LSE Media and Communications

The Branded Muslim Woman

A Qualitative Study into the Symbolic Boundaries Negotiated around the Portrayal of Muslim Women in Brand Cultures

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1 ABSTRACT

Traditionally, Muslim women in media have been framed as oppressed by the burdens of the hijab and their religion. However, Muslim women have been countering this narrative through the emergence of alternative Muslim media content circulating within the Islamic cultural industry. The growing consumer segment of Muslim women have resulted in mainstream brands targeting this demographic. Likewise, female Muslim bloggers are gradually entering the influencer market of social media. There is an emerging visibility of Muslim women within these brand cultures: through the branding of Muslim women in advertisements and the self-branding of Muslim women on social media. While these brandings are a positive shift from the damaging stereotypes perpetuated by news outlets - they have met their share of backlash. The online Muslim community has intensely debated the portrayals of these Muslim women in brand cultures, revealing the tensions within the community around her constructed portrayal. This dissertation explores what portrayals of this 'branded' Muslim woman on social media are negotiated and in this negotiation what symbolic boundaries are revealed within the community. Empirically, the research is based on 18 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Muslim women in the UK selected through purposive sampling. The findings revealed through thematic analysis that there exist specific symbolic boundaries that seem correlate to the negotiated features of the branded portrayal: Modesty was treated as a performance in drawing symbolic boundaries around what constituted an accepted hijabi online, which was discussed through the branding of femininity; over representation and under representation acted as a burden for hijabis and non-hijabis respectively forming a symbolic boundary between in-group shared experiences and the empowerment narrative of these portrayals were displaced onto an imagined other, creating a symbolic boundary around who was understood to benefit from this portrayal.

2   INTRODUCTION

> Raidha:
>
> I think I like that Muslim women are included in ads and that Muslim bloggers like Dina are popular, but sometimes I feel a bit conflicted – because sometimes I think that's my Muslim sister up there but I also think…that's a brand, that's a (pause) branded Muslim woman…and I don't know how I feel about that

It seems impossible to talk about social media influencers who are Muslim in the UK without the topic of Dina Torkia, popularly known by her Instagram handle as Dina Tokio, arising. She is arguably one of the biggest Muslim influencers in UK with a following totaling over 2 million. Dina started off with a small following on YouTube as she taught young girls and women different ways to style their hijab and how to dress modestly while still feeling fashionable. The media landscape 10 years ago was fraught with any positive Muslim woman representation and Dina stood out for her specific targeting of the under-represented Muslim community. She eventually grew to be a household name, with media branding her as a 'hijabi' blogger as her content focused around her fashion and lifestyle as a Muslim.

In late 2018, Dina made the decision to remove her hijab – a critical source of her identification and branding online. Her decisions to do so was met with intense backlash online, as both tabloid media and the online Muslim community were gripped by her choice. While the criticisms ranged, a few interrelated threads revealed that many Muslim women felt betrayed by her decision, blaming her desire for Western acceptability as a sinful move to remove her hijab. The sense of betrayal originated from the fact that her initial rise to popularity was on the backs of other hijab wearing Muslim women who shared a sense of familiarity with her. She was accused of trying to capitalize on the significance of the hijab and discarded it once she achieved her popularity. Though she did have strong support from followers who argued it was her right to do so, several online "haters" argued she was no longer a "true" Muslim. The Dina Tokio controversy revealed important tensions within the community around the branding of a Muslim woman and was the starting point of investigation and intrigue for this study.

Dina Tokio and other female Muslim bloggers participate in the newly emerging brand cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2018) around Muslim women. Mainstream brands have recognized the growth of the Islamic cultural industry (Gökarıksel and McLarney, 2010)

and have tapped into the profitable segment of the female Muslim community (cooke, 2007). What this study found particularly interesting, both with Dina and the "inclusion" of Muslim women in mainstream advertisements is their specific framing. Traditionally Muslim women in media have been stereotyped as oppressed and victimized (Mohanty, 2003) with the hijab acting as the representation of her burden (MacDonald, 2006). However, these branded Muslim women mark a change in stereotyped portrayals in media as they are framed as empowered (Banet-Weiser, 2018), stylish and beautiful (Lewis, 2013) and entrepreneurial (Duffy and Hund, 2015) – with the hijab acting as a key signifier of their marked difference. However, everything else about these women are ambivalently framed, she is Muslim – but at a limit. Constructed under the 'corporate gaze' (Wissinger, 2012) these branded Muslim women conform to contours of the Western palate (Mamdani, 2004) and perform within the economies of visibility (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

In Dina's case, she fit perfectly into the molds of the wider audience requirements but was also similarly celebrated in the Muslim community. However, the removal of her hijab created cracks in the branding she had built for herself throughout the years and raises the question of why did the change to her portrayal invoke so much debate within the Muslim community online? There is limited research that investigates the internal dynamics of the Muslim community, specifically between women as most scholarships have continuously juxtaposed the negotiations of Muslim women's identities against the West. Likewise, the new emergence of Muslim women in mainstream advertisements and the increasing visibility of Muslim female bloggers remains significantly understudied.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to address these two gaps by intersecting the areas of inquiry. It explores what portrayals of the branded Muslim woman are negotiated and in these negotiates what conceptual distinctions emerge. The study uses the concept of symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992) to frame the distinctions made and argue that these symbolic boundaries aren't necessarily based on material differences but the symbolic understanding of the imagined Muslim woman. The research proceeds in 3 stages: firstly, outlining the relevant literature and gaps in research around the topic, secondly the methodological rationale used to conduct the research and thirdly critically unpack the findings from the interviews conducted and contextualizes what the findings mean for future research.

3   LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1   Muslim Women in Media

Kumar (2012) argues that Muslims have historically been portrayed as uncivilized, barbaric and in need of the liberation from Western modernity. Specifically, after 9/11 the representation of Muslims in Western media has been concentrated with Orientalist stereotypes and Islamophobic prejudices (Mohanty, 2003). Said (1978: 90) describes Orientalism as "the ideological suppositions, images and fantasies about a currently important and politically urgent region of the world called the 'Orient'". Kavacki and Kraeplin (2017: 852) use Said's theory in their discussion of Muslims and media arguing that the idea of "Muslimness is invoked in political and public discourse to demarcate the nation and to situate the visibly Muslim body as the Other". This process of othering has traditionally produced monolithic representations and portrayals, reducing the subject down to a few traits. Muslim women especially have been victims of this monolithic narrative with her representation being "dominated by one all-consuming image, word and concept – the veil " (Tarlo, 2010: 2). As the obsession with Islam grows, it is the Muslim woman that is left most voiceless (MacDonald, 2006), for it is upon their bodies that ideological battles are waged, culture and tradition are carried, and the representation of the religion are debated. MacDonald (2006: 7) states that the images of "veiled Muslim female body" evokes intense reactions from both Muslims and non-Muslims. Abu-Lughod (2002) draws attention to this Western fixation on the 'veiled' woman as a reasoning for their obsession on the 'war on terror'.

Parallel to Western media's fixation on the veil, is the their equally obsessive nature with unveiling. Yegenoglu (1998) compares this fascination with unveiling to the Western framing of the Orient as mysterious femininity. "Making them visible" (Yegenoglu, 1998: 12) is associated with the power to control and dominate the subject. MacDonald (2006) using Fanon's (1959, 1965) conceptualization on sexual penetration and colonialism articulates how the method of unveiling serves to convince the public of the Western control over the Orient. This desire to unveil is explored sensationally in Western media as their coverage centers less on the woman's rights but more the burqa (Klaus and Kassel, 2005) and the liberation they experience through the Western intervention (Kumar, 2005). This idea has even filtered into popular media with Echchaibi (2018: 57) highlighting the dramatically televised unveiling of an Afghani woman on Oprah and the scene from blockbuster movie Sex and the City 2 where the "a group of niqabi women speak for the first time when they take of their veils and reveal stylish Western clothing". Therefore, whether it be through condemning the veil or 'unveiling'

the Muslim woman, media continues to equate her to the hijab (Ahmed, 1992), painting the community as monolith and perpetuating a damaging stereotype (Mohanty, 2003).

3.2 Changing the Narrative and the Islamic Cultural Industry

Mahmood (2004) argues that the role media has played in shaping the stereotypes of the Muslim is crucial. Considering this power, Muslims likewise have recognized the importance of media as a site for intervention (Echchaibi, 2018). In attempts to combat Islamophobic representations in mainstream media, Muslim media channels such as Muslim News, Radio Ummah and Crescent International (Reimer, 2015) have developed as alternative channels to discuss Muslim related content. Lewis (2010) highlights specifically the growth in Muslim women lifestyle magazines in the UK such as 'emel' and 'Sisters' that build an audience around faith and gender. This alternative media forms have two major objectives: the first being connecting the global Muslim Ummah and secondly combating Islamophobic representations in mainstream media (ibid). These alternative media content has been matched with the growth of more 'Islamic' consumer capitalism – forming a marketable culture around Islam.

The Islamic cultural industry has been described as a "new market for commodities, media, businesses and consumer segments identified as Islamic" (Gökarıksel and McLarney, 2010: 1) that mediate Islamic knowledge and performances (Bunt, 2009). Muslim women specifically have been actively involved in this industry through both production and consumption (Pink, 2009). There has been a significant progress in this industry that Lewis (2010: 61) affords to as the growth in "local and international Muslim bourgeoisies" combined with the established diasporic linkage of Muslim networks. The purchasing power of the Muslim community (Adas, 2006) combined with the "democratization of Islam" (Zaman, 2008: 466) through the democratization of the internet has presented a new 'market segment' for mainstream brands to capture. The 'inclusion' of Muslim women within mainstream secular branding is a relatively new emergence

3.3 Brand Cultures

Traditionally branding described in marketing scholarship is the process of giving meaning to a brand through strategies of identification and association (Kotler and Keller, 2016) in attempts to resonate with the individual consumer (Aaker, 1995). However, in contemporary

times it is far too simplistic to limit the affects of branding to traditional perspectives as Banet-Weiser (2012: 4) argues that brands are "about culture as much as they are about economics". The value of the brand and the social capital it commands moves beyond the binaries of commodification theories (Hull, 2016; Gottdiener, 2000) that limits the usage of social and cultural artifacts to exchangeable goods - as branding effects the way we recognize ourselves in its operation. These brand cultures as Banet-Weiser (2012: 4) describes are the ways in which "brand relationships have increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships" – becoming the backdrop for centering the consumer. Branding in its process of utilizing cultural and social artifacts also begins to posses' cultural value and transform from a product to a cultural phenomenon (Sinclair, 2011).

The concept of brand cultures also urges us to consider its fluidity – that we need to shift the "boundaries of what can and cannot be configured as a product to be sold" (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 85) and include the idea of self-branding within these cultures. While self-branding encompasses individuals used for sponsorships and promotional cultures (Davis, 2013), it also includes the self-branding of popular identities online. The self-mediation feature (Chouliaraki, 2012) of social media aids these 'self-branders' in curating and building specific identities online. The attention economy (Brody, 2001) individuals operate in has "inspired new thinking about creating lasting relationships with consumers" (Fairchild, 2007: 359) and creating new cultures (Shepard, 2005).

Webster (2014) argues that the late 21st century of branding is marked out specifically by the advent of social media and brand's increased objective of engagement. This approach of 'customer-centric marketing' (Richardson, 2015) and 'relationship marketing' (Godson, 2009) has shifted the strategic approaches of brand cultures. Brands and self-branders are more tactful in their framing, targeting and interaction with consumers. Considering the role brand cultures play in society, the absorption of the Muslim woman segment into these mainstream cultures is of importance. Scholarship on the Islamic cultural industry has aided theoretical understandings of how Muslim women have been framed and commodified, but the emergence of Muslim women in mainstream brand cultures is still relatively new and therefore understudied in academia.

3.4 Branding the Muslim women

3.4.1 Advertisements and Muslim women

Advertisements are the modes for commodity narratives (Williamson, 1978), constructed by companies who seek to capitalize on the desire for self-identity (Goldman et al, 1991). Commodity feminism scholarship (Winship, 2003; Wolf, 1991) have argued that feminism is merely reduced by companies to the status of something easily malleable, Muslim women likewise are reduced to a signifier of diversity for mainstream advertisements. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) argue companies for decades have benefitted from neoliberal commodity activism by strategically selecting issues related to individual consumption patterns and utilized it as a unique selling point. In the case of the Muslim women, this commodity activism is the fight to change Islamophobic stereotypes of the Muslim community in Western countries (Lewis, 2013).

Bahrainwala and O'Connor (2019) argue that mainstream fashion industries have been gradually commodifying the hijab, from the runways of Dolce & Gabbana to Nike's Pro Hijab. Gokarikel and McLarney (2010: 7) argue that in "the market veiling becomes a kind of brand or label of consolidated Muslim femininity". This new move ties into what Appadurai (1986: 32) states as the rapidity of fashion because of the assumption "of democracy of consumers and objects of consumption". For example, Procter & Gamble featured a Hijab wearing figure-skater in their #LoveOverBias campaign which aired during the 2018 Winter Olympics (refer appendix A) and most recently the Sports Illustrated Swimsuit 2019 issue featured Halima Aden in a burqini (refer image 1.1). hooks (2005) sheds light on this phenomenon by arguing that there is a sense of pleasure derived from the visibility of racial difference. This form of commodification of diversity, of Otherness, adds a certain amount of "spice" to the usually "dull" realm of visibility (hooks, 2005: 191).

What is particularly interesting about the intersection of brand cultures and Muslim women is less the capitalization but more the tactical framing of her image. Considering the emergence of Muslim women in mainstream advertisements is relatively new (Kassam, 2011), her 'inclusion' then is mostly secluded to advertisements portraying diversity or the empowerment of 'all'. For example, H&M featured a Muslim woman in a hijab in their ad addressing fashion stereotypes (refer Appendix A). Similarly, Nike Pro-Hijab ad attempts to challenge stereotypes of Muslim women and sports by showcasing visuals of 'empowered' Muslim women pursuing their sporting goals (refer Appendix A).

Kassam (2011: 544) argues that these brands construct a particular type of Muslim woman as a "marketable global citizen and neo-liberal subject". They place significance in her liberal

open-mindedness, marketed as a 'good Muslim' (Mamdani, 2004) effortlessly integrated into Western culture. She is easily recognizable, with the hijab acting as the key signaling of her faith (Tarlo, 2010). The Muslim women in these ads cultural and religion is ambivalently framed, only recognizable by the scarf around her head (Bahrainwala and O'Connor, 2019). Similar to Banet-Weiser's (2007) study on the representation of racialized individuals on TV - it's not that the Muslims women's religion is made invisible but that is not portrayed as anything particular – an embrace of difference but at a limit. This branding process produces essentialized and homogeneous (Maollem, 2005) portrayals of the Muslim woman that is used to represent the global Muslim community (cooke, 2007).

This selective construction draws parallel to Banet-Weiser's (2018) criticism of popular feminism, in how the economies of visibility prioritize a type of circulative feminism. Banet-Weiser (2018: 52) argues that advertisements "privilege beauty and the body" in the economies of visibility, which is maintained in the depiction of Muslim women – where most of the women featured are high-fashion models or are conventionally beautiful. This highlights that it's not that all Muslim women can, but a specific type of Muslim women can (ibid). White (1999) and Yavuz (2003) argue that certain types of visibility are privileged, and others deemed undesirable, therefore only Muslim women portrayals deemed palatable to the sensibilities of the market are included.

There is a dual-feature to this concept of visibility around Muslim women. One, the type of Muslim woman that is chosen to be made visible but also the complication that she 'needs' to be made visible. Drawing back to MacDonald's (2006) argument on media's obsession with unveiling, this paper argues a similar thread runs through the advertiser's portrayal of the Muslim woman. These brands participate in the Orientalist obsession with unveiling less explicitly than we've seen news outlets but through their "unveiling" of these women supposed neoliberal lifestyles. Nike unveils the empowered athlete, L'Oréal unveils the confident makeup artist, H&M unveils the rule-bending fashionista – playing into the trope that Muslim require someone else to bring them to the forefront. These brands' proposition themselves as progressive in their inclusivity but fall into the trap of perpetuating Orientalist tropes.

3.4.2 Self-Branding and the 'Hijabi' Blogger

A growing public is the online Muslim community (Pennington, 2018; Aziz, 2014), filled with a variety of voices and target demographics. Caught perfectly between the intersection of self-branding, blogging and 'Muslimness' is the new phenomena popularly known on social media

as 'Hijabi Bloggers'. As a term used to encapsulate a group of Muslim women, typically hijab wearing that are trying to carve their space on social media (Baulch and Pramiyanti, 2018). Waninger (2015: 2) describes this group as women who dress fashionable while still fulfilling the religious obligation of modesty in Islamic dress code. Research on 'hijabers' in Indonesia, Malaysia and Middle East have explored the influencers' linkage to the global community of 'Muslimah' keen to portray themselves as fashion-forward, entrepreneurial and digitally-savvy (Baulch and Pramiyanti, 2018). These women participate in what Duffy and Hund (2015: 1) describe as "traditionally feminine domains of fashion, beauty, parenting and craft". There exists research that has investigated the self-branding of the Muslim woman in fashion magazines (Lewis, 2013; Moors, 2011), there remains however limited research investigating this creation on social media, specifically in Muslim minority countries.

Aziz (2014: 138) argues that within this attention economy, typical attention-grabbing tactics employed by traditional brands are used by individuals to increase their popularity. Bloggers follow a series of self-presentation tactics, carefully constructing their persona online – sharing tailored information to their followers to boost their online status (Audrezet et al, 2018). Duffy and Hund (2015: 3) argue that self-branding through "normative feminine discourse" is linked to the "logic of post-feminism" which values individualism "rooted in consumer marketplace". Muslim female bloggers are aware of both their hyper-politicized identity (Mamdani, 2004) and the economies of visibility they navigate. In attempts to counter negative stereotypes, they participate in the popular post-feminist rhetoric Duffy and Hund (2015) criticize. This visibility is structured within the 'corporate and white gaze', as Wissinger (2012) highlights in her study of black models' online tactics in emphasizing and de-emphasizing their racial characteristics that achieve the aesthetic ideals of these gazes. Kavaki and Kraeplin (2017: 857) further argue that Muslim women bloggers must "minimize certain characteristics associated with her religious and ethnic identity if she is to win the favor of a largely White, Western cultural, and corporate elite".

Echchaibi (2018) argues that bloggers' attempts to fit into what mainstream visibility demands produces essentialized archetypes of good versus bad Muslim. Mamdani (2004) further argues that in creating this 'good' Muslim woman they fashion themselves within the demands of consumer capitalism. The label of "Muslim" is brought to forefront – continuing to be a persevering signifier of difference, but the rest of her characteristics are "anchored in the consumer marketplace" (Duffy and Hund, 2015: 3). Kassam (2011) argues, that these bloggers fit mainstream demands, but differentiate themselves through their identity of being Muslim. Echchaibi (2018: 64) argues that this form of "self-essentialism" through "assertive religious identification" of being a Muslim blogger or hijabi blogger acts as a normative frame that aids the audience in placing religion at the forefront of these women's identity.

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3.5   Negotiating the 'branded' Muslim Woman

Gökarıksel and McLarney (2010: 2) argues that "contemporary Muslim femininities are increasingly mediated through the market forces of consumer capitalism". The Muslim woman identity is "constantly negotiated, defined, and redefined" through these branded portrayals and knowledges about "Muslim womanhood constructed in the marketplace" (ibid). While they are forced to navigate the Orientalist stereotypes of their identity in media, they also now actively engage with these productions within brand cultures on social media. The intersection of brand cultures and Muslim women opens interesting spaces for negotiations. The most recent emergence from this intersection that gripped media and the online Muslim community was the case of Dina Torkia, popularly known by her Instagram handle as Dina Tokio. In late 2018, Dina Tokio, one of the biggest Muslim social influencers in the UK chose to remove her hijab which resulted in a series of backlash but also support. The online Muslim community intensely negotiated the importance of the hijab and the branding Dina had built for herself throughout these years as a 'hijabi' blogger. These negotiations revealed tensions around the hijab and about the way Dina had branded herself online as Muslim – but more importantly it revealed negotiations within the community.

There exists a plethora of research on the Muslim community, specifically women, as Mahmood (2005) argues academia is equally obsessed with the veil. These scholarships have debated the agency women possess when wearing the hijab (Lama Abu-Odeh, 1993; MacDonald, 2006) the role the hijab plays in integration within Western societies (Sakia and Samina, 2018) and the role media has played in its negative construction (Williamson, 2014; Sotsky, 2013) While these debates have contributed immensely to our theoretical understanding of the hijab and Muslim women, it does so by juxtaposing the complexity of the hijab and Muslim women against the West. Dwyer (1999: 8) argues that the "the hijab has become an over-determined signifier against which individual women must negotiate their own identities in relation to a complex of different meanings", however within academia these negotiations and differences of meanings within the community aren't fully explored. There remains limited research unpacking the dynamics within the community, specifically between women. Seminal works such as Mahmood's (2005) Politics of Piety, Tarlo's (2010) Visibly Muslim and Nayel's (2017) ethnography of Sudanese Muslim women in the UK have all revealed the complex heterogeneity of these women and emphasizes the requirement for academia to shift its investigative angle.

3.6   Symbolic Boundaries Within

These points of debate reveal the importance of understanding how this newly emerging branding of the Muslim woman is negotiated specifically within the community. The construction of the Muslim woman in ads and the self-branding by bloggers deal with elements in the portrayal that are both materialistic and symbolic. Even though the debate with Dina centered on her hijab, it was more the symbolism of the hijab and its social construction both within and outside the community that was debated. Likewise, the empowerment narrative, the neo-liberal framing of beauty and supposed representation are all symbolic features of the construction of the 'branded Muslim woman'. The negotiations within the community around this construction inherently deal with the 'symbolic' meaning behind the portrayal. These frames around the portrayal, and the resulting negotiations within the community are symbolic themselves, because they deal with "culturally and socially constituted aspects that are subjectively meaningful" (Puetz, 2018: 1). This social process is what Lamont (1992) conceptualizes as symbolic boundaries.

Lamont (1992) in his seminal work draws from a variety of boundary work theorists (Durkheim, 1915; Weber et al, 1968; Goffman, 1963) to develop the concept of symbolic boundaries. Lamont and Molnar (2002: 168) argue that symbolic boundaries "are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space". The symbolism aspects in these boundaries is derived from the idea that boundaries are socially constructed and don't necessarily correlate to material differences. According to Lamont and Molnar (2002: 168) the importance of symbolic boundaries is that a boundary is never constant or fixed – it is negotiated through means of "boundary-work, boundary crossing, and boundary shifting". Symbolic boundaries can be utilized to understand how people separate into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (Epstein 1992: 232). Symbolic boundaries then also refer to the internal distinctions of classification systems and to temporal, spatial, and visual cognitive distinctions (Wagner-Pacifici, 2000; Zerubavel, 1997). While this study recognizes that relational processes are a universal tendency, symbolic boundaries is specifically concerned with analyzing precisely how boundary work is accomplished to establish similarities, differences, groups mobilization and definition.

4 RESEARCH QUESTION AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Research Question

The range of research on the Muslim woman reflects her highly politicized nature and how her very existence provokes both public and academic intrigue. While these scholarships have contributed to our understanding of Muslim women and has guided this paper's critical conception there still remains significant gaps. As discussed in the literature review, on the intersection of Muslim women and media, the paper has identified two key areas for contribution:

i.   The development of Muslim women in advertisements and as bloggers in countries where Muslims are a minority is a relatively new phenomena, with very little academic inquiry on the emergence in the UK

ii.   Limited research has addressed the dynamics between Muslim women and how they negotiate their politicized identity within the community

The dissertation aims to address these two gaps by intersecting the areas of inquiry. It hopes to address how women in the UK perceive these new branded emergences on social media and how these perceptions also reveal how the women think of each other, or the imagined Muslim woman. It therefore puts forward the following research question:

RQ: What symbolic boundaries do Muslim women in the UK negotiate when discussing the portrayal of the 'branded' Muslim women on social media?

To aid the research structure the following sub-questions are used:

SRQ_1: Which features of the branded portrayal are negotiated?

SRQ_2: What symbolic boundaries are revealed in this negotiation?

4.2 Conceptual Framework

This section details the conceptual and theoretical approach used to frame the research project. It will be structured to address the two main sections of the research question: the 'branded' Muslim woman and the negotiation of symbolic boundaries:

The Branded Muslim Woman

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4.2.1 The Branded Muslim Woman

This framework draws mainly from Banet-Weiser (2012) discussion of brand cultures. Banet-Weiser (2012: 5) argues that the "cultural process of branding…marks the transformation of everyday life, from lived culture to brand culture" and therefore establishes the importance of situating a brand's a role within society. As discussed in more detail in the literature review, the concept of brand cultures is more holistic than classical theorization of branding and encompasses both tangible brands but also self-branding. Considering that the emergence of Muslim women in advertisements and Muslim female bloggers is relatively new and understudied, the flexibility of brands cultures aids the study in framing these portrayals.

The study chooses to work with Muslim framed both advertisements and by bloggers due to the lack of research on both media forms and needs to draw from research dually to develop a coherent discussion. The study draws from theories of commodity feminism (Winship, 1980; Wolf, 1991; Goldman, 1976), popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), and neo-liberal feminism (McRobbie, 2008) to frame the portrayal of these Muslim women within brands cultures. The theoretical direction was guided by parallel findings of audio-visual research conducted on Muslim bloggers and Muslim in advertisements conducted in Indonesia and Malaysia (Primayanti, 2018) and the UAE (Ahamed, 2017). The study also utilizes research conducted on the intersection of other minority groups such as race and nationality with brand cultures to further guide understanding the portrayals of Muslim women.

The phrase 'branded' Muslim women is developed within this study to encompass both Muslim women in advertisements and popular Muslim bloggers and refers to the framing argued in the literature review. This phrase is used throughout the analysis to capture this conceptual framework.

4.2.2 Symbolic Boundaries

In choosing symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992) as a conceptual framework to guide the findings does not assume that there are inherent 'divisions' between Muslim women but is more of a recognition that differences in perceptions will arise and therefore having a concept to guide the way these differences are framed or grouped provides more academically tangible information (ibid).

The fluidity of the concept allows the research to analyze the conceptual distinctions made between the women when discussing the branded framing and how these distinctions are formed. This angle will aid in identifying the 'symbolic resources' (ibid) used to justify

distinctions and group membership. Labelling these distinctions as symbolic boundaries and not social differences is because the study deals with the socially constructed branded women and therefore the discussion in centered on her symbolic portrayal. Furthermore, the concept of symbolic boundaries does not assume boundaries are fixed and therefore requires the study to focus equally on how the boundary is being negotiated.

5 METHODOLOGY

The following section illustrates the methodological rationale chosen to answer the research question proposed in (3.1) and a detailed discussion of its operationalization and the analytical strategy used. It concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations employed during the study and the reflexivity gained upon its completion.

5.1 Methodology Rationale and Potential Limitations

This dissertation hopes to investigate how Muslim women in the UK negotiate symbolic boundaries around the 'branded' Muslim online, it therefore seeks to collect descriptive and in-depth data to unpack these opinions. Qualitative research is therefore the optimal method for this investigation as it provides intricate and rich inquiry into real-life situations (Warren, 2002). Patton (2012) argues that the strength of qualitative research is its engagement with natural settings and its interactive data collection process. While there are multiple methodological approaches in qualitative research, this research paper operationalizes semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Qualitative interviewing is a way of exploring and uncovering meaning (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) by "generating empirical data about the social world" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997, p,140) with the aim of understanding things "that we cannot directly observe" (Patton, 1990: 278). Brenner et al (1985: 3) argues that unlike surveys and questionnaires, interviews allow "both parties to explore the meaning of the questions and the answers involved". Considering that the research question aims to address gaps in Muslim women perceptions about a new emerging media, interviews become a powerful tool in helping people make "explicit things that have hitherto been implicit – to articulate their tacit perceptions, feelings and understandings" (Arksey and Knight, 1999: 32). A sub-method of interviews is semi-structured interviews which is designed to achieve a balance between unstructured and structured interviews (May, 2001).

Semi-structured interviews were selected for three key purposes:

i.   The method "provides a more appropriate format for discussing sensitive topics" (Fylan, 2005: 67) and therefore allows the researcher to engage openly with the participants

ii.   The research question deals with discussing many features about the branded Muslim women and therefore requires structure in the interview process to make sure the discussion stays within the area of research (Gaskell, 2000).

iii.   The study employs purposive sampling (refer xx) and therefore semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to change the questions to address topics more important to the interviewee

Furthermore, in April 2019, a pilot study was conducted within the same research topic using semi-structured interviews and found that it garnered rich data and therefore will continue with this method. Another key observation derived from this pilot study was that the participants were more forthcoming in discussing their opinions about other Muslim women when they knew their identity would just be between the research and the interviewee. This revealed that the discussion of a sensitive topic such as boundary-work would not be best unpacked in a focus group as some participants might be hesitant to reveal their opinions in fear of offending or disrespecting another woman.

While semi-structured interviews provide considerable benefits in answering the research question there are important issues that the study has accounted for. Compared to standardized interviews, Gordon (1975) argues that semi-structured interviews reduce the opportunity for the differences in responses only being afforded to interviewees due the potential of different questions being asked. Due to the compromising of a standardized stimulus (Smith, 1975) the interview question (refer x.x) were aimed at conveying equivalent meaning to aid its comparability. Furthermore, as highlighted in the problem of conducting a focus group, the sensitivity of the topic at hand increases the chances of participants responding with politically or socially desirable answers (Denzin, 1989). Therefore, to avoid questions conveying implicit demand (Brink, 1989) the researcher utilizes 'probing' to improve the relationship with the participant and create a comfortable atmosphere to answer honestly (Orne, 1962).

5.2   Operationalization

5.2.1   Sampling Strategy and Rationale

The study recruited 18 British women who identified as Muslim between the ages of 18 and 30 years old. The women varied in educational and cultural backgrounds, employments and locations in the UK. The key focus of differences within the group was the visibility of their

religiosity: the study recruited, 7 women who wore the hijab, 9 women who didn't wear the hijab and 2 women that wore the niqab. Considering that it is beyond the study's scope to generalize the findings, the research focused on garnering a variety of opinions through recruiting a diverse group of women. This was conducted through purposive sampling:

Purposeful sampling is a method of selecting information rich respondents (Patton, 2002) that are particularly knowledgeable or experienced with the topic of interest (Bernard, 2018). Morse and Niehaus (2009) argue that qualitative methods are aimed at depth, compared to the breath in quantitative methods and therefore allows for flexibility in sampling strategies. Palinkas et al (2015) illustrate an extensive list of potential routes and considerations of purposive sampling – this study employed their strategy in emphasizing variation. The strategy of variation through purposive sampling is aimed at identifying "common patterns that cut across variations" (Palinkas et al, 2015: 3). Considering that the research question aims to draw perceptions about how brand cultures have structured a 'particular type' of Muslim woman online (refer x.x), it made sense to gathered Muslim women from a variety of backgrounds to unironically emphasize the heterogeneity of the Muslim community compared to the depiction online, and therefore generate a variety of opinions. Recruitment of these participant was conducted through different routes to gather the variation required: messages were posted on Muslim Facebook groups, the interviewer used her networks to recommend potential participants, and on-field recruitment was conducted at Mosques and other religious sites.

5.2.2   Interview Topic Guide and Procedure

The topic guide (refer Appendix B) was structured to address different aspects of the branded Muslim woman as the research questions seeks to investigate how the negotiation of specific aspects of her depiction reveal symbolic boundaries. Questions were intentionally open-ended to avoid bias and leading the participant (Creswell, 2008) and provides the flexibility for expression (Mann, 1985). The topic guide structure:

1. Questions about the participant to establish a comfortable environment and help contextualize their answers.

2. Questions on their social media usage, platforms and purpose

3. Questions on their exposure and interaction with these advertisements and Muslim bloggers

4. Diversity/Inclusion Tactic by brands

5. The beauty/feminine portrayal

6. The empowerment narrative

7. Discussion of the Dina Tokio backlash (flexible depending on if the participant brought it up earlier)

8. Representation

The interviews were conducted both in person and over skype at previously discussed locations and times, with a prioritization of the interviewee's preferences. Careful consideration was given to making them comfortable due to the sensitivity of the topic, for example, both participants who wore the niqab requested the interviews be conducted in their homes. The interviews were recorded via the researcher's phone and were transcribed using both verbatim and transcription software.

5.3   Analytical Strategy

Thematic Analysis is the process of identifying a pattern or capturing data of "shared meaning" which might "otherwise appear disparate" but is "organized around a core concept or idea" (Braun et al, 2017: 3). Namey et al (2008) argues that thematic analysis is the most appropriate for studies that aim to discover patterns using interpretations by providing a systematic method for analysis. These themes were derived from the process of coding – the process of defining what the data is about (Gibbs, 2007: 38). The study conducted an inductive approach to the coding, by interpreting the meaning post gathering the results (Patton, 1990). However, study's sub-research question of symbolic boundaries required the researcher to switch to deductive analysis accordingly when identifying specific patterns of boundary making. It therefore applied a hybrid coding approach (Crabtree and Miller, 1999) to the analysis.

5.4   Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity

All participants were informed prior to the interview about the research aims and the institution the researcher came from. Consent forms were provided and signed and the right to withdrawal was explained in detail before the interviews were conducted (refer x). All participants names are pseudonyms and any information within the transcripts or selected

quotes that might identify them have been omitted. The interviewees were reassured that the audio files would be kept in a secure location and only accessible by the researcher.

The study recognizes that it is difficult to "not influence and be influenced" (Jootun et al., 2009: 45) by the interviewees and realizes that the results are fundamentally the researcher's understanding of the phenomena. Considering this dynamic, the study identifies an important potential limitation of the researcher's positionality. The researcher possesses dual positionality: outsider positionality in being an academic research, potentially forming an imagined hierarchy where participants might have felt inclined to provide socially desirable answers (Bröckerhoff, 2014)– however, attention was given to reduce this. Parallelly, the researcher's insider positionality of being a Muslim woman herself was given more attention in handling tactfully.

The researcher's insider positionality proved to be very important in forming a relationship with the interviewees and allowed for them to discuss freely. Majority of the participants discussed openly concepts about Islam, their feelings on its interpretations and how it translated into their understanding of branded Muslim women. Their openness derived from the fact that they understood the researcher to already have background knowledge and shared experiences (Adu-Ampong and Adams, 2019). A lot of the respondents would frequently say "you know what I'm talking about" or "you get me, right" – alluding to the fact that they established a sense of connection with the researcher over our shared identity of being Muslim (ibid). The study was initially concerned with the fact that the researcher herself didn't wear the hijab and it might hinder some women expressing their thoughts openly – but it proved to be no barrier in how they expressed themselves. It should be noted that the interviews seemed to be quite therapeutic (Nelson et al, 2013) as some participants openly expressed happiness in being able to discuss this topic and get their concerns of their chest. This study feels that this type of rapport could not have been established had the researcher not identified as Muslim.
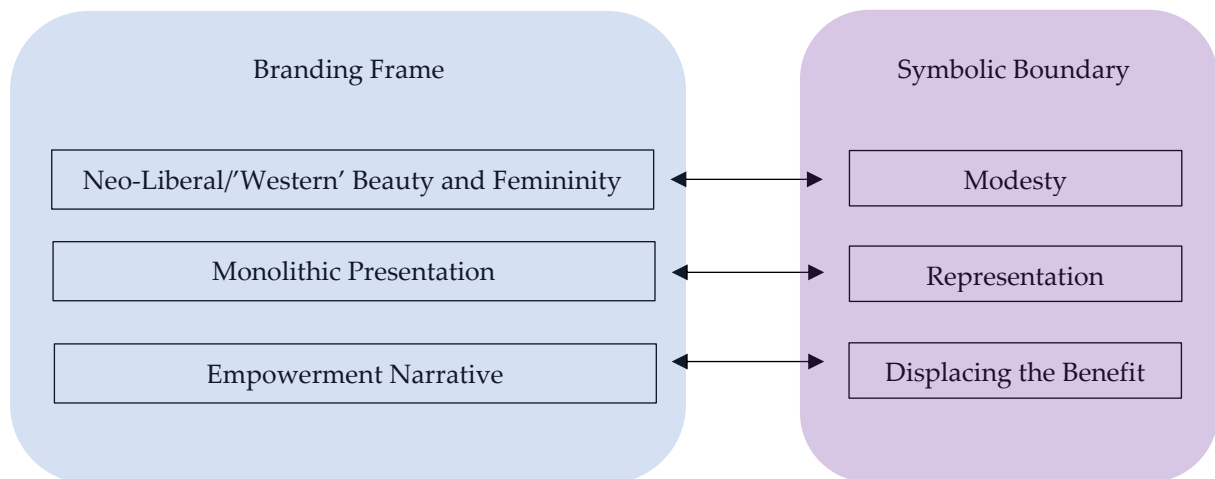
However, this insider positionality is two-fold: the researcher sometimes experienced difficulty in separating herself from the answers when the interviewees looked for affirmation, which might have led to what Patton (1990) calls an 'interviewer effect'. Furthermore, the study took careful attention during the analysis to avoid inferring the data from the researcher's insider positionality of being Muslim and reduce biases.

6 RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The next sections provide a detailed discussion of the main findings conducted through a thematic analysis. The study presents three main themes that were derived from the qualitative data which seek to answer the research question proposed. The themes analyzed below are categorized by the symbolic boundaries revealed from the specific features of the branded Muslim women the participants discussed. The themes are titled as follows:

1. 'Hijabi' as a Performance of Modesty

2. The Burden of Representation

3. Empowerment for Who

The below diagram is the high-level association between the framings negotiated the symbolic boundary it revealed:

Branding Frame		Symbolic Boundary
Neo-Liberal/'Western' Beauty and Femininity	↔	Modesty
Monolithic Presentation	↔	Representation
Empowerment Narrative	↔	Displacing the Benefit

6.1 "Hjiabi" as a Performance of Modesty

6.1.1 Modesty

Almost all participants expressed conflict around the issues of modesty whilst being a 'hijabi' blogger and with brands featuring Muslim women wearing the hijab. When asked the question of what they thought about how these bloggers present themselves and how brands frame these Muslim women, the most immediate response was around modesty.

Sumaiya:

Again, it still depends on how you are portraying yourself, you can't wear hijab and have your waist out and wear ripped jeans, you're kind of making yourself look a bit funny. If you want to keep your Western image then stick to the Western image without hijab. Hijab at the end of the day, is a modest thing, it's a modest fashion statement. Keep it modest.

A thread that runs through scholarly discussion is the contestation between modesty and visibility, as Jeldtoft et al (2013) highlights: the hijab is expected to be practiced in the private domain, and the idea that it is intruding the secular public domain is unacceptable to the public gaze. Contrary to findings within those academic arguments, none of the women interviewed identified the visibility of a hijabi as problematic, nor perceived visibility to cause tension for modesty codes - but focused more on *how* these branded women were being made or making themselves visible. The participants expressed conflicting thoughts on the "Western" portrayals of the Muslim women versus her obligations to remaining modest. What was deemed 'western' was not fully unpacked, although they alluded to the neoliberal framing of beauty and femininity. For example, majority of the women interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with Halima Arden's feature in Sports Illustrated Magazine:

Rukshana:

You know, the whole thing, where there's that hijabi who was on the sports magazine - that to me, doesn't make sense. They were saying it's the first hijabi, okay…but the hijab is inherently about modesty. To be like the first modestly dressed woman on a swimwear magazine cover - just logically doesn't make sense to me. And that I will agree with, that it doesn't make sense for me. I don't think it's something to be like, super proud of as a Muslim community, us taking a step in the right direction kind of thing

Fauza:

There was even that whole fuss about hijabi girl for like a swimming magazine. I thought was ridiculous. I'm not gonna lie. I thought that was really silly. And then the hijabi Playboy lady, and I thought that was kind of strange. I didn't think it was as bad

> - I kind of thought it was really funny as well, I didn't take it seriously. But it was the swimwear one where I was like, sis, what are you doing?

In their discussion of hijabi bloggers, some women voiced concern on bloggers participating in makeup and fashion blogs on Instagram. They described apprehension with hijabi bloggers wearing glamorous makeup and taking pictures that highlighted their bodies and attire. The idea that they were participating in, as one of the interviewees Sadiya called "classic western social media influencers tactics of drawing attention" to beauty and the body to brand themselves was considered problematic to modesty. Banet-Weiser's (2018) criticism of the economies of visibility highlights standards for women that are deemed popular, which runs parallel to the frustration's participants expressed in how hijabi bloggers were choosing to frame themselves. There is scholarship that aids in orienting the tension between these 'western' traits or neo-liberal sentiments and religiosity: Tarlo (2010) in her seminal research on Muslim women and fashion in the UK describes the personal conflicts they would face in finding a balance between their faith and following modern fashion trends. What was deemed modern or 'western' by these women were styles that focused on flattering the body and showcasing the women's beauty (ibid).

What was particularly interesting, was how the debate centered on Hijabi's and modesty, and not Muslim women in general and modesty. There was a different standard expected of women wearing the hijab and her religious obligations towards modesty. Ahamad (2017: 271) argues that "veiling is often interpreted as the physical manifestation of piety and religiosity, an act of worship and submission to the commands of Allah, an articulation of one's faith, and not just a visual marker in the construction of Muslim identity". There is then a sense of performativity evoked when wearing the hijab, one specific performative nature is that of modesty. One of the hijabi participants attempted to explain its significance:

> Aisha:
>
> I think western women can't appreciate the weight of the Hijab, it's not only the scarf on our head, but modesty in our tongues and modesty in our actions and so I can understand how this might seem extreme to someone who has been brought up in the West and not familiar with Muslim culture, because they're probably thinking – oh she has the Hijab on her head and she modestly dressed, so why should that affect what she does – but some people could take offence because the Hijab is more than just a scarf.

The idea of performativity, highlighted in Butler's (1999: 185) seminal work argues that gender is "not determined by the rules through which it is generated because signification is not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition that both conceals itself and enforces its rules". Gender identity is then a process of repetition formed with cultural contexts. Nayel (2017: 19: 99) in her ethnography of Sudanese Muslim women in the UK, employs Butler's (1999) theory of performativity to analyze the power relations involved in their Muslim identity construction. In her research findings, she argues that Muslim women would negotiate the performance of modesty in their understandings of being a Muslim woman by challenging what the veil meant to them (ibid). Modesty in this aspect becomes a set of acts drawn from religious and cultural contexts that serve to construct the subject of a hijab wearing Muslim woman (Butler, 1990, pp.278-279). The participants drew from how they understood the performance of modesty to be in their evaluation of other Muslim women.

6.1.2   Modesty as a Symbolic Boundary and its Negotiation

The participants' lack in discussion of 'non-hijabi's' in relation to modesty does not mean that they assume non-hijabi women as immodest but is instead a strong indication of the standard hijabis are held too. There seems to be an imagined hierarchy of modesty – where the Muslim woman in hijab is assumed to perform *more* modestly. This performative standard highlight how modesty can act as a symbolic resource (Lamont, 1996) in forming an imagined distinction between an "accepted" hijabi online and "unaccepted" hijabi online. Lamont (2002) argues that symbolic boundaries are conceptually important because it reveals processes of evaluation and the expression of cultural preferences. Modesty in this light, becomes a symbolic boundary in the evaluation of hijabis. The evaluation of modesty by the participants emphasizes the role symbolic boundaries play in offering group categorization within communities. By allocating modesty to a higher performance by women who wear the hijab highlights how members within a community can use these symbolic resources to re-emphasis how they demarcate in-groups (Lamont and Malnor, 2002).

Even though modesty was frequented as a mode of evaluation, what equally surfaced was the conflict women felt in making that judgement. Non-hijabis in particular were reflective in their judgements and standards of modesty they held a hijabi too - they would often say that they could not fully comment on the issue of modesty because they didn't wear the hijab. This correlates to the conceptual framing of symbolic boundaries as fluid and shifting - like the concept of modesty. Lewis (2013 ,p.3) argues in her research on faith and fashion, that "modesty is mutable concept that changes over time and is diversely adopted, rejected, altered

and imposed on different groups of women". Modesty, in this context is a negotiable symbolic boundary that the participants used to judge the branded Muslim woman and themselves.

6.2 The Burden of Representation

6.2.1 Hijabis as a Representor

Majority of the Muslim women interviewed expressed frustration with the burden Muslim women bore in representing the community and thereby the level of judgement afforded to her. This conversation arose from the discussion of Dina Tokio and her removal of the hijab and the unfair treatment she faced for her decision. It should be noted, that the discussion of Dina was brought up organically by the participants themselves, representing how significant the situation was to them. One of the participants in her discussion of Dina, highlighted how Muslim women in hijab are treated as the 'ambassadors of Islam' and the frustration she felt with that responsibility:

> Maryam:
>
> I don't know, where I've heard this phrase from " Wearing a hijab makes you an ambassador for Islam". Not everyone wants to be an ambassador, you know, sometimes you just want to be yourself. Sometimes you don't want to represent your entire religion, and how we're meant to conduct yourself and all. Like, it's a heavy burden to bear on a day to day basis. If you have a giant platform as well, and everyone's looking at you, like not just your local community, but like, the online community, the globe, like, that's a lot of pressure, because everyone is going to make mistakes, everyone's going to slip up. The perfect Muslim doesn't exist, mistakes are inevitable, to be scrutinized for that and then condemned for it - for like portraying a bad image. It's really unfair.

There was however a stark contrast in who was identified to bear bulk of this burden, with majority of the participants expressing their frustration in how hijabis were held to a different representative standard and therefore policed more astringently.

> Aliya:
>
> If a girl is not a hijabi, it's okay - but if she's a hijabi and then she decides to take it off, then it's not okay. And all the Muslims take it upon themselves, like this is a representation of the Muslim community. So, if someone does something, if someone's not wearing the hijab, it's okay even if they are Muslims, because they're not going to be a representation of the Muslim community, but once a girl wears the hijab, then she is a representation of the Muslim community. Like I don't wear the hijab, and if I did something wrong, Muslims aren't gonna be like oh my gosh, but if it's a hijabi girl - I think it's a bigger deal

The burden of representation that women are expected to bear, while also created through the religious and cultural significance of the hijab (Ahmed, 1992) is also perpetuated in media. As discussed in the literature review (refer 2.1), Abu-Lughod (2013) argues that Muslim women are reduced and othered down to the hijab, rendering her voiceless and the community monolithic. The representation of the Muslim women continues to be the "one single all-consuming image, word and concept – the veil" (Tarlo, 2010: 2). Brands comparatively, in their attempts to participate in progressive advertising (Davis, 2013) also construct a Muslim woman that is easily identifiable – the key signifier once again is the hijab. As discussed in the literature review (refer 2.1) using Banet-Weiser's (2012) criticism on how race is made visible – every aspect of the Muslim women in these ads is ambivalently framed, there is nothing recognizable about her identity or culture – the only signifier of her identity is the hijab. The participants frustration of only hijabi's bearing the representation highlights the arguments made in the literature review that brands are perpetuating similar Orientalist tropes as they focus in on the hijab as a representation of this 'market segment'.

Similarly, hijabi bloggers, as indicative of the categorization academia and media has given them, are first looked at as Muslim women, before they are bloggers. The literature review (refer 2.2) highlights Echchiabi's (2018) argument on the self-essentialism of the Muslim community online which is supported here, as the participants felt that the hijabi bloggers were bringing their 'Muslimness' to the forefront. This feature of presenting their Muslim identity at the forefront, was discussed as both important for challenging stereotypes but problematic because this burden of representation can force them to regulate their presentation:

> Noora:
>
> I think as someone who's different if they're presenting themselves as this blogger who's also Muslim, who also wears a hijab, for example, they're going to get criticism, whatever they do, and then they lose their autonomy, because it suddenly becomes about how can I tiptoe on eggshells - make sure I don't offend anyone, make sure I'm saying the right things for the most religious people and the least religious people. And then I think, then it's not as much of a choice for them. And they kind of have to really watch what they say. So you, you wonder how much of themselves they're actually portraying.

The continued focus on the hijab, and inherently the hijabi, forces the imagined public to assumes she is the main representor of the community. Mercer (1990: 61) in his study of black artists refers to the "burden of representation" they were troubled with carrying – an expectation that positioned them as the representation of a culture. Mercer (1990: 68) argues that culture is reduced to a monolith – "as a fixed and final property of different racial groups" which is borne on the backs of a single representor. Echchaibi (2018: 61) further argues media "readily confers on Muslims a perennial image of Islam as a particular intractable difference", which in the context of brand cultures is conferred on the hijabi.

6.2.2   Representation as a Symbolic Boundary

It was interesting that the focus was less on the 'representation' within these brand cultures but more on the idea that a hijabi was expected 'to represent'. That because she wore the hijab, she had to bear the problems of navigating a highly politized identity online and likewise absorb the backlash that came with making a mistake. The relevance of this expressed burden is two-fold: while it reveals that the participants are aware of the continued perpetuation of Muslims as monolith by brands, it also illuminates who is *not* considered – the non-hijabi. Women who didn't wear the hijab expressed this as a frustration for them when asked if they felt represented in these ads or by these bloggers. They expressed a sense of exclusion by not being considered in media as part of the Muslim community:

Khadija:

I think that the hijab is essentially what identifies a Muslim woman. Like, I personally do not wear the hijab. And I don't wear the headscarf. And I have often been mistaken for not being Muslim, like people thought I'm Sikh, I'm Hindu. And it is just like an identifier, that sign you're a Muslim. Which is why I don't think like, the portrayal of a non-hijab, a Muslim woman, like that's just not very common. If someone's going to be Muslim in the media then they tend to just bum the headscarf on her, and then suddenly she's a Muslim – it takes more than that you know, to call someone a Muslim.

Sarah:

No, never. Because I think that would be very specific to me. And mine would be…I would feel represented, if there was a character in a TV show, or film or a book, or even a blogger who was like, I don't wear the hijab but I pray, I fast, I don't drink or have sex because religion is important to me. Someone who makes it clear that they practice Islam but does it without wearing the hijab.

The different experiences in representation acts as a symbolic boundary between women who wear the hijab and don't. The different shared experiences and frustrations around this representation within brand cultures highlights the in-group dynamics between hijabis and non-hijabis. Research on symbolic boundaries orients heavily towards the idea of in-group formation within communities (Fine, 1987; Hannah, 2015). Tavory (2010) in her study on yarmulkes and symbolic boundaries highlights how the individuals who wore the yarmulke felt a sense of token representation and internalized that boundary in how they judged other members of the community. The assumed representation, according to Tavory (2010) is the symbolism in the boundary as it is socially constructed. Similarly, the participants of this study used the symbolic representation that is constructed around the hijab to differentiate their experiences and how they felt towards the branded Muslim women.

6.3   Empowerment for Who

6.3.1   The Empowerment Narrative

When participants were asked on how they felt about the empowerment or feminist narrative within these brand cultures, they specifically discussed the advertisements by brands and sponsorships they include bloggers in. There were mixed feelings about the portrayal: with some women expressing happiness in the framing and others describing their annoyance in brands taking a saviour role:

> Salma:
>
> Yeah, I think it's brilliant. Because I just feel like we just want to fight that like, oppressive thing. You know, like, we don't want to read it…We want Muslim women to be seen as strong because we are strong, you know. Yeah, definitely love it

> Tahani:
>
> I find that really annoying because they think they've been revolutionary by saying, like, now today, in the 21st century, Muslim women are going to be fierce, they're going to do sports, things like that. But actually, I've grown up hearing, like prophetic stories where Muslim women are fighting in wars, where they had businesses and how they earned more than the men. It's not a revolution. It's not new. It's just because Western society thinks that were oppressed, so therefore, they're trying to like, spin the narrative, and they expect us to fall for it.

There is a plethora of research that supports similar findings of women enjoying advertisements with an empowerment narrative (Henard & Rossetti, 2014; Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008; McMahan, et al., 2005). The participants that described happiness in these portrayals also expressed how these depictions would help Muslim women or translate into affective change:

> Sumaiya:
>
> But I do like the fact that they do involve Muslim women and it kind of removes a lot of that bad stigma around the Muslim community and I think doing that, or working with these influences or brands, kind of just shows you that you know, we've come a long way. It's actually giving women Muslim women an opportunity to do something that they probably always wanted, typical Muslim women or Asian Indian women, we were always told think a certain way, be a certain way but being on social media and seeing these women, anybody could be a boss

The findings that increased 'feminist' representation will manifest into feminist action aligns to criticism of commodity feminism. McRobbie (2008, p.533) refers to this as the "feminist fallacy" where the female consumers assume her alignment with a brand as a form of power. This fallacy is well articulated in Banet-Weiser's (2018: 23) criticism of the economies of visibility: "economies of visibility fundamentally shift politics of visibility so that visibility becomes the end rather than a means of an end". The visual representation of these Muslim women as empowered are portrayed as "self-sufficient and enough on their own" (ibid). Tsai (2011: 90) in her research on queer perspectives of diversity advertising reveals how participants aware of their marginalization gained a sense of "social recognition and political inclusion" from these brands. Tsai (2011) refers to the empowerment the participants believe the imagined queer community gains from as a form of self-validation. Similarly, the women who found the portrayal as positive, always referred to their marginalization and othering in media and described it as a refreshing change for the community.

In contrast, women who disliked the portrayals held strong opinions on the way the empowerment was being framed. Majority of them referred to the Western construction of these advertisements and only once the women in the advertisements or sponsorships marked certain Western criteria was, she included as empowered:

> Ameera:
>
> The other thing that bothers me is that, I think how empowered women are in those ads, and how they're shown is always linked to how Western they are. Like you never see a woman who's dressed traditionally, who has like hair or clothes that's traditional

and them being powered. It's always a woman brought up in Western ideals, buys into Western culture because it's the West that converts them…kinda the white saviour complex - only because we have showed them empowerment- are that they now. It's never like we're accepting you for you. It's more we're changing you into what you've always wanted to do - You want to be like – "You're welcome".

The white saviour complex that the participants alluded to aligns to academic criticism of 'unveiling' that media is notorious for. As discussed in the literature review (refer 2.1), Yegenoglu (1998) and MacDonald (2006) criticize media's obsession with unveiling the Muslim women as a satisfaction of the Western orient gaze and justification of Western intervention. These brands seemingly intervene in the stereotyped portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed and unveil the empowered women beneath but only "unveils" a certain type of Muslim women. These findings are supported by Kassam (2011) and Mamdani's (2004) argument of the 'good neo-liberal' Muslim women that media constructs so that she more palatable and recognizable to the Western audience.

6.3.2   Displacing Empowerment as a Symbolic Boundary

When asked about who these narratives appeal too or whether the women themselves felt represented by these empowerment tactics, there was an interesting displacement of the empowerment framed. The displacement occurred in two ways: the women who liked the ads would displace its effect onto an imagined 'other' Muslim woman, particularly hijabis and comparatively women who disliked the ads displaced its benefits onto the white imagined audience. When the participants who liked the ads discussed who would benefit from these portrayals, majority of them didn't claim it for themselves, but implied that there was *another* Muslim woman who would benefit. Some women did explicitly mention that a woman in hijab would benefit because media has framed her specifically as unempowered:

Leila:

I think for the people who are loyal to the hijab and want to wear it because of what they believe in – I think large brands empowering that, it's a big thing. But women who don't wear the hijab, we aren't as restricted so we're like doing sports either way

> because we have more sportwear options, and I'm going out either way – so it's good
>
> for the people who need that push in life.

This displacement of empowerment, or feminism relates to Dosekun (2015: 971) study on post-feminism amongst women in Lagos, Nigeria where her participants expressed a displacement of feminism on "other local women" and revealed the "logics of distinction, displacement…and their sense of being beyond some other state of femininity". While it is beyond this study's grasp to make a judgement on whether the participants of this study were expressing post-feminist traits, the similarity of displacement is significant. It should be noted that majority of them did not speak of these 'other Muslim women' in a bad light but came from their understanding of the trouble hijabis face because of their negative representation in media.

However, there still existed a sense of othering, by reaffirming the belief that women in hijab can't relate to empowerment portrayals the same way the participants do. Othering has traditionally been discussed as a means for the West to juxtapose the East as backward, however limited study has explored othering *within* (Shome and Hedge, 2002). Comparatively, the concept of symbolic boundaries provides for the flexibility to interpret the internal distinctions made within this group.

Compared to the displacement of this benefit from within the group, the women that disliked the ads displaced it outwards. In their critique of the Western framing, they discussed how the framing would help non-Muslims, specifically women understand Muslim women better:

> Munira:
>
> I think by painting the Muslim woman in a hijab, that's not as much for Muslim
>
> women as it is for the non-Muslim woman, I think, feminists, I think it's showing
>
> other women that Oh, that's the same as ours. Again, having the Muslim woman the
>
> ad - that's for us, but painting as a feminist, that's for them. That's for other women,
>
> like saying that Muslim women aren't that different to you. The only difference is that
>
> they'll cover their head, although, you know, pray five times a day. But at the end of
>
> the day, everyone is a feminist.

> Zahra:
>
> People who don't know, much about Muslims have this existing impression of Islam in their head. So then, like, obviously, for us, it's just like a bit of an overall like, an almost a bit patronizing. There are like some people who might see that and change their opinion. I don't think these big corporations' intention is to change people's perception. But like overall, it's a good thing, I think, because there are probably a few people who do see that and change.

This outward displacement assumes that the non-Muslim women is lacking in understanding reflects traditional out-group categorizations. Tarlo (2010) and Nayel (2017) both in their study of Muslim women in the UK described the othering of non-Muslim women to validate in-group understandings of the hijab and its importance.

Contextualizing this within brand cultures and symbolic boundaries reveal that the 'idea' of empowerment presented in these portrayals hold symbolic value. The displacement of empowerment in this context, reveals how the same symbolic resource is used to demarcate two different imagined groups.

7   CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the research questions proposed on the symbolic boundaries negotiated around the portrayal of the branded Muslim women on social media. The research question was structured to answer which features of the portrayal were being negotiated and what symbolic boundaries did the negotiation reveal. Investigated through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 18 Muslim women in the UK, the discussion around the portrayal of the branded Muslim women did reveal distinct symbolic boundaries aligning to specific features of the branding:

The key insights drawn from these negotiations that answer the research question were: The Western idea of femininity these branded women were framed under revealed tensions of modesty, specifically around the performative nature hijabis were held too. The focusing on hijabis revealed how modesty stood to represent a symbolic boundary in how hijabis online were being judged. The fact that mainly hijabis were being held to this standard revealed another symbolic boundary of who then was expected to, or socially constructed to represent the Muslim community. Nearly all hijab wearing participants expressed frustration in the fact that because they wore the hijab – that they were singled out to bare the representation of the Muslim community. This burden of representation aligned to the monolithic perpetuation of the Muslim woman in media, that brands now continue. This burden of representation was two-fold as non-hijabis felt a different sense of burden in not being considered as a representation of the community. The symbolism assigned to being represented or representation acted as a symbolic boundary in how the women identified themselves within the community. These were the two boundaries that distinctly differed by hijabi's and non-hijabi's. The third boundary was more blurred in distinction but revealed the distinctive displacement of the empowerment narrative brands have tried

to frame Muslim women in. The women had assigned this 'benefit' of empowerment to an imagined 'other' – another Muslim woman who needed the portrayal more, or the misguided white women. This imagined benefit from the empowerment narrative and its displacement onto other women rather than themselves revealed how this process acted as a symbolic boundary. These symbolic boundaries were all negotiated as the Muslim women were reflective of their position and did not want to afford judgement onto women they had never met. These symbolic boundaries also revealed the potential symbolic in-group formations and classifications around being a hijabi and non-hijabi within the community.

The study uses 'potential' as it recognizes these findings are limited in generalizability and representation of the Muslim community. A further limitation of this study was that due to the diversity of the sampling, it could not factor in the cultural contexts of the reasonings behind the participants negotiations. The study recognizes that cultural contexts around Muslim identity are significant and therefore recognizes that some symbolic boundaries might be more culturally constituted than religious. Due to the restriction in the scope of the dissertation, there are still significant gaps that can be addressed within the intersection of brand cultures and Muslim women. Future research on these intersections could potentially investigate how Muslim bloggers themselves construct their persona in light of their Muslim identity and what features of their portrayal do they negotiate. Likewise, as highlighted within the situation of Dina Tokio, men had an equal commentary around her portrayal, and it would prove insightful to unpack the heterogeneity of Muslim men as they are far less researched.

On a concluding note, drawing back to Dina Tokio, while her situation of removing the hijab can be argued as an expected backlash and an expected polarization of opinions, what this research revealed for both academia and the researcher herself was

the amount of personal debate and reflexivity that the interviewees negotiated in their discussion of both Dina and branded Muslim women. There seemed to be shared sense of sisterhood amongst these women as they always wanted to afford respect first before criticism. Considering that these women are constantly navigating the stereotyped plains of their identity in media and increasing threat of Islamophobia, it was refreshing for the researcher herself to experience the sense of togetherness these women expressed around their shared identity of being a Muslim woman. Therefore, while the backlash Dina faced might have represented for some the 'problems' within the community, this study argues that it is far more intricate than a handful of hate comments. The negotiations and deliberations Muslim women make about themselves and others is highly complex and requires reflection both from individuals and academia. As one interviewee eloquently put it, "I am more than just my scarf or my religion – I am a mother, a sister, a teacher and these are factors of my life I work around daily. These books I've read and, on the media, they never paint me as anything more – but I am more, I am more than my scarf and I am more than my religion – I just wish people would stop to see that".

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8   APPENDICES

8.1   APPENDIX A – DESCRIPTION OF ADVERTISEMENTS

8.1.1   Nike Pro-Hijab (2018)

The advertisement begins with a young girl with a loosely draped scarf skateboarding through a town or city that is ambiguous. The girl receives disapproving looks from an elderly woman in hijab and man before the female narrator asks in Arabic "What will they say about you". The imagery shifts to two women boxing, followed by the question "That it's unladylike?" – followed by series of questions to indicate the imagined public would not approve. The narrator then asks, "or maybe…?" and the imagery shifts to women training hard, a woman triumphantly rides a horse, a girl leaps on the rooftops of this city, a figure skater in a hijab performs and a fencer starts her competition. All whilst in the background the narrator says: "they'll say that you can't be stopped...that you make it look easy…that you're the next big thing". It then concludes with a child standing by ice-rink looking worried and then shifts to an adult leg stepping onto the ice-rink. The campaign slogan used for this ad is "Believe in More".

8.1.2   Procter and Gamble - #LoveOverBias Campaign

The advertisement was aired during the 2018 Winter Olympics, titled on YouTube as P&G - Thank You, Mom - The Winter Olympics (2018). It is an advertisement that highlights how mothers support their children's' dream and through all difficulties – whether it is biases over religion, gender, colour, race, disability or sexual orientation. Each of these biases are showcased through the relationship with the mother and how she pushes her child regardless. The Muslim mother and daughter are used to highlight the bias of religion.

The ad depicts a young girl in a figure skating outfit and hijab in their home getting ready, while the mother who also wears a hijab or abaya is in the background stitching something for the daughter. She then drapes another scarf over the daughter's head and helps her prepare her hijab. The ad concludes with the message "Imagine if the world could see what a mom sees…#LoveOverBias…Thank you, Mom".

8.1.3   H&M Conscious

The H&M ad, which gained over 10 million views on YouTube, challenges a series of stereotypes around fashion such as wearing "red as a red-head" or "wear pink" as a man, with the Muslim women coming into the spotlight when the narrator say's "be chic", immediately followed by a man in a thobe and the words "or be sheikh".

8.2   APPENDIX B – INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following is the interview guide referenced during the interviews. The following questions is the extended list and not all these questions were used in the actual interview. Multiple questions were laid out previously to help direct the interviewer in keeping the conversation within the research objectives whilst providing flexibility to alternate based on the response and probing.

1. Social Media Questions

- Do you use social media often?

- Which platforms do you use?

- What do you use them for?

2. Advertisements

- Having used (platforms mentioned by the interviewee) have you encountered advertisements on your timeline or brands sponsorships?

- One tactic brands are using is attempting to be more diverse in their advertisements, what do you think of that move?

- What do you think of Muslim women being included in those ads?

- What ads are you familiar with that included Muslim women?

- (Based on the response) What do you think of that depiction?

- How would you have described the way they've been depicted?

- What do you think of the empowerment narrative brands are taking?

- Who do you think that appeals to?

3. Female Muslim Bloggers

- Are you familiar with Muslim bloggers on social media?

- (if not brought up organically) What do you think of the Dina Tokio controversy?

- Why do you think she received that backlash?

- A term used to describe her was a 'fake' Muslim, why do you think people called her that?

- How would you have described the way these bloggers depict themselves?

- What about them appeals to the (Muslim) audience? / Why do you think they're popular?

- Do you think a woman without a hijab could be as successful?

4. Representation

- Do you feel represented in these presentations?

- Who do these ads or bloggers represent?

8.3 APPENDIX C – CONSENT FORM

<u>Interview Consent Form</u>

The conducted study is for my MSc in Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. As per the requirements for my masters, I am expected to conduct an independent research that has been approved by the Department's Academic Heads.

I aim to examine how Muslim women in the UK negotiate the way brands have framed Muslim women in their advertisements and how Muslim bloggers frame themselves. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked about your opinions and feelings towards these depictions. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour, however if specified earlier, the timings can be adjusted accordingly.

During the interview, I will seek your permission to record the interview on my phone and take notes during the discussion. Only once have you agreed will I make any audio recordings. All audio recordings, notes taken will be kept securely, only accessible to the interviewer. Any inclusion of your interview in the final study will be completely anonymized, through the replacement of your name with a pseudonym and any information that might indicate your identity will be omitted. If requested, I can provide you with a transcript of the interview and am willing to remove any comment you wish to withdraw.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any point during the research, without providing reason. If any questions during the interview make you feel uncomfortable, you are not obligated to answer. If you choose to withdraw from the study, all information you have provided will be destroyed, unless you specify otherwise. If you agree to participate in this study through interview, please sign below:

By signing this form, I ……………………………………………… declare I have understood what this research is conducting and my role in the study. I am aware that once approved my interview will be recorded and about my right as a participant to withdraw.

Signature: Date:

The Branded Muslim Woman

NuHA FAYAZ