

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mipsterz

Hip, American, and Muslim

KRISTIN M. PETERSON AND NABIL ECHCHAIBI

In a two-and-a-half-minute-long video released on YouTube in November 2013, a series of short clips feature a group of self-confident young Muslim women hanging out in various urban landscapes in the United States, as Jay-Z's song "Somewhere in America" plays in the background. The women parade their fashionable outfits as they walk down the street, skate in high heels, take selfies, dance and run through parks. The video appears to be a harmless and carefree expression of young women being creative with their fashion styles and enjoying the company of their friends. Within days of its release, hundreds of thousands of people had watched the video and many left scathing critiques on various online blogs and news sites. The viral video, entitled "Somewhere in America #MIPSTERZ,"¹ quickly became controversial, amid heated accusations that a "misguided" group of hipster Muslim women had gone "too far" in reappropriating modesty and staking out an edgy religious and gendered identity.

Critics specifically claimed that the video misrepresented Islam, that the women were immodest and oversexualized, and that the focus on fashion was promoting an excessive materialist culture fixated on consumption and brands. One of the most well-circulated critiques came from Sana Saeed, a writer for *The Islamic Monthly*, in which she

argued that the video attempts to normalize Muslim women by fitting them into mainstream culture and reducing them to a shallow visual portrayal based exclusively on physical appearance. Saeed concedes that the video is aesthetically attractive, but she finds little substance in the images. "The video doesn't really seem to have any purpose aside from showing well-dressed, put together Muslim women in poses perfect for a magazine spread," she writes.² Saeed seems doubtful that sleek visuals and hip music can ever provide a deep and unproblematic representation of Muslims.

In response to these comments, several of the women who participated in the Mipsterz video argued that their intention was to prompt a larger discussion about the multiple examples of Muslim modesty and the narrow coding of Muslim women as victims of rigid religious rules. Layla Shaikley, a participant and the fashion director for the video, explains that she was tired of always having to tell her story about her faith using words, so instead she wanted to participate in what she calls a "creative action." She views the Mipsterz video as a self-portrait of her identity and an expression of the larger Mipsterz identity.³ One of the creators of the video, Habib Yazdi, insists that the video was an effort to shift assumptions about the visual portrayal of Muslim women by creating new images. "We want to give people a different experience of what they tend to see and hear about Muslim women," Yazdi explains. "You see how easy it is to manipulate images to create an idea, so for us it was like, why don't we do the same thing? Why don't we do our commercial and manipulate the images in our favor?"⁴

The Mipsterz video provides an intriguing example of how young Muslims in post-9/11 America resist the simplistic and stereotypical narratives that largely pervade Western popular culture. Muslim women, in particular, have struggled to liberate themselves from a relentless framing that portrays them as either covered and oppressed by Islam or uncovered and sexually liberated by Western secular culture. This chapter focuses on how the women behind the Mipsterz video engage with visuals, urban styles, fashion, fun, and other forms of

popular culture to subvert these frames and articulate alternative narratives of what it means to be a Muslim woman in America. We analyze how the expressive and aesthetic practices of popular culture can afford marginalized groups a critical space in which to challenge dominant social values and foster a distinct sense of cultural and religious identity. In this case, we argue, popular culture and religion intersect in productive ways, breaking free of the discourse of victimization and exoticism and helping us understand the complex, multiple frames of reference that define American Muslims' everyday lives.

MUSLIMS AND POPULAR CULTURE

Since 9/11, it has become even more challenging for American Muslims to find media spaces that are receptive to their stories and willing to recognize the diversity of their identities. Muslim women, in particular, often find themselves trapped in a climate which has all too readily connected a popular discourse about their oppression to the moral imperative of rescuing them from the tyranny of their culture and religion. Over the past decade and a half, American Muslim women have sought to leverage the symbolic power of popular culture to address their seclusion in the larger mainstream culture and their lack of voice inside the American Muslim community. Some have turned to stand-up comedy to counter the image of the subordinate Muslim woman.⁵ Others have taken to popular literature, magazines, and comic strips to chronicle the rich and complex social and cultural experiences of Muslim women in America.⁶

The Mipsterz movement we are analyzing in this chapter is not too different from these other efforts because it is equally concerned with disrupting the popular rhetoric around the suppression of Muslim women and their lack of agency. But what is perhaps most striking about the Mipsterz movement and its "Somewhere in America #MIPSTERZ" video is, not just their invocation of fashion and popular culture, but rather their defense of a particular facet of Muslim female identity through the language, aesthetics, and sensibilities of neoliberal-

alism. In this case, consumer culture provides not only the space, but also the tools and techniques through which autonomy, resistance, and a more progressive form of Islamic piety can be imagined and affirmed. Such an intersection between market ideology, female bodies, lifestyle, and religious expression does not necessarily nullify the political value of this “creative” movement, but it raises significant questions about the relationship and possibly tensions between religion, fashion, popular culture, and social change as Muslim women seek to square their religious values with a modern urban lifestyle.

THE MIPSTERZ MOVEMENT

The “Somewhere in America #MIPSTERZ” video was not an isolated creative expression but rather the first public presentation of the larger Mipsterz movement. The filmmakers, Habib Yazdi, Abbas Rattani, and Sara Aghajanian, worked with young women who identified as Muslim hipsters to create this video as a visual portrayal of the identities of young, hip, fashionable Muslim American women. Hajer Naili, one of the women featured in the video, said that the filmmakers and women in the video wanted to create a “joyful and realistic” profile of Muslim American women, a profile that is not often shown in Western media.⁷

The Mipsterz fashion video is one aspect of the larger movement of Mipsterz, as young Muslims connect online through social media and meet up at public events. The Mipsterz Facebook page has around 15,000 fans, and every day members post articles about Islamic topics, social justice concerns, political issues, and popular culture. Members of the Mipsterz movement are also active on a Google group listserv, sharing practical advice about housing, employment, and travel; connecting with other members and setting up social events; and discussing political issues and religious topics. Recent discussions on the listserv have revolved around formulating responses to prejudicial attacks against Islam, assisting Syrian refugees, and sharing opinions about Muslim women’s attire and the headscarf.

Despite some of these more formal aspects of the group, such as the Facebook page and the listserv, the Mipsterz movement is a loosely associated group that is not concerned with official membership. The Facebook description of the Mipsterz explains that everyone is welcome to become a Mipster, Muslim and/or hipster or neither, and that the group is open to anyone regardless of assigned social categories. As the description explains, “Mipsterz is not a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization; rather, it is an organic . . . community and culture of individuals who want to chill with creative, critical thinking folks.”⁸ Members of the group are not connected by official identity markers, but instead by shared interests in religion, culture, and social change.

Besides the fashion video, other visual images of the Mipsterz movement highlight the creativity of this movement. The Facebook page features a banner image of black thick-framed glasses, symbols of the hipster movement, along with Arabic calligraphy inside the lenses. A similar drawing online shows a young woman in a headscarf, wearing thick-framed glasses. Another photograph shows three Mipsterz wearing T-shirts that say, “Keep calm and hijab on,” a play on the common phrase in pop culture, “Keep calm and carry on.” These visual examples illustrate how members of the Mipsterz movement blend elements of popular culture into their creative expressions.

THE MIPSTERZ VIDEO

The Mipsterz video profiles the innovative fashion styles of several young Muslim women, as they move around urban landscapes. Throughout the video, the women do more than passively pose for the camera. They run, jump, climb, dance, skate, cartwheel, laugh, and joke around for the camera. Unlike most fashion images that portray women as objects of the viewer’s gaze, some women in this video challenge the gaze by standing on top of things and looking down at the camera, staring straight into the camera, and even physically grabbing the camera.

The video was filmed in New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Washington, DC, and Hillsborough, SC. The settings are mostly urban outdoor spaces, such as parks, sidewalks, and alleyways, and the locations give the video a particularly American feel. The women wear various fashion styles that are distinct to the American context. Although the Islamic fashion industry is a large and growing business in Europe, Southeast Asia and the Gulf countries, North America is generally not considered a site of innovative Islamic fashion trends. The women in this video emphasize what is unique and creative about their own styles.

The main purpose of the Mipsterz video is to visually present the fashion styles of the Mipsterz movement. Overall, the fashion in this video indicates that the Mipsterz value creativity, hybridity, individuality, and diversity. There is no single Mipsterz fashion style. Rather, what connects these women is an emphasis on eclectic styles and creatively blending various types of fashion. The women mix mainstream fashion trends, retro clothing, urban fashion, ethnic culture, and Islamic styles.

Several distinct fashion styles are present in the video. First, there is a chic fashion style in which the women aspire to fit into mainstream high fashion trends that emphasize designer clothes. In this style, the women wear leggings, tunics, long sweaters, silk scarves, dresses with leggings or tights, collared blouses, and gold jewelry. These outfits are often colorful and attractive but are still modest, mature, and professional.

Another fashion style that is shown throughout the Mipsterz video can be loosely defined as a layering style, in which the women piece together various elements from current and retro fashion to create a more complex appearance. This style is distinct from the chic style because the women tend to incorporate looser, more flowing fabrics and integrate retro styles and ethnic styles. This layering style is practically useful for Muslim women because if they are concerned about revealing too much of their body shapes, they can dress in layers or more flowing outfits. Additionally, the layering style gives young women the chance to be more creative with their fashion. They can go to thrift stores, department stores, and their own closets to put together unique outfits.

The Mipsterz video also features a street style of fashion that incorporates darker colors and heavier materials. The women who emphasize this style wear black clothing, leather jackets, thick-soled boots, fake-fur jackets, dark makeup, and silver jewelry. This street style presents the women as tough, confident, and strong. The women reject the colorful, lightweight, flowing clothing of the other styles and instead wear darker colors and heavier materials that offer more protection.

FASHION AS POLITICAL IDENTITY

The women in the Mipsterz video incorporate elements of hipster culture, specifically fashion trends, as a form of resistance to dominant stereotypes that categorize Muslims as backward and oppressed. Fashion, like other elements of popular culture, has often been dismissed as a frivolous practice that has no impact on the larger culture and society. On the other hand, fashion can be seen as a political statement of identity. Especially for groups like Muslim women who are often misrepresented in the mainstream public, fashion offers an opportunity to resist stereotypes. Hajer Naili, one of the women featured in the Mipsterz video, explained that “the video offers an antidote to prevailing western stereotypes of Muslim, veiled women as inactive, passive, uniform in their appearance, and hidden.”⁹

In their edited volume *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*, Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors focus on how fashion can be a political statement for young Muslim women in Western countries, where their voices are often unheard. They argue that “through their visual material and bodily presence young women who wear Islamic fashion disrupt and challenge public stereotypes about Islam, women, social integration and the veil even if their voices are often drowned out in political and legal debates on these issues.”¹⁰ When Muslim women use fashion to show themselves as individuals with creative styles who participate in contemporary consumer culture, they overturn common misconceptions of Muslim

women as “dull, downtrodden, oppressed and out of sync with modernity.”¹¹ Muslim women may not be able to participate in public debates, but they use their fashion, daily practices, and public dispositions to express their opinions and their identities.

Furthermore, the process of getting dressed can be understood as what Joanne Entwistle calls an “embodied activity” through which individuals present their interior selves to the social world.¹² Dress provides a way for individuals to negotiate between larger social norms, the fashion system and individual identity markers. For instance, the women in the Mipsterz video have individual agency to choose what they will wear, but these choices are restricted by social norms based on their gender, religion, and ethnicity. Susan Kaiser explains that “people create their own ‘fashion statements’ but are ultimately constrained by what is available in the marketplace, by dress codes and social conventions, by political regimes.”¹³ The fashion styles in the Mipsterz video highlight the intersections, complexities and contradictions of the identity of Muslim American women. By focusing on the hybridity of the Mipsterz fashion styles, we are able to better understand what Kaiser discusses as “the overlapping or ‘in between’ spaces, through which fashion subjects exercise agency and articulate more than one subject position simultaneously.”¹⁴ It is arguably politically resistive for Muslim women to create blended fashion styles that emphasize their intersectional identities and complicate stereotypes of Muslim women as one-dimensional victims.

The women use fashion styles in the Mipsterz video to create a powerful identity statement of what it means to be a Mipster—a trendy, innovative, multifaceted Muslim American. First, rather than imitating the latest fashion trends on display in malls or magazines, the women in the video highlight their creativity and individuality by wearing outfits that they put together on their own. The women combine items that emphasize the religious value of modesty (headscarves, loose clothing), their various cultural backgrounds (African American, South Asian, and Arab styles), and contemporary trends (urban, chic, and hipster styles). The fashion styles in this video specifically focus on trends in

hipster culture, such as mustache-shaped jewelry, thrift store clothing, ironic T-shirts, and mismatched patterns and materials.

The women also incorporate elements from popular culture to show that they are in conversation with contemporary culture. For example, one woman wears a Marilyn Monroe T-shirt, and later on another woman is seen wearing a shirt with the phrase, "You're killin' me Smalls," which is a line from *The Sandlot*, a popular children's film in the 1990s. The video also shows the women using smart phones to take selfies or to videotape each other, as well as one scene in which a woman uses an old Polaroid camera to take a photo of her friends.

These examples illustrate how the Mipsterz women engage with pop culture trends and hipster styles in an attempt to normalize their appearance in mainstream American culture and to transgress boundaries that position them as oppressed and backward. Instead, the women incorporate hybrid styles to present themselves as complex individuals who are creative, fun, active, strong, and assertive without abandoning their faith or cultural backgrounds.

URBAN STYLES AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

Along with the incorporation of hipster culture and hybrid styles, it seems important for the women in the Mipsterz video to emphasize the stylistic sensibilities of urban lifestyles, from rap music and trendy clothes to skateboarding and street dancing. The urban landscapes that accentuate the video are used symbolically to place veiled Muslim women at the center of an American urban environment that seldom aligns with the dominant perception of Muslim culture. The inclusion of Muslim women in a hip display of decayed and distressed urban spaces is carefully designed to normalize their presence in the heart of Americana, even if American culture is reduced to an exaggerated essentialism that emphasizes the lure of consumption, play, and chic. The purpose of this visual exposition is to push back against the repressive gaze of American mainstream culture and to challenge the viewers to accept the

diversity of the Muslim American experience. Skateboarding and biking symbolize the mobility of these women and their supposed freedom to go anywhere and achieve anything. The video also celebrates the accomplishments of successful Muslim women like Ibtihaj Muhammad, a professional athlete and member of the U.S. fencing team; Sandra Shamy, a fashion and jewelry designer; Marwa Atik, a hijab designer; Hajer Naili, a journalist; Layla Shaikley, the fashion director for the film but also the co-founder of a software design company; and several other women who work in business, law, and medicine.

Setting these visuals and the women's movements to Jay-Z's song "Somewhere in America" is also choreographed, not only to highlight the compatibility of Muslim music tastes and the trendy world of hip-hop, but also to invoke the rightful place of Muslims in that diverse cultural tapestry, which is insinuated in the lyrics of the song. Jay-Z's "somewhere" is also a reference to the fact that anything is possible in this America, and the Mipsterz aptly appropriate those words to affirm that what might seem a far-fetched reality of hipster Muslims is also perfectly imaginable in this inclusive and tolerant view of America.

Equally critical for the producers of the Mipsterz video is that the women appear confident, natural and at ease in their display of their Americanness. But this effort at aestheticizing Muslim American identity quickly became a major point of contention in the massive critique that the video has provoked. While some saw this performance as necessary to defy the political and cultural boundaries of Muslim identity in America, others found it extremely vapid, noting that it essentially promotes the same kind of secular excesses that Muslim modesty vehemently disputes. As the journalist Ghazala Irshad argues, the video ends up reifying the same politics of silence by normalizing Muslim women into a secular culture that objectifies their bodies and devalues their voice. "Why spend all this time and money traveling to different locations around the US filming these intelligent women only to not hear anything from them and hear a man rapping about a girl shaking her ass in the background? Why don't we send a message about why we are different?"¹⁵

Telling the story of difference, however, is always fraught with difficulty and risks of misrepresentation. As Layla Shaikley, one of the creators of the video, argued in defense of the intentions behind her effort, this creative action was meant to be a “personal expression” reacting against years of discrimination and exclusion, but it was interpreted by many as a collective representation of American Muslim women and a rare opportunity for Muslim Americans to create their own responses to a long history of misrepresentations. “Muslim Americans are in many cases wounded, marginalized, reactive, and defensive, in large part because we’re underrepresented and misrepresented in the media,” Shaikley writes. “The two and a half minute clip stirred up feelings born of years, if not generations, of exclusion and marginalization.”¹⁶ Many Muslims reacted to this video by envisioning this project as a unique opportunity to address the serious political and religious issues that Muslims face in American society. Shaikley and her collaborators may not have set out to address those issues as much as they intended to strategically complicate the visual frames we associate with veiled Muslim women.

The reaction to the video has indeed raised some significant questions about the transgressive nature of this visual essay by the Mipsterz. Can a self-portrait of professionally-successful and fashionable hijabis who parade their bodies through commodities and style help build the kind of powerful Muslim female identity that defies invisibility and marginalization? And is this intervention through fashion and the aesthetics of urban lifestyles potentially transformative for young Muslim women who are forced to navigate both secular and religious contexts that seek to control and manage their bodies?

CONCLUSION

Our argument in this chapter has been that the Mipsterz video and the strong reactions it has engendered should be read as a dynamic site of struggle over what it means to be an American Muslim woman. The women engage with the aesthetic aspects of American popular culture

in an effort to challenge dominant visual framings of Muslim women as oppressed victims or exotic others, to formulate a distinct cultural and religious identity, and to assert their rightful place in the fabric of American life. Through hybrid fashion that blends elements of American fashion trends, hipster styles, international cultures, and Islamic modesty, the Mipsterz emphasize that Muslim women should be seen as creative, fashionable individuals. The Mipsterz women also incorporate urban styles such as hip-hop music, skateboarding, and street dancing to stake out a place for Muslim women within the public spaces of American cities.

The creators of the video wanted to foreground an alternative Muslim identity that straddles the two seemingly opposite worlds of secular modernity and pious modesty. Their goal was to appropriate the language, aesthetics, and logics of urban modern culture to complicate the unidimensional representation of Muslim women. Some critics, however, saw only an obsessive, trivial quest to normalize Muslim women as modern, Western, and American. Others denounced the video for its brazen, superficial portrayal of Islamic values like modesty. The video struck such a raw nerve primarily because of its provocative images and loose associations, but it also generated such a heated debate because of its combination of piety, religious identity, and popular culture. Both the women behind the video and their critics have indeed engaged in a contested conversation in social media around the terms of modesty, religious expression, the policing of women's appearance, and the depoliticization of veiling through consumer culture among the Muslim bourgeoisie.

The viral circulation of the video through YouTube and other social media platforms has also exposed taboo questions about gender and the visibility of women both inside and outside of the Muslim American community. The glamorous display of veiled hipster women and their commodification may rightly be objectionable to many, but the performative arrangement of veiling through fashion and urban culture helps demystify the veil and destabilize its closed meaning both in mainstream

American culture and in some conservative Muslim communities. Despite accusations of trivializing the religious and political function of veiling, the Mipsterz video actually succeeds in expanding the visual terrain of the veil by redeploying its symbolic power and social practice. It is true that the Muslim body in this video and the reactions to it are yet again the battleground for proper piety and devotion, but that same veiled body is also made into a site of critical contestation of the bounded, sealed narrative that dictates the behavior and the mobility of the Muslim veiled woman. The circulation of this video and the use of fashion styles may not be enough to change the conditions that produce such narrow narratives or to erase conventional racialized discourses about Muslim women, but this creative action can be meaningful in locating small and somewhat mundane acts of everyday resistance, which may or may not undermine structures of power.

Our analysis shows that the Mipsterz video and its complex message do not have a single, fixed meaning. In fact, the video requires an ambivalent reading, so we avoid celebrating this kind of action as a sign of assured empowerment and subversion or dismiss it as a case of total subordination and control. These oppositional readings do little to capture the dynamic nature of these forms of cultural production and their implications for social change. Popular culture in this case serves as a prime stage for exposing these examples of what the anthropologist Asef Bayat calls “quiet encroachments,” meaning “the silent, protracted but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives.”¹⁷ The actors behind these gradual, grassroots actions strategically turn to the symbols of popular culture as tactics to insert themselves into a more inclusive narrative of an American cultural identity. Despite being embedded in a capitalist logic of consumer culture and entertainment politics, the Mipsterz video fills a gaping hole in the absence of a public space in American society where Muslim women can address critical questions about their religious expression, representation, and autonomy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Watch “Somewhere in America: #MIPSTERZ” on YouTube or Vimeo. What are your reactions? Does the chapter help you interpret the video and/or put it in context?
2. Drawing on the video and the chapter, discuss the religious and cultural identities that the women portrayed. What images and understandings of Muslim women is the video attempting to counter? What are these women saying about themselves? Are the Muslim women in the Mipsterz video able to claim a position within the fabric of American society and to forge political autonomy through their use of popular culture, fashion trends, and urban lifestyles? If so, how?
3. What criticisms do Peterson and Echchaibi suggest more traditional Muslims have made of the video?
4. Are online productions like the Mipsterz video a form of popular culture? Why or why not? How are they like and different from more traditionally produced commercial videos? What does this suggest about the power of dominant voices to shape popular culture and the possibility that minority voices can be heard in popular culture?

NOTES

1. Sheikh & Bake, *Somewhere In America #MIPSTERZ*, video, 2:29, December 2, 2013, <https://youtu.be/68sMkDKMias>.

2. Sana Saeed, “Somewhere in America, Muslim Women Are ‘Cool,’” *Islamic Monthly*, December 2, 2013, www.theislamicmonthly.com/somewhere-in-america-muslim-women-are-cool.

3. Layla Shaikley, “The Surprising Lessons of the ‘Muslim Hipsters’ Backlash,” *Atlantic*, March 13, 2014, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/03/the-surprising-lessons-of-the-muslim-hipsters-backlash/284298.

4. Hajer Naili, “Video of Fun-Loving Veiled U.S. Muslims Goes Viral,” *Women News*, December 3, 2013, <http://womensenews.org/2013/12/video-fun-loving-veiled-us-muslims-goes-viral/#.UqDp-xZRg8M>.

5. See the work of the comedians Negin Farsad and Maysoon Zayid in the documentary *The Muslims are Coming!* (2013), <http://themuslimsarecoming.com>.
6. See the work of G. Willow Wilson, such as the comic series *Ms. Marvel*, the fantasy novel *Alif the Unseen*, and her memoir *The Butterfly Mosque*.
7. Naili, "Video of Fun-Loving."
8. "Mipsterz—Muslim Hipsters," www.facebook.com/Mipsterz.
9. Naili, "Video of Fun-Loving."
10. Annelies Moors and Emma Tarlo, eds., *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3.
11. *Ibid.*, 20.
12. Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2000), 10.
13. Susan B. Kaiser, *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (London: Berg, 2012), 31.
14. *Ibid.*, 37.
15. Saeed, "Somewhere in America."
16. Shaikley, "Surprising Lessons."
17. Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010).