HIJABI VLOGGERS: MUSLIM WOMEN'S SELF EXPRESSION AND IDENTITY ARTICULATION ON YOUTUBE

by

Nur Shazlin Abdul Rahman

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Abstract
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Nur Shazlin Abdul Rahman
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The *hijab* is often cited as a manifestation of Islam's patriarchy. The advent of mobile technology and social media platforms gave an antidote to this problem. Particularly, vlogging trend among Muslim women lets them disrupt problematic narratives about themselves, speak in their own voices to a global audience and demonstrate their agency. However, the women's focus on fashion puts them at the mercy of cultural and profit-driven norms. Their use of YouTube also means the vloggers are unconsciously conforming to prevailing trends. This research applies a feminist CDA to illuminate ideologies that shape the women's articulation of their identities in relation to their ethno-religious communities. The small stories approach of interviews with Muslim women vloggers unearthed this trend's liberative qualities and pitfalls. Since digital self-representation among marginalized identities like Muslim women is new, this research calls for further research into the utility of digital platforms as tools for identity articulation.

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Introduction

The term *hijab* comes from the Arabic language meaning 'cover'. Religious coverings for Muslim women take many different forms. In parts of the Muslim world like Afghanistan, and parts of Iraq and Pakistan, some women wear the *burka* which covers their bodies from head to toe. The *niqab* is a face veil which women wear in addition to their hijab to cover their faces. Today, the word 'hijab' is commonly used as a general term to refer to the headscarf worn by Muslim women. In Western non-Muslim majority countries, like many Muslim majority countries, not all Muslim women wear the hijab. This study has found that the practice of the hijab – from the women's motivation to wear it to the actual application of the hijab on the women's bodies – varies quite drastically from one individual to another. Some only wear it on certain occasions, such as on weddings, funerals or on Eid, the holy feast for Muslims. Among those who do cover, the degree to which they cover and the styles in which they cover vary widely. Some wear it loosely draped around their heads with parts of their hair visible. One vlogger in this research wears her hijab in elaborately draped layers which covers everything except her face, while another favours the "turban style" similar to those worn by Sikh women and considers the neck not a mandatory part of the body to be covered. A small number of women wear the niqab. One vlogger began practicing the hijab at a young age, eventually wearing it on a regular basis as part of a natural progression into womanhood in her ethno-religious community; another began wearing it as an adult out of personal religious conviction, stopping the practice of hijab briefly when the pressure to conform was too overwhelming. All three vloggers in this research were motivated to wear or keep wearing the hijab out of religious observance, although the motivation to wear the hijab can be due to prevailing cultural norms or religious laws like in Afghanistan and Iran. When it comes to the expression of their identities

online – in the case of this research, through vlogging – the Muslim women vloggers' use of the Internet and social media platforms is equally robust. One vlogger uses vlogging to promote her online hijab store, another uses it to showcase her creativity around "hijab fashion" while another uses it to share her poetry and promote social causes. This diversity among Muslim women's practice of religious covering is rarely reflected in Western mainstream media, be it in news, advertisement, films and television shows. Rather, they are commonly misrepresented as a voiceless, oppressed and monolithic group of women whose practice of religious covering is the result of patriarchy inherent in Islam. Sherene Razack's study shows how Muslim women's depiction in the mainstream media can be grouped under three categories: the militant extremist, the oppressed subject or the desirable harem belly-dancer. The Literature Review in this thesis reveals that the three stereotypes of Muslim women's representation within Western mainstream media is rooted in outdated Orientalist narratives which posit Muslims and non-white minority groups as 'the other'.

The trend of hijabi vloggers on YouTube caught my attention when I began my undergraduate studies in Journalism four years prior to this research. I was exposed to and consuming a lot of mainstream news media as part of my studies and I quickly noticed that Muslim women – particularly those who are visibly Muslim – were conspicuously absent from the media that I was consuming. Having come from a Muslim-majority country where it was easy to find people who look like myself on TV, billboards, and print ads, I was disturbed by this absence if representation and turned to the Internet instead. Having discovered the hijabi vloggers on YouTube, I quickly became a fan and have continued to follow these vloggers throughout the years as they accrued more fans and evolved in their vlogging practices and habits of audience engagement. The vloggers' videos were appealing to me because they were

visibly Muslim, creative in their practice of the hijab, can confidently articulate themselves to a global audience and were living in non-Muslim majority countries where they were significantly different from the dominant culture – just like me. Most importantly, they seem perfectly comfortable in their identities as both Muslims and as Canadians, Britons, Swedes or Americans. The videos quickly became a sort of security blanket that reassured me that, despite the absence of visibly Muslim women in mainstream media, they do exist. Nevertheless, over the years of watching the videos by these women, I began observing particular facets of their identities and their vlogging practices that were problematic.

These videos had very real effects on my body as well as the way I "fashioned" my identity as a Muslim woman in a predominantly non-Muslim environment. Absent of role models in the mainstream media, I couldn't help but emulate these vloggers. However, that identity often entails particular practices, like wearing makeup or purchasing particular items of clothing. I began wearing my hijab in a style common among the vloggers rather than in the style predominantly worn by women in my home country. There were mixed signals pertaining to modes of covering and what they implied about my religiosity and piety as a Muslim woman, or the degree to which I had adapted to being in the global West. I also felt unable to keep up with the consumer habits – refreshing my wardrobe with the current hijabi fashion trend, for example – which were costly and not financially sustainable. This was why I decided to embark on a formal research of this vlogging trend among Muslim women and the identities that subsequently emerge from their practices. While vlogging has dramatically increased Muslim women's media representation and can be seen as marked progress, its liberative potential warrants further scrutiny. There are undoubtedly underlying ideologies that influence the vloggers and, in turn, shape the identities they articulate. For women living in Western non-Muslim majority countries,

their identities are influenced by highly polarized ideologies, so much so that Ramadan (2010) foresees an inevitable crisis of confidence; this crisis could, in turn, affect the way these women see themselves as members of their respective communities.

Secular feminist ideologies promote ideals of female liberation and empowerment through absolute equality between genders. Often, these ideals calls for the rejection of some, if not all, of a woman's religious attachment to Islam. For example, the radical Ukraine-based feminist group, Femen has openly and unequivocally criticised the *hijab,* the *niqab* and other forms of Islamic headdress as a form of patriarchal oppression and a sign of Islam's backwardness. In France, the law prohibits the wearing or open display of any religious symbols in French schools and those most affected by the law are female Muslim students who wear the hijab. A French Muslim student made headlines when she was reportedly sent home from school because her long skirt was deemed "too religious" by France's standards of secularity; this is despite the student taking off her hijab when she arrived at school (Malm, 2015). In Belgium, a group of female Muslim students were sent home because they wore skirts, baggy trousers and pants underneath their dresses; the school's principles explained, "We don't authorize baggy trousers. We don't authorize long skirts or dresses with trousers underneath. And we don't authorize long skirts." (AJ+, Muslim Girls Sent Home, 2015). The incident caused widespread outrage among netizens, sparking a show of solidarity with the girls on social media with the hashtag #JePorteMaJupeCommeJeVeux (#IWearMySkirtAsILike). Canada has seen a spate of similar acts of discrimination towards Islamic coverings worn by Muslim women. For example, a Quebec judge faced criticism for refusing to hear Ms. Rania El-Alloul's case because she was wearing a hijab; judge Eliana Moreno insisted that Ms. El-Alloul must abide by the rules of the courtroom, which is deemed a secular space (CBC, 2015). More recently, soon-to-be-Canadian

Zunera Ishaq has had to mount her own legal battle simply for the right to wear the niqab at the citizenship oath ceremony. The Harper government's rationale for challenging Ms. Ishaq's Charter rights was that the niqab is "rooted in a culture that is anti-women" and did not belong in Canada (Chase, 2015). The Harper government's opposition to the niqab was typically couched in the language of women's liberation from cultural practices deemed oppressive to women and alien to mainstream Canadian culture. For many Muslim women, however, religious coverings carry immense liberatory capacity and shield them from the objectifying male gaze. More importantly, to them, expressing their religious identity is a critical component to their identities as Canadians, French or Americans. Condemnations of Islamic coverings were, in fact, another form of patriarchal oppression of Muslim women's freedom of religious expression.

The proliferation of mobile internet and the practice of vlogging offer a possible counter-narrative to the one commonly propagated by the West. Social media platforms are today's media of choice for personal expression. Since the launch of the social networking platform, Facebook in 2004 and the video sharing platform, YouTube in 2005, online social networking has progressed considerably. No longer reliant on traditional and mainstream media, individuals can launch their own channels, produce their own videos and circulate those videos through the myriad social networking sites (SNSs) that offer their services free-of-charge. Although YouTube remains the leading contender as the video-sharing platform of choice, it now has competitors like Vimeo, Keek, and Instagram, a popular photo-sharing website which now hosts videos as well. Easy access to affordable mobile devices and various mobile networking technologies have spurred a further deluge of user-generated content. Anything from serious political commentary and amateur documentaries to ridiculous pranks and silly cat videos can be found at the click of a button.

Within this social media proliferation rose the subculture of young Muslim women living in non-Muslim majority countries who utilize social media platforms as a tool to articulate their identities and connect with one another. A particular group in which I am interested comprise young Muslim women with immigrant roots and who wear the *hijab,* the Islamic head covering for women. They produce videos on a range of topics, although many focus on *hijabi* – a term for women who wear the *hijab* – fashion, make up and consumer goods. Their platform of choice is YouTube, which allows them to express themselves verbally and visually. Their *vlogs* – the acronym for "video blogs" – are usually recorded on webcams or hand-held consumer-level cameras, although a few vloggers have upgraded to cameras with higher definitions. These *hijabi* vloggers also connect with one another and with their audiences through Instagram, Facebook, Keek, and Twitter.

Against the misconceptions towards Muslim communities and the misrepresentation of Muslim women in Western mainstream media, social media seems to provide an anathema for Muslim women looking to speak in their own voices. Vloggers like Dina Tokio, Amena and Zukreat in the UK; YaztheSpaz, Babylailalov and Nadira in the US; Fashion with Faith and Ruba Zai in Sweden; Hijabs by Hanan, Saman Munir and Fareena in Canada are fashioning their own personal narratives and articulating unique gender identities through their vlogs for the internet audience to see. They all have very different family, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; Dina Tokio is British-Egyptian, YaztheSpaz is Turkish-Hispanic, Amena is of Pakistani background, Aqeelah is Jamaican, Babylailalov is Moroccan-Hispanic, Ruba Zai is Afghani, and Nadira is African-American. The vast majority of them were born in the Western non-Muslim majority countries they now live in while a small number migrated from other countries. As such, their identities as gendered subjects are also informed by a hybrid of cultures: that of their or their

family's country of origin and the country in which they currently live, to name a few. At any given moment, these women inhabit multiple universes of culture that may complement or contradict each other. In light of these challenging conditions, it is no surprise that Muslim women are articulating their own voices through social media; their identities are constantly obscured by ideological impositions while traditional and mainstream media does a poor job of giving these women the space they need for self-expression. Most importantly, these vloggers illustrate that there isn't one single narrative of 'the Muslim woman'; there are many different narratives and each of these narratives are informed by very different factors. These narratives also inform the identities of the vloggers in distinct ways.

Beyond the immediate and personal impact that vlogging has on the Muslim women's narratives and the vloggers identities, there is also the social dimension of the women's vlogging practice that warrants critical attention. Each of these vloggers has her own loyal fanbase on Facebook and Instagram. Their YouTube channels have thousands of followers who actively comment, like and share the vloggers' videos, and these numbers continue to grow at a steady pace. Among the more popular vloggers is Zukreat who has 213,707 subscribers, Amena who has 193,000 subscribers , Babylailalov has 150,000 subscribers, and Dina Tokio has 138, 400 subscribers. Their channel subscribers increasingly include young women who are Muslim and of other faiths and beliefs. There is also a significant group of vloggers with fewer followers and less consistent video production. These vloggers show a level of connectivity with one another while a stronger sense of community is evident among viewers who comment on the vlogs. Thus, this trend can be seen as constituting a form of discourse among Muslim women on both sides of the screen. A key characteristic of this trend that deserves a closer look is the role which consumerism plays in the vlogs. A majority of the vlogs produced by the *hijabi* vloggers revolve

around clothes, makeup, *hijabs*, technological gadgets, and a myriad of household items. Themes – commonly known as 'tags' – such as "monthly favourites," "shopping hauls," "international swaps," and "product reviews" where goods are purchased, used, reviewed and exchanged between vloggers and their friends are exceedingly common.

The broad geographical dispersal of these vloggers indicates that this trend may be part of a larger transnational, transcultural discourse within the Muslim diaspora. For example, Amenakin is of Indian roots and lives in the UK; YazTheSpaz89 is of Turkish and Hispanic roots and lives in the US, Fareena is of Pakistani roots and lives in Canada; HijabHills is of Afghani origin and lives Sweden; and Haiina is of Indonesian origin and lives in Australia. While the mainstream media and discourse are failing to capture the full spectrum of Muslim lives in non-Muslim majority countries, these women are engaged in their own networks of transnational discourse. A key aspect of this emerging discourse is the conspicuous consumption of goods, particularly through fashion, which forms an important part of Muslim women's identity expression within the vlogging phenomenon. According to the State of the Global Islamic Economy 2014-2015 report, one of the highest-level, values-based customer needs driving the global Islamic economy is clothing. In 2013 alone, Muslim consumers spent over $226 billion on clothing and footwear; the Global Islamic Economy Index (GIEI) predicts this number will rise to $488 billion by 2019 alongside the growth of the global Muslim population (Thomson Reuters, 2014-2015). This research will illuminate in further detail the ways in which ideas regarding what is Islamic, modest and fashionable versus what is not for Muslim women travels seamlessly within these networks from vlogger to vlogger, and from vlogger to audience. A cursory search using the term "hijab" on YouTube will result in numerous hijab tutorials by

online modest fashion businesses. It is plausible that these networks of transnational discourses among Muslim women will subsequently influence global movements of goods and labour.

In order to investigate this nascent trend of vlogging among Muslim women, this research will focus on the practice self-representation and articulation of gender identities through video blogs (vlogs) on YouTube by three Muslim women vloggers living in Canada. My personal interest in vlogging among Muslim women since 2010 and my initial observations of the trend prior to formally beginning this research suggest a tangible connection between the women's identities, the gender ideologies that shape those identities and the technology used to articulate those identities. Hence, my research inquiries are organized around three general themes of identity, ideology and technology. I located this research specifically within the Canadian context by interviewing three vloggers in Canada who are currently actively producing vlogs. This, for me, is crucial in making sure this research contributes to the academic discourse on Muslim women in Canada rather than becoming an abstract piece of work. This meant having a smaller sample size and participants that primarily focused on fashion – an aspect of this research I will elaborate further in this research. Through my interviews with the vloggers, I was able to elucidate how vlogs, as opposed to the mainstream media, are expedient in communicating the women's individuality. I also discovered that cultural and ethno-religious influences shape the women's practice of the hijab, which is an important component of their identities as Muslim women. Most interestingly, the vlogging trend among Muslim women showed that it is strongly circumscribed by consumer culture and profit-driven imperative of capitalism, which has significant implications upon the vloggers' identities. This stands at odds with the liberative quality of the trend, a point which I will explore in further detail.

Literature review

According to Cañas (2008), "Arabs and Muslims have a long, often dark history of representation by dominant Western media," (p. 195). In his assessment of the media's treatment of Islam, historian and economist Zachary Karabell made a similar critique. His foundational premise was that the period following the end of the Cold War saw increased and undue attention on "fundamentalist" Islam in the public media; the use of clichés in the media, policy journals and academia did considerable damage to the image of Islam (Said, 1997, p. xxvi). This attention continues to grow, particularly in the current climate of rising anxieties about the creeping Islamic influence in Western democracies. In *Casting out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics,* Razack (2008) observes that "in this climate, to write about violent Muslim men guarantees loyalties and the prestige of being on best-seller lists," (p. 83). Anti-Islamic stance have become so normalized that even in their critique of what Edward Said would call "modern Orientalist scholarship" such as Irshad Manji's *The Trouble with Islam*, Phyllis Chesler's *The New Anti-Semitism* and Oriana Fallaci's *The Pride and the Rage,* reviewers concluded that such authors' arguments were sound (Razack, 2008, p. 91-103). This rise in popularity for critiquing Islam can be traced back to Orientalist imaginings and Western powers' – America, Britain, France, to name a few – foreign policy towards Muslim countries and the dissemination of the knowledge produced by these entities through the public media. In his seminal work, *Orientalism* Edward Said (1979) states unequivocally that "there is a remarkable [...] parallel between the rise of modern Orientalist scholarship and the acquisition of vast Eastern empires by Britain and France," (p. 343). Indeed, knowledge, ideas, notions and assumptions about the Orient play as big a role in the expansion of empires by the U.S., France, and Britain during Said's time of writing as it does today. Academic scholarship and popular

media continue to inform the Western public's view of Islam, consequently effecting attitudes to Muslims both at home and in Muslim countries. In outlining his vision for a reformed Muslim society in the West, Tariq Ramadan echoes similar ideas. In *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* he states,

> The fallout from political situations in Muslim countries and the active interests, and sometimes manipulations, of governments cast a very negative light on Muslims living in the West and give rise to a whole range of prejudices and preconceived ideas about Islam and Muslims. [This] representation of Islam and Muslims is at the bottom of the difficulties lived by Muslim communities at the present time. (Ramadan, 2004, p. 71)

Like many scholars who agree with Said's (1979) historical excavation on the roots of Orientalism as a school of thought, Ramadan (2004) argues that Muslims were already the subjects of suspicion as well as systematic and social discrimination in Western societies. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the U.S. Pentagon on 11 September 2001, however, this undue attention and surveillance increased dramatically and continue to do so at an alarming rate (Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Ramadan, 2004; Cañas, 2008; Razack, 2008; Aguayo, 2009).

Following the September 11 attacks, the surveillance, detention and suspension of rights of Muslims, Arabs, or anyone whose physical appearance places them in either category has intensified, invigorated by what Razack (2008) calls a "new kind of Orientalism." Within the post-9/11 geopolitical context, Muslims once again found themselves the target of Orientalist discourses, fuelled no less by the public media. According to Cañas (2008), the media is expedient in disseminating a particular kind of cultural politics. In deconstructing the popular television show *Little Mosque on the Prairie,* the author found that, especially in the period following the terrorist attacks, the media has been extremely effective in creating and reinforcing connections between Islam, terrorism, and the oppression of women (p. 207). As the U.S.

government explicitly stated, "the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women," (Abu-Lughod, 2002). In particular, the plight of Muslim women has been effectively incorporated into the project of empire building by Western powers. A salient example of this hijacking of a feminist agenda is the invasion of Afghanistan by the U.S. and its allied forces in 2001 (Lewis, 2002); the discourse on the "war on terror" maintained its momentum even as the objectives changed drastically from searching for weapons of mass destruction to rescuing Afghan women and girls from the Taliban and fundamentalist Islam (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 784). Sherene Razack points a finger at Western feminists and transnational feminism for their complicity in mobilizing women to champion third-world women's issues as a global political agenda. She observes that any critique of Muslim men, particularly "when the writing is done by Western feminists, Muslim or non-Muslim, [provides] the 'war on terror' and the American bid for empire with ideological justifications," (p. 83). Drawing from a feminist anthropological perspective, Leila Abu-Lughod (1998, 2002) determines that transnational feminism has reified cultural difference and propagated a discourse on Muslim women as "the other" in its race to rescue their oppressed sisters. In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,* the author insists that we should be skeptical of the focus on "Muslim women" as it is used in public discourses today; the oppression of Muslim women in non-Western countries are often used as the clarion call for political interventions in these countries, which obscures the important distinctions such as those between "terrorists" and the Taliban, and between religio-cultural and historical-political global connections that facilitate the oppression – whether perceived or real – of Muslim women. The implicit logical trajectory that results from this obscurity is that Muslim women are oppressed by Islam's inherent patriarchy, barbarism and backwardness, and their oppression is made visible by their religious

headcoverings; hence, Muslim women's bodies become a symbol and the battleground through which Muslim societies are eradicated – in the case of Western invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan – controlled, in the case of legislations in various Western countries seeking to ban Islamic religious coverings.

It is useful, at this point, to briefly clarify how Orientalism is defined for the purposes of this research. In *Orientalism,* Edward Said, calls Orientalism "a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient [through] dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, [and] ruling over it," (p. 3). Furthermore, he states that "Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and thesis about the Orient and the Oriental," (p. 2). Said (1979) contends that Orientalism must be studied as a discourse in order to fully grasp its effectiveness in facilitating European culture's disciplining, management and production of the Orient "politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively," (p. 9). This is precisely why Ramadan (2004) believes that anxieties towards Muslims and grievances between Western Muslims and their fellow citizens must be dealt with at the level of rights to equal treatment, the practice of religion and its laws rather than simply at the level of representation. Abu-Lughod (2002) makes a powerful parallel argument for the rights of women when she states,

> Just as I argue [that] we need to be suspicious when neat cultural icons are plastered over messier historical and political narratives, so we need to be wary when Lord Cromer in British-ruled Egypt, French ladies in Algeria, and Laura Bush, all with military troops behind them, claim to be saving or liberating Muslim women. (p. 785)

In order for Muslim women to achieve equal treatment, both in pluralistic Western societies and in various Muslim majority countries, the historical, political and ideological roots of their

perceived oppression must be exposed in order to be properly redressed. If those issues continue to be half-heartedly teased at the level of representation – evidenced by Western feminists' fixation with the *hijab* and the *burqa* – Muslim women and their plight will continue to serve as a propaganda tool for modern-day colonization. This is why the vlogging trend among Western Muslim women is a complex site of self-expression that warrants further investigation. It serves as an entry point into a demographic that has been heretofore largely ignored by the mainstream media. The complexity lies in the way these women focus their identities strongly on the hijab; while Orientalist and Western neo-liberal feminists obsess over the removal of the headcovering as evidence of Muslim women's liberation, the vloggers emphasis on the hijab as evidence of their agency.

Growing anxiety towards Muslims in Western societies are increasing, a development that is evidenced by the enactment of laws at different levels of government. This includes France's ban on the hijab in public places in accordance with the country's secular constitution, Ontario's ban on faith-based arbitration to prevent fundamentalist Muslims from utilizing Sharia law against vulnerable Muslim women, European countries' ban on marriage between European Muslim girls and men from Muslim countries, and the town of Herouxville, Québec officially forbidding the stoning of women and burning them with acid (Razack, 2008). Overlooking the fact that there are Europeans, Americans and Britons who are also Muslim, these laws quite clearly target cultures originating from Muslim countries, perceiving them as inferior and needing to be curbed. Razack (2008) writes, "when race thinking unites with bureaucracy, when, in other words, it is systematized and attached to a project of accumulation, it loses its standing as a prejudice and becomes instead an organizing principle," (p. 9). From the Razack's list, the last example stands out as the most peculiar. The author asks why would a small, all-white town

of about 300 residents need to instate a law against cultural practices that were neither originated nor implemented there? The answer can be found in the invigoration of Orientalist tropes on Muslims and their perceived cultural inferiority. Abu-Lughod (2002) traces a similar thread going from the past few centuries' colonial feminism and Christian missionary project to present day laws affecting Muslim women where the language is secular and the appeals are to human rights and the liberal West's moral superiority.

"The issue of women is a sensitive one in almost all Western Muslim communities," Ramadan (2004) states. Among Muslims, women's bodies often represent the communities' or individual's faithfulness to the religion. For Western societies, women's bodies indicate Muslim communities' progress towards modernity and Western liberal values (Razack, 2008). Hence, policing Muslim women's bodies becomes an important political tool. In *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed observed the rise of "colonial feminism" in Egypt at the turn of the century. The British colonial government, lead by the then-controller-general Lord Cromer, embarked on the feminist project of liberating Egyptian women from the Islam's oppressive practices. The object of this effort was primarily the veil, while little to no attention was given to other issues of concern like access to education and employment (Ahmed, 1992; Abu-Lughod, 2002). Drawing from parallel studies on British colonialism in India, Abu-Lughod (2002) notes that, similar to the veil, practices like *sati* (the practice of widows immolating themselves o their husbands' funeral pyres), child marriage were used to justify British colonial presence. Today, the U.S. and its allied forces justify their presence in Muslim countries and their violent disciplining of Muslim men and Muslim communities through the body of a Muslim woman, "a body fixed in the Western imaginary as confined, mutilated, and sometimes murdered in the name of culture," (Razack, 2008, p. 2008). Gender has become an important tool in reinforcing the idea of

Muslims as stuck in the premodern, a common Orientalist trope in Western popular culture and entertainment. In *Representations of Muslim Bodies in* The Kingdom: *Deconstructing Discourses in Hollywood*, Aguayo (2009) critiques the film's narrative practices, reproduction of racial and gender discourse by deconstructing the complex ways in which Muslim bodies are scripted as dangerous, pre-modern and uncivilized in American popular culture. By, again, reinforcing Orientalist tropes about Muslim women as silenced, invisible and oppressed, *The Kingdom* indirectly links and supports America's project of empire.

The flow of Orientalist tropes between academia into popular imaginings about the Orient is a constant one, according to Said. In the pages addressing his critique of Bernard Lewis and Lewis' book, *Islam and the West,* Said (1979) observes that many periods of European history showed that writings about Islam by academics and scholars were reflected in creative literary and journalistic writings of the time. Furthermore, even after the customary nods towards multiculturalism and cultural differences, the field of feminist studies and even Islam in Western academia continue to be dominated by academics whose expertise lie in the study of Euro-American societies, white men and women (Abu-Lughod, 1998). This is because, contradictorily, scholars who focus on modern Islam "work within an agreed-upon framework for research formed according to notions decidedly *not* set in the Islamic world," (emphasis original). The standards, conventions and expectations guiding this framework are decided by the researchers' peers within the ivory tower, not by the Muslims whom they are studying (Said, 1997, p. 17). The link between Orientalism in academia and popular discourse on feminism and the plight of Muslim women is an important one, not least because "projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners," (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 789). Following on Deborah Cherry's analysis of visual studies' role in tracing the link between

visual representation with political representation (Lewis, 2002), this research connects Muslim women vloggers' articulation of their identities with the larger political project redressing their misrepresentation in the mainstream media. It is therefore important to look into the prevalence of these ideologies in the uncharted terrain of vlogging among Muslim women in Western societies.

In *Casting Out,* Sherene Razack (2008) draws on global geo-political events to show that, while Muslim men have become subjects of intense policing, Muslim women are targeted as victims needing to be rescued from "violent, hyper-patriarchal men" (p. 4). The author explains what she calls the three allegorical figures that have come to symbolize the global "war on terror" and the underpinning clash of civilizations – the dangerous Muslim man, the imperilled Muslim woman and the civilized European. These interrelated figures deploy Orientalist discourses and colonial violence onto the bodies of the "other." Muslim women in particular are often portrayed as one of three stereotypes: the veiled and submissive victims of Islamic patriarchy, militant fundamentalists or exotic and voluptuous belly-dancers (Razack, 2008; Cañas, 2008). The fixation upon the body of a Muslim woman as needing to be rescued by being exposed, unveiled and modernized reaffirms the Western subject's identity as civilized, rational and modern. By the same token of reasoning, Western women achieve their subject status by contrasting themselves against Muslim women, women who are their equal in the struggle for emancipation but culturally different - sometimes coded as "inferior" – nonetheless. In foregrounding her analysis of the popular Canadian television show, *Little House on the Prairie,* Cañas (2008) found that feminist discourse often makes a clear distinction between "first world women" and "third world women." Third world women are usually portrayed as "traditionalist, religious and submissive, in contradistinction to their Western sisters who are regarded as

modern and liberated," (p. 196). Bullock and Jafri (2000) made a similar observation about Canadian mainstream media where the proverbial "third world woman" is often portrayed as opposite the "first world woman" who is progressive, liberated, autonomous. Razack (2008) affirms that the so-called first world woman emancipates herself by saving Muslim women. The rise in the visibility – albeit primarily online – of Muslim women who are firmly situated within Western contexts disrupts this enduring but inaccurate binary. Vlogging primarily in English and employing common Western neoliberal tropes of fashion and consumerism as markers of identities as their non-Muslim counterparts do, these vloggers effectively blur the line between "first world women" and "third world women." This is quite evident even to someone who merely watches these videos without going into any in depth study of the vlogs.

The fixation on religious covering such as the hijab*, niqab* (a veil covering only the face) and *burqa* (a veil which covers from head to toe) is one manifestation of the West's and Western feminists' obsession with Muslim women's bodies. Particularly in Canadian mainstream news, the wearing of religious coverings automatically signals the women's backwardness. The popular perception that Muslim women in Canada commonly come from third world countries means that religious coverings related to Islam instantly signify backward values that are antithetical to "Canadian" values (Bullock & Jafri, 2000). Byng (2010) similarly observes that "veiling was argued to be, and generally accepted as, a corollary of women's oppression that was stipulated by the Qur'an," (p. 110). Abu-Lughod (2002) notes with a hint of sarcasm that the forcing of Afghan women under the burqa became the shorthand that efficiently signals at their oppression under the Taliban. She further states that

> Various religious coverings – including the veil, burqa, and niqab – are so central to contemporary concerns about Muslim women. Feminist discourses on Muslim women's liberation commonly fixate on the women's bodies and the rejection of religious coverings is often taken as a symbol of their liberation. The assumption was that once

> "freed" from oppression – be it Islam, the Taliban, etc – they will go back to their jeans, makeup and belly-baring blouses. This dichotomous framing disorients feminists when they see Muslim or Afghan women continue to wear religious coverings even though the Taliban was gone. (Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 785)

The gross mischaracterization of Muslim women who cover compels Razack (2008) to once again point the finger at Western feminists, arguing that they inadvertently support the "war on terror" and the violence imposed upon Muslim populations by legitimizing the project of "saving Muslim women" from Islam's patriarchal oppression (Aguayo, 2009). Again, the emergence of articulate and often outspoken Muslim women vloggers effectively problematizes that default association between religious coverings on their bodies and oppression. In fact, the mere visibility of these women on what are largely unfettered online networks raises the question, "Do Muslim women really needs saving?"

Western mainstream media's fixation with the veil simply as a symbol critically ignores the complex sociological reasoning behind Muslim women's decision to cover. In their study of articles in Canadian mainstream media about Muslim women, authors Bullock and Jafri (2000) found that over 80 per cent of them focused specifically on the hijab, reinforcing the notion that it is the only important facet of a Muslim woman's identity. Abu-Lughod (2002) cautions feminists from reducing, out of convenience or presumptuousness, "the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing," (p. 786). According to Byng (2010),

> Studies have shown that Muslim women do not necessarily associate veiling with oppression or gender equality with refuting traditional gender roles (Bullock 2003; Fernea, 1998; Read 2003). Moreover, there are social and political meanings associated with veiling that go beyond religious practice and gender inequality (Epstein 2007; Lorber 2002; Mohanty; 1991). (p. 110)

However, these social and political meanings behind the hijab are not often immediately evident, particularly from the vlogs produced by Muslim women vloggers. Furthermore, the vast majority of vlogs by these women evolve primarily around the hijab, as well as makeup and modest fashion. A cursory survey of the vlogging trend among Muslim women quickly showed as much. Despite the liberative nature of the vlogging trend, these women seem to mimic Orientalist and post-colonial neoliberal obsession with the hijab as a visual marker, whereas there is evidence that the hijab has so much more meaning than what is immediately visible. Papanek (1982) found that the burqa functioned as a mobile form of seclusion for women outside the home. They indicated the women's respectability, a social marker which protects women from harassment. In a culture where women's modesty is closely tied to the sanctity of the home, the burqa was the figurative vehicle that on which women moved outside the home. Furthermore, the burqa was a cultural practice that predates Islam and is specific to a particular part of Afghanistan, Papanek (1982) explains; it later became problematic when the burqa was indiscriminately imposed upon the whole of Afghan culture under Taliban rule. In this instance, the Taliban's policing of Afghan women's bodies mirrored Western states' policing of women's bodies as a way of managing racial populations (Razack, 2008).

Said (1979) contends that the interchange between colonial powers and Orientalist scholarship is still burgeoning, whereby the latter produces knowledge about Islam to justify colonial presence in Muslim populations. In *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World,* Said developed this observation further while echoing Althusser's (1971) conceptualization of mass media as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) (p. 28). Said (1997) asserts that television, radio networks, newspapers, magazines and

films form the cultural apparati which deliver not only knowledge about Islam, but also the interpretive lens through which the religion and its followers are viewed. He (1997) states,

> Together, this powerful concentration of mass media can be said to constitute a communal core of interpretations providing a certain picture of Islam and, of course, reflecting powerful interests in the society served by the media. Along with this picture, which is not merely a picture but also *a communicable set of feelings about the picture* (emphasis mine), goes what we may call its over-all context. By context I mean the picture's setting, its place in reality, the values implicit in it, and, not least, the kind of attitude it promotes in the beholder. (Said, 1997, p. 47-48)

The motivation behind media outlets' uncritical promotion of Orientalist ideologies about Islam, Said (1997) explains, is a confluence of several key factors: the quest for profit, Western powers' foreign relations with Muslim populations abroad and popular anti-Islam sentiments at home. To illustrate this point, I refer back to Razack's (2008) critique of best-selling books by Oriana Fallaci, Phyllis Chesler and Irshad Manji; the discourse on the "war on terror" and clash of civilizations have been so deeply embedded and rationalized as the status quo that reviewers, while expressing "queasiness" at the author's racist claims about Islam, still found the claims justified. To this end, vlogs by Muslim women within Western contexts carry enormous potential for providing a different – and perhaps a more accurate – lens on Islam and Muslims.

Western film industry is also deeply embedded with Orientalist ideologies about Islam (Said, 1997), as I have alluded to earlier in this chapter. Aguayo (2009) states, "terrorism-centered movies [such as *Jarhead, The Kingdom, and Black Hawk Down*] are reinvigorating Orientalist discourses and colonial violence disseminated through the negative images of Muslim bodies in Hollywood," (p. 42). The film *The Kingdom,* for example, strategically employs its lead (white) female character, forensics examiner Janet Mayes, to invigorate old Orientalist tropes. By having Mayes outrank her male colleagues, the film reinforces the idea that Western women are liberated and educated. And by contrasting Mayes, dressed in masculine military

garb while still retaining her femininity, against burqa-clad women, the film implies that Western women are equal members of government and society. Although such media are clearly fictional, they blur the lines between fact and fantasy by drawing closely from actual events and borrowing from popular discourses on the "war on terror." This is why media representations are the focus of my study – they play a central role in shaping public perceptions and understanding of social events and issues, especially the issue of veiling among Muslim women (Bullock & Jafri, 2000; Byng, 2010). Now with the help of the world wide web, vloggin by Muslim women is set to fundamentally shape those perceptions independent of the constraints that accompany mainstream media reporting. Bullock and Jafri (2000) found that the Canadian mainstream media reflect and shape popular notions of "Canadian values" as well as who belong and who does not. Disappointingly, the media oftentimes take the well-trodden route of portraying Muslim women as outsiders to the framework of "Canadian nationhood." Similarly, mainstream media in Britain, U.S., and France position Muslim women's choice to veil as undesirable and ideologically opposed to national security, social cohesion and assimilation or integration into the mainstream culture (Byng, 2010). Borrowing from Hannah Arendt's concept of "race thinking", Razack (2008) defines this subtle embedding of racism into common national values as a "structure of thought" which prejudices against individuals based on their ethnic or racial origins. She states that through the "culturalization of racism, [...]racialized groups are no longer widely portrayed as biologically inferior (as a cruder version of racism would have it), dominant groups often perceive subordinate groups as possessing *cultures* (emphasis original) that are inferior and overly patriarchal," (p. 173). Therefore different minority Muslim populations are portrayed as backwards and inferior by virtue of their cultural practices such as veiling.

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks, experts were invited by the media to provide religio-cultural insights to support the thesis that Islamic cultures are inherently oppressive of its women. This harnessing of expert opinions, according to Abu-Lughod (2002), reinforced the dichotomous framing of "us versus them," East versus West," and "silent, burqa-clad women versus vocal Western female leaders," (p. 784). Continued negative portrayal in the Australian mainstream media an impact on the psyches of Australian Muslims; Aly (2007) found that anxieties and victim mentality were caused by participants' perception that the anti-Muslim media discourses are powerful in impacting public perceptions about Muslims. Worryingly, these anxieties result from participants' internal dialogue about themselves rather than from experiences or relationships with individuals. To cope with this anxiety, participants employed what the author called "strategic withdrawal" where participants limited their exposure to the media's negative message about Islam; this improved their self perceptions and helped the participants formulate new narratives of belonging as Australians. The Muslim women surveyed by Bullock and Jafri (2000) showed similar reactions to the largely negative portrayal of Muslim women in the Canadian media, especially among younger Muslim women; they were found to experience crises of self esteem, confusion about their identity as Muslims and Canadians, as well as doubts about their faith. This research proposes that the vlogging trend among Muslim women in Western society is an indirect outcome of these women's experiences in their relationship with the mainstream media. Like Australian Muslims, the women in Bullock and Jafri's (2000) study resolved this crisis by formulating their own narratives of belonging to Canadian mainstream culture – one which includes their faith and religious practices as inherently Canadian rather than an importation of foreign cultures. In the case of the women

interviewed for this research, that formulation was subsequently articulated in visual form on social media platforms.

This new formulation of citizenship and feminist projects which includes Muslim women as agents rather than simply as objects of rescue fits with Abu-Lughod's (2002) call for a nuanced approach to feminists in the third world – one with "a serious appreciation of differences among women in the world—as products of different histories, expressions of different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires," (p. 783). The author proposes an amalgam which recognizes the value of local experiences and culture, much like the Muslim women vloggers' identities which were complex hybrids of Western and non-Western cultures. Despite Western mainstream societies' struggle to recognize Muslims as fellow citizens and Muslims' own internal struggle to develop a sense of belonging, Ramadan (2004) recognizes positive currents of change. He states, "there are clear signs today, *particularly among women* (emphasis mine), that things are changing and that more and more Muslims are aware of the challenges they have to confront," (p. 224). In *Western Muslims,* Ramadan (2004) outlines three axes of reform on the issue of women within the Western Muslim community; 1) the conception of woman as "women" rather than simply in relation to others as mother, daughter or wife; 2) the emergence of discourses which expand the interpretation of classical texts from female perspectives; and 3) the recognition of the need for women to be visible, which leads to their right to express themselves through visual cues such as the *hijab* and fashion, and to formulate an identity based on the culture that they are most comfortable in. My research focus on Muslim women's self expression through fashion and vlogging takes its cue from this framework for transformation and the rise of Muslim women's agency that challenge popular misconceptions.

Research Methodology – the qualitative route

The research problem that I am investigating in this study is three-dimensional; I am interested in unearthing the relationship between ideology, identity and technology within the microcosm of Muslim women's vlogging trend. The three major questions that I have explored in this research are:

1. What are the ideologies that influence the vloggers' identities as Muslim women?
2. What are the ideologies which inform or shape the technology used by Muslim women to vlog?
3. How are Muslim women vloggers' gender identities shaped or influenced by the technology and ideology which circumscribe the vlogging trend?

These questions fall squarely within the social sciences field and, therefore, call for qualitative research methods to arrive at possible answers. This is because a qualitative approach allows for inductive theory building where "generalizable statements about the topic are drawn from participants' accounts rather than from a pre-existing theory," (DeCoster & Lichtenstein, 2010, p. 233).

As I've established in my Literature Review chapter, the nexus where Western Muslim women, questions of identity, online communications and self expression converge is still a new and least-explored terrain of knowledge. Further adding to the complexity of this juncture is the constantly-changing political and religio-cultural contexts within which the women operate and which spurred their move to online self expression. This is why Polkinghorne (2005) subsequently concluded that "methods designed to study physical objects are not a good fit for the study of experience. Qualitative methods are specifically constructed to take account of the particular characteristics of human experience and to facilitate the investigation of experience,"

(p. 138). In her review of feminist research methodologies, Eichler (1997) agrees, stating that "qualitative research is particularly well-suited to new topics," (p. 11). By performing one-on-one interviews with Muslim women who vlog, I was able to explore the women's individual narrative accounts for "thick" data and perform inductive analyses about the social processes and contexts which shape these narratives. Importantly, a qualitative approach to this study afforded me with the flexibility to tailor my interview questions in order to encourage the women to speak further about particular experiences. Flexibility proved to be essential in dealing with questions of being a Muslim woman in a non-Muslim majority country; oftentimes during the interviews we would encounter issues of racism and prejudice but participants would summarily move on to a different matter. Being able to revisit these themes and explore them from a different angle was helpful in encouraging the participants to speak about them further. In these instances, a qualitative research approach's focus on sensitivity was crucial in alerting me to the nuances in the women vloggers' responses, particularly in discussing issues of ethnicity, gender, power relations, social class and social context.

In making the case for qualitative research methods, DeCoster and Lichtenstein (2010) affirmed that "qualitative research methods are often credited with giving voice to the powerless [through] action research in which the participants' or community's experience is presented in scholarly terms," (p. 234). By focusing on the ways in which Muslim women vloggers in Canada utilize YouTube to express their identities and counter negative stereotypes in the mainstream media, I was able to produce novel data and generalizable explanations about the larger vlogging trend among Muslim women in other non-Muslim majority countries. My qualitative research methodology in this study is two-fold: 1) narrative analyses through participant interviews, and 2) feminist critical discourse analyses through a textual analysis of Muslim women's vlogs.

Narrative analysis – small stories approach

Narrative analysis is applied by qualitative researchers to explain the ways in which individuals or groups construct and utilize stories in order to make sense of the world. Narratives are a researcher's primary access to people's experiences; they capture the richness and nuances of those experiences, which cannot necessarily be captured through behavioral observation (Polkinghorne, 2006, p. 139). Utilizing Squire's (2008) hermeneutic approach to experience-centered narrative analysis, I have attempted to arrive at an understanding of Muslim women's self-representation through vlogging and how the vlogs work to support the women's narratives about themselves. The guiding assumption of this research is that the women's narratives by and about themselves are meaningful. This entails focussing on parts of their story-telling that may not necessarily follow a clear storyline but which warrant equal attention. Squire (2008) notes that the area of narrative analysis has shown "growing interest in gathering and analysing visual materials and conducting interviews around them," (p. 45). She further cites Alan Radley and Diane Taylor's (2003a, b) research on patients where photo diaries during their hospital stay as well as follow-up interviews after they returned home were collated to form a narrative. Following the same methodology, my research began with one-on-one interviews with Muslim women living in Canada who actively produce video on their YouTube channels. Rich data collected from these interviews were then complemented by data extracted from a textual analysis of their vlogs as well as vlogs by Muslim women living in other non-Muslim majority countries. By expanding the context from which data is collected, I was able to include related materials such as the larger cultural and national narratives about femininity and Muslim women's gender identities. More importantly, I was able to include "hard-to-transcribe fragments, contradictions and gaps within narratives," (p. 45).

In analysing Muslim women's articulation of their gender identities, I've taken a specific route from the larger tradition of narrative analysis: the "small story" approach. This approach entails incorporating individual narratives from Muslim women vloggers into the study of contexts which influence their narratives. According to Pheonix (2008), this approach is expedient in the study of identity for several reasons. First, its focus on micro experiences highlights specific local dynamics, practise and the temporal frames within which specific identities are produced. The small story approach also allows me to take into account parts of the women's narratives that do not fit neatly into a clear storyline but which are nonetheless crucial building blocks in understanding the narrative. Facets of Muslim women vloggers' identities are articulated or expressed through many vlogs and on disparate topics. Focusing on individual narratives is thus particularly important in my study of the women vloggers whose identities are tied up in narratives that are diachronic and distributed across multiple small stories.

The small story approach also allowed me to perform a genealogical study of the vlogging trend which problematizes the wider discourses that constitute the vloggers as "Muslim women." Due to the contesting narratives that surround Muslim women's identities – particularly those who wear the *hijab* – it is important for this study to first embark on an investigation of the epistemology of Muslim women's notions of gendered identities. According to contemporary narrative social research such as the Russian structuralist, French post-structuralist, post-modern, psychoanalytic and deconstructionist approaches, narratives are produced through multiple and often disparate subjectivities which inform the way narratives are produced and consumed. For this research, that includes events and phenomena – real or hypothetical – directly experienced or perceived from a distance by the Muslim women vloggers. I see the women's negotiation with contesting ideologies and their articulation of identities as internal phenomena articulated

externally through their vlogs. As Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2008) explain, narrative analyses not only highlights the structures and operations of narratives; it also deconstructs the ways in which narratives are produced, who produced them, and how these narratives are consumed. These objectives fit squarely within the goals of communication research which tries to "describe how and why people send messages to each other and how the receivers are affected by these messages," (DeCoster & Lichtenstein, 2007, p. 227). The small story approach thus allowed me to situate Muslim women vloggers' narratives of identity and self expression in relation to dominant narratives surrounding Muslim women's gender identity.

The primary method of data collection for this methodology involves participant interviews. Following Squire's (2008) concept of a study of personal narratives, this research involves interviews with multiple Muslim women vlogger about the same phenomenon that is of a Muslim woman formulating and articulating her identity amidst competing narratives within a non-Muslim majority country. These interviews were followed by a closed textual analysis of the participants' vlogs produced between December 2013 and March 2014. Three Muslim women were interviewed for this research. The terms "hijabi" and "Canada" were used to search for potential participants and resulted in between 10-12 vloggers. The vloggers selected and interviewed for this study based on the following criteria:

- Aged eighteen years or older
- Identifies as a Muslim woman and wears the hijab
- Has a YouTube channel and is currently active in producing videos on the channel
- Lives in Canada
- Communicates on their channel in English

The interviews lasted for an average of one hour and the women responded to open-ended questions which addressed:

- their motivations for making videos
- their choice of topics and their audiences
- their choice of social networking platforms to engage with their audiences
- their identities as Muslim women living in non-Muslim majority countries
- competing influences upon their selves and their choices
- their perceptions of popular portrayals of Muslim women in the mainstream media
- their experiences with racism, Islamophobia and prejudicial treatment

In keeping with this research's aim of analysing the women's agency through vlogging, participant interviews and closed analyses of the participants' vlogs were important sites of investigation. As a researcher interested in the social and cultural roles of narratives, these interviews provided me with an insight into how the participants' personal stories' illustrate their social agency. By speaking to individual Muslim women vloggers, this study highlights the ways in which ongoing events on the global stage as well as potential future events – imagined or real – are being comprehended and consumed at the micro level. Furthermore, by incorporating the women's own words and reading their vlogs as "texts", I was able to focus on how each of the women's expressed ideas about their gender identity connects with that of another vlogger. Furthermore, tracing these ideas within the vlogging community highlighted the movement of ideas and the social agency of the women's narratives both on the micro and the macro scale. Finally, the small story approach brings attention to narratives on such events that are overlooked because they are not easily understood because they are non-chronological in nature or do not fit into the larger social narrative surrounding the event. By paying detailed attention to a small sample of vlogs, I was able to analyse the ways they tell their stories while, at the same time, paying attention to the wider cultural, religious and political narratives that operate in the background. The vloggers were highly cooperative and keen to discuss their vlogging practices,

particularly for this research's potential to broaden academic discourses on Muslim women's self-representation. They were also open to being identified by their screen names in this research, as that can help increase their exposure and grow their audience. Nevertheless, for the purposes of protecting their anonymity as interview subjects in this research, the vloggers' screen names will not be revealed and have been assigned pseudonyms Amina, Fatima and Sarah instead.

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Feminist CDA)

The final methodological approach in this study is a Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the Muslim women vlogging trend. CDA is a study of discourse which treats texts and language as a discursive social practice (Fairclough, 1995). According to Lee and Otsuji (2009), "the main areas of inquiry for CDA are the workings of political, economic, media, institutional, educational, racial and gendered discourses," (p. 67). From the authors' list of key characteristics of CDA application in social science research I have identified three that are most important to this study. Firstly, CDA is problem-oriented; its primary goal is to address problems surrounding political and social issues by evincing discursive power relations and ideologies that circumscribe text and discourse/talk. This study has identified as part of its hypothesis that the vlogging practices of Muslim women are embedded with problematic ideas concerning identity; a large majority of vlogs analysed in this research feature Muslim women expressing their identities through visual cues such as fashion and makeup. While the influx of Muslim women freely expressing themselves is cause for celebration, the underlying discourse of conspicuous consumption being reiterated through these vlogs is deeply problematic. Connecting the "talk" within the vlogs to the underlying text that surround Muslim women's identity discourse may

highlight the problematic ideologies that shape the women's identities. Conversely, following van Dijk's (2001) conceptualization of ideologies which potentially "can be 'good' or 'bad' depending on the consequences of the social practices based on them," (p. 14), such connections may also lead to strategies to harness the women's agency in self expression in cyberspace.

The second characteristic of CDA identified by Lee and Otsuji (2009) which is important to this study is that it provides an analytical framework which facilitates problem-solving at the micro (text) level while orienting towards the macro level (society and institutions). The authors state, "despite the enormous variation, what is common to all [CDA approaches] is the mutual constitution of discourse/text and social, historical and political actions, backgrounds, and structures," (p. 67). While this study takes a close look at how ideologies operate within the microcosm of Muslim women's online identity expression, it simultaneously orientates towards the social, political and religio-cultural contestations of power taking place on the local (Canada) as well as the global stage (Muslim and non-Muslim majority countries). As the starting point for this study, the vlogging trend is seen as one reaction to Western media's constant misrepresentation of Muslim women and prevailing negative perceptions of the women as helpless victims of Islamic patriarchy. At the same time, these vlogs continue to be informed by local and global discourses surrounding Islam in general and Muslim women in particular. This dichotomous orientation of analytical focus allowed for an expansive scope in investigating the epistemology of Muslim women's ideological underpinnings concerning their gender identities.

The final important characteristic of critical discourse analysis is its dynamic multi-disciplinarity. As Wodak (2004) strongly asserts, "CDA has never been and has never attempted to be or to provide one single specific theory. Neither is one specific methodology characteristic of research in CDA," (p. 198). Eichler's (1997) comprehensive review of various feminist

research methodologies traced a similar dynamism; she concludes that, while there are distinct feminist methodologies, epistemologies and ontologies, there are no distinctly feminist methods; feminist research remains dynamically multi-modal in its investigation and data extraction. In other words, "feminist is a perspective, not a research method," (p. 12). As a methodological approach, a feminist CDA marks the intersection of critical discourse analyses and feminist studies. With CDA as the foundation of my inquiry in the Muslim women vlogging trend, I was able to apply a critical feminist perspective in tracing the affects of patriarchal gender ideologies embedded within online social media platforms used by the women in expressing their identities. Lazar (2007) makes a compelling case for a feminist CDA by highlighting the invisibility of gender ideology;

> Gender ideology is hegemonic in that it often does not appear as domination at all, appearing instead as largely consensual and acceptable to most in a community. The winning of consent and the perpetuation of the otherwise tenuous relation of dominance (Gramsci, 1971) are largely accomplished through discursive means, especially in ways commonsensical and natural. [...] This accounts for the pervasiveness of tacit androcentrism in many institutional cultures and discourse, in which not only men but also women are complicit through their habitual, differential participation in their particular communities. (p. 147)

I refer here to my point regarding the need to be cautious in celebrating Muslim women's freedom of expression. Since much of the technology used by these women are circumscribed by unbalanced, patriarchal arrangements of power between genders (Wajcman, 1991), a critical feminist analysis of their vlogging practice will lift the veil on how such arrangements still prevail.

The hijab, ethno-religious cultural influences and identity

In her approach to Third World feminism, Leila Abu-Lughod (1998) prefaces her arguments by explaining her reason for teaching third world feminism to her students; she says, "As an anthropologist, I want to teach them to appreciate that others do not live as they do and that their systems for organizing gender relations may be different from but are not inferior to ours;" (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 26). Despite using the now-outdated term "third world" feminism, Abu-Lughod (1998) efficiently traces the genealogy of Western feminism to foundations that differentiates the developed world's systems of gender relations from that of the rest of the world. As a consequence, Western notions of feminism are widely taken as not only superior but the only form of emancipation for women. The notion that a Muslim woman, for example, covers her body out of religious observance is ultimately irreconcilable with the possibility that she may also be educated, empowered or instrumental in her decision to cover. Bullock and Jafri (2000) observes the correlation between the Muslim woman, particularly one who wears the hijab, with the state of being oppressed or disempowered manifested in mainstream media discourses that shape ideas around "Canadian" values. As she notes in her analysis of a number of Canadian newspapers:

> The "Canadian woman" is all that the third-world woman is not: progressive, modern, liberated, free, educated, autonomous, and so on (Mohanty). Since Muslim women in Canada are usually seen as coming from the third world, practices associated with Islam (especially visible ones like wearing a headscarf) can be seen as the importation of "backward" third world values to Canada, rather than being viewed as "Canadian" practices in their own unique way. (p. 35)

These connections are never directly articulated in the mainstream media discourse; rather, they are implied when stories concerning Muslim women are covered in the foreign section of the newspaper, for example. Such negative connotations of Muslim women have a two-fold effect,

but on the institutional and non-institutional levels. The general public not only sees them as oppressed, inferior and victims; it is also prone to be in favour of policies that infringe upon the women's right to observe religious coverings. There is clear evidence to prove that negative media representations of Muslim women in Canada and France correspond with public efforts towards banning the hijab in public schools (Byng, 2010). Byng (2010) concludes that "the ideology and hegemony of the West were supported by newspaper stories where representations of hijab and niqab were refracted through the prisms of the national identities of Western nations [and] their concerns about the assimilation/integration of Muslim minorities," (Byng, 2010, p. 114). Negative media representations of Muslim women who wear hijab clearly affect their lived experiences.

As de Lauretis (1987) asserts, gender and identity are not inherent properties of the body; rather, they are socially constructed. As such, it is important to look at how each participant's family, ethnic and cultural backgrounds inform their identities as Muslim women. All three participants interviewed for this research were born and brought up in Canada by first generation immigrant parents. Amina comes from a Caribbean background, Fatima from a South Asian background and Sarah from an Arab background. They each emphasized that they identify strongly as Canadian first, with Islam or their ethnic and cultural identities as complimentary dimensions to being Canadian. This identification with and a sense of belonging in Canada among the vloggers correlate with Saunders' (2012) observation of Muslims' integration into mainstream cultures of Western countries like the U.K., U.S. and Canada. It is worth noting that Saunders' (2012) analysis deploys the binary thinking prevalent in analyses Muslims in the West; the term 'host cultures' implies that Muslims are always outsiders to these cultures, even though their children may be native to these cultures as the vloggers are. Saunders also relies on

the binary argument of older versus younger generation, minority versus mainstream culture, and alienation versus integration. There is also very little consideration for the possibility of Muslims who are natives to the global West and whose cultural influences may not fall cleanly within the categories identified by the author. Nevertheless, in *The Myth of the Muslim Tide,* the author highlighted questions relevant to the analysis of the vloggers' identity formation as Western Muslim subjects. In asking "to what extent do their children and grandchildren carry the beliefs, and degrees of observance, of their parents? Where do these communities' loyalties lie? Where are their sources of self-identity?" (p. 7), the author found that Islamic beliefs are the foundations of self-identity for Western Muslims. Furthermore, for the younger generation of Muslims of immigrant roots, their loyalties are not necessarily or simply tied to geography. As Saunders (2012) states,

> Islam may date back fourteen centuries, but Muslim has only occasionally been a preferred label of self-identification. In the last two centuries, it often has been trumped by more modern identities. Until the very final years of the twentieth century, it was generally more popular for immigrants to identify themselves by their nationality (Indian, Egyptian) or their ethnicity (Turk, Arab). (Saunders, 2012, p. 140)

In other words, younger generations of Muslims with immigrant roots prefer to identify themselves as Muslims rather than as Pakistanis, Indians, Egyptian or Lebanese. This is because they identify as part of the native population, and thus hold similar values that are largely common to the mainstream culture. As such, Fatima, Amina and Sarah similarly say they are more comfortable identifying themselves as Canadian rather than simply as Caribbean, South Asian or Arabic. They attribute their identification as Canadian to the fact that they were born here and grew up within what they term "Canadian culture."

Nevertheless, all three participants say they either feel and/or maintain a connection to their ethnic cultures. They credit their parents as the conduit that links them to Arab, East Asian

or Caribbean ethno-religious cultural influences on their respective identities. This is illustrated, for example, in the way Sarah identifies herself; she explains, "I'm actually born in Canada, so I'm Canadian. My parents are from Lebanon. So I do associate myself with being Lebanese," (Sarah, interview, May 9, 2014). Similarly, Amina attributes her connection to Caribbean culture through her parents. Saunders (2012) observes that children of immigrants are especially adept at co-opting their immigrant parents' roots into the culture in which they live, or vice versa (p. 161). However, this intersection where Canadian culture and participants' ethno-religious cultures meet within their identities is also where tension exists. Each participant expresses varying degrees of feeling conflicted when faced with the question of identifying as Canadian or South Asian/Caribbean/Arabic. For example, although Amina says she feels more comfortable identifying simply as Canadian, she feels that doing so is disloyal to her parents and their ethno-cultural roots. Feminist Leila Abu-Lughod (1998) addresses this tension in tracing the roots of the developing world's feminist ideologies. Based on Abu-Lughod's (1998) analysis, Amina's conflicted feelings can be traced back to what the author identified as the binary that opposes the global East and West; this binary opposition often results in identity politics that excludes identities that do not fall into categories such as "Eastern", "Western", Canadian, Caribbean, Muslim or otherwise. Borrowing from Margo Badran's work, Abu-Lughod (1998) subsequently argues for an "escape [from] the binary thinking that posits a rigidly distinct West and East and assumes, therefore, a crude dynamic that correspond to this division," (Abu-Lughod, 1998, p. 27). Because Amina subscribes to the East/West or Canadian/other binary in thinking about her identity or has had this binary imposed upon her identity, or both, she cannot fully and comfortably express herself as simply Canadian or simply Jamaican.

In order to negotiate the tension resulting from this binary, Amina says she hyphenates her identity as "Canadian-Jamaican." This solution interestingly correlates with Abu-Lughod's (1998) description of her own identity as a "hyphenated Palestinian" (p. 26) (Abu-Lughod is an American with Palestinian and Jewish ancestry) and her unique position as both inside and outside the communities with which she interacts and studies. Amina echoes this insider-outsider position; she feels that while her religious faith ties her to the *umma* – the universal Muslim community – her Caribbean background sets her apart from it because she is neither Arab nor South Asian, as are the majority of Muslims in Canada. Despite acknowledging her insider-outsider status within the Muslim community, Amina says she feels largely immune to the influences of dominant Muslim cultures, be it Arab or South Asian. Rather, she says that she draws influences from what she calls "Western culture" – a diverse amalgam of different cultures that coalesce within Canada. When asked to define what she means by that term, Amina explains that Western culture "is very diverse [from] how it once was. Everything is very mixed no matter what country you're from and I really like that. I think each culture has something unique about it that's really beautiful that most people can benefit from," (Amina, interview, May 12, 2014).

It is worth noting at this point that both Fatima and Sarah come from two of the largest Muslim groups in Canada while Amina does not. Both participants B and C refer to the ethno-religious communities with which they identify themselves when discussing reactions to their practice of the hijab and questions around their identities as Muslim women. Collective notions on the significance of the hijab to a Muslim woman informed Fatima's decision to wear it. Sarah referenced her ethno-religious community as a key influence on the boundaries she confronted in her vlogging practices as a Muslim woman. In stark contrast, Amina was slow to articulate a particular source of influence that shaped her motivations to dress modestly and to vlog on the

topics that she feels passionate about. It is, therefore, perhaps a consequence that, different from Amina, Fatima and Sarah both feel adversely effected by their own ethno-religious communities. For them, what it means to be a Muslim woman is defined, to varying degrees, externally by these communities. The two participants' testimonies illustrate how their gender is defined, performed and policed in the public spheres of their communities where ethno- and religio-centric ideologies pertaining to women's gender identities operate. Fatima says she was placed in a double bind when she received negative reactions from close friends and family when she began wearing the hijab. She explains,

> If you're not wearing hijab, you can't do this; if you're wearing hijab, you can't do that. It was a lot of judging, I found, by Muslim sisters. It was difficult for me because I felt I didn't belong anywhere anymore. When I hung out with my friends who didn't wear the hijab, I felt that I was so different. But when I hung out with other Muslim sisters who did wear it, there's [sic] a lot of negative comments about what I shouldn't do. (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014)

This illustrates the complex layers of meaning attached to the hijab which, by extension, informs the identity of a woman who does or does not wear it. Fatima's struggle in navigating around her ethno-religious culture's norms echoes Lewis' (2010) observations on the Muslim lifestyle magazine as sites of struggle in "representing the human form and, in particular, [dealing] with competing definitions of female modesty and concerns about the depiction of female bodies," (p. 59). According to Fatima, attitudes towards the hijab within her community are similarly divided, primarily along religious as well as cultural lines. In East Asian culture, Fatima explains, older women primarily wear the hijab; a young woman in hijab carries the connotation of being backwards, uneducated, old-fashioned or religiously conservative. Bullock's (2000) study of the hijab among Canadian Muslim women confirms the multi-layered meanings of religious coverings; she found that "issues of class are also involved, with some women in favour

of covering, but feeling impeded by their upper-class heritage which emphasized the backward nature of covering (Cayer; Bullock), and so on," (Bullock, 2000, p. 37). In other words, in particular ethno-cultural communities, religious coverings such as the hijab functions as what de Lauretis (1987) describes as "socio-cultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc. to individuals within the society," (p. 5). In Fatima's case, she feels relegated to the lower strata of her community due to her hijab as well as the community's attitude towards the hijab. Consequently, Fatima often felt alienated both among the older generation who cover as well as among her peers.

Fatima's testimony poignantly demonstrates de Lauretis' (1987) assertion that "gender represents not an individual but a relation, and a social relation; in other words, it represents an individual for a class," (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 5). The hijab, in Fatima's case, signals at her relationship or social position within her ethno-religious community. Fatima explains further that negative attitudes towards the hijab caused her to lose her confidence even when she was in a predominantly non-Muslim environment, such as her workplace. She says that she felt so unconfident that she found it difficult to speak in meetings and presentations at her workplace. This transmission of individual affect from one sphere to another – in this case, from the community to the workplace – mirrors Byng's (2010) observation on the negative consequences of representation of Muslim women. The author states that "when media create the common sense understanding that veiled Muslim women will not be a part of the American public sphere it has significant implications for how religion informs minorities' participation in American public life," (Byng, 2010, p. 124). Byng's (2010) study found that Muslims communities that face stigmatization eventually internalize the stigma and form negative perceptions of

themselves in relation to mainstream society. They begin to see themselves as victims and outsiders, adopt mainstream perceptions of their ethno-religious cultural practices as inferior or unacceptable, and consequently withdraw from healthy civic engagement.

This transference of negative feelings and attitudes towards the hijab from media representations to Muslim communities and individual experiences was common among all three participants. Sarah recounts similar reactions from her Arab community where attitudes among family and friends affected her behaviour within mainstream society. Furthermore, Sarah explains that her Muslim community tend to be rather restrictive and prescriptive on what it means to be a 'Muslim woman'. In studying the construction of gendered identities among students in Canadian Islamic schools, Jasmine Zine (2008) found that this prescriptiveness towards women women's behaviours and bodies stems from *izzat* or notions around honour. Just as Western neoliberalism battles against Islam's perceived backwardness on the bodies of Muslim women and girls, so do Muslim communities through norms that "effectively regulates the behaviour and actions of young Muslim women so as not to compromise family honour," (Zine, 2008, p. 41). The following section will expand on the significance of the hijab for participants' identities as Muslim women and how this is illustrated through their vlogs.

Muslim women vloggers wear the hijab for a variety of reasons. What this research has unearthed is that the hijab forms an integral part of Muslim women's identity, either as a signal to their ethno-cultural backgrounds or their personal religious commitment. As Freedman (2007) observed from public debates that emerged following the hijab ban in France, many young Muslim women there feel as strongly about their French identity as they do about their Muslim identity, which is affirmed by the practice of wearing the hijab. For women in the U.K., wearing the hijab contributed to their process of challenging popular meanings attached to different dress

styles and in the imagining of alternative identities (Freedman, 2007). To Amina, wearing the hijab is a highly personal choice that fulfills her desire to get closer to God. She says, "To me, the hijab, it is a big reminder and something that reminds you of your connection with the creator." Furthermore, it helps her feel "comfortable, happy, respected," (Amina, interview, May 12, 2014). This internal and often very personal sense of fulfillment derived by Muslim women from religious coverings is something that is often overlooked in universal rights discourses which tend to privilege Western models of rights over the women's own lived experiences. Freedman argues that "this type of support for universal rights ignores the agency of Muslim women themselves, and negates the importance of cultural differences and identity," (p. 32). My interviews with Canadian Muslim women vloggers reveal that their agency, identity and cultural differences are reflected in their practices of vlogging.

Muslim women, vlogging and consumer culture

Consumer culture and capitalism are common factors driving the different trends of YouTube vlogging. This is most clearly evidenced by the prevalence of product reviews and shopping haul videos, among others, particularly by women. Simply type "shopping haul" in YouTube's search bar and the search result will show eight out of the top ten videos are by women. The vlogging trend among Muslim women shows an unmistakably similar pattern – the majority of videos by the vloggers in this research fall under the genres that are circumscribed by consumer culture, including shopping hauls, product reviews, "get ready with me" and "hijabi outfit of the day" or HOOTD, which I will expand on later in this paper. The vloggers' engagement with consumer culture is what makes the Muslim women vlogging trend an interesting and important study. The vloggers are being subversive by replicating the dominant cultural trends through their individual Muslim perspective. At the same time, by engaging with these trends, the vloggers are also being subjected to the profit-driven capitalist imperatives and consumerism that circumscribes it. This is why I contend that the Muslim women vloggers' gender identities are informed by capitalism and the consumer culture which circumscribes their vlogging practices and identity articulation on YouTube.

In her study of consumable Muslim dolls as the Islamic alternative to Barbie, Yaqin (2007) found that North American Muslims altered their consumer behaviour significantly following the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent increase in discrimination towards Muslims. North American Muslims asserted their desire to separate from American imperialist policies through the consumption of "Muslim-branded products," and the surge in the "Muslim Barbie's" sales illustrated that behaviour. The author states,

> A report by the Chicago branch of Reuters has argued that Muslim Americans feeling the pressures of a renewed nationalism hinged around the notion of a "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West, have turned toward Muslim-branded products as a way of asserting their identity in the face of a narrowing view of their community. (Yaqin, 2007, p. 174)

The author observed that the rise of the Internet and online marketing enabled the trend of "transnational consumerism" to transcend geopolitical boundaries, finding similarly fertile grounds in other countries where Muslims live as minorities. This study found that Muslim women vloggers' consumption of material goods as part of their identity articulation situates them firmly within this homogenizing transnational culture of consumerism. The conspicuous consumption, writ large, of modest clothing, scarves, makeup and other goods not only contribute to the larger scheme of capitalism, but also in the identities they express through their vlogs.

It is perhaps inevitable that the global Muslim *ummah* should be subject to a homogenous culture of consumerism. A closer look at the architecture of the Internet and social media platforms – and that of YouTube in particular – can elucidate why this is so. To this end, El-Nawawy and Khamis (2012) issue a caveat whilst applauding the Internet for its enabling potential through which religion enter the cyber public sphere. They caution that it can also be a Trojan horse which masks new infrastructures that significantly transform existing ways of religious mediation while introducing new formats and styles of expression (p. 42). McChesney (2013) affirms that the Internet has become the new, fertile playground for capitalism; in 2012 alone, four of the ten largest U.S. corporations were Internet giants Apple, Microsoft and AT&T (p.131). Furthermore, McChesney (2013) states that

> The Internet as a social medium and information system is the domain of a handful of colossal firms. Each of these firms is centred on having a monopoly base camp that generates piles of cash. By some accounts, Apple had $110 billion in cash on hand in 2012, while Google had $50 billion, Microsoft had $51 billion, and Amazon had $10 billion. Facebook

> pocketed $16 billion in cash from its IPO in May 2012, but even before that, it managed to make nearly two dozen acquisitions since 2010, topped by a $1 billion deal for Instagram. (McChesney, 2013, p. 137)

These numbers have probably increased significantly since 2013 when McChesney made these observations; nevertheless, this study will illustrate his assertion that "the digital revolution has been compromised by capitalist appropriation" (p. 97) remains true, if not more so today. The accumulation of capital and profits –the main goal of capitalism – are the main goals for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Google, which own YouTube. In fact, YouTube establishes itself as not only a platform that helps users to connect and share ideas across the globe; it also "acts as a distribution platform for original content creators and advertisers large and small," (YouTube, About). In a sense, YouTube's description of itself as a place that brings together ideas and actors across the globe feeds into the metaphor of the Internet as a cyber marketplace where these ideas are traded and sold, and where actors compete with one another to sell their best ideas. El-Nawawy and Khamis's (2012) analysis of the global cyber Muslim *ummah* follows a similar line of thinking when they likened it to a *souq* (market); borrowing from Bunt (2000), they state, "the large number of Islamic websites available today constitutes a virtual community that is similar to 'a bustling marketplace [souq] in which diverse 'goods' – in the form of ideas and concepts about Islam and Muslims – are exchanged, bought and sold'" (p. 32-33). It stands to argue that this drive for the accumulation of profits is intricately woven into the way YouTube is designed and the way its users are indirectly compelled to produce videos that serve the goal of profit accumulation. More importantly, the Muslim women vloggers' vlogging practices illustrate how the capitalistic drive for profits through material consumption have become part of their identity. This is most clearly reflected the types of videos they routinely produce on their channels and their motivation for vlogging.

Out of the three vloggers interviewed for this study, two of them illustrate a strong case for the influence of consumer culture in their vlogging practices. Sarah says that the primary reason she began vlogging was to promote her hijab styling and fashion business. She found that having a YouTube channel complemented her business website; more specifically, producing vlogs about hijab styling and fashion on YouTube allowed her to tap into YouTube's billions of users and reach out to potential clients. She explains, "I had my business but it was more like within Ottawa or within Canada itself but I wanted to get myself more out there. So I thought YouTube exposure would really help with that and it did." Indeed, her instincts are right because YouTube boasts over one billion unique users every month. Further, YouTube's Monetization program allows Google Ads to play prior to users' videos. The program allows users to gain income from advertisements. Most tellingly, YouTube states that "We have more than a million advertisers using Google ad platforms, the majority of which are small businesses," (YouTube, Statistics). In this way, not only is Sarah improving the prospects of her own business by vlogging, she is also profiting from the number of her viewers who view the advertisements that appear on her channel. Therefore, the impetus for producing vlogs is not only altruistic – "to help other Muslim women" – but also to increase viewership, which will also increase a vlogger's income from advertisements. Sarah also vlogs to help other smaller businesses – mostly online businesses selling hijab or modest-fashion products – gain more exposure. She does what is commonly known in YouTube neologism as "product reviews." This is where a business sends her samples of its products to try out. In return, she will produce a video in which she discusses, among other things, what she likes or dislikes about the products, her experience using them and recommendations on how to best use the products. Sarah explains,

> I do reviews for businesses. So like small hijab businesses that just started up or looking to create more exposure because I have a wide audience. So they just send me free things,

> products that they want to get out there. I'll make a post about that and hope that they'll gain more followers or make more customers. So, thankfully, I've helped a lot of businesses like that. They'll message me back and they'll thank me. (Sarah, interview, May 9, 2014)

Although it is rarely articulated in the vlogs, their content indicate that this is an exchange that has been pre-arranged between the vlogger and the business. More often than not, viewers will be encouraged to purchase the products; links to the business's website will be included in the vlog's description as well as discount codes. In some instances, a vlogger receives her own exclusive discount code, which she then gives to their viewers to use in their purchases; this helps the business track how many of the vlogger's viewers went on to purchase the product as a result of watching the "product review" vlog. These "product reviews" are akin to magazine "advertorials" where are advertisements are editorialized and presented as part of the magazine's original content rather than clearly as advertisements.

These reviews are exceedingly common among Muslim women vloggers, particularly those with large numbers of subscribers; product reviews are a staple content for vloggers like Babylailalov (191,000 subscribers), Ruba Zai (188,000 subscribers) and Nabilabee (124,000 subscribers). However, there are Muslim women vloggers who review products in their vlogs without any material incentive from the sellers of the products. Amina is a prime example where, by her own testimony, consumer culture directly spurred her into vlogging. Her first vlog was a product review; she explains, "I actually started with an item that I got from Sephora and I wanted to review something and I felt, 'Oh, why not help someone because I'm curious about this stuff.'" There is a level of altruism in Amina's explanation of why she chose to vlog about the product she had just purchased; she also explained that she has since changed her vlogging practice because her interests and motivations have changed. She says, "[That] was back then. I don't really have much interest in those things anymore. So, [...] I changed my channel because

my interest and my mind changed." (Interview, May 12, 2014). Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the possibility that she may have been influenced by the popular trend of reviewing products on YouTube. More importantly, the current sample of Amina's vlogs show that products are still indirectly reviewed and/or recommended in her vlogs. For example, the "GRWM! <3 Fresh Glowing Skin Ft. Modern Minerals" (Amina, 2013) vlog features a makeup tutorial where she discusses the reasons why she likes one product in particular. She also listed the details for all the products she used within the video's description box. This demonstrates how consumer culture informs Amina's vlogging practices when she is intentionally promoting a product as well as when she is vlogging about other topics, such as her daily makeup routine and "OOTD" ideas, which will be discussed further in this research.

As I have previously and briefly discussed, product reviews is one of the genres of vlogging that Muslim women vloggers engage in. Although the majority of products reviewed are cosmetics, clothes and hijabs in particular, they can sometimes include food, tech gadgets, personal care and household items. All three vloggers interviewed for this research regularly vlog about products they purchased. Of late, vloggers also receive free products from businesses in exchange for the vloggers' reviews on their personal YouTube channel. A common example is hijab tutorial videos where vloggers show viewers on how to wear a hijab using scarves that have been sent to them by businesses. Out of the eighteen videos by Sarah that were analyzed for this study, a full one-third were reviews or hijab tutorials using a particular brand of hijab. Neither of the remaining two vloggers happened to produce such videos within the study period, although they have done so before and after this research's study period. Although these videos are called "reviews", they would be more accurately described as "product endorsements". This is because these videos generally discuss what the vloggers like about a product and why viewers should

purchase them. Rarely does a vlogger – at least none of the three that were interviewed –find something they do not like about a product, least of all products that they received for free. Of the three vloggers interviewed and among their videos that I've reviewed for this research, only one video contained any criticism of the product being reviewed. Therefore, although this genre of vlogs is called review, in reality they do the work of advertising the business from whom they received products. In other words, these vlogs are a low-cost alternative for small businesses; the cost being the price of one or two of their products. From an anti-capitalist perspective, the genre of "product reviews" illustrates the subversion of free online expression by the capitalist system in general and consumer culture in particular. The vloggers' identities as Muslim women, as articulated through their vlogs, are backgrounded by material consumption. However, from the vloggers view it as a mutual exchange of resources. As Amina explained, she felt compelled to review a product in a video on her channel because she wanted to share her experience of the product with viewers who would like to better inform themselves about the product. Similarly, Sarah relates how a small business owner thanked her for reviewing a product; following Sarah's review, the business owner reported that there was increased activity on her business's Instagram account. Although it is unclear whether the increase translated into more commerce, the cross-platform impact of one vlogger on a business's social media channel is evident. Sarah also feels that these videos fulfill her desire to inspire Muslim women with ideas on how they can be presentable and fashionable without compromising their modesty. To this end, YouTube is a treasure-trove of "outfit of the day" videos, commonly known by its abbreviation "OOTD".

OOTD videos are also sometimes specified as "HOOTD" or "hijabi outfit of the day" videos, although that is no longer common among hijabi vloggers of late. Sometimes these videos are called "Lookbook," a term borrowed from the popular social platform lookbook.nu

which is specifically designed for users share photos of their outfits. In these OOTD or "Lookbook" videos, vloggers will pose in front of the camera in one or more outfits that they've put together. These outfits are purpose-themed, such as outfits to attend weddings, to go shopping or for a night out on the town. They can also be seasonal, such as "WINTER LOOKBOOK!" (DinaTokio, 2013). OOTD videos also carry details of what the vlogger is wearing; these details either appear as text overlays on the videos or narrated by the vloggers in voice-overs. Within this research's study period, Amina produced two of these OOTD videos. In the "October-November Lookbook!", Amina posed in five different ensembles; Islamic *nasheed* music played in video's background and text overlays detailed every ensemble's items and brands. "Quick OOTD #2" was fairly brief; the video featured only one ensemble with a voice-over introduction of the video and text overlays with details of the ensemble similar to the first video. These videos are articulations of Amina's identity as a Muslim woman. In this particular instance, that identity comprise of particular clothes (skirt, belt, top, hijab) from particular brands (Forever21, Call It Spring, Garage). In this sense, materials consumption is intricately woven into the Muslim woman's identity that Amina articulated. In other words, to be a Muslim woman is to be a consumer of goods and a subject within the capitalist market system. As such, the "outfit of the day" genre of videos within the vlogging phenomenon amongst Muslim women visually and firmly ties the articulated Muslim woman's identity to consumer culture.

Muslim women's vlogging as an act of resistance

As I have alluded to earlier in this research, the reasons that motivate Muslim women's practice of self-expression online are multiple and multiplying. These reasons catalyzed the phenomenon of Muslim hijabi vloggers that are steadily picking up momentum currently. One factor that came to the fore as an important one to look at is the women's vlogging as an act of resistance. As illustrated in previous chapters, Muslim women, particularly in Western non-Muslim majority countries are largely invisible or misrepresented within the mainstream media. In films or on television, Muslim women are often painted as oppressed, silent and victims of Islam's inherent patriarchy. This narrative is further bolstered by hard-line feminists who champion the cause of Muslim women's liberation through the symbolic rejection of the hijab, even, as Freedman (2007) observed in the re-emergence of public discourse on the hijab in France, through the exercise of state powers;

> Those who opposed the wearing of headscarves argued that they were protecting Muslim women from a patriarchal order which restricted their freedom. Even those who supported these young women's right to attend school wearing headscarves argued that the French school system would help integrate them into French society and 'liberate' them from Islamic pressure within their families and communities, implying a superiority of French society over patriarchal Islamic society whilst ignoring the presence of male domination within their own social order. (Freedman, 2007, p. 37)

Christiansen (2011) similarly noted amongst public debates in Denmark that "public figures from the whole political spectrum agreed that the hijab is not only the sign of a Muslim woman, but also of an oppressed woman," (p. 337). In his seminal work on how stereotypes function within the communication circuit, Stuart Hall asserts that there is no escaping the stereotype that is imposed upon a person or group (Hall, 1997). Any expression in response to that stereotype continues from the point of stereotypification. Hence, once positioned as victims, there is little room for Muslim women to respond with agency and without further reinforcing stereotypes

about themselves and Islam. This is why Muslim women's vlogs effectively disrupt problematic narratives about them by not only speaking for themselves, but also by highlighting the diversity that exists amongst them.

It is important to note, at the outset, that the Muslim vloggers' sense of agency gained through online self-expression is strongly tied to the hijab as the symbol of their Muslim identity. At the most superficial level – and I use the term "superficial" in the positive sense to mean a surface level observation of the women's external presentation of their individual identities – the connection between their identities and the hijab is evident in the myriad ways the women style the hijab and clothes to establish their individuality. Christiansen (2011) noted this connection in her study of Danish Muslim women and the ways in which they present themselves in or engage with Danish mainstream media. By choosing distinctly Islamic styles of clothing in their media appearances, the women effectively disrupt the mainstream's preconceptions about Muslim women; for example, one who is covered according to what she believes Islam requires is not necessarily silent, and invisible. Among the Canadian Muslim women vloggers I have interviewed, another layer is added to this connection between the hijab and agency – vlogging. The hijab goes hand-in-hand with vlogging as Muslim women's tool for resisting hegemonic values that they do not agree with. In Denmark, Christiansen (2011) points out that Muslim women have been placed center stage in managing relations between Muslim communities – especially among newcomer Muslim communities – and the dominant or "receiving" society. In managing these relations, Christiansen (2011) found that the emphasis was on "weaving Islam into the cultural and social fabric," (p. 350) and they do so at the micro-political level by staging their selves through distinctly Islamic clothing styles. I would argue that this emphasis is taken one step further by vloggers in staging themselves as distinct Muslim women online. Borrowing

from Bunt (2009), Akuo (2010) observes that the Internet has had a transformational effect on the way Muslims perceive themselves and connect with one another (p. 332).

Muslim women vloggers are not oppressed – they can explore fashion, dress the way they want, and make their own choices.

The vlogging phenomenon among Muslim women disrupts the popular notion that women who wear the hijab are not simply oppressed, at least at the most basic level of silent, passive domestic identities. As I discovered among the Canadian hijabi vloggers I interviewed, the women feel they are able to express their individuality and creativity through fashion, as well as dress according to their understanding of what Islam requires of them. They consider themselves free to make their own choices, including the choice to cover or not cover. This is an important point that is often missed in mainstream discourses about women who wear the hijab – that some of them choose to wear out of their own volition and sometimes against the wishes of their families. Fatima clearly demonstrates this agency in her nonchalance when she explains how she began to wear the hijab and then took it off for a period of time. No mention was made as to the actors – parents, husband, relatives and friends – who might have influenced her decision; rather, the focus was on her own feelings towards the hijab and motivations behind the decision to wear it or to take it off. In her own words, Fatima says,

> It was a bit of a struggle for me but when I took it off I realized how much I missed wearing it. And once I started wearing it again, that's when I realized that it's what I understand to be hijab [that matters] and, obviously, I'm going to struggle to be better, insyaAllah (God willing). But it's my struggle and I can choose to take it where I need to go. (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014)

Fatima's decision to stop practicing the hijab upon encountering difficulties and then to wear it again when she felt the need for it showed that she did not feel constrained or compelled to wear

it against her wishes; she stopped wearing the hijab when she felt uncomfortable in it, and started to wear it again when she was ready to do so. Sarah expressed a similar sense of agency, although the challenge she faced came from how she felt she was being perceived by others due to her hijab and modest attire. Like Fatima, Sarah resolved to address those challenges herself. She acknowledges that Muslim women can and have been discriminated against because they cover their hair, but she feels empowered to address that problem proactively. Sarah explains,

> I do hear stories from other girls where they faced racism and barriers to finding employment because of wearing the hijab but, for me, I highly believe in presentation and how you present yourself. So, although you're wearing a hijab, how you look wearing the hijab is important too. So because I care about that and I fixed that part of me, I don't think it's ever been a barrier to finding employment. (Sarah, interview, May 9, 2014)

Sarah's testimony clearly demonstrates that she does not feel constrained by the hijab; where she perceives there is a challenge related to being visibly Muslim, Sarah resolves to adapt the way she dresses in order to suit her surroundings while maintaining the hijab. This is a startling similarity with the sartorial strategies that Christiansen (2011) observed among Danish Muslim women in their engagement with the mainstream media. For example, the author explains that one of the women, "Shabana, is convinced that [black] engenders images of Islamic extremism with the people she encounters. Consequently, she prefers pastel colours," (Christiansen, 2011, p. 342). Again, it's important to note that Sarah's testimony is also absent of other players who may have influenced her practice the hijab and the way she adapts her style of modest dressing. All three Muslim women vloggers I interviewed took steps to resolve the challenge of practicing the hijab and being fashionable at the same time.

Muslim women vloggers are neither silent nor passive

By definition, the vlogging phenomenon among Muslim women demonstrates, in the simple literal sense, that they are not silent and that they have their own voice. Vlogging has provided a platform on which they can speak without going through intermediaries such as the mainstream media. They don't have to wait to be approached by a journalist. As Bullock (2000) previously observed, Muslim women in Canada feel highly dissatisfied by the way they are represented in the mainstream media. The vloggers I interviewed echoed this general dissatisfaction, pointing further to the narrowcasting of Muslim women. As Fatima explains,

> I really get upset that, especially in our city like Toronto where it's so multicultural, there's no representation of Muslim women, especially hijabis.[...] I feel that in the mainstream media they purposely don't show Muslim women who are actually very successful. (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014)

Fatima's 'pet peeve' strongly correlates with Bullock and Jafri's (2000) conclusion that the Canadian mainstream media excludes Muslim women's identities in the national imagination of 'women'. This leads to the Muslim women's difficulty with imagining themselves into fabric of mainstream Canadian society. It is difficult for the women to model themselves after women that they don't see when they turn on the television or look at billboard ads. Fatima says, "When I started wearing hijab, it became very difficult to figure out how to be fashionable." For hijabis looking for guidance or cues on how to be stylish, there is little to nothing to be gained from such magazines as Chatelaine, Elle, Cosmo, or Vogue. Coupled with the realization that other young women may be facing the same challenge, the vloggers' solutions lead to making YouTube videos. Sarah says, "[Vlogging] is important to me because there are so many girls out there that are wearing the hijab but don't know how to wear it." The sense of connectivity and community reflected in Sarah's response is another similarity among the three vloggers I interviewed for this research.

Muslim women's impetus for vlogging – audience, connectivity, and positive feedback

Connectivity to both a virtual and real community of hijabi women emerged as another impetus for self expression via YouTube among the vloggers I interviewed. Positive feedback in the form of comments, "likes" and their videos being shared with others encouraged the vloggers to produce more videos. Fatima admits that she did receive negative comments on her videos; however, the positive comments and responses from her audience were far more numerous and indicated that she was on the right track. She explains, "there were a lot of girls who really like my Outfit of the Day videos and the ideas I had. And my hijab styles, et cetera, so it just kind of kept me going and I really started liking it," (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014). She adds further,

> I know a lot of girls who want to be fashionable, they want to look good but they really don't know how to do that modestly. I feel like perhaps my videos may help them. I guess the message that I really want to convey is that it's ok if you want to be fashionable. [...]. So through my videos I just try to show them that it's possible to look good and be modest at the same time. (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014)

Amina echoes this sentiment, illustrating that positive comments from viewers affect her motivation much more than negative ones. It is interesting to note that all three vloggers either refrain from dwelling on the effects of negative feedback they receive on their vlogs, or have difficulty being specific about negative feedback..For example, when I asked Fatima about the feedback she received from her audience, she admitted, " There's a lot of negative feedback on what I shouldn't do, how I should be wearing hijab," (Interview, may 30, 2014). However, when I inquired further about the negative comments she received on her vlogs, her response was brief and ended on a positive note:

> I notice that when I do make turban styling videos, a lot of people comment that it's not hijab. So I know that gets a lot of people going. I really think it's...there are negative feedback I'd get. For example if I'm doing an outfit of the day and I'm wearing pants, lots of people say they're too tight. They'll definitely comment on that. I guess some sisters tend to [suggest] what I might have said instead. [...] People will find negativity in whatever you do, right? (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014)

In her response above, there is also the brief moment when Fatima stopped herself from going into further detail when she said, "I really think it's...there are negative feedback I'd get," (Interview, May 30, 2014). Even when I questioned her further on how the comments made her feel, her response expanded on how the comments built her confidence; she explained, "I did mention earlier that's actually why I started it. I wanted to develop that thick skin, I wanted to be able to wear hijab without feeling overweighed by it because that's initially how I felt. [...] Now it just rolls off my back," (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014). Sarah struck a similarly positive tone and a more nonchalant attitude towards the negativity received. She says,

> You're going to gain negative feedback from whomever and whoever. It's just a constant of life. It's normal. Not everyone is going to like you, you can't please everyone. So I'm completely ok with that. Of course, if that negative feedback can be seen as constructive criticism, then I'll take it that way. If it's not, then either I'll leave it, depending on how negative it was, or I'll remove it if it's not that polite. (Interview, May 9, 2014)

Contrastingly, all three participants are quite cognizant of the positive feedback they've received from their audience.

Amina explains when asked if she received negative comments on her vlogs, "Yeah, I have [laughs]. I have to try and think of some off the top of my head because lately I've gotten a lot of positive [feedback] so I have to try and think of any negative ones. The three Muslim women vloggers speak eloquently and clearly on what their viewers like about their videos and why. Interaction with their fans and other Muslim women was a strong motivator for the vloggers; the Internet, social media platforms, and YouTube in particular allowed the vloggers to reach large swathes of women who were facing the same struggles as they were. Amina says, "it's really heart-warming to hear what they're going through and how a video could help them," (Amina, interview, May 12, 2014). Sarah goes even further, saying that the positive responses she received from her viewers "inspire" her to keep vlogging. She says, "If I didn't feel like I

was getting any feedback from my videos then what's the point of continuing? Because it's not really making an impact. So it definitely makes me feel really good and [makes me] want to continue [vlogging]," (Sarah, interview, May 9, 2014). Furthermore, YouTube's comments section and other social media platforms the vloggers use to connect with their audience facilitate a two-way conversation that informs the vloggers' vlogging practices.

All three vloggers draw inspiration for their vlogs from different sources. This includes popular female Muslim figures such as Nour Tagouri, an American Muslim journalist who is striving to become the first anchor woman in hijab and Yasmin Mogahed, a leading female American Muslim scholar. For Amina in particular, her source of inspiration as a Muslim woman and as a Muslim woman vlogger are closely tied together. She is inspired by others she sees on YouTube. They make her want to be a better Muslim woman and encourages her to continue to express herself through YouTube. Most importantly on the issue of vlogging inspiration is that all three vloggers similarly demonstrate that they pick up cues from their audiences on which video resonates with their viewers and what topics they should or could vlog about. As Amina explains,

> I'm doing hijab tutorials as well because when I'm in public, a lot of sisters, I always get compliments, masyaAllah and they always ask me, "How do you do your hijab like this?" or things like that. So I just make some hijab tutorials. (Amina, interview, May 12, 2014)

Sarah reports similar requests from her viewers as well. She says,

> I get a lot of requests and emails and different events where they want me to show how to style their hijab for that event. Some girls grow up in areas that don't have many Muslim women living there, or Muslim women wearing hijab there. [...] So they often email me and ask me questions about it and ways to wear it differently. So that's what I try to help them with. (Sarah, interview, May 9, 2014)

The exchange and the sense of community between the vloggers and their audiences is a two-way dialogue. The vloggers produce videos that they feel will serve their viewers, and their

viewers respond with positive comments and feedback that the vloggers draw from to inform their future videos. Based on her communication with her viewers, Sarah feels strongly that she is making an impact on her audience. Fatima and Amina, although less affirmative, echo the same sentiment. Feedback from their viewers, positive or otherwise, seems to signal to the vloggers that there is value is the vlogs they produce. I would also suggest that it is safe to infer that the lack of feedback from viewers would either discourage the vloggers from continuing their vlogging practices or change their vlogging practices. The viewers' feedback also works to affirm the vloggers' sense of agency in their identities as Muslim women and in their self expression. This relationship between the vloggers and their viewers strongly correlates with Akou's (2010) observation that the Internet helps "users to interact and build a new sense of what it means to be Muslim," (Akou, 2010, p. 332). The open and fluid nature of online environments allows individuals to connect easily and transcend physical boundaries. The hijabi vlogging phenomena demonstrates an intimate two-way communication between vloggers and audiences that simultaneously feeds into both parties' sense of identity and agency.

The vlogging phenomenon among Muslim hijabis illustrates that Muslim women are able to express themselves independently and eloquently when given the opportunity to do so. The YouTube videos show that these women have something to say about themselves and other issues that they are passionate about; for example, Amina cares deeply about the water crisis facing communities in third world countries and she took the initiative to produce a vlog specifically to raise funds for a charity that's addressing this problem. In one of Fatima's vlogs, she shares insights on post-pregnancy weight-loss in order to help her audience members who may be going through the same experience. Within this fairly small sample of Canadian Muslim women vloggers there exists a diversity of complex identities that is rarely seen in the

mainstream media. The voices of Muslim women have been painfully absent in public discourses, and the *foulard* (hijab) affair in France was a key example: Freedman (2007) notes that

> In many of the original reports and discussions of the headscarf issue, the views of women – particularly Muslim women – and an acknowledgement of the fact that this was a gendered question, were strangely absent. The young women who chose to wear headscarves to school were represented by many media reports as mere passive agents: either victims of dominating fathers who insisted on them wearing headscarves, or unwitting tools of Islamic organisations who manipulated them for their own purposes. (Freedman, 2007, p. 37)

As the author has previously pointed out, the young Muslim women who were at the centre of the debate saw the hijab as an integral part of their French identities, but that was never the focus of the mainstream discourse. Today, thanks to the proliferation of the internet and the rise of vlogging culture, Muslim women are able to broadcast their opinions independent of mainstream discourses; they don't have to wait for the traditional mainstream media to solicit their opinions because their own channels allow them to broadcast their opinions with far less restrictions. More importantly, these vlogs work to fill in the gaps within traditional mainstream media's representation of Muslim women. As I have discussed in the Literature Review chapter of this research, mainstream media consistently fail to go beyond stereotypical portrayals of Muslim women. News media may be constrained by editorial guidelines, journalistic standards, and is limited to reporting only timely issues. Entertainment media such as television shows and films often portray characters with which audiences are already familiar; rarely does that include Muslim women, and even less so characters that disrupt popular stereotypes and realistically reflect Muslim women as they really are. There is little incentive or proclivity for mainstream media to include the diversity of Muslim women's identities and voices which will problematize, challenge and augment current narratives about Muslim women. Hence, YouTube and vlogs by

Muslim women vloggers play an important role in enriching public discourses and narratives on Muslim women with nuanced stories by the women themselves about their lives and the various dimensions of their identities. This development is particularly important considering the ways in which policies are increasingly being interpreted in ways that restrict Muslim women's full engagement in Canadian public life. A recent example is that of Ms. Zunera Ishaq who was not allowed to take her oath of citizenship with her *niqab* on. Another more worrying case is that of Ms. El-Aloul; the presiding judge refused to hear her case until she takes off her hijab because the court room was defined as a 'secular space.' It's important to note here that the judge who refused to hear case was a woman, which may or may not inform her demand for the removal of the hijab. As Akou (2010) notes, "for many Muslims as well as non-Muslims, hijab is a flash point in debates over feminism, neo-colonialism, and the secular state." Furthermore, the author states that these are "debates that have quickly expanded into cyberspace," (p. 332). This research also found that the expansion of discussions into cyberspace has also expanded the scope within which Muslim women are engaging in discourses.

As one interviewee lamented, the representation of Muslim women in the mainstream media operates within a very limited scope; even when their voices are actually included in the discourse, it is often regarding issues that reinforce their image as oppressed and victimized. She feels strongly that there are many Muslim women out there who are successful, educated and playing important roles in their respective environments, whether they are at work, at school or in the community. Although the majority of the vlogs I surveyed on YouTube evolve around the hijab, makeup and modest fashion, that is true of only one of the vloggers I interviewed. The vlogs and vloggers I analyzed for this research show that Muslim women who wear the hijab are concerned about or are interested in so much more than just the hijab; for Amina, this includes

philanthropy, body image in the media and her ethnic identity which I will discuss further in the following section. For Fatima, her interests span from OOTD ideas to post-pregnancy weight-loss to DIY fashion. When asked about what she focuses her vlogs on, she answers simply, "Anything that really interests me that I think people may like," (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014). Despite the fact that the bulk of Sarah's videos are about hijabs, I would argue that there is a far more progressive way to look at her; she is vlogging as an entrepreneur who is promoting her business, which happens to be selling hijabs. Even then, Sarah does occasionally make videos about other topics, such as how to organize spaces in the home. Therefore, all three vloggers I interviewed proves the point that Muslim women in hijab have something to say about much more than just the hijab. Further to this point, the vloggers utilize vlogging for their own purposes and set their own agendas.

The 'Muslim woman' narrative – There isn't a single common narrative that applies to all Muslim women

The sudden influx of YouTube videos by hijabis across the globe of late strongly demonstrates a simple fact that has been ignored by mainstream media and, consequently, by mainstream society: there isn't a single common narrative that applies to all Muslim women. In fact, I might go so far as to say that the "Muslim women" narrative does not exist. The identities expressed through these vlogs are rich in their multiplicity of dimensions. Amina, for example, produced eleven vlogs within the period of this research; seven of those related to fashion, makeup and skincare while the remaining four vlogs touched on a diverse range of topics. For example, in the "Ethnicity tag" vlog, Amina spoke to audience about her ethnic background, her family and culture. She discusses in elaborate detail her favourite foods, drink, and the accent her family speaks in, which are all informed by her parents' country of origin. This is an important point to note because Amina reveals that she has never visited her parents's country of origin, but she maintains a strong connection to the culture. In "*MUST SEE** Announcement: they are dying from.." (Amina, 2013). Amina makes a passionate plea for her audience to contribute to a charity for which she is helping to fundraise. In it, she explains the crisis of the community that will be receiving the funds, why she chose to support it and how her audience can safely make their donations. In "What Makes You Beautiful?", she spends over five minutes discussing what beauty means to her. She also problematizes popular notions around beauty and cautions her audience the dangers of accepting media portrayals on the standards of beauty set for both men and women. Within this small sampling of vlogs, Amina effectively disrupts mainstream perceptions about Muslim women. Firstly, she is passionate about and can speak to multiple topics including fashion, philanthropy, problematic notions of beauty and body image. Secondly,

because Amina does not belong to the dominant ethno-religious groups in Canada, her "Ethnicity Tag" video effectively disrupts popular misconceptions that all Muslims are of either Pakistani or Arab descent. Lastly, Amina's fundraising vlog showed that she, like many other Muslim women vloggers, are capable of manipulating social media platforms to serve their need for expression. Not only did she vlog on fashion, makeup and hijabs as does regularly, she also turned to her YouTube audience to bolster her fundraising efforts.

A cursory glance at a handful of YouTube's more popular hijabi vloggers will show that these Muslim women come from a variety of ethno-religious cultural, educational, and professional backgrounds. Among the vloggers who participate in this research, all three expressed their identities as complex hybrids – Lebanese-Canadian, Pakistani-Canadian, Jamaican-Canadian – that are informed by their families' cultures of origin, the cultures they encounter in Canada as well as the global Muslim culture that they encounter via the world wide web. All three firmly identified themselves as Canadian first felt uncomfortable identifying as culturally Lebanese or Pakistani. Even when prodded, Amina refuses to identify with a singular culture which influences her vlogging practices or from which she draws her inspirations;

> I'm not really sure if any other culture really influences me. I think each culture has something unique about it that's really beautiful that most people can benefit from. But I wouldn't say there's a certain one. I grasp my inspiration from everywhere, to be honest. (Amina, interview, May 12, 2014)

The Canadian Muslim vloggers' responses to the question on cultures that influence them illustrate the complex relationship they have with Lebanese, Pakistani or Jamaican culture; although they feel their identities are strongly informed by these cultures, they feel removed from them because they were not born and brought up in Lebanon, Pakistan or Jamaica. The complexity of these women's identities and their feelings towards their families' cultures of

origin disrupt the mainstream narrative about Muslims women; furthermore, vlogging has allowed these granular, individual identities to bubble to the surface of public discourse and reach a wide audience.

Vlogging has allowed Muslim women to resist being lumped into the monolithic category of "Muslim women" and demonstrates their individuality. Each of the vloggers perceives herself as possessing individual qualities that set her apart from the crowd and vlogging allows them to highlight their individuality. "I think I'm really satisfied [with vlogging]," Fatima says, adding "I'm really myself when I'm in front of the camera. So the videos that I post, and what people may think my personality is based on those videos – that's totally who I am," (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014). Amina's nonchalant response shows that she utilizes the tools at her disposal as her perspectives and tastes change over time. More importantly, Amina feels vlogging on YouTube allows her to express her individuality and the different dimensions of her identity; as she became more actively engaged in producing vlogs, she found herself producing more spoken word poetry, one of her favourite ways of expressing her thoughts. She explains, "I feel like that's a great way to get some things off your chest, in a positive way, of course," (Amina, interview, May 12, 2014). Fatima similarly resorted to YouTube in addressing the criticism she received when she started wearing the hijab. As I've discussed earlier, Fatima relates how she sometimes encountered contradictory advice and messages regarding the proper behaviour for a *hijabi*. She was also often told that the way she dressed wasn't in compliance with Islam's standards of modesty. In addressing all the advice and criticism, she found it more effective record her thoughts in video form and broadcasting them via YouTube rather than addressing her critics individually. Although Sarah, as I've previously pointed out, vlogs primarily to promote her business, she similarly uses YouTube to her benefit; she says that one of her biggest

challenges was stage fright, which was hampering her ability to communicate clearly and effectively in front of an audience. Thus, Sarah uses vlogging to hone her public speaking skills: "I found that creating YouTube videos helps with stage fright," she explains, "[the] nervousness and that stage fright that I get, I didn't like that and I wanted to change that. […] and I thought creating Youtube videos would help with my communication and it actually does," (Sarah, interview, May 9, 2014). The vloggers' sense that YouTube vlogging satisfies their need for self expression is evident in Amina's confirmation that "I don't feel like I have any restrictions. It's pretty "open-speech." You can pretty much say whatever you want," (Amina, interview, May 12, 2014). The sense that one can "say whatever you want" amongst the vloggers on YouTube is key in fostering the diversity of narratives among Muslim women who vlog.

They draw their uniqueness from the mix of cultural influences in their backgrounds, their interests and the topics they vlog about. This can be clearly observed from Amina's explanation as to why she isn't a "typical" Muslim woman:

> I'd say I'm very different from most, as you would see. A lot of people, that you would see in the mainstream media, they would be from the Middle East, they would be Arab, they'd be Fijian, Asian, Malaysian, masyaAllah all those things, very different from what I would be. Because my background is not your typical background that most people would guess. (Amina, interview)

Indeed, she is correct in her perception of her uniqueness as a Muslim woman. As this research has earlier demonstrated, the majority of mainstream representation of Muslim women feature those from North African or South Asian descent. Amina's background as a Canadian-Jamaican Muslim is rarely seen or heard about in the mainstream media. The women vloggers also have their own distinct understanding and interpretation of what it means to dress modestly in accordance with Islamic teachings. Although all three women feel the need to cover as Muslim women, how they do so are distinct from one another. As Fatima related earlier, she faced

conflicting advice and criticism with regards to the way she practiced the hijab. After resorting to making YouTube videos to air some of her questions and thoughts regarding Islamic coverings, Fatima seems to have arrived at a place where she feels comfortable wearing the hijab in her own way. As she explains, "I realized that I'm different and I'll wear my clothes and hijab the way I think is ok. As long as I feel that I'm being modest, I felt that, you know, people will just learn to deal with it," (Fatima, interview, May 30, 2014). She no longer feels the need to conform to one particular interpretation of Islamic coverings; rather, she practices dressing modestly according to her comfort level and what she feels Islam requires of her as an individual. In her analysis of Danish Muslim women's sartorial strategies in engaging with the public sphere, Christiansen (2011) made a similar observation about the women's practice of modest dressing; she states that there isn't a clear pattern of a political agenda signalled by the women's clothing because "some women may switch from one to the other strategy or move from a phase in which the distinct Muslim style is emphasized to another in which an ambiguous one is presented," (Christiansen, 2011, p. 340). Indeed, one of Fatima's oft-received criticism from her YouTube viewers was that the turban style of hijab she favours is "not hijab" because it is more similar to the turban worn by Sikh men. This clearly points to the ambiguity and fluidity of Fatima's practice of the hijab, which informs of her individuality as a Muslim woman.

Conclusion

When I first set out to explore the nascent vlogging phenomenon among Muslim women, I was highly optimistic about the Internet and social media platforms' potential as tools for the women's self-expression and liberation from oppressive mainstream narratives. The continued vilification of Muslims by Western mainstream media and the misrepresentation of Muslim women in particular have necessitated new means of expression that is free of anti-Muslim biases. To that effect, personal blogs, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have been particularly effective as the alternative channel through which the often-silenced voices of Muslim women can be heard. These platforms' effectiveness is proven by the popularity of many Muslim women vloggers who command up to hundreds of thousands of fans on their personal YouTube channels. Devoid of adequate representation in print, TV and other broadcast media, these Muslim women vloggers fill a critical void for young Muslim women looking inspiration and a reflection of themselves. The Muslim women vloggers interviewed in this research prove that they are effectively appropriating YouTube to challenge misrepresentations of Muslim women in Western non-Muslim majority countries. Their vlogging practices show that they are both diverse in their backgrounds, interests, and religio-cultural influences. They draw inspiration from a variety of sources besides the Quran and other Islamic sources. They are also highly have highly individual approaches to being a Muslim woman, something that directly contradicts mainstream narratives about muslim women as uniformly oppressed, and about Islam as a monolithic religion. This is most evident in their individual approaches to practicing the hijab, something that is demonstrated in their creative approach to fashion and modesty in their vlogs. Most importantly, the vloggers exhibited a high level of agency in their usage of YouTube to express themselves. They vlog about issues that interest them personally, they utilize other

social media platforms to engage with their audiences and they are adept at tailoring their vlogs according to their audiences' feedback. By and large, vlogging has allowed the Muslim women vloggers I interviewed to challenge common misconceptions about themselves. It was heartening for me as a Muslim woman to observe these positive outcomes that vlogging has had on these women. Nevertheless, having turned a critical eye to this phenomenon, I have also unearthed several observations that deserve attention and criticism.

Although YouTube has afforded Muslim women virtually free reign of the online public sphere, this research shows that the Muslim women's identities that are being expressed through vlogging are strongly circumscribed by consumer culture. A brief look at the more popular vloggers will show that the majority of them vlog about clothes, makeup, and hijabs. Shopping hauls, product reviews and gift swaps between vloggers are one of the most common genres of vlogs. It's useful to note that this trend in vlogging is not unique to Muslim women; the same can be observed of the general vlogging trend on YouTube. Thus, this raises the question, "What is the utility of Muslim women's vlogging if they are merely replicating the general trend in YouTube vlogging?" It is also important to note that only one of the vloggers interviewed for this research strongly reflected this underlying consumer culture in her vlogging practices. Of the two remaining vloggers I interviewed, one vlogs on a variety of topics that interest her besides fashion and makeup, while the other vlogs to promote her business. The microcosm of vloggers I interviewed for this research thus form a fairly diverse representation of motivations and types of vlogging among Muslim women – women who utilize YouTube in ways that truly reflect their individuality, agency, and diversity of thought and identities. This research clearly demonstrates that the Internet in general and YouTube in particular has immense potential as a tool of self-expression for Muslim women. Although the women have made a lot of progress in getting their

voices heard by using these tools, there remains to be ample opportunity for these tools to be used in more effective and robust ways beyond discussing Islamic fashion, hijab, and makeup.

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