A personal decision or a public action? Followers' reaction to a hijabista's decision to unveil
by Dina Abdel-Mageed

Abstract
This article looks at the encoding-decoding process in the communication between hijabi influencers and their audience, focusing on the case of the influencer Amena Khan. A hijabi influencer based in the U.K., Khan acquired the status of a microcelebrity over her decade-long social media presence. In 2018, Khan was chosen as L’Oreal’s first hijabi model. Khan removed her hijab recently. She received mostly negative reactions to her move reflected in the comments on her YouTube video “Change”. I collected some of the YouTube comments on the video to examine her audience’s response. In light of reception theory, this study divides the comments into oppositional, negotiated or dominant. Khan’s case reveals how a niche audience identify with hijabistas, decode their messages, and react to their content. This study showcases the representational role played by hijabi influencers and the limitations of their ability to “influence” when their content challenges dominant cultural discourses.

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1. Introduction
There are a number of studies on hijabi influencers and the role they play on the Internet (Baulch and Pramiyanti, 2018; Beta, 2014; Kavakci and Kraepelin, 2017). To the best of my knowledge there is no study that explores such a moment of change in a major aspect of how a hijabista encodes her messages. By breaching the “contract” negotiated between her and her audience, Khan failed to meet her followers’ expectations [1]. More often than not, hijabistas are regarded as living manifestations of “women’s ability to negotiate between contemporary fashion trends and the maintenance of modesty as a component of faith” [2]. Abandoning the veil in Khan’s case seemed to demonstrate that striking that balance was impossible. This was clearly reflected in the sense of disappointment apparent in many of the comments.

By exploring the impact of such a shift on the hijabista’s audience, we can understand more about the
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influence of the growing phenomenon of microcelebrities and how their social media messages are decoded by their followers. The word “hijabista” is used in this article to refer to a Muslim woman who — through her media presence — “[mediates] ... the boundary between personal identity and consumerism on the one side and collective (i.e., religious) identity and piety on the other” [3].

Amena Khan has been sharing content on social media for the past 10 years. She has a major following on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube; her YouTube channel alone has 408,000 subscribers at the time of writing. Like other influencers, Khan has been monetising her popularity by selling her modest fashion products and marketing for different beauty brands. In recent years, she has also launched her own makeup line. Abidin (2016) describes the advertisement done by influencers as one that takes “the form of a personal narrative and incorporate Influencers’ perspectives of having experienced the product or service first-hand”. Khan has been using her makeup and hijab-styling tutorials on YouTube as well as her social media posts to advertise for different products. She seems to be fully aware of what Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017) describe as “the marketing value of personal information within the attention economy” [4]. Topics of her videos range from her latest hijab styles to a step-by-step guide to solving marital problems based on her personal experience. Her religious identity has been cleverly incorporated into her online content, and the most prominent symbol of that identity is her hijab. Against the backdrop of a tidy, cosy house, Khan has been taking videos of herself talking to her audience or interviewing other people. Making up a single name for her and her husband Osama like celebrity couples, Khan has been referring to herself and her partner as “OsaAmena”. Like a number of other hijabistas, Khan has been “offering up borderline provocative imagery wrapped in the legitimacy of marriage” [5].
2. Literature review

Waninger (2015) describes a hijabista as “a woman who blends her taste and style to create a name for herself, branding the veil in a way that seems ‘natural’ to Islamic lifestyle” [6]. Hijabistas are part of what has become known as the “Islamic culture industry”, which consists of “series of images, practices, knowledges, and commodities [that] are marketed specifically to Muslim women” [7]. While studying
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hijabi influencers, it is important to look at how hijab has acquired a symbolic meaning in the communication. For hijabi influencers, the act of wearing a headscarf can be seen as a statement of identity, an attempt for distinction in an online environment that is largely defined by non-Muslim terms. In the offline world, wearing hijab is a field of struggle rather than merely a religious practice. Moruzzi (2008) describes the code of dress as a “representational code”, whose capacity of identification depends on the wearer’s ability to utilise the code and the others’ ability to interpret it. This explains why, in real life, hijab has so much symbolic power as well as multiple layers of social, cultural, and political meanings. It can be symbol of rebellion in some contexts and a symbol of oppression in others. It can be an indicator of social status or economic class, and it can simply be a personal sign of piety. In some political contexts it signifies opposition to the state while in others it signifies submission to the state.

In her study of hijab styles in Iran, Moruzzi (2008) describes a “game of social distinction”, arguing that clothing choice is about self-representation as much as it is about practicality. In the glamorous world of influencers, hijab can be seen as a flag to a niche audience with limited attention to indicate that the kind of content they are looking for is here: a mediated “reality” constructed on their own terms. Influencers engage in a process of negotiation over their position in a busy, oversaturated media environment. Thus, hijab is an important identity marker for hijabi influencers to distinguish themselves from other microcelebrities, with whom they compete for stage and audience.

Theresa Senft (2008) defines microcelebrity as “a new style of online performance that involves people ‘amping up’ their popularity over the Web using technologies like video, blogs and social networking sites”. Abidin (2016) defines influencers as “everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in ‘digital’ and ‘physical’ spaces, and monetize their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events”. In comparison to celebrities, microcelebrity status “involves the curation of a persona that feels authentic to readers” (Abidin, 2016). However, the fact that the influencer’s online persona feels authentic does not mean that it is actually authentic, hence the importance of curation. In today’s media environment, the concept of authenticity is an elusive one. Some recent studies suggest a need for rethinking the idea of microcelebrity because it does not fully articulate the current complexity of the phenomenon. Bethany Usher (2020) argues that what started as an individual activity in the past is today a “professionalised and commercialised group production practice”. Rather than icons of “individualised emancipation” who challenge the “cultural hegemony of corporate media”, those microcelebrities now are part of the mainstream. In this context, authenticity is curated rather than communicated. It is interesting to look at how the authenticity discussion unfolded in Khan’s case because her audience connected her authenticity to her appearance, namely the way she dressed. Therefore, removing hijab resulted in a strong backlash because her followers started questioning how genuine her online persona has been all along. Many comments implied that Khan deceived her audience by pretending to be someone she was not.

This article will draw on Hall’s (1973) encoding and decoding model. Originally developed to explain the role of broadcast media, particularly television, in the circulation of meaning. Reception theory, as developed by Hall, highlights the importance of the “interplay between text and context”. This model “shifted the balance of power to construct meaning away from media texts and toward their consumers” (Worthington, 2008). In the age of “produsage” (Bruns, 2008), reception theory is sometimes perceived as outdated. However, according to Mathieu (2015), reception analysis “remains relevant in its articulation of the text-context relationship”. In today’s media environment, Mathieu argues, “audiences are reduced to a single reality or simply ignored as an empirical reality”, which is reminiscent of the status of the audience in media studies before the development of Hall’s theory. According to this view, this gap can be filled by reception analysis.

This study serves as a critical means to further understand the YouTube’s comments as a fan discourse form. By looking at followers’ comments in relation to the content produced by the influencer herself, we can enhance our understanding of how the process of meaning making works. According to Madden, et al.
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(2013), YouTube comments have remained relatively “understudied” because of the difficulties related to language as well as the amount of data. YouTube comments are more often than not represented as an “unregulated space of hostility” (Murthy and Sharma, 2019). Many of the available studies focus on the video content instead of the comments produced by users (Madden, *et al.* 2013). Among research that examined the content of YouTube user-generated comments is Murthy and Sharma (2019), a study of comments on videos of the musical group Das Racist. The study by Rabby and Raddon (2015) involved a qualitative content analysis of the YouTube comments on a speech given by a twelve-year-old child on banking reform.

This work explores the relationship between production and reception in the interaction between hijabi influencers and their followers in a specific situation: an instance of breaching the audience’s expectations, by taking off the veil. I draw on a textual analysis of the YouTube comments of Khan’s followers to highlight how such a major shift distorted Khan’s ability to produce a meaningful discourse for her audience. This has resulted in a mostly “oppositional reading” — in Hall’s (1973) terminology — of her video.

### 3. Data and method

This study focuses on an encoding-decoding process of Khan’s YouTube video titled “Change...”. My analysis began with viewing the video repeatedly to explore the main themes of the producer’s encoded message. This was followed by collecting 10,000 comments to decode how the audience reacted to Khan’s video.

**Encoding the video**

Khan uploaded the video on 3 June 2020 under the name “Change” (Khan, 2020). By 28 June 2020, it had been viewed 572,969 times, with 19,617 comments. Khan created the video to break the news of her taking off hijab to her audience. In her words, she wanted to “sit down and have a chat with ... [them]”, which indicated that the aim was to spark some response. The idea of creating the video itself also indicates a feeling of accountability towards her audience, which urged Khan to offer an explanation of what at face value seems to be a personal decision.

The selection of the title for the video itself is noteworthy because it highlights the significance of the shift. The one simple, straightforward word indicated a disruption to a communicative message that had been stable for many years. Since this article was first written, the name of the video has been changed to “Choice”. Unlike “Change”, the new name diverts the attention from the action of unveiling itself to the mental process behind it.

In Senft’s (2008) study of the camgirls’ subculture, she points out how challenging it is to deal with “presentation of self” online given the difficulty in compartmentalising identity. “Online, the words and images with which we associate ourselves persist indefinitely, retaining their exact original form long after the context of their creation has been lost and the self who created them has been discarded.” This explains the challenge of Khan’s task in communicating the change in her “presentation of self” to her large following. The hijabi influencer managed over the years to appeal to a niche audience and to encode her content in a way that met their expectations, resulting in a specific mode of interaction between her as an encoder and her audience as decoders. The content she produced for no less than 10 years persuaded her followers that living a modern life guided by faith was feasible. The encoded message in the video, however, was that it was time to set up new expectations and to negotiate a new “contract” with the audience. In this context, the act of unveiling was perceived — as reflected in the comments — as an act of detachment from the faith and of surrender to worldly temptations, rather than an exercise of free choice.
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A textual analysis of the video suggests that the message was conveyed by four major themes: 1) separation of public from private; 2) choice and female agency; 3) authenticity and spontaneity; and, 4) change vs. continuity.

In the video, Khan emphasised that there was a clear distinction between her personal life and her online presence, and by this she did not mean that her online self was less authentic. Rather, the distinction, according to her, had more to do with how she learned to “draw boundaries” to protect her privacy. She explained that she did not share much of her life and never would because her life was not “for public consumption”. She said that keeping the hijab on only for the videos was not an option for her because she refused to live that “duality”. Not all her content was about hijab, she argued, but she admitted that the veil was “a big part of the visual aspect”. She said her words might be misunderstood, but she was “willing to take the risk”. Despite describing the act of unveiling as a “personal act”, she said she “owed” her audience an explanation. In her words, the video felt important, but she described the change in her personal life as “a fairly kind of smooth transition”.

The contradictions in Khan’s discourse highlight some of the dilemmas inherent to the idea of being an influencer, particularly a hijabi one, whose private life is shared publicly. Despite sharing details of her marriage and family life with her followers and shooting videos taken in the private space of her home, Khan claimed to maintain a distinction between the private and public aspects of her life. Also, her framing of the act of taking off the veil as a personal choice/act and her statements about her audience being entitled to a clarification sounded inconsistent, if not outright paradoxical.

“Choice” is a recurring theme throughout the video, and it is the video’s title now. Khan said that wearing hijab and taking it off were both her choices, explaining that her veil never held her back. “Pursue what your heart wants,” she told her audience. She advised her followers not to be “swayed” by her decision. Emphasising that she was not a religious figure, Khan explained that she never shared why she put on the hijab because she did not want “the female Muslim experience to be boxed up into what is perceived to be the experience of a few”. According to her, there were “millions of reasons to wear the hijab”. Khan spoke on behalf of Muslim women: “We’re not monolith. We’re not these flat objects. We’re real humans with history, a past, complexities”. Khan said she only shared how she put on the veil, but never shared why she did it.

Her argument sounds contradictory. Why would an audience be interested in how a personal decision had been made if it did not have public implications? The fact that putting on the veil is more often than not framed as a dramatic moment of spiritual awakening that attracts a celebratory response makes the attempt to downplay the significance of its removal, especially among celebrities and microcelebrities, sound unrealistic. Khan herself made a video about her “hijab story”. Also, advising followers not to be “swayed” be her decisions/actions clearly contradicts the very logic of being an “influencer”. Introducing the concept of “choice” in discussions about hijab is a sure trigger for strong responses because it challenges traditional discourses that frame covering up as an unnegotiable, religious obligation for women.

In the video, Khan stressed her authenticity by arguing that her off-line and online personas were the same. She described her decisions to wear and to take off the veil as “spur of the moment decisions” to highlight their spontaneous nature. Spontaneity was emphasised again when she described the beginning of her online presence as “purely circumstantial”. She described communication with her audience using words such as “connection” and “sharing”. She said that with such a change, she was sharing her “truth”. “It won’t resonate with everyone,” she explained, adding that that was better than being “fake”. She argued that her online presence has not been as profitable as some people might think and that her business was “not a multi-million-pound company”. While backgrounding the commercial aspect of her content, she foregrounded the “gratification” it has been giving her and the “connection” it has enabled her to establish with her audience.

Again, there are obvious contradictions in these arguments. Khan’s statements about authenticity and spontaneity ignore the performative and authoritative aspects of being a microcelebrity, whose fame largely
A personal decision or a public action? Followers' reaction to a hijabista's decision to unveil depends on presenting online a carefully curated image of herself. In their study of the relationship between bloggers and their audience, Arnould and Price (2000) argued that “while authenticity and authority weave together, the authoritative voice is paramount” (quoted in Usher, 2020). This can be applied to Khan’s case, where the hijabi influencer has been assuming the role of an “expert” on modest fashion and beauty. Also, the way Khan framed the commercial aspect of being an influencer in terms of personal gratification and connection dismissed how — through their hidden advertisements — influencers help perpetuate consumerism by presenting and encouraging consumerist behaviour (Usher, 2020).

In Khan’s opinion, change is good. “I’m OK with change,” she said in the video. In one part of the video, she argued: “We don’t remain in the same spot. We continuously move.” Although some aspects of her online presence are going to change, others would just remain the same; towards the end of the 20-minute video, Khan announced that her business Pearl Daisy would remain “live”.

Khan did not detail the reasons behind her decision, but she framed it using a female empowerment discourse. Despite Khan’s emphasis on concepts such as choice, authenticity, and female autonomy, it is important to note that there can be more to her “choice” than meets the eye. Khan operates within a media environment governed by the capitalist logic of supply and demand. In the video, Khan herself mentioned that when she first decided to put on the veil, she was discouraged by some people who thought that hijab would limit her chances of success. The work of Elizabeth Wissinger (2012) on “aesthetic labor” is relevant here. Her study of black fashion models shows that the “aesthetic labor” involved in highlighting or downplaying one’s racial characteristics is required by both society’s “white gaze” and the “corporate gaze”. The challenges faced by Black models in Wissinger’s study are quite similar to those faced by hijabi influencers, including Khan, which makes it understandable why some of them might try to de-emphasise some of their religious or ethnic characteristics to construct a more “marketable” identity (Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017). In a social media realm where success is measured by the numbers of likes, shares, and followers, trying to appeal to a bigger audience seems to be every influencer’s quest. It is important to mention here that in 2018, Khan had to quit her role in L’Oreal’s campaign as the beauty brand’s first hijab-wearing model over a controversy surrounding some tweets that she had published in 2014 criticising Israel’s war on Gaza. This indicates the kind of pressure that hijabistas experience to mediate a version of themselves that could be accepted across different online publics.

Decoding the video

I used MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020 to capture the most recent 10,000 comments on Khan’s video on 28 June 2020. Users responding to other users were ignored because my focus was on the relationship between the influencer and her followers, so I analysed top level comments only. I ended up with a dataset of 6,811 comments.
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**Figure 2:** Amena Khan’s first appearance without hijab in a tweet shared on 3 June 2020.

First, I generated a word cloud ([Figure 3](#)) using MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2020, displaying the most frequently used 75 words in the dataset. I created a stopword list to remove common words devoid of analytical value. The visualisation indicated potential concepts to focus on. The word cloud, in which font sizes represent the words’ numbers of occurrences, shows that commenters used the words “hijab”, “Allah”, and “Muslim” the most respectively. The following chart shows that some other frequently used words, such as “sin”, “sad”, “disappointed”, and “shame”. Also, words like “decision” and “choice” appear in the visualisation.
A lexical search for the word “hijab” was then conducted, and all the segments containing this keyword were combined for the purpose of analysis. The coding was then focused on findings with the word “hijab” to concentrate on comments using this specific keyword. By refining the lexical search, I managed to analyse what the users thought about a specific concept (in this case, hijab). Refining the search reduced the number of comments to 3,991. Next, a sample of 200 comments was collected by applying a random sampling technique. A combination of manual coding and textual analysis with MAXQDA was then carried out. The subcorpus was coded into three groups based on commenters’ positions: oppositional, negotiated, and dominant. For example, a comment supporting Khan and encouraging her to exercise free choice was coded as dominant. A comment describing Khan as fake, hypocritical, or opportunistic was coded as oppositional. A comment containing supplication, calls to followers not to judge others was coded as negotiated. It turned out that 73 percent of the comments analysed were oppositional, 9.5 percent dominant, and 17.5 percent negotiated.

My decoding discussion aimed to investigate the reaction of Khan’s audience to the video where she announced taking off her veil. The majority of the comments in the sucorpus had an unfavourable response to the video, which might be one reason why Khan disabled the like/dislike feature. Most of the comments coded came under the oppositional category.

**Oppositional**

Seventy-three percent of the comments expressed an oppositional view of the video. The central themes that emerged from analysing this group of comments were the followers’ feelings of disappointment and scepticism and accusations of opportunism. The word “disappointed” appeared 206 times in the initial corpus. Many female commenters attributed their disappointment to the fact that they either were “inspired” to put on hijab or continued to wear it because of Khan’s influence. Some of the comments were quite emotional, expressing how disheartening Khan’s decision was. Various commenters described how they felt “betrayed”. One commenter wrote, “It’s just so sad to see that this world couldn’t let you stay true to yourself it makes me not want to create content in case I get lost”, describing how Khan’s success “sucked” her into “this superficial world”. Another commenter described Khan’s decision as “the biggest disappointment ever”.

Figure 3: Word cloud for Khan’s video.
Personal decision vs. public action

One of the interesting arguments made in the comments was that hijabi influencers carried an extra layer of responsibility for their words and actions because of the “influence” exerted on their followers. Based on this line of reasoning, a number of commenters blamed Khan for “misleading” other Muslim women, particularly younger ones. A fear of a domino effect, where Khan’s move set off a chain reaction among her female followers, was reflected in the comments. One commenter warned Khan, “Know that 100s if not thousands of girls will take off their scarf because of you. It’s your liability as you love influencing girls”. Another one wondered, “how many girls who see you as a role model will also remove their hijabs now? Do you even care about that happening?”

According to this argument, unlike ordinary people, Khan was not totally free to do whatever she wanted because she decided to put her life online. In other words, promoting a certain way of life by publicising it made her accountable to her audience at some level. Assuming the role of stakeholders in her success, followers felt a sense of entitlement to know about her personal life and decisions. Some of the commenters mentioned a specific video Khan made about her “hijab story”, where she explained how she donned the veil. For them, everything about her hijab was public, but her decision to remove it was framed to her audience as private, and the “Change” video seemed to give them neither “closure” nor answers. One commenter addressed Khan, “be bold enough to publicly explain the intellectual and philosophical reasons why you no longer want to cover your hair and body according to the mainstream consensus on what hijab is for Muslim women”.

Such an assumption about the nature of the interaction between the audience and the influencer resonated with Khan’s statements about her feeling that she “owed” that to her audience. The very idea of creating the video and the apologetic tone reflected a level of acceptance of that idea. But at the same time, in the video, Khan maintained that it was a personal decision, drawing boundaries between private and public.

In some of the comments, Khan was blamed for failing in a representational role that she had been supposedly undertaking. Some of the followers thought of her as “representative” of Muslim women. By “selling out”, she was proving the oppressed Muslim women narrative accorded to them. “Its people like you that make the non muslims thinks the hijab is forced and a form of suffocation? Now your free?” wrote one commenter. The contradiction between how Khan’s message about her not being a religious figure had been encoded and how it had been decoded should be pointed out here. Khan assumed that by not verbally claiming to be a religious authority figure or a representative of Muslim women, she had not acquired that role. Many of the comments tell a very different story, where Khan’s message accomplished an important function for her followers. As reflected in many of the comments, Khan’s audience did not perceive her content merely as a form of entertainment. Rather, it actually satisfied her audience’s need for craving a space for themselves — represented by her — in the digital world.

In the video, Khan said that hijab never held her back, a statement to which some commenters responded with cynicism. “If it didn’t hold you back why take it off so more brands can pay you more money to be in there campaigns,” asked a female follower. Another commenter lamented how Khan used to be “a positive representation for many british muslim women”. She argued that Khan created her brand “off that very thing”. “You’re living is created on you being a hijabi,” she wrote. “Hijab was your identity,” said another commenter in what clearly reflects an oppositional reading of Khan’s argument about Muslim women being more than their hijab. Some people argued that hijab was actually what distinguished Khan from other influencers. One commenter pointed out, “You represented Islam internally and externally. Now you are just like any other youtuber”. One hijabi wrote to Khan about how she perceived her as more than a social media celebrity:

Many women, and I myself, started watching your videos 10 years ago and were inspired to emulate your hijab styles. My friends had purchased your products because they found the
way your wore and presented hijab to be inspiring. I used to show your videos where you spoke about Islam to my non-Muslims friends because you spoke so eloquently and clearly about Islam.

**Follower identification**

The sense of disappointment reflected in many comments highlights the concept of identification in the follower-hijabi influencer relationship. Some fan studies suggested that “social media amplify fan identification” (Click, et al., 2013), which was obvious in the case of Khan. Followers admire the influencer, consider her a role model and copy her. In this context, the content offered by Khan can affect the attitudes and behaviour of her followers. Some female commenters expressed how Khan’s decision can influenced how Muslim women at large view themselves. One of the commenters argued that the fact that more hijabi influencers were taking off their hijab “makes it harder” for other women to wear it. In another comment, a female follower said that Khan’s decision “proved that there is no way for a [hijabi] woman to be successful”. Another commenter pointed out, “I’ll be honest I feel sad because you wearing hijab in spite of the difficulty felt like we were in this together somehow ...”. A female follower wrote that she started watching Khan’s videos when she was only 12. “i’m 20 now, i would watch your tutorials and loved my hijab because i could style it and feel beautiful,” she wrote. A similar sentiment was expressed in another comment:

*Honesty my issue isn’t that you removed your headscarf. That’s entirely your perogative. But the fact that you made your money, your fame etc from selling headscaves and making us Muslim women feel like our hijabs shouldn't hold us back. Now we feel even more inadequate because you removing your headscarf makes us feel like we won’t become accomplished unless we do the same.*

Commenters used the words “inspiration”, “leader”, and “role model” in a way that reflected a desire to imitate the hijabista’s look and behaviour. One of the comments read, “The only reason I started following her was for her amazing hijab styles”. One commenter wrote: “... You do you, boo but without the hijab, there is nothing much I can relate to you anymore”. In one of the comments, hijab was described as Khan’s “whole forte”. Some followers interpreted the video in light of the actions of other influencers by making connections between Khan’s decision to take off the veil and those of other hijabi influencers, such as the famous YouTuber Dina Tokio. One commenter wrote: “We lack hijabi role models, and were not represented. and every hijabi influencer there is either takes it off or its for clout. I feel like i have literally no one to look up to”. Another female commenter said everyone she looked up to was removing hijab and she wanted to take hers off too. “i dont want to be the only one left in the world wearing a hijab,” she wrote. Some commenters decoded Khan’s message using their preconceived notions about women and gender relations reflecting a patriarchal discourse where it is the responsibility of Khan’s husband to ensure that she remains modestly dressed. In some of the comments Khan’s husband was described as “effeminate”, “too soft”, “docile”, and “dayooth” (a man who lacks protective jealousy). According to the commenters who insulted him, Khan managed to remove her veil only because her husband was not macho enough. Such comments only helped to reinforce a narrative of oppressed Muslim women, whose covering up was imposed by male family members. Women were seen as lacking agency either in the case of putting on the veil or taking it off. Such responses demonstrated how Khan’s attempt to engage with patriarchal social structures has been misread. Despite her attempts to emphasise ideas like female autonomy and free choice in the video, a lot of the comments in this category denied her agency over her body.

Some of the comments in this category reflected a sense of scepticism towards the hijabi influencers’ phenomenon itself. The rejection of the phenomenon was based on the argument that it is “un-Islamic” or that it commercialises religion. Hijabi influencers were criticised for “making money off the back of Islam”.

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The sense of disappointment reflected in many comments highlights the concept of identification in the follower-hijabi influencer relationship. Some fan studies suggested that “social media amplify fan identification” (Click, et al., 2013), which was obvious in the case of Khan. Followers admire the influencer, consider her a role model and copy her. In this context, the content offered by Khan can affect the attitudes and behaviour of her followers. Some female commenters expressed how Khan’s decision can influenced how Muslim women at large view themselves. One of the commenters argued that the fact that more hijabi influencers were taking off their hijab “makes it harder” for other women to wear it. In another comment, a female follower said that Khan’s decision “proved that there is no way for a [hijabi] woman to be successful”. Another commenter pointed out, “I’ll be honest I feel sad because you wearing hijab in spite of the difficulty felt like we were in this together somehow ...”. A female follower wrote that she started watching Khan’s videos when she was only 12. “i’m 20 now, i would watch your tutorials and loved my hijab because i could style it and feel beautiful,” she wrote. A similar sentiment was expressed in another comment:

*Honesty my issue isn’t that you removed your headscarf. That’s entirely your perogative. But the fact that you made your money, your fame etc from selling headscaves and making us Muslim women feel like our hijabs shouldn't hold us back. Now we feel even more inadequate because you removing your headscarf makes us feel like we won’t become accomplished unless we do the same.*

Commenters used the words “inspiration”, “leader”, and “role model” in a way that reflected a desire to imitate the hijabista’s look and behaviour. One of the comments read, “The only reason I started following her was for her amazing hijab styles”. One commenter wrote: “... You do you, boo but without the hijab, there is nothing much I can relate to you anymore”. In one of the comments, hijab was described as Khan’s “whole forte”. Some followers interpreted the video in light of the actions of other influencers by making connections between Khan’s decision to take off the veil and those of other hijabi influencers, such as the famous YouTuber Dina Tokio. One commenter wrote: “We lack hijabi role models, and were not represented. and every hijabi influencer there is either takes it off or its for clout. I feel like i have literally no one to look up to”. Another female commenter said everyone she looked up to was removing hijab and she wanted to take hers off too. “i dont want to be the only one left in the world wearing a hijab,” she wrote. Some commenters decoded Khan’s message using their preconceived notions about women and gender relations reflecting a patriarchal discourse where it is the responsibility of Khan’s husband to ensure that she remains modestly dressed. In some of the comments Khan’s husband was described as “effeminate”, “too soft”, “docile”, and “dayooth” (a man who lacks protective jealousy). According to the commenters who insulted him, Khan managed to remove her veil only because her husband was not macho enough. Such comments only helped to reinforce a narrative of oppressed Muslim women, whose covering up was imposed by male family members. Women were seen as lacking agency either in the case of putting on the veil or taking it off. Such responses demonstrated how Khan’s attempt to engage with patriarchal social structures has been misread. Despite her attempts to emphasise ideas like female autonomy and free choice in the video, a lot of the comments in this category denied her agency over her body.

Some of the comments in this category reflected a sense of scepticism towards the hijabi influencers’ phenomenon itself. The rejection of the phenomenon was based on the argument that it is “un-Islamic” or that it commercialises religion. Hijabi influencers were criticised for “making money off the back of Islam”.

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One commenter argued that hijabistas were “compromising” their hijab by posting photos showing their beauty publicly online. Others criticised Muslim women for looking up to influencers as role models in the first place and argued that influencers’ hijab was not proper hijab because it was not modest enough. One of the comments read, “Anyone who looks up to an ‘influencer’ anyways needs to reevaluate their priorities.”

Khan was also accused of opportunism. Lots of commenters pointed out how they felt “used” because Khan expanded her fan base and made money using hijab, then removed it. Some commenters discussed what they perceived as a growing phenomenon where hijabi influencers achieved fame through their niche (mainly Muslim) fan base then “abandoned” them to become more mainstream. By “normalising” themselves, hijabi influencers were perceived by their audiences to be losing themselves. “she’s made her whole career money fame because of her hijab. It juss seems like the hijab was used for all the money and fame now that she has it all it’s gone,” said one commenter. One commenter wrote:

Very smart business move selling fashionable hijabs for the last 10 years. And a very calculated move to move on from Muslim hijab audience as that audience revenue stream has probably topped out. Coordinated move here and makes alot of business sense now you can generate more revenue and take sponsors and ads that won’t be held back by hijab and you can use of the Muslim audience with this one last video that will most likely go viral so makes perfect sense to fill it up with ads ...

Monetising hijab

In the video, Khan mentioned that she intended to continue to sell her modest fashion products. This aspect of the video sparked disapproving comments that described her decision as another indication of opportunism. Mocking Khan’s statements in her video about continuing to support hijabis, one commenter wrote: “Of course you’ll ‘always stands by hijabi’s’ because you still plan to make a profit from it and continue your hijab business.” Another follower criticised Khan for what she described as “turning her back on” her audience and beliefs. “This would be easier to digest if you didn’t build your platform around modesty, hijab and Islam etc.,” continued the commenter. “Own up what you did and say that you did it for money and promotions bc we all know thats the truth. You came this far because of HIJAB and modest fashion and now youre cutting off that hand that fed you and shaped you.” wrote one commenter. Some commenters suggested that appealing to a larger audience required a change in Khan’s appearance, hence her decision to remove hijab. The dichotomy of hijab vs. success appeared here again. One commenter argued, “the problem is that the Fashion industry do not recognise Hijabi Influencers compared to influencers who do not wear it ... so big companies dnt sponser them as much as non hijabis, so at the end they have limited oppurtunities, they than have to make a choice — Hijab or a FashionCareer/Fame/success! we know which one she chose!”

Because of her decision to take off hijab, Khan was accused by some of her followers of lacking authenticity. The words “fake” and “hypocrisy” were used to describe her in several comments. Some people even accused her of being fake all along. “So you fake your channel for 14 years wearing hijab and build your platform with fans and now you take it off? God bless you sister,” wrote one commenter. Another commenter said, “Why are people surprised? Did you actually believe that this Amnena was genuine with her fake hijab and perfect youtube life she was portraying?” Several commenters urged her to shut down her business to remain true to herself and her audience. One of the comments noted: “if you would really like to keep being genuine, I feel the best way to do that is to shut down your pearl daisy store ... be an influencer whichever way you’d like, but don’t monetize your hijab looks since you no longer represent that image ....” Such comments reflected an oppositional reading of Khan’s comments about her online presence being spontaneous and reflective of her off-line self.

Negotiated
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A percentage of the comments, 17.5 percent, reflected a negotiated reading of the video. Textual analysis suggested that the central theme was understanding. The comments in this category reflected decoding that combined both oppositional and dominant elements. Many of the commenters in this group expressed unfavourable views of the act of unveiling, but they asked others to be more understanding of different viewpoints. They expressed non-judgemental attitudes towards Khan, made supplication for her or urged respect for her decision. Addressing other commenters, one commenter wrote: “You may not like her choice but you can control what you say. Hijab is not just a fabric. Hijab is also what you say”. Another follower urged people to “let her do her thing”. “Everyone has their own journey with the hijab. You as viewers shouldn’t be disappointed because it’s between her and Allah(SWT). So please let’s not be mean and just pray she will one day wear the hijab comfortably and confidently,” she continued.

The comments in this category could be seen as negotiated readings in that they strayed from the meaning intended by Khan, but still disapproved of harsh feedback and judgemental comments.

Dominant

Only 9.5 percent of the comments reflected a dominant reading of Khan’s content by acknowledging and supporting Khan’s right for free choice. One commenter expressed her anger at the inability of an “intelligent Muslim woman” to make such a decision without being abused and judged. “If you were following her solely because she wore a hijab you were clearly following her for the wrong reasons,” she wrote. Some commenters accused those criticising Khan of creating a toxic environment, where women feel pressured to wear hijab just to be perceived as more pious. Others commented on how Khan had to disable the likes and dislikes feature on the video because of the “hate she would get for taking [hijab] off”. One of the interesting features of the comments supporting Khan’s right for free choice was that some of them came from non-Muslim followers. A non-Muslim commenter had been following Khan for the past 10 years, leading to a reading the Qur’an and to learn more and talk to people about “a very misunderstood religion”. Another commenter wrote:

Amena, I started following you in the very beginning, with those first hijab tutorials, because I was curious about how getting dressed was like for a hijabi muslim woman. I remember you starting Pearl Daisy, and you actually inspired me to wear headscarves myself during the time I was living in India. Still got two of your hoojabs from way back as well 😊 Lost touch with your channel when I switched Youtube accounts so seeing this in my suggestions today was a huge surprise! But what struck me most wasn’t your hijab being off, it was how confident and mature you’ve come to be ...

4. Discussion and conclusion

According to Hall (1973), “the broadcasting structures must yield an encoded message in the form of a meaningful discourse” [19]. When applied to Khan’s case, it could be argued that the act of unveiling deprived her of her ability to produce a meaningful discourse for her audience. Her hijab was an important shared symbol, and its absence has led to distorting the coding system used in the communication. As a reaction to the video, many commenters argued that Khan lost her authenticity and some of them even suggested that she had not had any in the first place. The comments reflect how Khan was viewed as “authentic” only by wearing her hijab, but without it, she was considered “fake”. This demonstrated how central the role of modest appearance as a visual symbol was to the process of encoding and decoding in the hijabista-audience interaction.
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The overwhelmingly negative response demonstrated how Khan’s message was “misread”, which reflected the struggle over meaning in the communication. According to Hall (1973), such “misreadings” have “a societal basis” because they indicated “the structural conflicts, contradictions, and negotiations of economic, political and cultural life” [20].

Some of the contradictions reflected in the encoding-decoding process have to do with the hijabistas’ attempts to adapt their Muslim identity to a largely Westernised digital environment. In their study of three prominent hijabistas, Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017) discuss “metaphorical collisions that often occur today between an online culture rooted in secular, market-based values and the faith-based belief systems of traditional religious groups” [21]. It is important here to highlight that hijab is not simply a headscarf; rather, it poses limitations on the behaviour of hijabi women and that of the people who interact with them (Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2017). Concepts like modesty and attracting as little attention as possible is at the heart of the whole idea of covering up. Therefore, hijabi influencers’ audience usually have some expectations, which are not always realistic or attainable in a social media environment characterised by exposure, blurring of public and private spheres, and attention-seeking behaviour.

A big part of the content produced by hijabi influencers can easily be labelled as “unislamic” by some Muslims: from flaunting their beauty publicly to their excessive use of makeup and from their casual mannerism to their “suggestive” poses. Therefore, it can be argued that hijabi influencers send “a mixed message” as described by Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017). While emphasising their “hijabi identity”, they promoted “a highly marketable image” of their lives, be it their marriages, homes, or fashion styles (Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2017). No wonder that the contradiction between Hijabi influencers’ performance and the values their attire supposedly represent was brought up in many comments. Lots of commenters expressed their detestation of the “hypocrisy” embodied in the market-driven use of hijab as a tool for self-branding. One some level, Khan resolved the contradiction by giving away a key indicator of her religious identity, namely hijab. However, despite her attempt to downplay the significance of the change, her audience’s response reflected in the comments revealed the major symbolic implications of taking off the veil.

This analysis shows that the audiences response to Khan’s transformation was largely oppositional and it suggests two findings. First, the media content produced by hijabi influencers or hijabistas was used to accomplish a representational function for their audience. Unlike other influencers who are blamed for frivolity (Abidin, 2016), hijabi influencers were perceived by their followers as role models that they look up to. Khan was only one example of a phenomenon, where hijabi influencers or hijabistas sell/promote more than just modest fashion products; they fulfill the need of their audience — particularly young Muslim women — to believe in the possibility of living a modern, Westernised lifestyle within the boundaries of religion. Many hijabi commenters stressed how by mediating her life, Khan used to give them hope of success and acceptance from their larger societies. Khan and other hijabi influencers are not religious authority figures, but — endowed with religious cultural capital and proficiency in utilising digital technologies — they play such an influential role in the digital era. Using the symbolic power of their Islamic attire, they construct an identity relevant to their young tech-savvy audience. But the act of unveiling accompanied by the positions encoded in her new video clearly breached the “contract” between her and her audience and distorted the communicative exchange. Second, responses to the content produced by hijabi influencers still largely drew on traditional cultural discourses about women and hijab. This shows that influencers’ ability to “influence” was still constrained by the larger context of the communication and the expectations by the audience.

**Limitations and recommendations**

Despite the thorough analysis in this study, it is not without limitations. First, the analysis in this study depended on the comments on Khan’s YouTube video titled “Change”, which reflected the audience’s immediate reaction to Khan’s decision. Her followers might have adopted different opinions in the future. Also, this study does not take into consideration the reactions of Khan’s followers who might choose to respond by not following her videos or unsubscribing to her channel instead of writing a comment. Future
research should explore the long-term effects of changes in hijabi influencers’ self-presentation by observing increasing/decreasing popularity using user engagement metrics, such as the numbers of subscribers, comments, and video views. According to Social Blade (“Amenakin”), Khan’s YouTube channel lost around 5,000 subscribers over the 30 days before collecting the data, but that was combined with an increase in video views. Second, commenters’ interactions were not examined in this study. It would be interesting to conduct further research to explore the conversations between commenters using social network analysis. Third, followers’ reactions to the video on other social media platforms were not examined. Future research could explore the variety of responses on different social media platforms.

**About the author**

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**Notes**

3. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
11. Abidin, 2016, p. 3.
13. Ibid.
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