

## Faces of Contemporary Islam With Perfect Make-Up

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Muslim influencing is an important phenomenon of contemporary Islam.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, it is an invisible phenomenon in scholarly research on Islam.<sup>2</sup> The term influencer has become a buzzword for all people who are active online. In Islamic terms,<sup>3</sup> every person who formerly would have called his or her activity *da'wa* now claims to be an influencer. However, this exploratory study focuses on Muslim fashion, make-up, and lifestyle influencers, enabling new insights into the self-perception of young female Muslims in a specific part of the world (see below), This study does not focus on female Muslim *da'wa* since the accounts analyzed only have an implicit *da'wa* approach by simply being Muslim. The configuration of the field of influencers is much more complex than the mere focus on *da'wa* would suggest.<sup>4</sup>

The paradigmatic platform for influencers has been *Instagram*<sup>5</sup> for some time, although other platforms are also used. Since this is not the place to discuss the intricacies of using *Instagram* for

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<sup>1</sup>For a preliminary survey of this phenomenon with a focus on Europe, cf. Lohlker 2021.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Ithnin et al. (2020) and Lohlker (2021); with a specific focus on Qatari, Emirati, and Saudi users and their engagement with influencers, cf. Hindi (2000) and the survey on *Media Use in the Middle East* by Northwestern University in Qatar (Northwestern 2019).

<sup>3</sup>We are not looking at the phenomenon discussed here in a normative way (cf. Ahmad 2017 for this approach).

<sup>4</sup>Nevertheless, a *da'wa*-focused approach will shed more light on specific aspects of this field (cf. Nisa 2018).

<sup>5</sup>The emerging role of *TikTok* is not discussed here due to reasons of space.

the presentation of influencers, *Instagram* will be understood as a specific universe of goods, services, and presentation primarily used for commercial purposes.<sup>6</sup> One such purpose has become the presentation of influencers.

Influencing started as part of contemporary youth culture online. Muslim influencers are part of the generation of young Muslims worldwide, called Generation M<sup>7</sup> by one survey published by Janmohamed.

“This book is not about me, but rather about Generation M. Imagine this book as a conversation, a series of intimate moments with young Muslims from around the world, drinking lattes on the pavement at midnight in Jakarta, or smoking shisha on London’s Edgware Road on a balmy summer’s evening. Some are at photo shoots in trendy Istanbul, styling a model in a headscarf posing in front of a fountain. Another is doing a stand-up comedy gig in her Indonesian hometown. Join them as they shop for Ramadan clothes in Dubai at DKNY or indulge in rare halal treats at a night market in California.

Their enthusiasm and gusto for life are infectious. Conversations about love, sex and shopping are as full of passion as those about pilgrimage, prayer and hijabs. There’s humour: if your son is called Jihad, don’t lose him at the airport – you won’t be able to call out for him. But there’s also intense seriousness, debate and self-reflection [...] What we discovered was a group of young Muslims bound together by a core underlying worldview: that their faith and modernity go hand in hand. Their faith affects absolutely everything they do, and they believe it can make modernity better. Equally, they are fully immersed in modern life and harness its benefits for both individual and communal good, as well as improving their faith.”<sup>8</sup>

There are young Muslims who may not fit into this idea of people inspired by faith, but for our analysis we will focus on this group.<sup>9</sup>

Generally speaking, we could talk about politics of belonging of young Muslims.<sup>10</sup> Some of the aspects of the phenomena that we are studying may pertain to the institutional diffuse<sup>11</sup> aspect of the practices of everyday life<sup>12</sup> of Muslim influencers. The diffusivity of the practice of the Muslim influencers that we are studying is guided by a sense of Islamic spirituality, a kind of implicit theology. Following Nancy Ammerman, we may say that:

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<sup>6</sup>Cf. Gunkel (2018).

<sup>7</sup>The lengthy quotation is taken from the book of a Muslim female author to lend a voice to Generation M members and avoid an old white man talking for young Muslims. This may be a way of participative observation by the author of this text.

<sup>8</sup>Janmohamed (2016: 16).

<sup>9</sup>This remark is necessary to avoid the temptation of creating a reified “Generation M” whereas this generation emerged from research for an international branding and marketing company trying to identify new audiences for its products.

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Yuval-Davis (2011), but we may assume that in most of our cases there is no *politics* in the sense of Yuval-Davis.

<sup>11</sup>Obviously referring to Thomas Luckmann’s *The Invisible Religion*.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. the contributions in Ammerman (2006).

“spiritual practices were neither utterly individual nor strictly defined by collective tradition. There is a strong relationship between participation in religious communities and engaging in spiritual practices in everyday life; spiritual community and spiritual practice are in a dynamic relationship with each other. Within every tradition, there are people who are more and less active in pursuing everyday spirituality and more and less inventive in that pursuit. People draw on practices that they learn about from others, both inside and outside traditional religious communities; and occasionally they come up with something genuinely new (meditative mountain biking comes to mind).”<sup>13</sup>

The genuinely new phenomenon we will study is, e.g. the role of make-up, fashion and lifestyle in contemporary Muslim identities and the ways in which a Muslim may define her place in global beauty, i.e. at least among many Muslims influencers. Especially in Western Europe or North America there *is* a strong feeling of the need for politics of belonging in the context of BIPOC narratives.<sup>14</sup> However, should we indeed universalize this need? Taking our (non-European) case studies as an approach to provincializing the Europeans or North Americans – and the regions affiliated to them – we may dare to say that there is no general Muslim politics of belonging. The creation of a global Muslim space may be happening, but it easily lends itself to the creation of a *homogenous* global Muslim space. We are witnessing another dimension of influencing, engaging with practices that:

“offer an articulation of how creative and professional platforms are used to disrupt and reconfigure symbolic and material spaces, roles and identities imposed by conservative Islamic and Western-liberal thinking on Muslimness, womanhood and labour. It suggests how patriarchal structures that impact opportunities in non-Muslim and Muslim states are being re-negotiated across public-private space. Existing technology and creative methods are operationalised [...] to garner visibility and discourse on the power and influence of Muslim women in a performance of equality.”<sup>15</sup>

One of these forms of garnering visibility and forming alternative spaces of belonging<sup>16</sup> is influencing. Talking about Muslim fashion influencers leads to a context called modest fashion. What is meant by this term?

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<sup>13</sup> Ammerman (2014: 290).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Lohlker (2021).

<sup>15</sup> Warren (2018: 118).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. (219).

## Modest fashion

In a recent volume on modest fashion, it is stated that looking at phenomena like *hijab* or religious dress is not new, although looking at them from a perspective combining religion and fashion is quite novel beyond fashion studies and often ignored by studies on modern religion.<sup>17</sup> Woodhead writes:

“The fact that fashion is so marginal to historic, authorised and ‘orthodox’ forms of religion is precisely why it offers such a good sight-line into an area of new religious vitality. We as scholars may not have appreciated that fashion and religion can mix, but the research which this book presents leaves little doubt that fashion choices are central to the religious lives of many people.”<sup>18</sup>

Hence, our study will demonstrate – again – that women play an active role in religion and fashion. This may be caused by fashion and religion being a field<sup>19</sup> with a low profile, allowing for better access for women. Whereas ‘real’ religion is dominated by men (and a smaller number of women), fashion and religion are preserved for women who are able to act on their own right. As Woodhead says:

“Of course, a major reason for women’s high profile in both fashion and contemporary religion is that these are – or, in the case of religion in the West, have become – areas of low prestige. This is both cause and effect of the way in which these spheres are often trivialised or ignored. However, it also turns them into spheres where women can act autonomously and creatively, outside of male control and as leaders in their own right. By paying attention to the margins rather than the centre, research such as this turns power relations upside down and, by shifting the dominant gaze, allows us to see what otherwise falls below the scholarly horizon.”<sup>20</sup>

Muslim influencers and their role in fashion and lifestyle can be analyzed as an example of non-Western fashion styles, criticizing the existence of their microcultures, cultures, and macrocultures with the idea of one global fashion system.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the activities of Muslim influencers may be read as a global movement of empowerment of especially women in the industry and beyond.

This study will not focus on *hijab* and other – too – often discussed issues. However, a few remarks will be needed. The recent discussion on *hijab* is often inspired by the experiences like the

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<sup>17</sup>Woodhead (2013: XVII).

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>We are referring to the field theory of Bourdieu understanding as a field of contestation on symbolic capital.

<sup>20</sup>Woodhead (2013: XVIII).

<sup>21</sup>cf. Akou (2007).

experience of colonized Algerian women resisting French colonialism and claiming a cultural identity that colonialism tries to let it disappear.<sup>22</sup> The concept of *hijab* as a symbol of resistance has subsequently been haunting many discussions. The female Muslim influencers discussed here are transforming *hijab* to a kind of symbol of non-political day-to-day religion.<sup>23</sup> The *hijab* they are wearing is sometimes perceived as a fashion statement.<sup>24</sup>

Since the discussion on Muslim influencers should avoid the usual focus on Europe,<sup>25</sup> North America, the Arab, Turkish, or Iranian worlds, this article describes the situation in South-East Asia, highlighting a region in which a large number of Muslims live today. Hence, an attempt to offer insights into any aspect of contemporary Islam<sup>26</sup> leaving this important part of the Muslim world aside means re-colonializing the Islamic world by the European gaze at Muslims.

## Beauty Industry

An interview may provide some insights into a Muslim woman's views on the beauty industry.<sup>27</sup> Salwa Rahman is a make-up artist.

“Salwa Rahman refers to herself as a “self-love consultant” that happens to have a knack of doing makeup. While she’s incredibly talented at drawing graphic eyeliners and a statement, outlined lip — just take a glimpse at her artful Instagram account and you’ll agree — the London-based creative isn’t one to utilize makeup for conventional reasons of beautifying one’s appearance. “[The] ideas of beauty and what is deemed as ugly are actually interchangeable and, well, ugly is beautiful, too,” Rahman tells us. Her style of makeup, often playing with unexpected shapes, textures and color combinations, is highly experimental and truly delightful to look at.

Beauty can sometimes be dismissed as a superficial matter, but with someone like Rahman, who understands that beauty is really what you make of it, the topic can inspire a stimulating conversation. Besides sharing her go-to cosmetic products, she also touches upon how her relationship with makeup has changed over the years, as well as why it is important for the beauty industry to be more inclusive of Muslim women in our interview [...].”<sup>28</sup>

<sup>22</sup>Evidently I am referring to *L'Algérie se dévoile* of Frantz Fanon (2017). Here we will not discuss the problematic gender conceptions of Fanon (cf. Wolter 2001).

<sup>23</sup>Part of this dimension of modest fashion is women taking off the *hijab* and e.g. the wig (for Jewish women) (cf. Lewis 2015).

<sup>24</sup>“Statement” does not mean a political statement but in terms of fashion it is a distinctive part of the presentation of the fashion style of the influencer.

<sup>25</sup>The author has recently finished an article covering European Muslim influencers.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Ahmed (2016).

<sup>27</sup>The Muslim modest fashion and beauty industry is not free from size and race inequities (cf. Lewis 2019).

<sup>28</sup><https://hypebae.com/2019/3/salwa-rahman-urgalsal-make-up-skincare-beauty-muslim-women-representation-interview> (retrieved February 1, 2021).

The Muslim beauty industry is part of a larger fashion and lifestyle non-Western industry. Let us turn to some case studies.

## Singapore

Nur Fatiin is a Singapore-based blogger writing about fashion, lifestyle, traveling<sup>29</sup> (e.g. Italy and Indonesia), etc. Her blog called *inmyshawls* offers *hijab* tutorials, posts on food, travels, beauty, and others.<sup>30</sup> She writes: “Just so you know, that piece of cloth on my head doesn’t stop me from being fabulous.”<sup>31</sup> Other parts of her network are *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Twitter* and *Instagram*.

On *Facebook*, she has 2,590 likes and 2,620 subscribers,<sup>32</sup> while her *YouTube* channel<sup>33</sup> has 935 subscribers. The videos that she presents are on cosmetics, make-up, and *hijab* tutorials. Her number of followers on *Twitter* is moderate, with four.<sup>34</sup>

The main platform used by Nur Fatiin is *Instagram*.

Dalilah Ismail is a Singapore-based fashion blogger. She not only blogs<sup>35</sup> about fashion, but also travel, food, family and friends. Featuring a trip around Australia, she (and her husband) traveled to New Zealand, Indonesia, Thailand, Spain, Vietnam, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom. The blog presents many fashion styles while lifestyle posts are also to be found, e.g. a post on the Singapore Modest Fashion Week 2017 presenting women without *hijab*. The blog started in 2012 as an early blog in this field, while the last post dates from 2017.

Having evidently left *tumblr*, Ismail presents herself on *Instagram*, *Pinterest*, and *Twitter*. Her *Twitter* account<sup>36</sup> seems to be inactive at present, with the most recent tweet dated from May 24, 2017. The tweets link to the *Instagram* account of Ismail. On *Pinterest*, she has a small number of followers, namely 103.<sup>37</sup> This platform seems to provide fashion and lifestyle ideas much more than presenting these ideas herself. Ismail evidently transferred her activities to *Instagram*.<sup>38</sup> She

<sup>29</sup>Traveling is an important aspect of the online presence of Muslim influencers. Supporting female Muslim travel is an important aspect of this part of influencing (Oktadiana/Pearce/Li 2020).

<sup>30</sup><http://www.inmyshawls.com/> (retrieved February 1, 2021).

<sup>31</sup>[http://www.inmyshawls.com/p/about\\_9.html](http://www.inmyshawls.com/p/about_9.html) (retrieved February 1, 2021).

<sup>32</sup><https://www.facebook.com/inmyshawls> (retrieved February 1, 2021).

<sup>33</sup><https://www.youtube.com/user/inmyshawls/videos> (retrieved February 1, 2021).

<sup>34</sup><https://twitter.com/inmyshawls> (retrieved February 1, 2021).

<sup>35</sup><https://aveilofmodesty.com/> (retrieved February 2, 2021).

<sup>36</sup><https://twitter.com/dalillahismail> (retrieved February 1, 2021).

<sup>37</sup>By date of February 1, 2021; [https://www.pinterest.nz/nurdalillah/\\_saved/](https://www.pinterest.nz/nurdalillah/_saved/) (retrieved February 1, 2021).

<sup>38</sup><https://www.instagram.com/nurfatiin/> (retrieved February 2, 2021).

has around 16,000 subscribers and around 2,000 posts. The main issues are fashion, lifestyle, make-up, tutorials, travels, and marriage.

Her *Instagram* account has 36,500 subscribers. It presents around 3,000 posts, most of which focus on fashion, some on lifestyle accessories like jewelry or food, and her new cat. For some posts, it is mentioned that these posts are sponsored content.

Turning to another field of influencer activities beyond fashion and make-up, we have to mention the food bloggers Adam and Maryah Shah, based in Singapore. In 2012, “they started blogging about restaurants, cafes and even coffee-shops with halal food to share their experiences with others looking for similar dishes. [...] From halal western food found in fancy restaurants to simple dimsum found in coffee-shops, you can find many [...] local delicacies on their social media platforms.”<sup>39</sup>

Their network starts with a blog<sup>40</sup> providing many reviews of Singaporean *halal* restaurants. The last review bears the date of December 18, 2020. A few partners are mentioned. They have been running a YouTube channel since 2014, counting around 87,000 hits and 895 subscribers. The videos show the bloggers traveling around, visiting halal restaurants all around South-East Asia, East Asia, and even Central Asia. The bloggers are eating, enjoying, and praising their food, reflecting the usual influencer way of acting. Halal food is not shown in a theological perspective, but rather it is much more of a normal way of having nice food.

The *Facebook* page<sup>41</sup> has a wider outreach and is much more up to date than the other parts of the Halal Food Blog network. It has 39,002 likes<sup>42</sup> and 40,603 subscribers. Like the other parts of the network, most of the content are reviews of restaurants, etc. The last one reads: “Mentaiko Cream Cheese Garlic Bun sounds like the ultimate (also got just Cream Cheese Garlic also if y'all want). Also look out for Mentaiko Fries, Mentaiko Salmon and Mentaiko Takoyaki among others.”

The *Instagram* account<sup>43</sup> is even larger, counting around 80,500 subscribers and offering 8,103 posts. Besides many appetizing photographs, pictures of take-aways, various drinks, and other

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<sup>39</sup><https://www.getkobe.com/top-muslim-influencers/> (retrieved January 29, 2021).

<sup>40</sup><https://thehalalfoodblog.com/homepage/> (retrieved January 29, 2021).

<sup>41</sup><https://www.facebook.com/TheHalalFoodBlog/> (retrieved January 29, 2021).

<sup>42</sup>As of January 29, 2021.

<sup>43</sup><https://instagram.com/thehalalfoodblog/> (retrieved January 29, 2021).

food-related issues are to be found. Generally speaking, *Halal Food Blog* has earned the rating of “Singapore’s Top Halal Food Blog.”<sup>44</sup>

Halal food blogging and influencing is an emerging sub-field of the general field of Muslim influencing and urban food culture,<sup>45</sup> which is still to be researched.

## Indonesia

Since Indonesian Islam is still restricted to a small number of researchers, a look into the varieties of Indonesian Muslim<sup>46</sup> influencers will be helpful to understand the global culture of Muslim influencers beyond European and North American influencers.<sup>47</sup> In terms of the numbers of followers, etc., the Indonesian influencers are the most influential group among Muslim fashion, beauty, and lifestyle influencers, if this play on words is allowed. Many Indonesian influencers mention their religious affiliation.

The Muslim fashion market in Indonesia is described by Purwaningwulan et al. (2018) as follows:

“The magnitude of the potential of the Muslim fashion market in Indonesia raises competition. Competitions not only come from Indonesian businesspeople but also from other countries such as Malaysia or global brands such as Dolce & Gabbana who has launched abaya and hijab clothing. Zara, Louis Vuitton, Gucci and H&M has also begun to enter the Muslim fashion industry. Competitions are getting fierce, where more producers are involved in meeting consumers’ needs and demands.”<sup>48</sup>

One of the tools used to meet these challenges are Muslim influencers. Since an attempt at a detailed analysis of Indonesian influencing would be premature and would have to contextualize Indonesian Muslim influencers among the totality of non-Muslim influencers,<sup>49</sup> we have to restrict ourselves to an overview to offer at least a sketch of the field and a conclusive remark giving some ideas about a possible understanding. We will focus on the *hijabi* influencer as a distinct group.

The majority of the Indonesian *hijabi* influencers have around 10,000 to 40,000 followers. We will create a sample of these influencers with 100,000+ followers.

<sup>44</sup><https://www.facebook.com/TheHalalFoodBlog/> (retrieved January 29, 2021) and others.

<sup>45</sup>For an overview including Singapore (and Shanghai and Sydney), cf. Leong Salobir (2019).

<sup>46</sup>A thorough study of influencer culture in Indonesia is still needed.

<sup>47</sup>For a first study of Muslim modest fashion in Indonesia, cf. Jones (2007).

<sup>48</sup>Purwaningwulan et al. (2018: 114).

<sup>49</sup>The influencer marketing platform *sociabuzz* has 161 pages linking to female (many not wearing *hijab*) and male Indonesian influencers.



*Aghnia Punjabi*: Influencer, videographer, fashion, beauty, lifestyle, food and drink influencer

Instagram: 1.1 million followers<sup>50</sup>, more than 4,000 posts (including wedding images), a kind of webshop titled *Preloved by Aghnia Punjabi*.

YouTube: 79,700 subscribers, 32 videos; make-up, *hijab* tutorial, fashion, hauls, weddings, engagement, body care.

Moreover, group photoshoots take place with the collaboration of Aghnia Punjabi, e.g. at the grand opening of a department store in 2017 with a group including two fashion influencers (including herself), a singer, a model, and a fashion blogger, two of them wearing no *hijab*.<sup>51</sup>

*Amalia Wanda*: Endorser.

Instagram: 110,000 followers, 349 posts; food and drink, lifestyle, beauty, many videos, parenting.

*bellattamimi*: Influencer, content creator, TV host.

Instagram: 163,000 followers, 2,374 posts; lifestyle, beauty, fashion, travels, diversity of other interests, many videos.

*Cordeliaaryati*: Endorser, Mom-influencer.

Instagram: 118,228 followers,<sup>52</sup> 1,116 posts; fashion, beauty, marketing, family, graduation photos, *hijab* tutorials.

She also runs a WhatsApp chat. *Cordeliaaryati* is part of a network of female – with a minority of males among them – influencers.

*Feby Asriani*: Influencer.<sup>53</sup>

Instagram: 112,000 followers, 459 posts; beauty, lifestyle, fashion, food and drink, family, many marketing videos.

*Irlitalmida*: Influencer.

Instagram: 378,000 followers, 3,404 posts; lifestyle, beauty, fashion, many marketing videos.

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<sup>50</sup>As of January 2021.

<sup>51</sup>Not unusual in an Indonesian context. Cf. for this video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7eD6r9o1qg> (retrieved January 9, 2021).

<sup>52</sup><https://www.sociabuzz.com/influencer-muslim/indonesia> (retrieved February 10, 2021).

<sup>53</sup>Influencer sometimes means *selebgram*, Instagram celebrity.

Endorsing beauty and cosmetics products, presenting glasses and sunglasses, some travel photography.

*Melodyprima*: public figure.<sup>54</sup>

Instagram: 1,600,000 followers, 870 posts; fashion, beauty, make-up, skincare, food, family, recommending some Islamic books.

*Rizky Amelia* aka *ameliaelle*: Influencer.

Instagram: 536,000 followers, 328 posts; fashion, lifestyle, make-up, travels, food, family, celebrating her pregnancy, featuring some cats.

*Yunita Pridiwi*: Endorser; calls herself “happy wife” and “happy mom”.

Instagram: 128,000 followers, 414 posts; fashion, beauty, lifestyle, marketing, food and drink, family; photos of a visit to Prambanan temple, Java.

## **The landscape of Indonesian Muslim influencing**

As usual, Indonesia can be regarded as a special case, even in the case of Muslim influencing. The situation is more complex than may be expected upon first glance. There is a diverse landscape of male and female influencers not marking themselves as Muslim. There is another diverse field of explicitly Muslim influencers understanding their presence online as a way of doing *da'wa* and trying to present their idea of being Muslim in a normative way. The third field of Muslim influencing can be described as acting as influencers undertake promoting certain brands, whether food, fashion, skincare, or traveling destinations, and at the same time – for female influencers – a kind of modest fashion, living a globalized urban life, presenting their social life to the public. At the same time, they mark themselves to the global public and act similar to other non-Muslim influencers.

Hence, we may analyze Muslim fashion and lifestyle influencing as a case of a societal multiple mosaic: 1) part of Muslim influencing in general, 2) part of the global lifestyle and fashion industry, 3) part of the global modern youth culture, 4) part of the modern online culture, 5) part of the restructuring of gender roles (Muslim and non-Muslim), 6) and part of the restructuring of the

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<sup>54</sup>In terms of ranking influencers, i.e. far beyond normal influencers.

religious fields worldwide. Without including these aspects, any analysis of the field would fail to understand these phenomena.

## Conclusion

Is it all about fashion and lifestyle, or is there more to these influencers? If we leave the idea behind that religion is made by theologians, and there may be some rituals<sup>55</sup> to be considered, we could turn with these influencers to an implicit theology expressed and lived day by day. Understanding these acts of believers as inspired and implicitly guided by religious ideas may lead to a better understanding of contemporary religious practice without privileging theological ideas or even political ideas. Conceptualizing this implicit theology of e.g. Muslim influencing will help to overcome the dichotomies deeply influencing (you may allow for this play of words) the life of the younger generation and open up spaces for discourses that are corporeal rather than textual.

In our cases, wearing *hijab* or consuming *halal* food is understood as the natural way of behavior for young urban Muslims. This does not necessarily exclude other ways of behaving. These influencers understand their practice as claiming a specific Muslim position in a highly competitive field, namely fashion and lifestyle. Thus, this may also be analyzed as a strategy of empowerment.

A final remark on *hijab* will be helpful for understanding this choice of behavior. Reading *hijab* or *halal* food simply as political, as a political statement related to political Islam<sup>56</sup> ignores the complex reality of the lives of modern young Muslims and politicizes Islamic behavior producing political Islam. To some extent, political Islam is in the eye of the beholder.

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<sup>55</sup>A recent field of religious studies, e.g. cf. the contributions in Ambos et al. (2006).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>56</sup>Whatever these words haunting the world may mean. Usually no acceptable scholarly definition is applied.

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