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Research paper

Hijabi Fashion Creators in Germany – Between Influencer Marketing and Diverse Digital Activisms

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ABSTRACT

Fashion content on social media might not be the first thing that comes to mind, when thinking about digital activism. Fashion images on the internet are likely to be embedded in influencer-marketing and by that represent and foster the logics of capitalism, which is why, fashion influencers are often perceived as undermining struggles for emancipation and gender equality. Nevertheless, posting fashion content on social media can be understood as a practice of resistance and emancipatory expression. However, it is not one per se, only because actors with marginalized or even stigmatized subject positions are involved and not even, if the creators pursue sociopolitical and normative positions. Based on a discourse ethnography, this article explores, how Muslim fashion images are produced and perceived by differently positioned gazes. The research on hijabi creators in Germany, who specialize in fashion content, including interviews, participant observations of community events and digital ethnography, displays a rather complex mixed-use area, where influencer marketing and emancipatory activism are not clear cut and where hijabi creators, who do engage in empowerment and activist work, do not always identify with feminism at all.

Keywords: hijabi influencer, fashion images, Instagram research, sociology of knowledge approach to discourse, hybrid ethnography

Fashion content on social media might not be the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about digital activism. Fashion images on the internet are likely to be embedded in influencer-marketing and by that represent and foster the logics of capitalism, which is why fashion influencers or digital creators, how they mostly call themselves, are often perceived as undermining struggles for emancipation and gender equality.

Nevertheless, social media has helped change the fashion industry in the last decades fundamentally. In the early 2000´s fashion bloggers, equipped with new digitalized smartphone cameras became an "(…) annoying competition for the established fashion critique" (Weis, 2020). Young people without any formal education in fashion suddenly entered the Inner Circle and sat front row at shows. These new actors embodied new claims to what fashion images should entail. Fashion bloggers and their successors have questioned what is recognized as fashionable (not only high-end designers from the West), have challenged the normativity of who could wear and present fashion (not only the standard sized white models) and have critically pointed out how we appropriate cultural artefacts from marginalized communities as fashionable accessories (cf. Mentges, 2019). "The internet" (Rosenstein, 2016) became a symbol for post colonially informed critique that helped address historic and sociopolitical implications in the fashion industry. By this, among other subaltern subject positions, also Muslim

women have become more visible as agents in fashion than it was the case before the social media era (Abdul Khabeer, 2019).

As the ethnocentric understanding of fashion did not recognize any non-European dressing culture as fashionable on their own account (non-Western dress was always seen as folklore by default) (Entwistle, 2000), Muslim women in Germany have not been perceived as fashion subjects by the mainstream fashion at all. There were no modest fashion brands or collections in any of the big retail companies and labels whatsoever on the German Highstreet. This has changed partly because of the industry´s need for new consumer groups and the impact of the diversity turn that effected a diversity boom with questionable sustainability. But it is also due to the growing diversification of fashion creators.

Still, Muslim women who veil are widely seen as oppressed by the non-Muslim society, even if they explicitly commit to veiling as a deliberate practice and/or if they engage with fashion and social media. Moreover, hijabi creators face additional accusations of breaking Islamic law by presenting their bodies fashionably, even under modest standards. These scrutinizing gazes are not only male (with whatever ethnic or religious background), they are also promoted by so-called white feminists, who understand their own secular world view as universal. This poses not only a lively example for intersectional cleavages (McCall, 2015) but also a substantial problem for the reputation of feminism at large, as I will elaborate in my paper.

Problematizing feminism as a Western concept is a mainstream position in the current hijabi fashion sphere, although it was feminist and intersectional work that made it possible to claim the hijab as artefact of cultural heritage and a deliberate female dressing practice in the first place. As I discuss in my paper, postcolonial and intersectional thought is widespread in the modest fashion discourse and the whole sector genuinely builds on the intersection of embodied identity markers, such as sex and religion (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006).

Against this background, posting fashion content on social media can be understood as a practice of resistance and emancipatory expression. However, it is not one per se, only because actors with marginalized or even stigmatized subject positions are involved and not even, if the creators pursue sociopolitical and normative positions.

Based on a discourse ethnography (Keller, 2019; Möller, 2019), I explore how Muslim fashion images are produced and perceived by differently positioned gazes. My research on hijabi creators in Germany who specialize in fashion content, including interviews, participant observations of community events and digital ethnography, displays a rather complex mixed-use area, where influencer marketing and emancipatory activism are not clear cut and where hijabi creators, who do engage in empowerment and activist work, do not always identify with feminism at all.

I present three creators whose engagement with digital activism differs on the level of visual expression, fashion wise as well as referring to their femininities and religiosities. By that, I seek to present and demonstrate the broad spectrum of subject positions among hijabi creators and therefore prevent the reproduction of an essentialized and homogenized perspective on Muslim women, as it still circulates widely. While the term feminism is not used by any of the women I portray, I will argue in my paper that their accounts can add new insights and nuances to the discourses on intersectional feminism and net-feminism.

METHODOLOGY

I follow the knowledge-sociological debates in discourse analysis (Keller, 2005) and understand subjects as decentralized and contradiction as an inherent feature of postmodern subjectivity (Hall, 1999). Thus, whenever I point out a contradiction in statements of the observed actors, I am not doing this out of scrutiny, but to address the ambiguous ways people find to make sense of their social worlds and their actions.

Researching fashion images involves different types of data that are contextualized with each other. The term fashion image refers to a visual representation of embodied clothing practices, which includes both visual snapshots and textual captions (Weis, 2020). This means that Roland Barthes' separation between worn clothing and written clothing (Barthes, 1985) is neglected through the concept of the fashion image in favour of a comprehensive understanding of verbal and visual expressions (Keller, 2019; Traue, 2013). My contribution also addresses how visual discourses constitute normative subject positions that navigate manifold discursive invocations and is especially interested in reconstructing the processes of subjectification within the discourses on Muslim women in Germany.

I started my digital ethnography by creating an Instagram account using my full name and institutional affiliation and exclusively following accounts that produce content on Muslim fashion in Germany. After a first period of exploring different hashtags and building up a sample of around 80 accounts which I collected through snow-ball techniques and asking my first contacts for other creators, they follow, I started narrowing down the sample by clustering the posted content in situational maps (Clarke, 2012) and sorting out which of the accounts informed my research interest best. Since my focus lied in the mutual discursive production of what was considered fashionable and appropriate for Muslim women in Germany, I chose to further engage with the

accounts of creators, who shared content that addressed Muslim fashion as well as their personal perspectives on everyday life in Germany. Through this theoretical sampling, I chose 15 creators whom I contacted via Instagram to ask them for permission to conduct interviews, participant observations and go-alongs with them.

Eight creators responded to my request and agreed to meet me. When first contacting them, I was as transparent as possible in describing my project aim and the purpose of my data collection. I gave all my informers the possibility to prepare and ask their questions concerning my investigation, before interviews or go-alongs were conducted.

With these eight creators, I had recurrent check-ins and meetings over a period of around six months. During this time, I also saved around 300 posts (most of them came from the 8 creators I had met) that in a broad, grounded-theory-approach added to my reseach interest. These 300 posts were analyzed in a situational analysis (Clarke 2012) and different approaches of discourse analysis (SKAD and Visual Discourse Analysis) (Keller, 2005; Traue, 2013) that structured my understanding of the data at hand and resulted in the framing of the data through the concept of digital activism and the ambiguous positions towards feminism. In the qualitative guided interviews, I conducted with the eight actors, I wanted to find out more about how media self-marketing relates to their everyday dressing practices, religious self-images and private relationships. The interviews primarily serve to classify the digital data from social media, i.e. postings (images/videos and their captions), and to shed light on how mechanisms of action (e.g. algorithms) are interpreted by the actors in social media and what strategies they develop to reach their audience or to deal with different appeals and expectations. Moreover, I have interviewed five other agents of the fashion industry, who do not classify as fashion influencers: among them modest fashion designers, hijabi stylists, and casting directors, who all contributed to my context knowledge of the modest fashion field and the fashion industry at large. The empirical analysis in this paper is based on different types of empirical material: TikTok Videos, Instagram reels, posts, or stories (that are only online for 24 hours), interviews that were recorded and transcribed with the assistance of the transcription software noscribe and finally translated into English by myself, and fieldnotes that I wrote while doing online research.

Of the above mentioned 8 actors that I did in-depth fieldwork and conducted interviews with, I chose three creators Sara, Bahar and Sagede for empirically basing my analysis presented in the article at hand. While all the creators I investigated can be framed in terms of activism and emancipative practices, for the article I chose those where it seemed to be the easiest to present my argumentation line. Moreover, by means of this sample, I seek to present a broad spectrum of Muslim fashion accounts in Germany while at the same time, I am not claiming completeness at all. What I am up to is rather the emphasis of difference within the often-homogeneously presented group of young Muslim women who engage in fashion.

MULTIFACETED APPROACHES TO ACTIVISM IN HIJABI FASHION CONTENT

The global rise of Muslim fashion through postcolonial, feminist and intersectional thought

With the advent of social media, the fashion industry has experienced a profound change, which has an impact on the original fashion image production of the few (Weis, 2020) and permanently shakes it, nevertheless, as I will show by applying the concept of intersectionality, racialized, religionized and ethnicized bodily formations uphold discursive power relations in the fashion industry (Pham, 2015).

Until recently, the monopoly of fashion images was held by a clearly defined fashion elite consisting of fashion designers and the leading fashion magazines and their representatives (Titton, 2010). Social media and street style blogs have changed this so radically since the late 2000s, that blogs have developed into their own mediation authority in fashion alongside print media. The scale of this flux can be compared to the impact of the miniskirt, which is considered a symbol of the class-specific reversal of fashion change (Weis, 2020). The miniskirt emerged as a trend among English schoolgirls who rolled up their school uniform skirt at the waist, thereby creating a fashionable look that designers and consumers eventually copied (Weis, 2020). This exemplifies how actors can shift the meaning of uniforms, traditional costumes and fashionable clothing in the context of spatial, temporal and social boundaries (Ellwanger, 2015; Bendt, 2005). Furthermore, this example reveals the central importance of gender roles for fashion. Also, and above all, the otherwise historically marginalized social position of young women contributed to fashion being seen as their domain (Crane, 2000; König, 1985). But this is accompanied by a double exclusion in cultural studies research: neither was female fashion documented as a subcultural practice in the 'Chronicles of Street Culture' (McRobbie & Garber, 1976), nor was the largely female-connoted fashion consumption seen as meaningful or creative (Weis, 2020; Palmer, 2005). Today, this lack of recognition is still relevant, also because of an ongoing scepticism of fashion and consumption practices, promoted by so called intellectual feminists that oppose feminist accounts, which use mediatized popular visualities as micro-political actions (Kohout, 2020). Kohout describes these mediatized feminist practices in her book on net-feminism as a loose movement that reclaims consumerism and affirmative

femininity as visual practice of resistance and especially uses social media as stage and platform (Kohout, 2020). As I will show, the visual expressions of hijabi creators partly resonate with this particular net-feminist approach.

A central motif of recent fashion research is the deconstruction of the distinction between Western and non-Western fashion systems (Craik, 1994; Rovine, 2009). The ethnicization of non-Western clothing is also criticized with reference to Muslim clothing practices (see Akou, 2007). Undisputedly, the epistemological turn in research leads to an embedding of fashion in the social system of global inequality. The objectification of non-Western fashion artifacts, be it through appropriation or through exoticization, is illuminated as a dichotomization of Western fashion and non-Western clothing cultures (Mentges, 2019). By now, style is understood as an agency that enables the self-empowerment of marginalized subjects through dress related, performative and embodied practices (Tulloch, 2016).

Related to this, the discourse around intersectionality finds its way into cultural-scientific fashion research. Intersectionality as an umbrella term for analysing the interaction of various socially based axes of distinction structurally refers to body-related categories (McCall, 2015). Social, gender, ethnicizing and racializing characteristics are attached to and inscribed on bodies (Crenshaw, 1991). In this context, effective bodyism is still at work in fashion, privileging certain body images over others and making it hard for individuals, who do not conform to those standards to feel good in their skin and clothes (Yaghoobifarah, 2017). This manifests physical determinations of classism, racism, gender constructions or ethnicity in fashion images. As Pham shows in her study on "Asian Superbloggers", even if racialised bodies are becoming successful in the fashion/social media industry, they still maintain "similar material and social positions in fashion´s productive economy as Asian garment workers" (Pham, 2015) and therefore remain on marginalized subject positions. Pham argues that "social media have not so much democratized the fashion industry as they have enabled limited forms of diversification that do not upset (…) the Western fashion industry".

While the concept of intersectionality is criticized for its static logic, it has fostered and connected global debates on feminist thought (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006; Dhawan & Castro Varela, 2023). Regarding fashion practice, intersectionality can be helpful as an approach for investigating the subjectification of conflicting discursive invocations, as fashion is linked to the dominant visual culture within which it takes place and to the bodies that perform it (Craik, 1994). Putting on a headscarf changes the wearer to varying degrees, depending on where she is and what she is identified as. In the context of an unmarked, non-Muslim-looking head, the scarf is seen more as a fashion accessory and less associated with specific social meanings than in the case of a woman socially read as Muslim (Lewis, 2007). Clothing practice is embedded in the knowledge archives of the surrounding social world(s) and closely linked to discursively manifest body images and body techniques (Craik, 1994). Therefore, the emergence of social media actors as „oscillation between individual dress practices and collective fashion narratives" (Titton, 2015; Rocamora, 2017) might be central to address structural issues of the fashion world (Pham, 2015).

The global rise of Muslim fashion through postcolonial, feminist and intersectional thought

To contextualize my case studies and embed the theoretical discussion above in the framework of fashion studies, I will sketch a short overview on the emergence of modest fashion: while the term was controversial until a few years ago because it referred to a pietistic interpretation of Islam, Lewis now describes it as having a majority and being "fully monetized" for the Anglo-American region (Lewis, 2019). Lewis sees modest fashion as a transreligious movement that not only mobilizes Muslim women but also meets a universal need for covering clothing and freedom of fashion choice. In the mid-2000s, the magazine Fashion Theory published a special issue on "Muslim fashion practices" (Moors & Tarlo, 2007), in which the heterogeneity of Muslim clothing and veiling practices is discussed. This heterogeneity is expressed, among other things, regarding the different national and regional contexts in which not only different clothing regulations prevail but also the same type of veiling can communicate a variety of meanings and symbols (Moors & Tarlo, 2007). There is a wide range of literature about specific regional developments in fashion images of and for Muslim women, which often have transnational references (Abaza, 2007; Dasgupta & Alimen, 2024). In addition to the literature on Muslim fashion in the Islamic world, there is a corpus on contexts in which Muslims are in the minority, which primarily documents the negotiations of post-migrant Muslim fashion (Tarlo, 2010). Differences in the national contexts emerge here, which point to historical path dependencies and colonial histories (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017). Some of the studies deal specifically with the question of the interactions between Muslim clothing and Western gaze practices (Lewis, 2019). Some studies pursue an intersectional approach (Abdul Khabeer, 2019) and address the possibility of self-empowerment and re-appropriation of circulating stigmas against Muslim(s) and, above all, veiled women through fashionable clothing practices (Tarlo, 2010; Moors, 2007; Moors & Tarlo, 2007). In addition to paying particular attention to the urban context (Dasgupta & Alimen, 2024; Fournier, 2012; Lewis, 2007; Tarlo, 2010, Siraj, 2011; Bendixsen, 2013), recent cultural studies of fashion practice primarily refer to social media or other digital information communication technologies (Abdul Khabeer, 2019; Yaqin, 2007).

Moreover, there are studies that deal with practices of unveiling (Lewis, 2015) and fashion as means for making and unmaking community (Dasgupta & Alimen, 2024). While the research on Muslim Fashion influencers in Western Europe is still limited, there is the work of Malli (2024), where he investigates Muslim influencers to problematize the limited subject positions of Muslim women.

All mentioned research points out important developments that have built the foundation for the role, hijabi creators play by now. This short overview was supposed to lay out the cultural context, in which my investigation takes place. Another important building line for this article is the development of debates on integration and "Leitkultur" in Germany, by which Muslim women became the targets of white feminism.

The global rise of Muslim fashion through postcolonial, feminist and intersectional thought

As (white) feminism is often used as negative blueprint or demarcation line by the women in my empirical sample, I will provide a short and selective overview of the political actors and circumstances that have contributed to this opposition.

Feminism in Germany was coined by one name over many years: Alice Schwarzer. The journalist and editor of the journal "Emma" is known for her decade long commitment for women´s rights, but more recently she attracted the attention of the German public by generally critiquing Islam and condemning the hijab as symbol for religious oppression. By this, Schwarzer has become a symbol herself, representing white feminism, a term coined to emphasize the lack of intersectional perspectives in certain feminist discourses (Dudley, 2022). White feminism is understood as centring Western perspectives on secularization, enlightenment, and gender roles as universal while making invisible the epistemic violence carried out by white women towards women of colour or other marginalized subject positions. Therefore, it is also called non-intersectional feminism as it does not acknowledge intersectional power hierarchies among women, but on the contrary, reinforces their own values and motives on others. Referring to modest fashion, one example for this self-inflation was a protest on the exhibition on "Contemporary Muslim Fashions" in Frankfurt. The exhibition presented global modest fashion looks and was initially shown in San Francisco. In Germany, this was the first time modest fashion was an integral and central part of a museum show with national public attention. The protest of the show, led by a group called "Migrants for Secularity and Self-Determination (in German: Migrantinnen für Säkularität und Selbstbestimmung)" was platformed by the magazine "Emma" and Alice Schwarzer herself (Emma, 2019).

The initiatives of Alice Schwarzer are still - 5 years later - referenced in the mediatized discourses and comments on the topic. One quote from a TV show on diversity and fashion is hitting this point quite accurately: Isi, a Berlin-based hijabi stylist puts it like that:

> *If a hijabi, especially here in Germany states, she is wearing the hijab self-determinedly, that she likes to wear the headscarf, I do not want to hear from a white woman, who did not engage with this topic at all, that this is oppression. And her struggle then, is not my struggle. And I think, many have not understood this yet, that feminism does not apply for all women. Especially not for POC. (ARD 2024, translation Laura Haddad)*

This statement clearly shows, how the understanding of feminism is bound to a very limited, narrow part of the concept and to a certain group of older white women, who are not seen as allies and therefore miscredit the whole project of fighting for women´s rights. Although, historically, feminism is not at all a Western concept (Butalia, 2023), the German context and its key figures like Alice Schwarzer have damaged the reputation of feminism among young Muslim women in Germany. This is also informed by debates on a German "Leitkultur" that has been strongly pushed by right wing politicians after 9/11 (Landman, 2005). The discourse on integration and "Leitkultur" has instrumentalized the veil as main scapegoat and therefore stigmatized veiled women at large. Political initiatives, supported by feminists like Alice Schwarzer, even tried to envoke a general hijab ban for schoolteachers in Germany (Kandel, 2004). By that, until today, Feminism occurs to conflict with postcolonial, intersectional thought that validates experiences of discrimination, racism and oppression. Feminism and intersectionality appear to be mutually exclusive, although it must be said that feminist intersectional thought globally is at its peak and does influence a lot of discourses and ultimately effects change to the better for many women (Butalia, 2023). Nevertheless, in the German modest fashion bubble, this is not yet recognized. Creators, who did use the term feminism recently, rather casually referred to it without theoretic or political understanding and knowledge of the state of the art. One example for this, is a creator, who randomly praised – referring to the ban for women to pray and fast, when they are menstruating – 'how feminist our religion is' in a TikTok Video (Fieldnotes,1 April 2024). She was hit by a two folded shitstorm for this statement: the Islam-critic-section in her comments argued that calling Islam a feminist religion could only be meant ironically or sarcastically. The other, feminism-critic section held against it that feminism was a Western/white concept that globally colonized women with their one-sided values. Thus, in another video, the creator distanced herself from her previous statement and publicly decided to not use the term feminism anymore.

CASE STUDIES AND DISCUSSION

Hijabi fashion creators often produce also non-fashion content that widely circulates around religious, spiritual and self-help themes, implicitly or explicitly negotiating questions of femininity and subjectivity in the late modern society. Some of them perform unproblematized understandings of gender roles in Islam. "You look so feminine!" is a common, often used compliment in the comment section that creators proudly repost. This illustrates a widely unpolitical stance on gender roles, which is not unusual for the field. Nevertheless, the data shows to be ambiguous about femininity and is full of examples for problematized body standards, self-doubt and the situative emancipation of these agonizing motives. Thus, although a feminist/activist approach often renders implicit in the data, the subject positions of the women, I observe are affected by reflections on gender roles in a crucial way.

Figure 1
Bahar in the woods

Source: July 2024. ©Bahar

Bahar has more than 300 000 followers on Instagram and works full-time as content creator already in her fourth year. During my research, her style and attitude has changed strongly, resuming after her umrah to Mekka and Medina. When I discovered Bahar´s account in early summer 2023, she mainly posted outfits wearing streetwear brands, sneakers, baggy pants and caps or other accessories over her hijab. Bahar has become one of the first hijabi creators in Germany who was included into major fashion campaigns and has been featured as a model by mainstream retailers seeking a more diverse image. In the first interview I conducted with her (before her umrah), she assumes she only has been featured so much because her hijab was hidden under a lot of accessories and a street-stylish look that integrated well into the German/Western fashion mainstream. Respectively, her shift away from a more accepted street wear style (wearing baggy pants, sneakers and hoodies) towards the full modest gear, wearing long skirts, wide dresses, abayas and less make-up (see Figure 1) is framed by an emancipatory narrative, stating that the Western beauty standards have had prevent her from dressing properly, like a faithful Muslim woman. In an Instagram story from February 2024, two months after her Umrah, she told her community, how she enjoys going out visibly dressed in Muslim gear without being afraid of the public reactions. In this story, it becomes very clear that she refers to a hostile majority society and a lack of self-confidence as reasons for not dressing as modestly in the past. This argumentation line functions as empowerment narrative, that now with her new religious standing Bahar can stand above the mainstream gaze and rises to a higher spiritual self. In the interview after her umrah, she frames her development a little differently: here she discloses her inclination for being extra and never wanting to be an ordinary girl, which was allegedly the reason for her extravagant styling. Now, she was condemning herself for this personality trait. Seeking attention has been exchanged for the joy of not receiving attention, as she put it. To achieve this new goal, she started wearing more conservative, more traditionally feminine looks that also changed her attitude, as she states in the interview. While the streetstyle/masculine looks made her feel arrogant, "(…) dressing like a woman also makes me acting more polite and modest." (Interview 18 January 2024). Yet, at the same time, she

states that she interprets her old/former style as a way of people-pleasing, trying to fit in with society. This ambiguous positioning in the world is evened out by her conclusion: "I do not want to please society anymore, but only please my creator." This sentence ultimately resolves the struggles for societal recognition, personal expression, assimilation and being recognized in the fashion world. But despite this seemingly firm decision, Bahar repeatedly posts about her struggle of being tested and challenged in her modesty. This is illustrated by various examples, one of them refers to wearing makeup: Bahar started hiding her face on pictures, when she was wearing makeup - to not be a bad role model for her followers. But avoiding makeup generally, she admits, she does not dare to. Going out without makeup has been a huge challenge for her. This has changed eventually and today (in July 2024), she is posting mostly no-makeup-looks. The makeup dilemma has been transitioned into discourses on natural beautifier (like eyelash curler and skincare), which is regarded halal. But the struggle with beauty standards seem to remain the same.

In a Q&A which is a format to connect with followers Bahar responded to questions about her style transition ("How did you transition styles and became more modest?"), that she stopped buying Western clothes as well as trying to distance herself from Western beauty standards by unfollowing influencers who promote non-modest style. By this, Bahar reproduces both, the dichotomy between Muslim and Western style and the Western beauty standards itself, as is shown in the next quote:

I sat down (...) played with my hijabs see which style suited me most and to see which I feel most confident in. (...) Once I figured out which styles, colors & materials suited my face best, I started to feel confident in it and love wearing it sm (so much) now. (Story on Instagram, 15 February 2024).

The connection of confidence through self-expression and self-leading is a typical element of postmodern feminist empowerment (Kohout, 2020).

Figure 2

Sagede travelling to the U.S. November 2024 ©Sagede

Sagede is a part-time influencer with around 31000 followers on Instagram, which is not unusual for my sample. Next to her work as content creator, she studies Social Work at a German university. She is married and lives with her husband in a medium-sized German city several hundred kilometres away from her parents and brothers. Initially, she put on the headscarf as a provocative action towards her grandmother, as she told me during our second meeting. Her grandmother had tried to prevent Sagede from dressing too visible, as this was not seen adequate for girls. She even forbid her grandchild to wear light colours because it did not suit girls to do that. All these rules only had the opposite effect, as Sagede decided to break every single one of them. Sagede remembers to be harassed and discriminated for wearing the hijab on a regular basis. Once, she even got pushed on the rail tracks by a stranger insulting her for wearing the headscarf. Sagede emphasizes the strength and even resilience she developed from experiences like this. When she told me the story, she was smiling and light-hearted. In her posts, this is a common motive too. She often uses the Instagram-story function to tell her everyday experiences of discrimination, however always with a superior smile on her face, as to say: they can´t defeat me. In the interview, Sagede also stressed her observation of being treated better when dressed up. She could tell that her rather newly acquired elegant look (see Figure 2) led to a tangible shift in the perception of others. People (also Germans) would hold the door for her and talk to her politely. Wearing sweatpants and hoodies when going to the gym she would not witness such things. Sagede´s activism is multifaceted and

complex. Neither would she organize in a mosque community, nor would she identify as a feminist, as this would present too much of a container, although she clearly stands for equal rights between men and women. Her case also illustrates very well the misleading consequences of equating outer appearance/formal living conditions and inner positioning and attitudes (Moors & Tarlo, 2007). While Sagede comes across elegant, rather assimilated young woman who has married early and gets trained in a typically female dominated profession, she could be mistaken for a conservative woman. Her mostly improvised and spontaneously seeming video posts on her daily outfits speak a different language. My personal impression from the co-present meetings we had enforced this different perspective. Sagede performed as a self-confident, hard-boiled person who does not let anyone dictate her ways or even intimidate her. When I addressed this impression, she reflected on her experiences as a teenager and young woman, being discriminated by institutions and individuals and, maybe equally important, being alienated by her parents, especially her mother, who was bringing up her children in an authoritative and strict manner. When talking about the relationship to her mother, she stresses the fact that she has grown away from her and became her own compass. In a post on Mother´s Day, Sagede publicly reflects on her relationship:

I grew up with a migrant mother, culturally strict broad up. (She) will never accept that I go my own way. 'Ayip' and 'What shall the people think' is like a wedge between us. There is no Mother's day Post about our feelings. But one to all daughters, who feel the same way about their mothers and still love them, because they did not know better. You are not alone with this. (translation Laura Haddad) (Instagram Story 12 May 2024).

This post has several layers. Sagede addresses her own feelings towards her mother, which are described as ambiguous: despite her mother's non-approval of her daughter's lifestyle, Sagede states to love her mother anyway. So, this difficult mother-daughter relationship is quite the anti-post to all the affirmative, overly positive Mother's Day statements one finds on social media. In this regard, Sagede dares to publish unpopular content and can be seen as activist against a certain toxic positivity. But there is another layer to the message, which is illustrated in the statement's last sentence: "You are not alone with this." Sagede recurs to her followers as a community, knowing that her stance will resonate to at least some users. "You are not alone with this" is also an empowered statement, shifting the focus away from herself as a victim but creating a community of like-minded women, who find strength in their shared experiences, even or especially when they are irksome. Her motivation for posting on social media is described by her in a twofold logic: she began doing it for fun and as joyful practice of resistance, similarly to the decision of putting on the headscarf. But later, she realized that she could function as role model for her followers and even for the non-Muslim public, representing and publicly performing the self-determined hijabi, who's subject position lacked in the discourse (Interview 8 February 2024).

Figure 3

Sara in her hometown, April 2024 ©Sara

Sara is not a professional creator as she does not make a living out of content marketing and her range is rather limited in comparison to the two other creators, presented here (about 1200 followers). Every now and then, she has a cooperation with small brands and local retailers, but mainly she posts fashion content without corporate support. In the interview I conducted with her, she speaks about her goal to work in the fashion industry as a stylist – and not as influencer, because of the ethical pitfall that comes with content creation and influencer-marketing. At the time we speak, she is enrolled for a Social Science Master studies program in a large German city. Asked for her hijab journey, Sara tells me she started wearing the hijab only three years ago – during Corona and in the beginning of her twenties (Interview 22 February 2024). As all my interviewees, also Sara frames her decision and the actual process of putting on the hijab as emancipatory practice that empowered her. This is also because of her worries before the hijab would make her face look round and she would not feel attractive wearing it. This is a regularly expressed concern that bases on the dominant beauty standards obliged on women and once again shows that despite, the attempt of distancing oneself from so-called Western beauty standards, they still have effectiveness (Yaghoobifarah, 2017). Sara remembers the start of actively posting on Instagram as connected to her insecurities about her outer appearance. In 2014/15, when she started using Instagram actively, many uploaded pictures were overexposed with a blue filter that made all blemishes disappear. This social media trend encouraged Sara to post pictures of herself (Interview 22 February 2024). By this, social media can be seen as a place to express oneself and become creative with one's body. The self-presentation on social media can therefore be empowering by being less direct and extensive than in co-physical encounters. Not only Sara, but also other women in my sample find joy in the possibility of choice provided by social media. Among the women in my sample, it is an ongoing controversial discourse whether practices of beautifying their natural appearance are halal or not. Sara does put on makeup and wears mostly wide street style that she considers perfectly fine in terms of modesty (see Figure 3). This stands in sharp contrast to Bahar, who condemns her former masculine streetstyle, as I sketched above. Sara also combines traditional clothes from her parents' homeland or abayas, and often her hijab is bonded in the back of her neck. In contrast to the other two creators portrayed here, Sara's mother does not wear the hijab, thus her decision putting it on is even more an individual choice, she made for herself, which she is proud of.

When I asked Sara if she would use the label of feminist or net-feminist for herself, she clearly refused this. As a Muslim woman, she said she would not identify with feminism as this was a Western/white concept and its pillars would not apply for her (Fieldnotes 22 February 2024). By this, she opposed feminism not only on a knowledge-genealogical level (it comes from white women, who do not understand the struggle of oppressed people), but also on the level of conceptual thought. Sara emphasizes the empirical pitfalls of feminism, as overburdening women with ambiguous role expectations (e.g. being a mother and having a career). By this, the anti-feminist approach is framed as postcolonial critique of Western living conditions. Feminism is understood by Sara as neoliberal practice of self-optimizing without effectively providing justice.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have argued that being a hijabi creator neither automatically circumvent the possibility of (feminist) activism, nor does it guarantee such engagement. As the discussion on the genealogy of modest fashion and its connection to postcolonial and intersectional thought has shown, the emergence of Muslim fashion influencers is deeply intertwined with practices of resistance and alternative representations that are informed by digital activists (Titton, 2015; Rocamora, 2017).

In the empirical analysis, I showed, how the creators maintain different gender expectations and images of how to be a good Muslim woman. This is for example true for the interpretation of wearing male clothes/streetwear. While Bahar is condemning her former affinity to Hip Hop-affiliated gear for being too extravagant for a modest woman, Sara explicitly qualifies her streetstyle as perfectly modest. Sagede is finding pride and resistance in dressing elegantly and somewhat old-fashioned as this vintage-style enables a different recognition by the German public. Thus, all three creators portrayed here position themselves and their styles in connection to being publicly perceived, but they draw different conclusions from this and, hence, make each differently subjective sense from being a hijabi creator in Germany. This variety resonates with findings of other studies on Muslim dressing practices and female self-empowerment that I discussed above (Moors & Tarlo, 2007; Tarlo, 2013). While their digital activism looks different, too, all three do engage with social media on a deep personal level. In fact, this personal approach could be named as the characteristic, binding all three cases together. As young women wearing the hijab, their appearances are politicized anyway – claiming and reappropriating the politization of the personal has always been a feminist practice and one that can be connected to fashion (Kohout, 2020; Tulloch, 2016). Platforming and mediatizing personal struggles (with gender roles, mother-daughter relations and beauty standards) is a contemporary way of digital activism that can provide more recognition for alternative, marginalized positions. Moreover, by engaging with social media, their identities and political stances evolve. If activism is understood as promoting or resisting certain public discourses for personal normative reasons, the influencers I portrayed here fulfil the task. As a matter of fact, hijabi creators often ally with non-veiled Muslim women in requesting the freedom of choice, which might be considered one of the central motifs of female liberation struggles. Also, the ambiguous ways hijabi creators engage with beauty standards and navigate through different normative invocations to perform and look refer to intersectional layers and net-feminist practices: the creators respond to different lookisms (religious and secular beauty standards) that partly contradict each other and find subjective approaches to deal with them, what recurs to the emancipatory practices laid out by intersectional thought (Abdul Khabeer, 2019; Yaghoobifarah, 2017). Moreover, the creators reclaim their bodies (Thimm 2021) by appropriating and creating visual expressions on their own. Especially Sagede's and Bahar's imageries could also be understood through the frame of net-feminism (Kohout, 2020) that is characterized by girly and hyper-feminine expressions, centring female gazes and escaping feminism´s overly intellectuality. The playful visualities of net-feminist artists could provide a bridge to critics of feminism that many Hijabi creators are. Acknowledging these different, sometimes ambiguous emancipatory positions could enable a more encompassing female liberation movement.

My research was limited to hijabi fashion creators, who avoid or oppose the explicit concept of feminism. It is important to state that there are female Muslim activists organizing on social media, who do not oppose the term as strictly as that (Mahra, 2023). For further investigations, it could be relevant to incorporate other mediatized Muslim perspectives into the discussion.

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Ethical statement

N/A

Competing interests

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Data availability

For data inquiry, please contact author.

AI disclosure

AI has only been used for the transcription of the interview audio files for a first draft (noscribe) and has later been checked and revised by the author.

Biographical sketch

Dr. Laura Haddad is a sociologist at the institute for sociology, Georg-August-university Goettingen in Germany and holds a PhD in cultural geography from the university of Osnabrueck in Germany. Her research fields focus on ethnographic research, practice theory, fashion studies, Islam in everyday life and qualitative social media research. With her current project, she is elaborating on experimental/speculative approaches of visual discourse analysis.

Disclaimer/Publisher's note

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Apendix

Empirical Resources in order of appearance in the text:

Fieldnotes,1 April 2024

Bahar

Figure 1. Bahar in the woods. July 2024. ©Bahar

Interview 18 January 2024

Story on Instagram, 15 February 2024

Sagede

Figure 2. Sagede travelling to the U.S. November 2024 ©Sagede

Instagram Story 12 May 2024

Interview 8 February 2024

Sara

Figure 3. Sara in her hometown, April 2024 ©Sara
Interview 22 February 2024
Fieldnotes, 22 February 2024