self-representations of the hijab—but instead notice that bloggers seem to play by the rules of the attention economy and social media trends that reward and privilege the turban as hip, classy and empowered vis-à-vis a more 'closed' hijab.

By analysing the following images, I aim to explore the visual and textual references to classic beauty icons in representations of beauty; how that fits within a postfeminist notion of empowered, modern, classy women; and what role this plays in rebranding Muslim femininity.

In this photo, Dina Tokio (@dinatokio) is wearing a makeup look copied from Dutch beauty blogger NikkieTutorials, which is "so festival and so tropical", and is heavier than she would wear normally,[138] hence her caption: "Cldnt waste the face so had to do a lil shoot." Dina is wearing a lavender modal headscarf from one of her own brands, tied to the side in a way that used to be her signature style at the time. This style was also worn in 1960s Europe and US, see the Vogue sewing pattern below. Style and colour-wise, Dina's purple scarf and earrings resemble Disney's gypsy heroine Esmeralda, known as a powerful character, who wears a pink hair bandana, hoop earrings and dances with a purple scarf. The visual resemblance with Esmeralda invokes an exotic ambience (see Dina's own description "tropical"[139]), which is nearly fairy tale-like. Dina's makeup and expression distantly resemble Italian Hollywood star Sophia Loren, see the Vogue magazine cover below, who is wearing a (quite Orientalist) 1960s glamour turban designed by Yves Saint Laurent and worn in the film ARABESQUE (1966). A question that comes to mind is: does a headscarf needs to be styled as an exotic accessory, seen from a Eurocentric point of view, in order to be found glamorous and fashionable?

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[138] Dina Tokio, 28 Feburary 2018, I TRIED FOLLOWING A NIKKIETUTORIALS MAKEUP TUTORIAL https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFQeJY6BrK0
[139] Ibid.

6410 Vogue pattern   Disney's ESMERALDA, 1996   Sophia Loren, 1965, by David Bailey

To further illustrate Dina's visual associations with classic femininity, I curated three photos below that show resemblance in the use of a 1950s—1970s turban style. The first photo is Dina's advertisement for a £300 scarf designed by Liberty London, a luxury department store, in which she stunningly presented the turban as essential component of a chic—and thus high-class—ensemble. She paired it with diamond earrings, "because they just make any turban look a little bit classier."[140] Dina bears strong resemblances with the second image below, depicting a Vogue turban pattern designed by Halston of Bergdorf Goodman around the year 1960. And the way in which Dina put her collar up resembles the third image's stand-up collar. One style of turban is worn while several ethnicities are present (White British/Egyptian, White and Persian). However, their turbans are all based on a Eurocentric idea of a chic headscarf. This implies that classiness is synonymous to more Europeanness and less perceived Muslimness. Arguably, by simulating old turban styles, bloggers rebrand the headscarf as classy, to counter the Islamophobic idea that Muslim women are unglamorous or second-class citizens.

@dinatokio, Jan 2015;   6606 Vogue Pattern by Halston of Bergdorf Goodman;   Farah Pahlavi, 1975

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[140] Dina Tokio, 21 April 2016, SHOPPING FOR SPRING SUMMER / TAG ALONG
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8PDXdZN1zk 8:05

To further demonstrate that Dina's references to classic turbans and femininities forms a pattern, I discuss an Instagram photo with a matching YouTube tutorial below, both captioned "GLAM look". Dina's photo resembles the Vogue image below of a White woman in a turban, designed by Adolfo in the 1960s. Beside turban styles, classic facial expressions are also copied, which can be seen in the screenshots of her YouTube tutorial below. Dina shows one of her makeup products that has a 1940s style pin-up lady on it, after which Dina can be seen posing with the same facial expression towards the end of the video. These representations of femininity draw on the same cultural repertoire, existing of retro/vintage/classic beauty icons of the 1940s—1970s Anglophone/European world. What these resemblances show is that, whether consciously or not, bloggers, brands and audiences have commonly shared ideas on what a glamorous head covering could look like and what certain feminine ways of posing are. This comparison raises questions about the extent to which Eurocentric and high-class connotations are deemed important in displaying a modern-yet-classic way of presenting oneself online as a modern and stylish Muslim woman.

@dinatokio, 12 July 2015   7461 Vogue pattern by Adolfo

Screenshot YouTube, 14 July 2015[141]

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[141] Dina Tokio, 14 July 2015, SUMMER GLAM | MAKEUP TUTORIAL
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PBJyInSx5g

Instagram post by omayazein:

omayazein Can you tell I'm feeling myself in these glasses! 💋 I've left Link to my outfit detail here -> http://liketk.it/2umAY #liketkit @liketoknow.it #LTKbeauty #LTKsalealert #LTKstyletip #LTKunder50 #LTKunder100 #Zaful #Ootd

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mizz_phreda1 My role model 😲😲😲😲
s_hijabstylist 🖤🖤
azuracoretouchmakeup Nice turban😊
onyejuruwanicole I have just proclaimed you my ELDER SISTER wowow sis u slayed
leemahp 🖤🖤🖤
rasanakhancept Omg @omayazein I love thiss girlll

11,991 likes
JANUARY 24

Log in to like or comment.

✔️ @omayazein, 24 January 2018

There are many more bloggers within my sample who draw on this classic repertoire, including US-based Omaya Zein (@omayazein), who is wearing a black turban, black sunglasses and diamond earrings, and resembles American actress and Monégasque royal Grace Kelly who is wearing a turban in the picture below The retro, Eurocentric and feminine character of Omaya's outfit is reinforced by the plaid corset waist-accentuating belt, a fabric that has been a symbol of Britishness for centuries.[142] This ensemble amalgamates beauty and class with royalty, Whiteness and traditional beauty ideals. As

mentioned, Moors (2009b: 403) found that the likeability and acceptance of Muslims is connected to taste, appearance and beauty. Perceived as such, Omaya and Dina's representations of veiled Muslim femininity in these turban photos are governed by respectability politics (Wolcott, 2001: 5). It contributes to a discourse in which distinctions are made between acceptable and unacceptable hijab styles, whereby wearing a classic turban represent one's taste and upward social mobility.

Grace Kelly, 1962, by G. Lukomski

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[142] https://www.bustle.com/articles/20343-how-did-plaid-become-popular-a-brief-and-grungy-fashion-history

✔️ @chinutay, 28 June 2018

In this photo, Chinutay/Manal (@chinutay) is sitting on a terrace in a typical, privileged, upscale neighbourhood in London. The atmosphere is set with artisan coffee, cake, and her phone that symbolises Chinutay's social media career that funds her modern lifestyle. The caption reads: "I'm ready ☕🐸 spill bish. Wearing Lady Danger by @maccosmeticsuk 💄". The phrase "spill, bish" or "bitch" is a cool way of saying "give me the latest news/gossip" and adds to her self-presentation as a badass beauty in this post. The name of the lipstick she is wearing, Lady Danger, also bears significance, since it is similar to the figure of the *femme fatale,* which is a negative stereotype about women that was used in the late 19th century to supress early forms of feminism "with warnings of the dangerous power of women, and depictions of the femme fatale, or a dangerous, evil woman, in art and popular culture."[143] It is as if Chinutay is reclaiming that figure in a postfeminist way through her pose. These signs convey the message that veiled Muslim women can be badass (impressive/beautiful) too, and therefore modern and empowered.

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[143] http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/lessons/gender-in-nineteenth-century-art/

The way in which Chinutay is wearing her camel-coloured turban, her tortoise-shell patterned cat-eye sunglasses (in the 1960s style of beauty icon Audrey Hepburn)[144] and bright red lipstick (which she described as "classy" herself in a tutorial),[145] strongly resembles below 1950s-style Pidgin doll, designed in 2017 by artist Joshua David McKenney.[146] Since Chinutay's facial expression is not visible behind her sunglasses, I added below photo in which Chinutay's facial expression resembles the Pidgin Doll's expression. Although Chinutay's headscarf styles are often inspired by her Ethiopian background (tucked behind ears), in these particular photos, both Chinutay's and Pidgin's turban styles are built on images of glamorous retro femininity, albeit in a modern package. The resemblance in these photos makes one think beyond coincidence, and wonder what role Hollywood's imagery continues to play (through Instagram) in constructing normative beauty and the turban (rather than the full headscarf) as beautiful, classy and classic.[147]

@pidgindoll, 26 September 2017, "#PidginDoll does '50s elegance!"   @chinutay, 11 August 2018

It is important to note here that within my sample, I found interpretations of turbans that are clearly not rooted into White, Eurocentric, classic fashion, such as Saufeeya and Sagaleeyaa's Afro-centric turbans. The following post below shows Saufeeya's African(-American) version of the turban, or knitted hat.

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[144] https://www.seen.co.uk/blogs/journal/slow-and-steady-tortoiseshell-glasses-and-sunglasses
[145] Chinutay A., 18 August 2017, EID MAKEUP LOOK | CLASSY RED LIP | Chinutay A.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qK_DpPZrLfg
[146] Although he says his dolls (who bear the colonial name of Pidgin) are designed to be ethnically universal, he also says they are inspired on French fashion dolls, Kate Moss's bone structures, and contemporary celebrity styles: 20 September 2019, INTERVIEW WITH PIDGIN DOLL ARTIST JOSHUA DAVID MCKENNEY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjudbicnhvQ
[147] Artist Joshua David McKenney claims: "I sculpted Pidgin to be as universal as possible, so she doesn't have a particular age, a particular race, a particular era that she is from, she is just an aesthetic and a style."
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NjudbicnhvQ 10:00

✔️ @saufeeya / prev. @feeeeya, 1 November 2017

Although this post is geotagged in London, where the graffiti scene is burgeoning again[148], but the graffiti and mesh gates reminds one of New York scenes in old-school hip-hop and R&B music videos (1980s, 1990s, 00s). Against this background, Saufeeya's (@saufeeya/prev.@feeeeya) power pose, headcover, denim jacket and even colour-scheme resemble rapper/singer Lauryn Hill's 1990s style, depicted on the right. This resemblance is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, the resemblance positions Saufeeya as a creative artists like Lauryn Hill. In the caption, Saufeeya mentions that her outfit is from Wåven Studio, a London-based brand: "Wåven blends references from art, modern culture and sophisticated emerging trends."[149] Secondly, Saufeeya lives in Dubai, has half Moroccan, half African-American roots, and usually dresses according to Dubai high-street fashion (or plays with dress of countries she visits such as Bahrain or Brazil). This self-representation therefore forms a creative performance of her seldomly-mentioned African-American heritage. Thirdly, in terms of the representation of gender, both Saufeeya and Lauryn Hill *queer* existing beauty norms by switching between feminine and more tomboy outfits,

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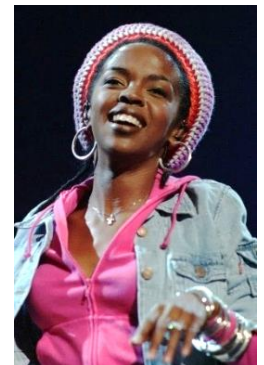
[148] https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/9kdbm3/why-graffiti-has-returned-to-london
[149] https://www.waven.co.uk/about

which add to their self-brand as empowered women. Her resemblance with Lauryn Hill is meaningful since Hill's legacy is one of powerful femininity, filled with songs that challenge gendered, classed and racial structures and critique powerful industries.[150]

✅ @saufeeya / prev. @feeeeya, 22 April 2018

Contrary to the last image, in this photo Saufeeya (@saufeeya/prev.@feeeeya) emulates a more Eurocentric style that resembles classic beauty icon Audrey Hepburn, the paragon "of white beauty" (Springer, 2007: 252). In a Dubai alley, Saufeeya is twirling on her danceshoes and waiving her 1970s style polka dot dress, while looking in the camera through her big sunglasses and wearing a navy-blue straw hat, similar to Audrey Hepburn's in the film BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S (1961). According to Collar (2017), "Audrey is the pop culture goddess of elegance, intellect, and integrity, of introspection and introversion, of quintessential European sophistication." In the caption, "summer in Dubai, spring in London", Saufeeya refers to the two iconic cities she is often dwelling in and with that positioning herself as relevant to followers in the West and East. It also signifies taste and class, since the relatively young city of Dubai is filled with new money and the established city of London is associated with old money and classic style. This posts' mise-en-scène, caption and outfit combined, indicate an attempt

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[150] See, for example: I GET OUT (2002) https://vimeo.com/13776644

Audrey Hepburn, BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S, 1961

Besides her turban and hat styles, Audrey Hepburn is also known for another iconic style of headcovering, namely the silk triangle scarf tied under the chin, showing the front of the hair and perhaps the back, preferably paired with big sunglasses, as seen below on the right. Some bloggers in my sample, for instance Saufeeya and Summer Albarcha, have replicated this style. Saufeeya has referred to Hepburn when quoting her in the caption of this photo: "The most important thing is to enjoy your life, to be happy, it's all that matters."

@saufeeya, 27 July 2018   @summeralbarcha, 23 September 2019   Audrey Hepburn, CHARADE, 1963

An interesting question with implications for these representations' emancipatory value, is whether the Hepburn-like headscarf style should be interpreted as bloggers' efforts to brand themselves as fashionable, and thus modern, glamorous and classy. This would be quite problematic for all kinds of gendered and postcolonial reasons. Or should this be understood in a more feminist way, as (playfully) reclaiming the headscarf proudly in public spaces? In hijab fashion, beauty becomes a class project, a development of upper/middle-class style, which is framed as empowerment. However, I argue that this way of thinking is affected by consumerism, White privilege and Islamophobia. Essentially, a return to classic beauty is an attempt to minimise perceived Muslimness, or a way of "acting right around White folks," as film critic Rebecca Theodore-Vachon (2013) says in relation to Black femininity, because they "can't quite shake the feeling of being the 'Other'—of being under the omniscient White gaze, judging and measuring their worth as human beings." By returning to classic beauty, hijab fashion bloggers thus create "a model of respectable womanhood" with which they can function within a

racialised system (Wolcott, 2001: 3). Crockett (2017: abstract) explains: "Respectability makes life more tolerable by offering a counternarrative that disavows stigma through status-oriented displays." This kind of respectability politics is not new: "black women throughout the twentieth century have used respectability to enhance their reputation, ensure social mobility, and create a positive image for their communities" (Wolcott, 2001: 8). But instead of stimulating a so-called racial uplift, what the notion of beauty as empowerment does is anticipating "what representations […] are deemed acceptable, marketable, as well as worthy of seeing" in the eyes of a White supremacist dominant culture (hooks, 2009: 285). Interviewee #3 Faiza also found this kind of rebranding problematic and draws on a postcolonial discourse: "who is it breaking stereotypes for, for the white man? To see that 'oh, a covered Muslim woman can also be attractive?' We bloody know that."

eslimah • Follow
Tallinn, Estonia

eslimah So.. the biggest issue I have to deal with back home is people somehow considering me less Estonian or as if I abandoned my roots and heritage.. which is far from the truth. Therefore... Yesterday I challenged myself to push over some stereotypes and wear the traditional/national Estonian clothing with my head-cover... and thought of creating a picture in an authentic Estonian setting for both the Estonians and for all of you guys.. I caption it: THE ESLIMAH 😊 aka.. Estonian Muslimah (not kidding, this is initially the thought I had in mind years ago when I created this account! Lol) One does not contradict the other, and I am proudly both. I know the picture depicts only a piece of clothing, which is something I think we get too obsessed over. Us as Muslims, and everyone else as well. We all need to learn to look beyond

10,469 likes
1 DAY AGO

Log in to like or comment.

✔️ @eslimah, 19 June 2018

something I think we get too obsessed over. Us as Muslims, and everyone else as well. We all need to learn to look beyond this and nurture true values. I hope to one day live in a world with less prejudice and less judgement and as the cliche saying goes: we need to be the change we want to see in the world, right?
So, I hope this encourages us all to work on ourselves: to be a little bit more understanding, a little bit more tolerant, and a little bit kinder. And if we fail today, try again tomorrow. Peace! 🌸 ☺

Qatar-based Eslimah/Eileen (@eslimah) may have White privilege as an Estonian convert, but loses some of that privilege at the same time, because of her hijab (Midden, 2018: 692). In this photo, she wears traditional Estonian dress and inhabits her identity proudly, despite Islamophobic reactions to her conversion from Estonians in her past. In order to merge her ethnicity and religion, she minimises her perceived Muslimness with a turban and national dress. Interviewee #4 Aissa narrates: "I think she was even mentioning that she wears it a bit different when she is there, isn't it, just so that it is not as obvious a hijab." The assumption here is thus that a scarf that does not cover the neck approaches Whiteness more than a 'full' hijab. This linking together of turbans with Whiteness and traditional femininity indicates some of the requirements for acceptability in mainstream society.

6.2.2 Feminine Poses

Beside makeup, procedures and turbans, another way in which bloggers return to traditional or hyper-femininity is through feminine posing. As mentioned in my methodology chapter, gender is constructed in posing through such elements as facial expression, a feminine touch or leaning/laying down (Döring et al., 2015). I found that posing with a feminine touch is highly represented in my data and can be found in 56.5% of the total amount of images. This breaks down into 58 images (36%) in which bloggers use a feminine touch of their face, clothes or body, and 33 images (20.5%) that display a feminine touch of an object, person or environment. Furthermore, there are 11 (6.8%) images in which bloggers are posing in a traditionally feminine way by leaning, laying down, accentuating their figure or applying lipstick, see images below.

✅ @nuralailalov, 28 July 2016   ✅ @nuralailalov, 28 June 2017   ✅ @lifelongpercussion, 11 June 2018   ✅ @withloveleena, 30 May 2018

Contrarily, only 10 images contain a power pose (8,7%). These numbers ask for a closer analysis of the ways in which beauty relates to empowerment in postfeminist culture. Notably, a feminine touch does not always signify hyper-femininity or sexiness: see image on the left picturing Ibtihaj Muhammad, who touches the décor but does not create a sensualised image and therefore forms an exception in my study.

✔ @ibtihajmuhammad, 20 July 2017

Through modest fashion, veiled Muslim women seem to actively circumvent or resist what McRobbie (2004: 259) has called the "hyper-culture of commercial sexuality", which was the hallmark of earlier postfeminism. However, some veiled Muslim bloggers, mostly outside of my sample, push the boundaries of modesty and exploit their sexual attractiveness. Admittingly, the bloggers in my study sit somewhere in the middle, so it would be unfair to criticise them as sexualising women's representations. Most of them, nevertheless, aestheticise, sensualise and overly feminise Muslim femininity and (re)introduce a significant amount of labour needed for creating beautiful shots, see below photos of pouting lips, hand on hip, leaning backwards and applying lipstick. In essence, they are "remodelling" Muslim femininity "in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of 'female attractiveness'" (Gill, 2017: 616).

✔ @basma_k, 9 April 2017   ✔ @basma_k, 16 Nov 2016   ✔ @mariaalia, 25 May 2018   ✔ @mariaalia, 24 June 2018

Basma K and Maria Alia are foot-popping, enjoying the sun, leaning backwards or doing the woe-is-me pose. These quite theatrical ways of posing in refined environments are part of a self-branding technique that bloggers use for, what Duffy and Hund (2015: 2) have called, "staging the glam life". I noticed that one particular hyper-feminine pose is recently becoming a trend among (former) hijab fashion bloggers, which reminds one of fashion models in magazines: they place their hands on their waist, lean their shoulders or chest forward or their hip side-wards, and raise their chin. This pose, see below, communicates elegance, sexual confidence, fabulousness, celebrity or professionality. The fact that this trend is growing could be explained by the observation that "[i]n the hypervisible landscape

of popular culture the body is recognized as the object of women's labour: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy" (Winch, 2015: 21, cited in Gill, 2017: 616).

@ascia, 19 Sept 2019; @shahdbatal, 22 Feb 2020; @dinatokio, 1 Jul 2020; @yazthespaz89, 18 Jul 2020 @amenakhan, 26 Jul 2020

Bloggers' ways of posing are sometimes inspired by or associated with classic beauty icons, for example Marilyn Monroe, represented below by blogger Aaliyah JM (@aaliyah.jm) below.[151] In this photo, Aaliyah can be seen smiling in a shiny pink dress, with a pink ribbon hanging from the ceiling. She edited in Monroe's photo from 1953 beside her own selfie. In the caption she expresses her surprise about the fact that she found visual confirmation of her resemblance with her idol Marilyn Monroe[152] in terms of outfit and features: "This was not intentional😱 😱 😱 😱 … i knew I had that Marilyn swag in me 😅 freakyyyy #IconForever", to which her follower @beingmiable replies: "You're the halal marylin 😅 and moooore beautiful 👌". Interviewee #7 Saba said about Marilyn Monroe, "the way she poses looks more sexy, and then Aaliyah's one, she looks more innocent and it doesn't appear to be as sexual."

Marilyn Monroe's photo is a movie still of the film GENTLEMEN PREFER BLONDES (Aaliyah died her hair blonde as well for a period of time), in which Monroe is singing *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend* (which is a sign of wealth). In the background, women figure as lamp bases and chandeliers, while Monroe is surrounded and carried by admiring men, wearing her famous hyper-sexual pink dress, designed to be sexy yet not too revealing in a bid to save Monroe from an overly promiscuous image at the time (St. Clair, 2016: 127). Monroe was and is the perceived opposite of Hepburn. In the words of writer Collar (2017), "Marilyn has become the pop culture goddess of glamour, sensuality, and sex appeal, of openness and outwardness, of unmistakably American excess [and] the curvaceous female body type." Collar (2017) is making an interesting analysis here with regards to the reason why both Audrey

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[151] Aaliyah deleted her Instagram posts of this period from her account.
[152] Aaliyah also called Monroe "Iconic" in her earlier Instagram post of 15 October 2017, to which follower @yasmeen_hamdi replied: "U soooo look like her holy shit" and @ma_ryam42 "A copy of you" and @hijabiloves "Woah twinnin!!!".

Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe became such big beauty icons: "they fulfill the roles we desire them to play not as people, but as archetypes. [T]his is a distinctly American phenomenon (we cultural descendants of Puritans do love our madonna/whore dichotomies)."

✔️ @aaliyah.jm, 26 December 2017

This post serves as a microcelebrity technique of associating oneself with (bigger) celebrities. Moreover, this post hyper-counters stereotypes by conveying that veiled Muslim women can also be glamorous, playful and sensual. Interestingly, the fact that Aaliyah compares herself to a sex symbol could create some tensions with the concept of modesty or the turn to feminism. However, when comparing this image to her next one, Aaliyah seems to play with the "virgin/whore dichotomy" (Wyman and Dionisopoulos, 2000: 209), which could be interpreted either as a postfeminist return to traditional femininity or as a feminist subversion of traditional gender roles.

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aaliyah.jm Admiring the view in my home town Nottingham where I grew up and learnt a lot of valuable lessons (the good and the bad). I'm thankful for the experiences and the people I've met but as you all know pain and suffering is inevitable no matter where you are from.. That's why it's so important to reach out to those who do need help close to home, whether we know them or not to make them feel just as lucky as us.

Donate your Zakat with @nationalzakatfoundation who are helping those who need it close to home - or atleast tag 3 friends or family members so that even if you can't donate, you can share in their rewards!

#NZF #OurFutureDependsOnIt #MIN
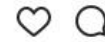
7,210 likes

5 DAYS AGO

Log in to like or comment.

✅ @aaliyah.jm, 8 June 2018

Featured in this photo is Aaliyah (@aaliyah.jm), smiling and sitting in front of a bush in what looks like a park or garden, wearing a wide-fitting peasant-style maxi dress and headscarf tied in her neck and

hanging down her shoulders, almost in the style of a Catholic saint or nun. In this philantropic post, she tells a brief personal story about growing up in her hometown, in order to make an appeal to her followers to donate their *zakat ul-fitr* (obligatory charity contribution) to the foundation she endorses. The manner in which she sits, folds her hands and drapes her outfit resembles the figures of woman saint Mother Teresa and the Madonna-figure of Our Lady of Seven Sorrows, see image on the left. This imagery of a modest, philantropic Madonna figure stands in contrast with the previous hyper-feminine, festive Monroe image, and creates an interesting virgin/whore dichotomy.

Our Lady of Seven Sorrows[153]

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[153] https://www.amazon.com/Ebros-Dolorosa-Compassion-Heavenly-Sculpture/dp/B00BZWVA7E

Criticising this return to both a sex symbol and a chastity icon as non-feminist and disempowering may be lacking depth. There is a different and more thought-provoking analytical perspective to be offered on Aaliyah's self-representations of femininity. Nearly two decades ago, Gamson (2001) analysed discourses around feminism and celebrities and found that popular discourses like these are filled with judgments related to the the virgin/whore dichotomy: "bodily virginity and media innocence, the loose women and the media whore, the good girl and the self-commodifier."[154] Numerous opinions and studies link young women's online presence with vanity (Senft and Baym, 2015: 1590-1591). But Bareket et al. (2018) found that the separation of women's nurturing (goodness) and sexuality (badness) is sexist and stems from toxic masculine thinking. In the US, Black women were historically seen as either promiscuous or asexual (Wheeler, 2018, cited in Kumar, 2018), which is also said about Muslim women in Orientalist and Islamophobic narratives; in Muslim contexts ("the perfect Muslimah"); and commercial contexts.

Bearing this in mind, Aaliyah's posts can in fact be interpreted as reclaiming both sexuality and sainthood/caregiving as positive feminine sides. And it can be understood as liberating to see these two sides unified in the performance of one and the same woman—especially a (veiled) Muslim woman, since they are often faced with heightened expectations related to sexuality and chastity. Thus, although the return to beauty icons as Monroe follow a postfeminist pattern and are problematic in terms of the reproduction of beauty standards, the online reclaiming and normalising of different sides of womanhood can be empowering. That said, Aaliyah applied the two femininities in different contexts for marketing reasons, which may compromise its empowering quality. After all, it is typically postfeminist to "reconcile semantic opposites: confidence and modesty, and innocence and provocativeness, respectively" (Lazar, 2009: 384).

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[154] http://social.rollins.edu/wpsites/wp-content/blogs.dir/115/files/2014/01/sex-scandals-and-female-publicity.pdf

In this photo, Shahd (@shahdbatal) is standing on the top floor of Equinox Westwood's (gym) parking garage, overlooking the busy Wilshire Boulevard in LA, surrounded by high corporate buildings. The setting and Shahd's pose are comparable to the way in which women have historically been represented in balcony scenes in glamorous cities: leaning forward and posing flirtatious like Marilyn Monroe did on the balcony of the Ambassador Hotel in New York in 1955 (Paniagua, 2016: 45), or curiously and innocently peaking over the edge like Audrey Hepburn, both depicted below. Or, in Shahd's case, posing with a feminine touch of her headscarf in her hand and denim jacket slid down her arms. This photo plays with the gaze and near-voyeurism, since Shahd is overlooking the city but is also aware of the camera looking at her. Marilyn Monroe's photo on the New York balcony is an iconic photo, one that bloggers would imitate even if they would not realise that they are copying her specifically. It suggests that iconic feminine poses are most valued in the (online) beauty industry.

Marilyn Monroe's photo is a symbol for glamour and the American Dream, since it bears connotations of making a career and becoming famous in America, whether that is in New York or in Hollywood, LA. Shahd is reproducing this meritocratic idea of the American Dream by posing while looking out over her new place of residence. This photo positions Shahd as a beauty blogger following in the footsteps of her iconic predecessors. It connects beauty with upward social mobility and celebrity.

Shahd's balcony photo fits within a pattern in Shahd's photos and videos of positioning herself as emotionally and financially mature and distinguishing herself as culturally progressive. The metropolitan setting functions as a sign for her relatively recent move from Minnesota to LA with the purpose of boosting her social media career. This move away from her parents as a single young woman is a big deal culturally, as Shahd explains in a video, which makes this photo a signifier for independence and empowerment.[155]

Interviewee #7 Saba offers an interesting perspective on such balcony scenes, when commenting on Maria Alia's below, taken in Paris:

> The way she poses is like, what's the word for it… it seems like she is very free. Free in what she can do, like she is not restricted to anything, she is open. […] If you live in a non-Muslim country, it's hard to fit in with the culture and society, […] but with Maria Alia's pictures, it seems that she fits in, wherever she is. […] It's nice to see how a Muslim hijabi female can fit into the Western culture.

This remark offers an insight into the role that these classic poses play in modelling empowered femininity to their Muslim followers (and perhaps a non-Muslim audience as well).

Marilyn Monroe, 1955
(by Ed Feingersch)

Audrey Hepburn, 1960
(by Cecil Beaton)

✔️ @mariaalia, 19 March 2016

Another interesting feminine pose, especially with regards to its intersection with class and ethnicity, is Basma K's (@basma_k) girly way of sitting in the grass beside a flower hedge and smelling a flower. In this romantic and aesthetic composition, Basma is wearing a white floral maxi-dress and is surrounded by greenery and white flowers. Her dress is in fashion at the time of writing, but is inspired

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[155] Shahd Batal, 16 March 2018, ARE MY PARENTS OKAY WITH MY MOVE TO LA? | SHAHD BATAL
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6veCIBiKcs

on earlier fashions, such as the Edwardian dress, known from the late 19th century paintings by Monet and Manet, see below. This type of dress is also a recurrence of the 1970s broderie trend, and was also worn by the late Princess Diana during a tour in Canada in 1983, see below. Whether consciously or not, Basma's dress and scenery draw on visual codes for purity, elegance, class distinction and perhaps White Britishness. In the brief Edwardian era, Britain was the greatest imperial power, aristocrats put their wealth on display, and aristocratic women were assigned to play the role of being beautiful and not politically involved. Edwardian paintings often depicted upper-class women who had the luxury of spending time in nature and, for instance, read books. Similarly, Basma's photo could be interpreted as a contemporary portrayal of this upper-class way of dressing and spending free time.

✔️ @basma_k, 13 June 2017

In this photo, Basma represents beauty as a nostalgic return to this colonial era of elegance, nobility and hyper-femininity. This kind of gender-stereotypical self-representation creates a remarkable contrast with the power poses and badass self-representations in Chapter 4 and 5. It is precisely this contrast of gendered poses that shows the postfeminist character of contemporary popular culture. Nevertheless, posing in an elegant colonial style could also be interpreted as Basma's subversive way of reclaiming a type of femininity as a Black veiled Muslim woman, that was exclusively available to

White upper-class women, historically. Some followers really appreciate Basma's style, such as interviewee #2 Loubna:

> She shows a very classy image of how Muslim women in hijab fashion can dress. […] I think if I was not Muslim, and I would think: 'oh they all dress in a rubbish bag and this,' and I would look at her picture and I would say: 'oh no actually she is tall and she is nice and she dresses really… she is elegant,' I think it would change my mind. So maybe she changes the mind of some non-Muslim people.

Manet, Young Woman among the Flowers, 1879; Monet, In the Meadow, 1876; Princess Diana, 1983; @basma_k, 7 June 2017

This section has demonstrated that hijab fashion bloggers return to classic beauty icons, because of their connotation with several qualities, such as: classiness, glamour, wealth, royalty, celebrity, Eurocentrism, Orientalism, sensuality and the American Dream. These are ingredients for rebranding Muslim women as modern, glamorous and respectable, but has problematic sides to it. This section has thus shown that using past beauty icons' aesthetics is a way of minimising perceived Muslimness, as well as enhancing perceived respectability, glamour or class. In the next section, I discuss an opposite trend I found in hijab fashion, in which bloggers emphasise their perceived Muslimness.

6.3 Return to Orientalism

In this section, I discuss cases in which hijab fashion bloggers accentuate their perceived Muslimness in self-representations. In these images, Muslimness is not represented in a religious/political sense, or even in an everyday/relatable sense, but rather in a way that exotifies Muslim women. In what follows, I explain that this exploitation of otherness in aesthetic ways can best be described as self-Orientalism. Eurocentrism (Whiteness) and Orientalism should not be thought of as opposite modes of representation, but rather as two sides of the same coin. This is the coin of (neo)colonial aesthetics, that minimises or emphasises perceived Muslimness, in order to make the hijab more acceptable or

marketable. Statistically, merely a small number of images in my sample contain references to Orientalism, however, during the span of my study, I noticed that a growing number of hijab fashion bloggers and brands make use of such Orientalist visuals. By studying my sample in conjunction with this additional material, it became evident that this trend forms a new Instagram genre. Are hijab fashion bloggers becoming the new face of Orientalism? Such a return to Orientalism on Instagram would be problematic, because Orientalism upholds "the power of the West to know, speak for and regulate the Orient better than the Orient itself" (Lewis, 1996: 16). Moreover, many scholars have stressed that Orientalism was and is always already gendered (Said, 1985; Lewis, 1996; Yeğenoğlu, 1998; Sardar, 1999: 2).

In recent years, the inclusion and diversity trend has fuelled more visibility of (veiled) Muslim women in advertising campaigns and on Instagram. As Littler (2017: 65) explains, ethnicity has become more commodified and implemented in strategies. Orientalist aesthetics function herein as bloggers' markers of difference and distinction that "attract eyeballs" in the attention economy (Marwick, 2015a: 138). Bloggers may fill Muslim/Arab/Asian audience's expectations when displaying a modern Orientalist aesthetic during travels, such as @eslimah and @saufeeya do in this section; others use this around the time of religious celebrations, such as @amenakhan and @nuralailalov in this section; or when posting a story about feeling represented and culturally included, such as Muslim beauty blogger

@nabela did (pictured on the left), when she posed as Jasmine on a Persian carpet at a cinema that screened the live-action film ALADDIN (2019), to promote the Aladdin Collection by MAC Cosmetics: "it felt like they were cheering on my people, our culture and our world." Orientalist visuals seem to resonate with many followers, because it is a form of representing *their* cultural elements in a positive, proud and aesthetic way—as opposed to the post-racial, mainstream Instagram aesthetics, as discussed in Chapter 5, and as opposed to negative stereotypes in Islamophobic representations.

@nabela, 16 May 2019

This prompts the question of whether self-Orientalism can be interpreted as a subversive form of claiming and reclaiming *otherness*, similar to the history of the word queer or the colour pink. Nevertheless, Ponzanesi (2014: 48) highlights that postcolonial "traditions, products and subjectivities enact in an interdependent fashion both in complicity with neo-colonial cultural industries and resistance to them." In this case, Orientalist aesthetics construct and address a niche audience by

standardising or homogenising Muslimness: "who gets to be seen and how exposes the underlying logics of capitalism that flatten visibility into which Muslim women are the most marketable" (Kumar, 2018). An important factor to take into account in this section is, beside self-branding, the role businesses play in branding bloggers in an Orientalist way. Moreover, my data suggest that self-Orientalism still involves an obsession with Muslim women's dress by turning it into an aesthetic spectacle (Merali, 2019: 54). This would imply that self-representations do not form a radical departure from stereotypical, mainstream representations and "might prove to be far from emancipatory given that power relations remain, in the end, essentially unscathed" (Ponzanesi, 2014: 3).

6.3.1 Self-Orientalism

The term Orientalism and the scholarship around it is mostly associated with Edward Said, who published his book *Orientalism* in 1978 as part of a trilogy—although others had written about the topic before that (see Said, 1985: 93). Said (1978) criticised 'the West's' (neo)colonial construction of the MENA region and Asia as a monolithic *Orient* that is exotic, barbaric and inferior, while imagining itself as rational, civilised and superior. In other words, Orientalism refers to the Eurocentric production of distorted knowledge and stereotypical images about 'the East', based on a colonial fantasy, serving the West's political and cultural dominance. Sardar (1999: 9) explains that "Orientalism is not a construction from experience of the Orient. It is the fabulation of pre-existing Western ideas overwritten and imposed upon the Orient," which means that metaphorically, Orientalism can best be compared with a pair of imperial glasses. This "artificial construction […] is entirely distinct and unattached to the East as understood within and by the East" (Sardar, 1999: vii). There are exceptions and nuances to this, thus stating that Orientalism is solely a Western/White practice would be inaccurate. Orientalism did and does not only concern how the West sees Muslims, but also influences how Muslims see themselves: their internalisation, subversion, negotiation or reclaiming of otherness.

Although Orientalism can be used in subversive ways, more often it poses problems for representing the self, for many reasons, such as inviting non-Muslim audiences to perceive Muslim bloggers not as multi-layered individuals but as representatives of their religious/racial group.[156] Whether in colonial paintings or in current media, images were/are generally not produced to provide information about Muslims to a Western audience, nor for Muslims to recognise themselves in it, but rather for the

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[156] This relates to the "burden of representation" as discussed in section 1.2 (Tarlo and Moors, 2013: 20).

purpose of objectification and essentialising (Kim and Chung, 2005: 82). Reading Stuart Hall's (2005: 470) writings about representations of the exotic in mainstream media, it seems that Orientalist performances meet Western non-Muslim expectations of spectacle and non-threatening diversity: "a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic."

The example of blogger Eslimah (@eslimah) seems of particular relevance here. Because whereas she usually emphasises her Whiteness/White privilege, she seems to do the contrary here, which is stressing her Muslimness by dressing up in traditional Omani clothing and holding up a face veil. She does this in quite an Orientalist way, treating it as a fancy costume (McDonald, 2006: 19; Navarro, 2010: 101), and in a gendered way, hiding her smile behind her veil (see Döring et al., 2015: 957).

@eslimah, 6 april 2019

Shay and Sellers-Young (2003: 19) state that the *exotic* is a fantasy made up of arbitrary fragments, and connotes something frivolous, harmless, playful, entertaining. Eslimah's smiley eyes here, and her caption: "Dance. Smile. Giggle. Marvel. TRUST. HOPE. LOVE. WISH. BELIEVE." suggest that Orientalism presents a mysterious yet non-threatening, playful, loveable, beautiful, glamorous, marketable version of Islam, in popular imagination. In general, Islamic teachings and traditional items such as prayer beads are replaced on Instagram by more popular expressions of spirituality, such as motivational one-

liners and (depoliticised) self-actualisation. King (1999: 2) describes that this spirituality is enjoyed as exotic because it is rooted in "the notion of 'the Mystic East' as a prevalent theme within Western understandings of [the Orient] as 'the Other'." Eslimah further orientalises her outfit by stressing in the caption below, that its colours are the extreme opposite of her normal nude-colour outfits: "I don't think I've worn this much colors in my lifetime!" One might argue that, despite being White European, Eslimah has legitimacy to wear Oriental outfits as a veiled Muslim, however, in the caption she says that she is dressing up, and she is posing with her non-Muslim mother. In this section, I am not concerned with bloggers that include cultural references specific to their ethnic backgrounds, that pay tribute and do not mystify women. I refer here to certain (self-)representations that bear strong associations with colonial, Orientalist paintings and photographs, rooted in Western expectations of feminine spectacle, and the use of mostly Arab elements by women of other ethnic backgrounds. Such spectacular aesthetics and easy text are meant to sign "Muslimness" and be picked up by followers and the Instagram algorithm.

@eslimah, 5 April 2019

Dirlik (1996) defined self-Orientalism as 'Oriental' people's self-images that incorporate fundamental Oriental ideas, whether deliberate and subversive or not. He does not see self-Orientalism as something novel, but rather as having been there from the start of Orientalism (1996: 96). As mentioned briefly, Orientalist ideas were adopted by some people and governments in the 'Orient'

itself during colonial eras.[157] Even recently, there is an Orientalist trend visible in popular culture,[158] which can be called "'everyday' or popular Orientalism" (Eldem, 2010: 27), "new orientalism" (Maira, 2007: 225), "popular orientalism" (Maira, 2007: 236) or "late capitalist orientalism" (Maira, 2007: 235). Concretely, this means that some MENA/Asian/Muslim people apply Orientalist elements in tourism, popular culture, products and self-branding.[159] Liu (2017) calls this "strategic self-Orientalism"; Eldem speaks about "self-exoticization" (2010); Said described it as "second-order Orientalism" and Al-'Azm as "Orientalism in reverse" (see Maira, 2007: 225).

Sometimes Orientalism is used in subversive, non-hegemonic ways, for example in art exhibitions that reflect subversively on colonial history, or by certain artists who reclaim Arab culture and representation in their work (Fowler, 2013). Other uses of Orientalism are not very subversive but also not exploitative, such as the popularisation of henna/mehndi among Asians and non-Asians alike (Maira, 2007: 229). Although some see it as appropriation, many Asian women welcome this as a celebration of their culture (ibid.). Some of my interviewees also see the use of Oriental elements as a way of celebrating heritage, or a form of intercultural communication and countering stereotypes, such as interviewee #5 Jenan:

> I mean, you can see it either positively or negatively. I can either say that it's bad because it just brings us backwards, it just reinforces some of the stereotypes people have of us. But at the same time it can be good because it's part of a culture, you know, so you could really value that and you can put that forward that 'yeah, it's a different culture, there is nothing wrong with that.' And just trying to make people accept each other.

And interviewee #9 Asmaa comments on some bloggers' combination of traditional Arab elements with modern Western makeup:

> It's not really a stereotype, I feel like they are trying to use the best of both worlds. Because we can't just shy away from our culture and not be a representative of our culture, because it's a big part of our identity, as well as hijab, but at the same time, [*living between two cultures,*] it's very relatable to me […] it's quite representative of our lives, we're just a mixture of both.

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[157] For instance, Turkish governments who used Orientalism to modernise and secularise (Eldem, 2010: 28), Ottoman painters who were trained by Orientalists (Eldem, 2010: 27) and Ottoman women who dressed up for visitors in stereotypical ways so as to meet their expectation of a "tourist attraction" (Cevik, 2011: 474).
[158] https://www.wsj.com/articles/orientalist-art-makes-a-surprising-comeback-1429305221
[159] An example is the government-backed sales-driven implementation of traditional elements in Moroccan artifacts and fashion (Jansen, 2016: 11).

Nevertheless, Dirlik (1996: 114) argues: "The part that self-orientalization may play in the struggle against internal and external hegemony [...] must not be exaggerated. In the long run, self-orientalization serves to perpetuate, and even to consolidate, existing forms of power."

6.3.2 Oriental Touches

Historically, "cultural references" in Orientalist paintings and photography were reduced to a few—fantastic and luxurious—visual clichés, "repeating them over and over" (Celik, cited in Fowler, 2013). These cultural references are not location-specific, but are supposed to represent "the entire world of Islam", as if such a thing exists (ibid.). At best, this aesthetic mash-up of Instagram Orientalism could be described as pastiche or as a post-racial aesthetic, but more often it "inches toward essentializing who young Muslims are, which can then be monetized by corporations" (Kumar, 2018), who are operating according to a Western consumerism logic (Waninger, 2015: 19). This could potentially normalise stereotypes in popular culture and thus further orientalise Muslim women (Fitzpatrick, 2009). I found that Orientalism is becoming an aesthetic Instagram genre on its own, mainly consisting of the following four visual elements that I discuss in the sections below: Persian rugs/décor; harem-style group photos; henna/mehndi; and face veils/jewellery.[160] These Oriental touches could potentially normalise stereotypes about the headscarf in popular culture (Fitzpatrick, 2009).

Persian Rugs/Décor

This series of photos for @savoirflair, a leading Middle Eastern fashion e-magazine, is captioned by Saufeeya (@saufeeya/@feeeeya) as "possibly the best shoot I've done to date". It pictures her in Arab designer outfits, against a geometric backdrop of Persian rugs, Moroccan pouffes and tea. This magazine sets or follows a trend of overt use of typically Arab elements in self-representation, which could function as a form of Arab pride and reclaiming narratives. Nevertheless, the extent to which it bears resemblances with settings and poses in Orientalist paintings is striking. After a brief exploration of Orientalist art, one can find many scenes like these in harem paintings, see images below.

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[160] This list of Orientalist elements is not exhaustive, and new elements are regularly introduced on Instagram, such as a shisha pipe by @amenakhan on 15 February 2021.

@saufeeya, 11 November 2017, Dubai (@savoirflair)

Fragments of John Frederick Lewis, A Lady Receiving Visitors, 1873; Lewis, A Favourite of the Harem; Franck Dicksee, Leila, 1892

If these images are a modern execution of older paintings, it suggests that, in collective memory, this was the last time in history in which images of Muslim women were admired or glamorised in Western culture, mainly for their perceived beauty, luxury, splendidness and sensuality.[161] Why does our generation (subconsciously) remember these paintings? Orientalist paintings are trending again among certain artists or collectors, and Orientalist costumes and themes are popular in American music videos (see Booker and Daraiseh, 2019: 65-81). But even earlier than that, these kind of images

have been reproduced in Hollywood, starting in 1920s with actress and first (evil) sex symbol Theda Bara (Golden, 1998: 7), and later on in the 1950s and 1960s with actresses like Marilyn Monroe, see left. In other words: Orientalism has always been fetishized and commodified in art, music, fashion and advertisement, and it seems that hijab fashion bloggers are tapping into this "hijab fetish" (Malik, 2018).

Marilyn Monroe impersonating Theda Bara, 1958
(Fabulous Enchantresses, by Richard Avedon for *Life Magazine*)

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[161] See for example the following quote: "I fell in love with the aesthetic beauty of Orientalist paintings"
Elfonoon https://elfoonoon.wordpress.com/2014/01/19/lalla-essaydi-orientalist-mythologys-challenger/

Potentially, self-Orientalism is "a culture of deconstruction which recycle[s] media images and commercial spectacles" (Moore, 2004: 312). Self-Orientalist representations resemble stereotypical and sexist Orientalist paintings, but are different because bloggers are the protagonists, they present themselves in powerful (confident) poses and with modern aesthetics, and they benefit financially from it. This has subversive potential, *if* these processes are deliberately built on Orientalism, reflecting a level of postcolonial awareness and cultural critique, and perhaps even representing the feminist figure of the trickster (hooks, 1984; Cai, 2008: 278-279). However, it is more plausible that this is simply a trend, a homogenised taste, that generates likes and drives up sales, and provides models for identity and self-representation (Moore, 2004: 306). Therefore, self-Orientalism's ability to shift power remains limited.

My data strongly suggest that there is a trend on Instagram of representing the Muslim self as the exotic other, yet aesthetic self. Brands and bloggers use Orientalist visuals to rebrand veiled Muslim women as beautiful. Orientalist visuals serve to fascinate or to *other* the hijab, while beauty serves as a way to normalise the hijab. The following quote from the most prolific collector of Orientalist paintings, Shafik Gabr, illustrates this link between appreciating Orientalist art and hyper-countering Islamophobia: "With all the bad news coming out of the Middle East, it's important to spread awareness of its beauty."[162] Perceived as such, Islamophobia is hyper-countered by a return to Orientalist aesthetics, which is ironic and problematic from a feminist and postcolonial standpoint.

Harem Style

Since a few years, a new trend emerged on Instagram in which veiled Muslim women are posing in dreamy group pictures. This can be interpreted as a representation of Islamic sisterhood and modern female friendships. In Chapter 5, this group modelling was present in Habiba da Silva's advertising of her headscarf line. The group set-up worked well in that instance for demonstrating the variety of skin colours her line is dedicating to. Another well-known example of a group set-up can be found in Mona

[162] https://www.forbes.com/part_forbes/2009/0413/062-oriental-art-embracing-the-past.html

Haydar's music video WRAP MY HIJAB, see screenshot on the right.[163] In this case, this group set-up serves as an activist formation that supports the feminist message of Haydar's song. However, more often, this group modelling is used in highly gendered ways by Muslim-owned brands to advertise headscarves and outfits, such as in the examples below by brands @culturehijab, @silq.rose and @aabcollection.
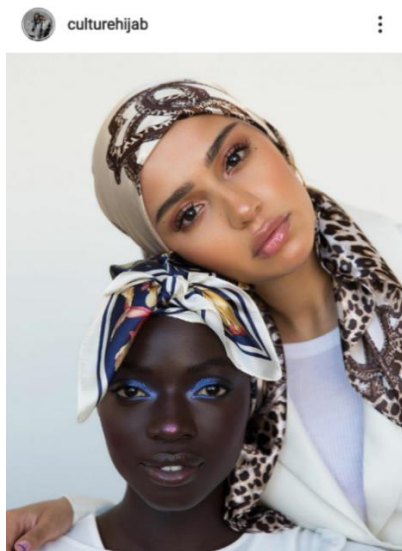
@culturehijab, 24 March 2020   @culturehijab, 10 April 2020   @silq.rose, 10 March 2020

Fragments: Ferencz Eisenhut, In the Harem, 1889; Rudolph Ernst, The Reader, 1854-1932; and Fabio Fabbi, The New Slave Girl, 1861-1946

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[163] mona haydar, 27 March 2017, MONA HAYDAR - HIJABI (WRAP MY HIJAB)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOX9O_kVPeo

Remarkably, these women's body language is reminiscent of the way in which women were painted, and later photographed (Khiabany and Sreberny, 2004: 54), in Orientalist depictions of harems. In these paintings, Orientalist painters imagined women as sensual beings who are half-dressed, lying down, leaning on each other or grooming each other, see images below. This type of representation may be described as "cross-racial lesbianism", which is an Orientalist frame that Kim and Chung (2005: 83) found in advertisements. It is a way of representing Muslim women as desirable. Although beauty, sexual confidence and desirability are seen as sources of power in a postfeminist discourse, the return to colonial, racialised, fetishized, heteronormative ideas of beauty and sexuality are problematic from a postcolonial point of view.

Henna/Mehndi

✅ @nuralailalov, 8 September 2017

In this image, the US-based Nura Afia (@nuralailalov) is showing off her henna-tattooed hands, with which she frames her dramatic eye look. The modern dusty-pink colours of the background and hijab make her eyes and hands stand out. Her caption shows that this photo is taken as part of a promotion for a company that supports content creators: "Love this collab I did with @ipsy for Eid Al-Adha!!!" Her hands are henna-tattooed to show viewers, in a related get-ready-with-me video, how Nura

celebrates *Eid ul-Adha*: "Henna makes me feel beautiful, it makes me feel like I'm about to get married again, makes me feel very glamourous, makes me feel traditional, it's a celebration."[164] This campaign fits within the current diversity and inclusion trend, in which brands and companies profile themselves as progressive by diversifying representations. However, the campaign's overall focus on makeup and henna, as well as Nura's short story about their family's celebration, seems less progressive because it reduces *Eid* to a reason for beautification. There is no space for discussing the particulars of Eid ul-Adha from an Islamic point of view, such as pilgrimage, sacrifice and commemorating Abraham, Hagar and Ismael.

Moreover, Nura's pose is strikingly similar to an image of henna/mehndi that many people globally may remember, whether consciously or not: namely of Beyoncé in the Coldplay music video HYMN FOR THE WEEKEND (2016).[165] This look, as well as the entire video, has been criticised for its appropriation and Orientalism (Berlatsky, 2016). Both Nura's and Beyoncé's pose are based on framing their eyes with their hands to create a mysterious look, which is not a traditional or habitual way of posing but is staged for marketing purposes. These observations indicate that this image tactically includes elements that signify 'Muslimness', which are aesthetically pleasing and easy to recognise for Muslim audiences.

Face Veil

I have also noticed a trend of Muslim bloggers posing with a face veil or face jewellery. Whereas face veils are a *normal* or *cherished* piece of everyday or festive clothing for women in several (sub)cultures, none of the bloggers in these Instagram posts wear a face veil habitually, most of these veils are not draped in traditional or practical ways, and are not even part of their own cultural backgrounds. On the contrary, many of the bloggers and followers live in Western political contexts in which face veils are ridiculed or banned, instead of celebrated as in these advertisement. For a great part, these photos are shot for (collaborations with) brands, whether Muslim-owned or mainstream. This makes one wonder what the role of third parties is in posing with face veils. It seems that, based on a collective

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[164] IPSY, 1 September 2017, EID AL-ADHA MAKEUP TUTORIAL FEAT. NURA AFIA | IPSY OPEN STUDIOS PRESENTS
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDZnX9pqy-8
[165] 29 January 2016, COLDPLAY - HYMN FOR THE WEEKEND (OFFICIAL VIDEO)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YykjpeuMNEk

but subconscious colonial memory, the face veil is used as an exotic item, a superficial symbol of Eastern culture, that adds some extra flavour of Muslimness. It is a fascinator: an object meant to hold audiences' fascination—similar to the face veil in Ralli's painting pictured below.

Theodore Ralli, Young Ottoman, 1879   @nabela, 29 November 2017

Sardar (1999: 6) explains that in Orientalist paintings, veils were used to represent "a modesty that maintains a mystique". Oriental sexuality, symbolised by veils and harems (Said, 1985: 103), was seen as something exotic and abundant but mysterious and partly hidden. Arguably, the veil is still used to partly hide and partly reveal a mysterious sensuality, exemplified by Nabela (@nabela) who captioned her transparent face veil photo above: "A true sneak peek 💜🙈." Although these photos are often modest in terms of covering, the linking together of a veil with beauty creates a sensual fantasy. It attracts likes in the attention economy and is recognisable to many people as a sign of Muslimness. Fetishizing the veil may attract Muslim audiences, however, it serves to appeal to White/non-Muslim audiences and their ideas of acceptable (entertaining) Muslimness. In other cases, it reflects how White/Orientalist marketeers think they can represent diversity and include Muslims to reach their target audience (Malik, 2018).

The Instagram post shows:

amenaofficial • Follow

إن الفؤاد يرى ... ما لا يرى النظر amenaofficial
The heart sees what the eyes can not

Load more comments

smallorbit I've never seen a pic of you that hasn't moved me in a good way. 👌❤️

amarkhikyar 💋💋❤️❤️❤️😄😄

amarkhikyar so lovely bless u

stanleydesigns_ 😄😄

thatbarriogirl So beautiful ❤️❤️❤️

nature_admirer18 @amenaofficial Salam alaikum dear sister. Inshallah you are well with your family in this blessed month. Sis can you please tell me how did you get your Instagram account offiially verified. As I am assisting someone very special with this. I contacted Instag via E-mail and I am still waiting for their response. If you can assist me it would be greatly appreciated. I

11,137 likes

5 DAYS AGO

Log in to like or comment.

✔️ @amenakhan / prev. @amenaofficial, 31 May 2018

The above photo was shot by Amena (@amenakhan) and her husband after filming an "EASY EID 2018 MAKEUP TUTORIAL" on YouTube.[166] Amena stares into the camera through a transparent white veil with sequin edge that is part of a Desi wedding outfit. She is holding the veil over her head and eyes,

exposing her nose and lips. The warm, passionate and feminine purple of her lips matches her purple nail polish and purple flower background. These colours, however, are manipulated: in fact, as shows from her tutorial (left), the roses are red and her lipstick and nail polish are bright pink instead of purple. This suggests that purple (aubergine) is found to be more stereotypically Oriental.

It is very unusual for women to cover their eyes with a veil, except perhaps in Western bridal traditions, hence it is a farfetched and highly staged way of posing with a face veil. Interviewee #7 Saba:

This one is quite confusing because normally, with the veil, your eyes are showing and the rest of the face is covered. But in this one, her eyes are covered and then the bottom half of her

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[166] Amena, 3 June 2018, EASY EID 2018 MAKEUP TUTORIAL | AMENA https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ML3lO--DamU

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face is showing. […] It's probably for a photoshoot or something, […] 'cause it's so unique and I haven't seen any pictures like this around.

Amena captioned her with an Arab proverb that Amena translated as: "The heart sees what the eyes can not."[167] The caption is catchy because it speaks about inner beauty instead of outer beauty. It means that she, or anyone, can perceive spiritual beauty by being in touch with their heart, even if being blindfolded by a metaphorical, or in this case an actual, veil. Nevertheless, Amena uses an Arab proverb here, while being of Indian background and posing with an Indian veil, which suggests that the Arab proverb is only used here to tap into a larger Muslim audience. Perhaps the religious occasion of *Eid ul-Fitr* was a reason for Amena to use *mystic* aesthetics and caption it with *mystic* spiritual wisdom. A parallel can be drawn here with notions of the "mystic East" that Eslimah invoked (King, 1999).
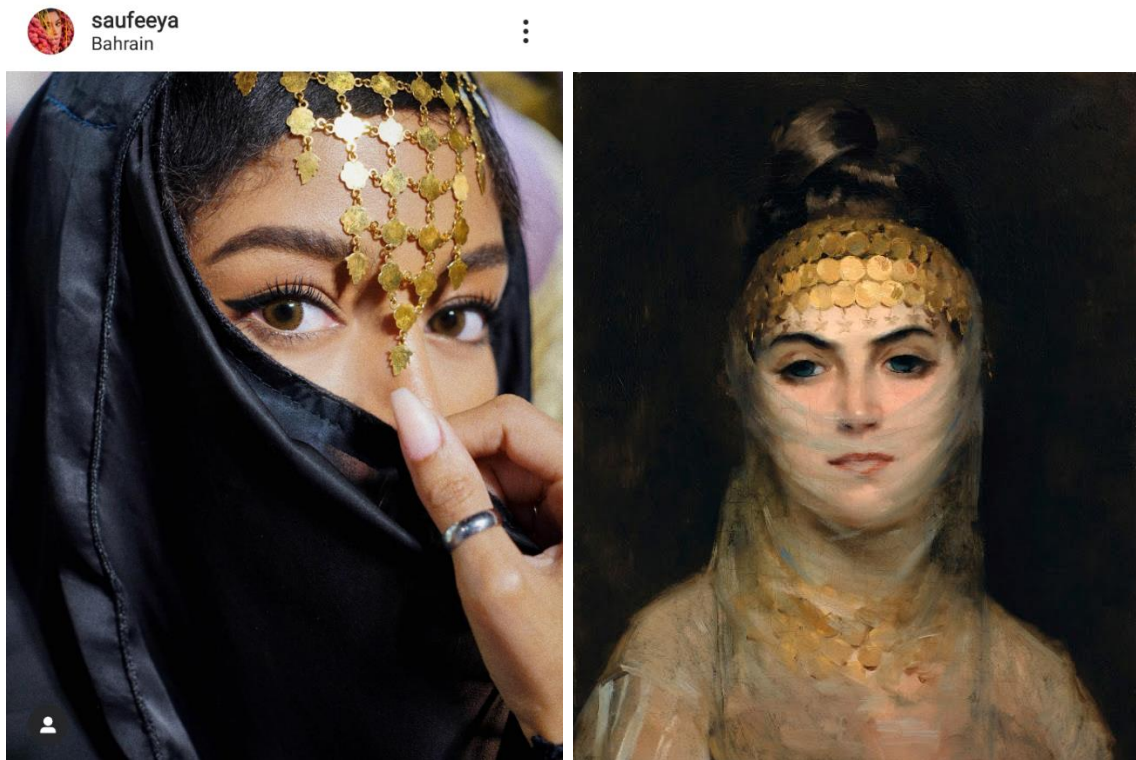
@saufeeya, 27 December 2019   Theodore Ralli, Odalisque, 1852-1909

Saufeeya (@saufeeya) geotagged the location of this close-up photo by photographer @ahmedalkuwaiti in Bahrain. She is dressed in what looks like traditional black Gulf attire with golden headpiece that decorates her forehead and nose bridge. Her thumb ring, manicured nail and modern makeup lift the photo into the present time. She covers her mouth and tip of her nose with the veil that she holds in her hand, while staring sideways into the camera. There is a striking resemblance

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[167] Alternatively, it could be translated as: "The (affectionate) heart sees what the (evil/envious) eye(sight) cannot see."

between Saufeeya's photo and Ralli's portrait of an Ottoman young lady with gold coin headpiece and translucent face veil, that I found when exploring Orientalist art. Whereas this Ottoman lady was probably dressed for a special occasion,[168] Saufeeya is dressed up in Bahrain's national dress, as a tourist. Thus, this photo treats a face veil and headpiece as a costume, as part of a role play of great aesthetic worth on Instagram or in advertising. It is unclear whether Saufeeya is holding the veil up or is pulling it down, but it gives the photo a mysterious allure, a classic representation of a veil as hiding the sexual attractiveness that lies beneath. In this photo, sexuality or seduction is represented as a play of hiding and revealing—thus of voyeurism. Love and Helmbrecht (2007: 41-42) state that when *othered* and marginalised groups in Western culture become more visible, "this visibility is often accompanied by surveillance, voyeurism, and the desire to possess another." This (neo)colonial voyeurism corresponds with the voyeuristic character of Instagram.

Although colonial Orientalists regarded sexual pleasure as a sign of Islam's inherently sexist nature, sexuality was celebrated, more liberated and evolved than in ultra-conservative European societies/marriages at the time. In current Western postfeminism, a display of sexual confidence often serves as a barometer for women's liberation and power. Whereas sexualised images of women in historic Orientalist paintings and photos took away from their power, it seems as if seductive self-Orientalism on Instagram reclaims some of that power—since in postfeminist logic, sexual attractiveness equals power. Saufeeya's photo could thus be interpreted either as a postfeminist, seductive, self-Orientalist display of female power, or as the reproduction and commodification of colonial voyeurism. In any case, both Orientalism and postfeminist logic are taken up to rebrand Muslim femininity and counter Islamophobia. Illustrative of the fact that self-Orientalism is applied as a form of hyper-countering Islamophobia is Dina Tokio's video titled WE ARE NOT OPPRESSED (2017) and its thumbnail photo of her in niqab (see below), shot by a magazine for bloggers that describes her as "The hijabi blogger breaking stereotypes".[169] Although it is positive to see that industries and media are making diverse identities visible, one question is why the magazine used a stereotypical niqab on her for communicating the message of countering stereotypes.

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[168] http://myartblogcollection.blogspot.com/2016/12/26-paintings-by-orientalist-artists-in.html

[169] Dina Tokio, 11 March 2017, WE ARE NOT OPPRESSED. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LTFhD-R9ok

We are NOT oppressed.
227K views • 1 year ago
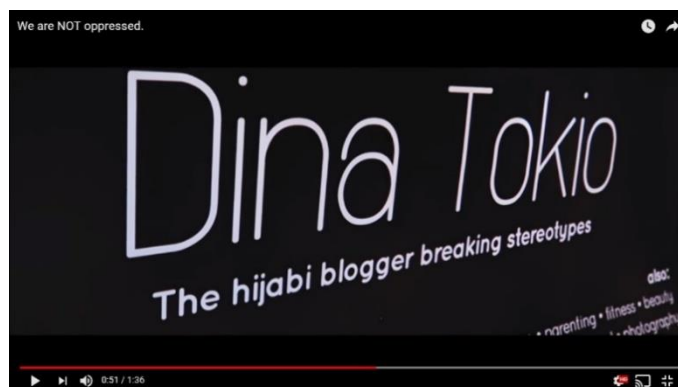
Earlier sections in this chapter demonstrate that, in hijab fashion discourses, beauty is empowerment mediated by confidence, choice, class and minimising Muslimness. And in this particular section, beauty is empowerment mediated by exotic sensuality and emphasised Muslimness. On the one hand, beauty and sensuality are postfeminist expressions of power. On the other hand, beauty and sensuality are a very gendered, raced, conditional and material means of getting mainstreamed in the attention economy and accepted by a non-Muslim audience. The images in this section suggest that Orientalist aesthetics are appealing to advertisers and audiences for its association with beauty, luxury, sensuality and exoticism.

6.4 Conclusion

I contextualised the data in this chapter by establishing that earlier postfeminist discourses of empowered beauty, and a recent popularisation of feminism, led to a conceptual unification of feminism and beauty in popular culture. A renewed interest in feminism has also brought forth a body-positivity movement that challenges beauty norms and diversifies representations. However, since many body-positive conversations are embedded within the beauty and influencer industries, the body positivity discourse serves more as a marketing tool for than a critique of hyper-femininity. Although hijab fashion bloggers do challenge certain beauty norms in terms of ethnicity or modesty, a body-positive discourse is mainly applied to make their beauty content more relevant, authentic and feminist-sounding to followers. Progressive language is thus met with a continued focus on the feminine body and a return to traditional ideas of beauty, which is typical of the postfeminist double entanglement. In this chapter, I also focused on the societal privileges that come with beauty, and the role of beauty for veiled Muslim women to feel accepted, recognised and normal.

Postfeminism is characterised by a simultaneous promotion of progressive ideas on gender and a return to traditional (normative or constrictive) gender roles. It is evident from my data analysis that hijab fashion bloggers reproduce gendered, classed and raced beauty standards in three postfeminist ways: by (1) a return to hyper-feminine beauty; (2) a return to classic Hollywood beauty icons; (3) and a return to Orientalist aesthetics. The first postfeminist return to traditional beauty and femininity is manifested in a re-glorification of hyper-femininity. As my data indicates, beauty practices are surrounded by a feminist vocabulary that frames beauty as body-positive, as providing confidence, as fun and easy, as a form of self-care, as women's free choice and as something that requires transparency. Notably, these discursive frames still locate confidence and empowerment in women's appearances, which means that women would continue to depend on the beauty industry for their sense of empowerment. Although my interviewees reported that makeup and fashion can indeed enhance their self-confidence, the majority was critical about bloggers' representation of beauty-based confidence as empowerment.

In this chapter, I demonstrated that, in hijab fashion content, the return to hyper-feminine beautification manifests itself in three ways that borrow from a feminist lexicon: (1) makeup is linked to confidence, (2) skincare is presented as self-care, (3) and botox/fillers are discussed through a choice and transparency discourse. Within the skincare trend, hijab fashion bloggers often pose wearing the colour white or covering their hair with a towel to signal purity and pampering. Skincare is presented as a form of self-care and as confidence-enhancing, and, therefore empowering. However, some interviewees rejected this content by pointing out the staged character of the bathroom-and-towel-scenes, the commercial interests involved, and its exacerbation of women's insecurities. After that, I addressed the normalisation of such beauty procedures as botox and fillers, through a choice and transparency discourse. My interview data shows that certain followers are concerned about these hyper-feminine trends, but nevertheless foreground how they value the transparency with which bloggers address their beauty enhancements. I also explained that, in postfeminism, hyper-femininity and feminism are an unproblematised combination, because beauty is presented as a form or sign of empowerment. This inclusion of feminist rhetoric in content about beauty procedures makes it more immune to any claims that it is un-feminist or disempowering. Overall, hijab fashion bloggers do not move away from the hyper-focus on women's appearance or produce radically different images, and this fact limits the empowering potential of their self-representations.

A second postfeminist return to traditional beauty and femininity was visible in my data in bloggers' use of turbans and feminine poses, which refer to or strongly resemble the aesthetics of classic Hollywood beauty icons, such as Audrey Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe. Following (White) Hollywood's appropriation of Oriental fashion, the turban became a symbol of glamour and class. Its association

with classiness is appealing in a commercial and Islamophobic context in which the turban is more palatable for a non-Muslim gaze than a full hijab which is perceived as more conservative. Its creative and aesthetic qualities aside, the turban trend is problematic because it bears an element of performing Europeanness and minimising perceived Muslimness. Emulating classic beauty icons is a way of signalling upward social mobility and constructing a glamorous, modern, classy, respectable and empowered Muslim femininity. Perceived as such, the turban undoubtedly plays a role in hyper-countering the stereotype of Muslim women as second-class citizens. Many interviewees negotiate the turban trend, not because of its perceived modesty, but mainly because they see it as a response to Islamophobic tendencies in the beauty industry and society.

A third return to traditional beauty is noticeable in the return to Orientalism in posts in which hijab fashion bloggers emphasise their Muslimness. By using visual elements that resemble old Orientalist paintings, bloggers create a new aesthetic genre on Instagram that invokes an ambience of beauty, luxury, sensuality, mystery, spiritualism and exoticism. While this could be read as a subversive appreciation of cultural diversity, as can be seen from my interview data, self-Orientalism primarily serves as a way of hyper-countering Islamophobic ideas of Muslim women as threatening or oppressed. Self-Orientalism rebrands Muslim women's bodies and veils as an aesthetic spectacle and markers of a niche. This is exemplified in group photos that resemble the heteronormative sensuality in harem paintings, or in images that treat the face veil as a costume, a fascinator or a superficial symbol of Muslimness. Though aesthetically pleasing, the self-Orientalism trend indicates that bloggers and industries still take their inspiration—whether consciously or not—from a shared memory of colonial images in which the hijab used to signify beauty and seduction.

This chapter has thus demonstrated that hijab fashion discourses equate beauty with empowerment, mediated by confidence, choice, class and minimising Muslimness—or by exotic sensuality and accentuating Muslimness. Beauty content can either serve as a way of navigating *or* of reinforcing the simultaneous pressures of beauty standards and Islamophobia. Beauty-based empowerment discourses may also widen the discursive gap between the beautiful, empowered and accepted versions of Islam, and unfashionable, conservative and unaccepted versions of Islam.

7 Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine hijab fashion bloggers' representations of femininity and empowerment on Instagram as a postfeminist phenomenon. Due to Islamophobia, veiled Muslim women are often invisible in mainstream media or negatively stereotyped as being oppressed or radical. Digital technologies, however, have provided Muslim women with the tools to tell their own stories and represent themselves in diverse, creative and subversive ways. Amongst the veiled Muslim women with the heaviest social media presence are hijab fashion bloggers, who are applauded by popular and academic sources alike for their modern and fashionable appearances, and thus their ability to debunk Islamophobic stereotypes about the headscarf. This is among the reasons that hijab fashion is celebrated as an empowering phenomenon. However, in my study, I asked what 'empowerment' means in a discursive context shaped by such factors as the influencer industry, Islamophobia, neoliberalism and postfeminism. Grounded in intersectional feminism, this study set out to complicate the claim that hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations are per default empowering to veiled Muslim women.

Although there are some popular and academic tendencies to dismiss young women's selfies and social media use as merely frivolous or commercialised (see Abidin, 2016), my study provides a plenitude of reasons for taking women's self-representations seriously. I identified the empowering elements in bloggers' images and revealed in detail the many refreshing, subversive and creative ways in which the bloggers represent their perceptions of what it means to be a young veiled Muslim woman. Nevertheless, my study has also identified how progressive elements in these self-representations are paradoxically met with normative and problematic elements, which indicates that hijab fashion blogging operates within a postfeminist media culture. This is the first large-scale study that treats hijab fashion blogging as a postfeminist phenomenon. To this end, my study developed an original theoretical approach, integrating the study of Muslim women, social media, postfeminism and Islamophobia. This approach led to engaging in the Literature Review (Chapter 2) with academic debates about the (dis)empowering potential of social media and the (Islamic) culture industry. In Chapter 4, 5 and 6, I analysed my data in the light of relevant literature on feminism's entanglement with consumerism, meritocracy and entrepreneurialism, and the attention economy and beauty industry, respectively. This allowed me to understand both postfeminism's *appeal* for Muslim women and postfeminism's *limitations* for creating emancipatory self-representations.

In what follows, I revisit the study's research questions, outline the chapters' conclusions and reflect on the answers to each of my research questions, after which I discuss the study's limitations and suggestions for further research.

7.1 Revisiting Research Questions

Whereas existing scholarship about hijab fashion describes and analyses the hijab fashion *subculture* and *industry* within various disciplines, including fashion studies, anthropology and religious studies, I examined hijab fashion bloggers' *images*. My analysis was informed by feminist media studies and cultural studies, hence, I used an intersectional lens and built on a growing body of literature on postfeminist digital culture. In designing my research, I was specifically interested in understanding what kind of images are produced when veiled Muslim women are in charge: on what discourses do they draw? How do their images relate to, and do they radically move away from, Islamophobia and other oppressive narratives?

My study primarily set out to examine a large body of hijab fashion images (161) of the 23 most popular hijab fashion bloggers among a UK audience (which I determined by survey), using semiotic and discursive analysis. To the best of my knowledge, my project is the first large-scale study of hijab fashion images, and thus serves as a methodological example for other researchers on how to qualitatively analyse and clearly present many digital images. My research questions examined: (1) what femininities hijab fashion bloggers construct in their images on Instagram; (2) how these images relate to power; (3) what notions of empowerment are represented and which discourses underlie these; and (4) what postfeminist elements can be seen in the images and how this rebrands Muslim femininity. Furthermore, due to the novelty and omnipresence of hijab fashion images in many Muslim women's lives, I complemented my visual media analysis with a small audience reception study, asking (5) how young Muslim women receive hijab fashion images. Interviewees' diverse perspectives provided commentary on the images and an insight into the ways in which Muslim women audiences negotiate bloggers' empowerment discourses.

7.2 Findings: Thinking it Together

7.2.1 Feminine Archetypes

Research question: What femininities do hijab fashion bloggers construct in their images on Instagram?

In my study, I have examined the gender constructions in hijab fashion bloggers' images, and found that generally, bloggers represent themselves as being strong, empowered, successful and entrepreneurial; beautiful, stylish, classy, hip and heteronormative; and sometimes maternal, badass, exotic or ethnically proud. In my analysis chapters, I have identified bloggers' visual and textual references to, or similarities with, the following (female) figures: Rosie the Riveter, Khadija bint Khuwaylid, Khaleesi, Oprah, Beyoncé, Lauryn Hill, Erykah Badu, the Strong Black Woman, the Black queen, Nefertiti, Cleopatra, Black Panthers, Barbie, Marilyn Monroe, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren, and Edwardian and Orientalist paintings. These results revealed which icons are seen by bloggers and followers, whether implicitly or explicitly, as examples of aspirational femininity.

In Chapter 4 about popular feminism, I have shown that bloggers use the popular archetype of Rosie the Riveter or the Afrocentric strong queen archetype, amongst others, to address structural inequality and encourage women's solidarity. However recognisable and thus accessible these archetypes are for audiences, the emancipatory quality of their aesthetic representations is questionable, as it is often based on heteronormativity and consumerism. These elements, and the lack of archetypes from Islamic (feminist) discourses, indicate that the images are above all aligned with mainstream, popular feminist ideas. This alignment is problematic from an intersectional point of view, since it implies that mainstream archetypes of empowerment are preferred over feminist writers, female politicians or historic Islamic role models, for instance, and even over creating new Muslim feminist role models and archetypes. Although most representations of Black femininity are strong and subversive, they are anchored in the American music industry, thus easily recognisable in the attention economy.

In Chapter 5 about entrepreneurial femininities, I detailed how the themes of female ambition, achievement, girl power and resilience form the building blocks for hijab fashion bloggers' powerful gender representations, which are a source of pride to many. I also noted how problematic it is that these femininities simultaneously uphold the meritocratic myth and the entrepreneurial myth of fashion blogging as the gateway to success. In this chapter, I mapped out which feminine archetypes can be found in bloggers' images, such as a contemporary version of the earlier postfeminist archetype of the can-do/top girl, and the figure of the badass/kick-ass lady boss who reaches neoliberal success. The badass femininities in this chapter often serve as a model for navigating marginalising structures without addressing them in depth. Additionally, bloggers create a visual discourse in their

entrepreneurial images, consisting of power suits, power poses, work devices and motivational speech. In my data analysis, I further found the maternal archetypes of the princess/queen mother, the badass mom and the mumpreneur, who manage gendered labour in a way that idealises blogging/enterprising as the ultimate career option for balancing work and child-rearing. Despite identifying some gender-progressive elements in these entrepreneurial archetypes, they remain problematic for several reasons. For instance, they obscure the hardships of gendered labour; they reproduce the idea that women are children's primary caretakers; and they may perpetuate the Islamophobic binary distinction of acceptable/meritable vs. unacceptable/meritless Muslims.

The first part of Chapter 6 revolved around the creation of a feminine archetype that empowers herself through beauty and confidence, which constructs gender—just as in earlier postfeminist times—according to a heteronormative, hyper-feminine focus on appearance. In the second and third parts of Chapter 6, I recognised feminine archetypes in bloggers' visual references to, or resemblances with, classic beauty icons and styles of the past. The gender constructions based on these archetypes look novel, aesthetically speaking, but are based on a longer mainstream tradition of what is considered beautiful, classy and feminine. The chapter lays out in detail that bloggers' similarity or association with classic Hollywood icons serves to minimise their perceived Muslimness, and create a form of veiling that is associated in mainstream culture with hipness, glamour and class. Furthermore, I detected an upcoming Instagram genre of self-Orientalism, in which bloggers include outfits and props that resemble old Orientalist paintings, in order to accentuate their perceived Muslimness and invoke an aesthetically pleasing image of veiling as connoting luxury, exoticism and mystery. Such striking visual resemblances between hijab fashion bloggers and past femininities suggest that gender constructions have not completely parted with colonial and Eurocentric images of the 'veil'/turban and glamour.

In summary, hijab fashion images display a limited range of feminine archetypes that are privileged in many aspects (such as body type or wealth). The feminine archetypes are problematic from an intersectional perspective, because inasmuch they shatter one social norm, they reinforce other social norms. There is a lack of creation of new—or referral to existing—Muslim feminist role models among these 'feminist' Instagram posts. It is extremely concerning that the only alternatives to Islamophobic representations seem to be either White beauty standards, Beyoncé's concepts of Black femininity or Orientalist aesthetics.

7.2.2 Empowerment Discourses

Research question: What notions of empowerment are represented and which discourses underlie these?

Besides scanning hijab fashion images for feminine archetypes, I examined and evaluated the images to trace the various discourses of feminism and empowerment used. Generally, hijab fashion bloggers' representations of empowerment are bold and contain high levels of feel-good messages. Nevertheless, their notions of empowerment are also often heavily simplified, commercialised and stripped of cultural critique, in order to be 'Instagrammable'. My analysis demonstrates that hijab fashion bloggers adopt an aestheticised empowerment discourse in text and images, based on postfeminist ideals. That is, there is an economic, postfeminist and Islamophobic incentive or pressure to brand oneself as empowered on social media. In a postfeminist discourse, empowerment is something that one can buy, wear and display. Empowerment becomes a slogan, a self-brand and a visual image. When hijab fashion bloggers deploy this empowerment discourse to hyper-counter Islamophobic stereotypes, I call this 'empowerism'.

In Chapter 4 about popular feminism, I observed that hijab fashion bloggers embraced a feminist vocabulary of girl power, equal pay or free choice, for example. However, there are merely a handful of bloggers in my sample that explicitly refer to feminism: they use a language rooted in such discourses as fourth-wave feminism, Islamic/Muslim feminism and Black (Muslim) feminism. Regarding the more general references to feminism and empowerment, I have found that hijab fashion bloggers incorporate popular feminist slogans, sometimes on T-shirts (e.g. "strong women support other women") and symbols (e.g. Rosie the Riveter, biceps emoji). In my analysis, I have shown that feminist(-sounding) slogans and symbols are easily reduced into popular symbolism, and may even coexist with anti-feminist ideas. Throughout this chapter, I have highlighted a continuous tension between the more idealistic discourses of feminism and the more commercial versions. In most instances, popular feminism is used for the purpose of femvertising and creating an empowered self-brand that followers find aspirational and wish to emulate by consumption and transforming the self. This has a unique significance in a marginalised context, which I explained through coining the term 'empowerism' (see section 5.4). Furthermore, I argued that postfeminism runs through all these representations of empowerment, which is antithetical to intersectional understandings of empowerment and turns feminism into a self-brand instead of a social justice matter.

In Chapter 5 about entrepreneurialism, I argued that the underlying discourses of representations of female empowerment are: postfeminism, neoliberal capitalism, the meritocratic myth, and the Islamophobic narrative of the good vs. bad immigrant or acceptable vs. unacceptable Islam. Hijab

fashion images in this genre contain many inspirational messages that motivate (veiled) Muslim women to achieve success regardless of their hijab or skin colour. Still, this type of content is problematic because it normalises meritocratic ideas and silences any critique of oppressive structures, among other reasons. Notably, the equation of empowerment with entrepreneurialism is more of a marketing language of motivational speech, than a feminist model for structural change. Moreover, I have argued that hijab fashion bloggers' display of success should be interpreted as a neoliberal class project or respectability project that privileges upper-middle class norms.

In Chapter 6 about beauty, I have shown that contemporary beauty content in my sample is filled with empowerment discourses about confidence, body positivity, self-care and choice. However, I have also discussed that this discourse of beauty-based empowerment primarily serves as a justification for intensifying beauty standards with regards to makeup, skin care, botox and fillers. Such empowerment discourses, therefore, continue to uphold a system in which women's sense of empowerment and confidence is dependent on products and services of the beauty industry. Additionally, I have found that hijab fashion bloggers create a visual discourse of veiled beauty, whereby empowerment relies on class and glamour. I have also identified the discourses underlying this representation of empowerment, which are: respectability politics, White privilege/Eurocentrism, Islamophobia and consumerism. Lastly, this chapter has shown that bloggers use an Orientalist aesthetic to create an empowered sense of the Muslim self. Whether bloggers use self-Orientalism in subversive ways or in ways that exploit their otherness remains unclear, but my findings indicate that this discourse limits the images' emancipatory potential.

The hijab fashion bloggers in my sample mostly adhere—whether consciously or not—to a popular, and mostly postfeminist, discourse of empowerment. Hijab fashion bloggers deploy beauty-based empowerment discourses to navigate the simultaneous pressures of beauty standards and Islamophobic prejudices. However, because these representations are situated within the beauty and influencer industries, the aforementioned pressures are not only navigated but also reproduced. Thus, besides Islamophobic standards, beauty pressures result in an even higher standard that (veiled) Muslim women are held up to in order to be regarded as socially acceptable. Postfeminism also lacks a transparent and complete conceptualisation of the power dynamics that influence young Muslim women. It empowers the lucky few [*or* the most privileged among the marginalised] and provides the rest with a consumerist substitute of power—instead of educating Muslim women about power and empowering to transform those power structures.

I argue that hijab fashion bloggers' empowered (chapter 4), entrepreneurial (chapter 5) and stylish (chapter 6) self-representations have become a form of "respectability politics", which is comparable

to African-American women's rebranding in the interwar US (Wolcott, 2001: 9). Wolcott (2001: 9) avers that certain black circles developed a concept of "female respectability to both refute white stereotypes of African Americans' innate inferiority and 'uplift' incoming African American migrants." This was opposed to other emancipatory discourses such as "a more masculine language of self-defense and self-determination" (p. 10). According to Crocket (2017: 554), "[r]espectability makes life more tolerable by offering a counternarrative that disavows stigma through status-oriented displays," which is a process that is aided by consumer culture. Crocket (2017: 555) adds that "[m]anaging everyday racism seeks to make daily life more tolerable, not necessarily more equal," something with which my data analysis in this chapter agrees.

7.2.3 Audiences' Negotiation

Research question: How are hijab fashion images received by some Muslim women in the UK?

The interviews I have conducted show that, to young Muslim women, hijab fashion bloggers' content can be engaging and aspirational, but can also be alienating and controversial. To my knowledge, this is the first study to voice the perspectives of Muslim women on hijab fashion content. It therefore lays a basis for future explorations of Muslim women audiences' negotiation of popular social media discourses. Given that hijab fashion content has an ever-increasing dominant presence online (compared to other Muslim women's self-representations), the opinions and alternative discourses of Muslim women audiences deserve more visibility to prevent their discursive erasure.

Hijab fashion bloggers deploy style tips, entrepreneurial or maternal encouragement and popular feminist slogans to connect with their audiences. Sometimes my interviewees find this content relatable, entertaining, accessible and aspirational. They might even be accepting of a postfeminist discourse, particularly pertaining images of strong, professional and stylish femininity that motivate Muslim women to not be held back by prejudice and discrimination. But more often, my interview data shows a critical voice among audiences. Taking a discursive approach to my interviewees' language use shed new light on the differences and competition between hijab fashion bloggers' discourses and some audiences' discourses.

I have observed that my interviewees appreciate, negotiate or reject hijab fashion content by using language that is rooted in such discourses as media literacy, feminism, anti-racism, anti-consumerism and Islam. For instance, I have discussed that some interviewees critiqued the turban trend, not because of issues to do with modesty (which is the usual topic of criticism online), but because they see it as a response to Islamophobic pressures in the beauty industry and society at large—while they

prefer to see more diverse and proud representations of the hijab (and ethnicity and class). Additionally, interviewees' negotiation or resistance of content was evident from their critique on social media pressures and their concern about beauty trends. The women showed a certain level of media literacy by acknowledging their compliance with certain narratives, and the limitations they set in when and where to look for inspiration/entertainment and in which bloggers to (un)follow. My study further demonstrates that multiple (conflicting) stances can be embodied by and united in one and the same person.

7.2.4 Postfeminist Rebranding: Empowered, Entrepreneurial and Beautiful

Research question: What postfeminist elements can be seen in the images, and how does this rebrand Muslim femininity?

My work demonstrates that postfeminism is still very present in popular culture, albeit in new forms and among new subcultures. Additionally, my work contributes new perspectives to the rapidly expanding critique of digital postfeminist culture, by detailing the specific manifestation of postfeminism within a Muslim context.

Due to the recent popularisation of feminism, such contemporary (sub)cultures as hijab fashion can look and sound quite progressive at first. However, by performing an intersectional analysis, I have gained a deeper understanding of the ways in which hijab fashion images simultaneously encourage a return to (gender) normativity, couched in a feminist language. Each of my three analysis chapters has shown a different facet of this postfeminist *return* to traditional/normative ideas about gender, namely: a return to a commercialised and depoliticised version of feminism (Chapter 4); a return to gendered labour (Chapter 5); and a return to hyper-feminine beauty (Chapter 6). *Gender normativity* is preserved by a simultaneous celebration of women's acquired power *and* of everything feminine and girly (Chapter 4); by combining the display of professional ambition with a girly, approachable, caring or maternal femininity (Chapter 5); and by turning the hijab (and thus Muslim women's bodies) into an aesthetic and Oriental spectacle (Chapter 6). These returns to gender normativity are *couched in progressive language and incorporate critique*. That is, firstly, postfeminism celebrates feminism as a glamorous self-brand but rejects it as radical politics (Chapter 4). Secondly, postfeminism incorporates a critique of privilege, while finding new entrepreneurial and meritocratic words to uphold the same system (Chapter 5). And finally, postfeminism challenges beauty norms by turning to feminist language, while simultaneously introducing new beauty routines in the name of empowerment (Chapter 6).

This incorporation of counter-discourses makes it harder to critique popular content. Only when subjecting the data to an intersectional interrogation, can one form a complicated picture of how some social inequalities are challenged, while others are reinforced. Quite often, hijab fashion bloggers challenge sexism, racism and Islamophobia, while holding up neoliberalism, classism and heteronormativity. In other instances, Islamophobic stereotypes are countered while rebranding Muslim femininity in Orientalist ways. This partial progressiveness or diversity remains unproblematised in a postfeminist discourse. As such, I have noticed simultaneous feminist and anti-feminist approaches to femininity and sexuality; activist and commercial messages of feminism; anti-Islamophobic and Orientalist approaches to race and visible Muslimness; and spiritual and (primarily) material expressions of religion. Generally, with few exceptions, my sample does not offer radically new, diverse, liberating or postcolonial femininities. Instead, hijab fashion content is postfeminism in a new guise—or in hijab.

In line with postfeminism, hijab fashion content often rebrands feminism into a consumer lifestyle, without its politics reaching beyond semiotics. Besides feminism being rebranded into something popular, I have argued that Muslim femininity itself is being rebranded. Hijab fashion bloggers rebrand veiled Muslim femininity into the postfeminist combination of being empowered, entrepreneurial and beautiful (as reflected by the themes of my three analysis chapters). These three areas are valued (aspirational) in the attention economy and society at large, and are the exact opposites of Islamophobic stereotypes. An insight gained from my study is thus that postfeminism's appeal for Muslim women is the rebranding of veiled Muslim femininity in a way that hyper-counters Islamophobic stereotypes.

Affected by Islamophobia and inspired by a postfeminist discourse of power, there is a push for (veiled) Muslim women to identify as empowered in order to be seen as modern and not to be seen as oppressed, see cartoon below. My conceptualisation of empowerism (Chapter 4) may help scholars who work on similar case studies understand how marginalised women brand themselves as empowered in a bid to hyper-counter the entrenched stereotypes about them. Additionally, due to the obscuring of labour market discrimination in meritocratic narratives, there are incentives for veiled Muslim women to portray themselves as hard-working, barrier-breaking professionals. Moreover, the exclusionary nature of beauty standards forms a reason for bloggers to prove that their hijab *is* attractive, classy and cool and can attract a marketing niche.

@yesimhotinthis, 25 February 2020

I established that, generally, the most popular hijab fashion bloggers should not be considered as forming a *counter*-Islamophobia movement. Instead of a social movement, hijab fashion blogging is an everyday form of *hyper*-countering Islamophobia, whereby Muslim women present a positive image of themselves in reaction to omnipresent negative ones. Hyper-countering practices are not agenda-setting and put the onus on Muslim women to prove the stereotypes against them wrong. Islamophobia creates a preoccupation with coming across as normal, outstanding, exceptional, desirable and badass. Toni Morrison's (1975) words on racism are pertinent here and could be used in reference to the link between Islamophobia and Muslims' hyper-countering efforts:

> The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being. Somebody says you have no language and you spend twenty years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is.

Perceived as such, hijab fashion content is an effort to 'prove' that veiled Muslim women are not oppressed (Chapter 4), that they are employable (Chapter 5) and that their hijab can be attractive, hip or cool (Chapter 6), see cartoon below.

@yesimhotinthis, 8 August 2017

Notably, my data suggests that hijab fashion bloggers do not only rebrand Muslim femininity in order to counter Islamophobia, but also in order to create and address a marketing niche of Muslim women. The hijab often serves as a reductive symbol of that niche—instead of carrying spiritual, social and other meanings—to make content more accessible to a wider audience (and more compatible with a consumerist agenda). Although hijab fashion content is organised around the hijab as a visible marker of religion, a certain religious erasure is taking place. This practice is concerning from an intersectional standpoint, since it further perpetuates the marginalisation and stigmatisation of Islam and Muslim experiences. This process of erasure constitutes the opposite of what emancipatory representation should be, namely, moving from the margin to the centre of visibility. This erasure of religious markers implies that hijab fashion on Instagram is not purely about self-representation but more about, what I call, an 'acceptable-version-of-myself-representation'.

Returning to the postfeminist combination of empowerment, entrepreneurialism and beauty, that I discovered in my data; I argue that these three themes are also key areas in which postfeminism is undoing feminist wins (see Gill, 2016a: 613). Firstly, an empowered self-brand (Chapter 4) replaces a feminist discussion about rights, power, politics and collective activism with a popularised, commercialised, and sometimes appropriated claim to feminism. Secondly, a construction of entrepreneurial femininity (Chapter 5) shifts a discussion about the precarity of work, the gender pay gap, domestic labour, social security and childcare to a professionalisation and aestheticisation of motherhood and a glamorisation of digital labour. It also frames collective and structural issues as personal and motivational issues. Thirdly, a focus on empowered beauty (Chapter 6) undoes the feminist aim of moving away from a focus on women's bodies and heteronormativity, and instead builds an (influencer) industry around hyper-femininity and self-transformation.

My understanding and demonstration of hyper-countering Islamophobia can prove useful for researchers of Islamophobia and its impact on women's lived experiences and media behaviour. So far, many studies of Islamophobia have focused on definitions, mainstream media representations, online and offline violence and discrimination, counter-movements and identity formation. Useful as these studies are, Islamophobia affects young Muslims beyond that remit, such as experiencing the pressure to brand oneself in a certain way—which is a gap that my research sought to fill.

7.3 Reflection on Power

Research question: How do these self-representations relate to power?

My study aimed to provide insight into the inquiry: do hijab fashion bloggers' images change something fundamental for the issue of self-representation and power? Where do we stand now in terms of media representation? Although hijab fashion on Instagram should arguably not be seen as a feminist practice, it does hold potential for "ameliorative [...] micro-political action" against (rather than an eradication of) religious/racial inequality (Crockett, 2017: 555). As demonstrated in this thesis, hijab fashion bloggers' representations are new, diverse and strong, and form rich alternatives to the harmful Islamophobic stereotyping of Muslim women in certain media outlets. Online self-representation is an important feminist tool for imagining oneself in better positions and creating role models. In this marginalised context, displaying empowered femininities is a way of mainstreaming the hijab and (subversively) countering women's internalisation of Islamophobic narratives of Muslim women as oppressed and powerless.

Nevertheless, the hijab fashion images examined in my study are not radically novel or liberating. On the contrary, nearly all images are problematic when analysed intersectionally. That is because they mostly counter Islamophobia *while* or *by* reproducing other norms and inequalities. The influencer industry empowers bloggers to make a career on social media, and empowers them to speak out on issues that concern Muslim women. However, in exchange, bloggers have to look and sound a certain way that does not disturb the status quo too much. My findings indicate that both the influencer industry *and* Islamophobia create a combined pressure to mainstream the self. Since postfeminist discourse dominates mainstream culture, bloggers' self-representations perpetuate a further erasure or othering of common/alternative Muslim appearances, experiences, beliefs and traditions. As Hall (2006: 471) said, "I know that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility."

Postfeminist and meritocratic discourses underpinning my data claim that anyone can be empowered, while, in fact, only some are empowered by these narratives: those that are born with privilege or those that play by certain rules. Many Muslim women may not be or feel empowered by these empowerment discourses, not just for reasons to do with beliefs or preferences, but for systemic reasons. What space does a postfeminist discourse of empowerment and constructions of femininity leave for, say, ultra-orthodox, unfashionable, unintegrated, insecure, poor, disabled and/or queer Muslim women? Do self-representations have to be hip, relatable, respectable and marketable in order for Muslim women to be seen, heard or valued? Would it help eradicate Islamophobia and other injustices if veiled Muslim women work hard, consume enough, look acceptable and hold different beliefs? Due to a lack of unconditional inclusion and equality, Muslim women's non-compliance to this logic will be framed as meritless unwillingness, or worse, as radicalism (instead of executing a valid right to non-participation). Therefore, this logic necessarily leads to disempowerment and marginalisation.

Both Islamophobia and sexism should be fought simultaneously. The intersection of Islamophobia with beauty standards creates an environment where brands demand problematic content creation from Muslim bloggers (such as hyper-feminine, Eurocentric or Orientalist representations), and poorly remunerate them for creating content, thus reinforcing the digital double bind (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017: 845). In this process, Muslim femininity is rebranded into something that benefits (mainstream) industries more than Muslim women themselves. After all, hijab fashion bloggers' self-representations change little about the issue of Islamophobic misrepresentation of Muslims' *beliefs.* Put differently, hijab fashion content is more about exhibiting how much alike Muslims and non-Muslims are, instead of opening up spaces to share unique cultural traditions or spiritual gems. In Islamophobic narratives, displaying a more practising/ethnic/orthodox form of Islam is associated with

being radical/foreign. This is wrong in essence as new generations of veiled Muslim women should not grow up feeling that branding oneself according to the hijab fashion subculture is the only 'acceptable', 'integrated', 'empowered' or 'moderate' way of being visibly Muslim under a non-Muslim gaze. Furthermore, they should not have to grow up thinking that popular feminism/postfeminism is the only suitable way to engage with a feminist agenda. Love and Helmbrecht (2007: 47) "want students to see a difference between feeling empowered because the media says they are, and actually being empowered—through knowing women's history, from political engagement, by working collectively on cultural and social issues important to women."

The hijab may be increasingly included in popular culture, but that does not say much about inclusion on a political level. The images in my sample do not address question such as whether style contributes to being accepted and perceived as modern; if hyper-visibility and providing a peek into one's family life is an effective response to the silencing and stigmatisation of Muslim women; if the political struggle for recognition can be won in an attention economy that rewards appearance and consumerism; if the success and inclusion of some Muslims weigh up against society's lack of measurements against Islamophobia; and how Muslim women can be empowered on an institutional level. Postfeminism depoliticises empowerment by replacing a focus on human rights with a focus on choice: in the presence of Islamophobic ideas and policies, such as the burka ban, it not a woman's *choice* to wear a headscarf that needs explaining/justification, but it is the *right* for women to wear a headscarf in secular countries that needs defending.

Thus, media representation should go hand in hand with pursuing political representation in places of power. Media representation is important for Muslim emancipation, since more cultural recognition may lead to a different perception, which *may,* in turn lead to less institutionalised Islamophobia and violence—though not necessarily. Postcolonial feminist Gayatri Spivak (1988) mentions two meanings of representation that are important factors in emancipation, namely media representation (*Darstellung*) and political representation (*Vertretung*). At present, unfortunately, the focus on glamorous self-representations on social media seems to distract from addressing Islamophobic structures that affect Muslim women's ability to gain equal access to political representation. Hijab fashion blogging should not merely be a form of escapism from individual struggles, but also address the fact that those individual struggles are of a collective nature. As Banet-Weiser says, media visibility is not an end goal, "we use visibility as a route to politics."[170]

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[170] IWL Rutgers, 13 May 2019, Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AG4I1hepm1k 45:00

The message that emerges from my findings is that we (as scholars and as Muslim communities who are having conversations about Muslims' self-representations) should always first engage in deconstructing postfeminism and related hegemonic discourses, in order to understand in a Foucauldian way how one's reproduction of certain language and knowledge is often aligned with hegemonic interests. These insights will aid the process of producing better and more emancipatory representations that counter multiple injustices and contribute towards the development of a critical concept of Muslim emancipation. The critique of postfeminism should be a part of that conversation, but unfortunately postfeminism is not a very widely known term, including amongst my interviewees. This does not mean that interviewees are not aware of the mechanisms of postfeminism, because my study shows that they do describe postfeminist trends and tensions. The (re-)introduction of the term postfeminism through research outreach will provide communities with a word and a body of literature that describes their critique, or will provide new insights into their social media perception and production.

In addition to postfeminism, Suleiman's (2017) term hyper-countering and my term empowerism are potentially useful as well, for both academics and Muslim communities, for discussing social media representations. Because these concepts of hyper-countering and empowerism are unknown so far, people had to use a many alternative words to describe the same representational issues. As mentioned in my Introduction Chapter, many Muslims felt uneasy about the Mipsterz video since it seemed to them that Muslim women had to showcase their level of empowerment and style, and thereby, their all-Americanness. Essentially, they criticised the act of hyper-countering stereotypes through empowerism. Since then, more Muslim writers, thinkers and artists have contributed to a growing counter-narrative of both Islamophobia and hijab fashion discourses, such as Malik (2017) who critiques the "attractive, overly feminized, bourgeoisie Islam", Ahmed-Chan (2020) who critiques "the narrative of the Empowered Muslim Woman™" and Khatun Dewan (2021) who writes about the pressure to "appear normal" in modest fashion. Similarly, in "This is not a humanizing poem", Manzoor-Khan (2017) challenges the unwritten rule that Muslims need to appear normal or exceptional in order to be treated equally:

> Love us when we aren't athletes, when we don't bake cakes
> When we don't offer our homes, or free taxi rides after the event,
> When we're wretched, suicidal, naked and contributing *nothing*
> Love us then
> Because if you need me to prove my humanity
> I'm not the one who is not human.

Furthermore, regarding the role of the politics of representation in counter-Islamophobia, Merali (2018: 30) states that the visibility of celebrity Muslims in mainstream media creates a dilemma: on the one hand it humanises Muslims, while, on the other hand, it does not resolve the dehumanising of other Muslims. Another instance of Muslim's counter-narratives is Qureshi's (2020) book *I Refuse to Condemn*, in which many Muslim thinkers and artist resist oppressive narratives. The societal relevance of my study is, therefore, its contribution to these critical reflections on the politics of representation, by showing that social media, postfeminism, meritocracy, Islamophobia, hyper-countering and empowerism are all interwoven in a unique way.

7.4 Future Recommendations

Due to rapid and constant social media developments, which trends and which bloggers are considered popular will indubitably change. This begs for further studies of hijab fashion content—and not just Instagram images, but content across different platforms. Additionally, in order to understand the scope of the hijab fashion subculture, the interaction between bloggers and followers, and the influence of cultural trends, more studies involving statistical analysis are needed, perhaps conducted within the digital humanities.

Similarly, across different disciplines, more research is needed to establish whether self-representation in hijab fashion will become more diverse in time (or empowering in an intersectional sense). Future research would also need to identify whether more on-screen diversity is paired with more diversity in higher positions within the fashion, beauty and influencing industries—since this says something about the level and extent of institutionalised racism, Islamophobia and sexism. It would be interesting to see more research into the emerging trend of self-Orientalism or other visual signalling of Muslimness, to evaluate if that is taking on either subversive or exploitative forms. Additionally, I believe it is important to explore my concept of empowerism further and test its usefulness in applying it to other case studies of minorities' self-representation.

As the main purpose of my thesis was to identify and interrogate the visual discourse used in hijab fashion blogging, my study did not include a larger diverse audience reception study. Although the data gathered by the reception study was rich, my small sample size, and the high level of cultural critique among participants, did not allow for a generalisation of Muslim women's attitudes or media literacy. This topic begs for further elaboration on how self-identified fans or more conservative Muslim women interact with hijab fashion content. That said, one of my main recommendations for

future research would be to conduct more audience reception research, perhaps using such methods as netnography or departing from the field of fan studies.

Another interesting approach that future research could take is to interview hijab fashion bloggers themselves, in order to obtain a more complete picture of how commercial and Islamophobic pressures within the fashion, beauty and influencing industries affect bloggers' media practices. Such research could, for example, take place within the discipline of celebrity studies, thereby allowing for questions about how (micro)celebrity relates to social media influencing, consumerism, globalisation and the creation of (religious) niche markets.

Other interesting areas for future research, which were not my primary focus, are the role of religious experience and religious identity in the reception of hijab fashion content, or the role of Islamic discourses in the interpretation of such concepts as piety, modesty or social cohesion. These topics would be very suitable to address within the field of religious studies, for example. Religious studies would also be the ideal field for researching the differences between hijab fashion discourses and the Islamic concepts of *dunya* (worldly attachments), *nafs* (ego/desires), *ghurur* (flaunting), as well as *zohd* (soberness), *tazkiya* (purification) and *fitra* (natural state). This kind of research is relevant for understanding the growing dominance of a postfeminist discourse over other, religious or subcultural, knowledges and beliefs.

7.5 Conclusion

Overall, my semiotic and discursive study of hijab fashion bloggers' representation of femininity and empowerment has highlighted a much-needed bold, positive and empowering imagery of veiled Muslim women. However, when examining these self-representations intersectionally, their verbal and visual discourses seem much less rosy and, at times, quite problematic, since they are filled with postfeminist paradoxes. The three main themes of representing oneself as empowered, entrepreneurial and beautiful can be seen as a postfeminist combination that rebrands Muslim femininity into the opposite of Islamophobic stereotypes. Notably, the three themes of empowerment, entrepreneurialism and beauty are also three areas in which postfeminism is undoing feminist achievements. Furthermore, although I have showcased and appreciated the instances in which bloggers resisted injustices, the overall reproduction of neoliberal, meritocratic, Orientalist, heteronormative, raced, able-bodied and other normative elements, showed that hijab fashion bloggers adhere to a definition of empowerment that lacks a conceptualisation of the systemic

character of inequality. Hijab fashion bloggers use feminist language to brand themselves as empowered and hyper-counter Islamophobic stereotypes (empowerism). In the process, they glamorise the gendered labour of the entrepreneurial blogging lifestyle, and normalise hyper-femininity, Eurocentrism and Orientalism.

This notwithstanding, I do realise that improving the politics of representation is a process, and hope that small steps forward (such as Sebinaah's and NabiilaBee's fearless addressing of structural issues on their Instagram Stories recently) will eventually become bigger and more effective. I can foresee that, in the coming years, bloggers will demonstrate more reflexive self-representation, claim more space to speak out, create more constructive and inclusive ways of modelling empowered femininity, and find alternative ways of making their content lucrative (more independent of oppressive dynamics within the beauty industry). Hijab fashion bloggers' individual efforts are important, since collectively, they form a community effort. This, in turn, might become a movement that holds power to self-definition; that holds brands, media and other institutions to account; sets its own agenda in representation (whether that agenda is feminist, anti-racist, Islamic, anti-consumerist or postcolonial); and creates a powerful alternative to Islamophobic media representation. Finally, my interview data indicated that hijab fashion discourses are already being challenged and may eventually be transformed by audiences' alternative discourses (see also: Talja, 1999: 468; Watterson et al., 2019). My thesis has made a pioneering and significant contribution to the study of hijab fashion, and will continue to add to vibrant conversations about the creation of self-representations that benefit as many Muslim women as possible.

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Appendices

List of bloggers included in sample:

1. Aaliyah JM (@aaliyah.jm)
2. Amena (@amenakhan)
3. Ascia (@ascia)
4. Basma K (@basma_k)
5. Chinutay (@chinutay)
6. Dina Tokio (@dinatokio)
7. Eslimah (@eslimah)
8. Habiba da Silva (@lifelongpercussion)
9. Hodan Yusuf (@hodan.ysf)
10. Ibtihaj Muhammad (@ibtihajmuhammad)
11. Leena (@withloveleena)
12. Maria Alia (@mariaalia)
13. NabiilaBee (@nabiilabee)
14. NourKa (@nourka92)
15. Nura Afia (@nuralailalov)
16. Omaya Zein (@omayazein)
17. Ruba Zai (@hijabhills)
18. Sagal (@sagaleeyaa)
19. Saufeeya (@saufeeya)
20. Sebinaah (@sebinaah)
21. Shahd Batal (@shahdbatal)
22. Summer Albarcha (@summeralbarcha)
23. YazTheSpaz (@yazthespaz89)

21/12/2017

Dear Laura

PI: Laura Mora
Title: Agency through Ethics: Muslim Women's Configuration of Feminine Identity in Hijab Fashion.
Ref: ERP 2284

Thank you for your request to amend your study.

I am pleased to inform you that your request has been approved by the Ethical Review Panel.

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated or there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator at research.governance@keele.ac.uk stating **ERP 2284** in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely
PP.

Dr Colin Rigby
Chair – Ethical Review Panel

invitation
for a research
interview on
hijab
fashion

MIPSTERZ

Keele University

MAIN QUESTION:

What does hijab fashion mean to you?

Researcher:
Laura Mora

PhD student
Media & Culture

Supervisors:
Dr Elizabeth Poole
& Dr Eva Giraud

Sponsor:
Keele Research Centre
for Humanities

Confidential and anonymous

WHEN ?
spring of 2019

MODERN ICON

TOPICS

your favourite bloggers ✳ ✳ media portrayal
modesty & hipness ✳ of Muslim women
beauty standards ✳ ✳ Islamophobia
gender & ethnicity ✳ ✳ consumerism

Interested?
Please contact me at
l.mora@keele.ac.uk
or 07505916390

Once you have expressed interest in participating, an e-mail with detailed information will be sent to you.

Changed your mind in the process? Participation is voluntary & withdrawing is certainly an option.

YOU...

☑ are interested in hijab fashion
☑ are Muslim and aged 18 - 35
☑ attend Islamic gatherings (e.g. ISoc/jum'a) in Keele/Manchester/Cardiff

✾ it doesn't matter if you wear hijab or not

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