

The network of meanings constructed around the hijab in YouTube videos in Spain between 2015 and 2021

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to identify the network of meanings constructed around the hijab in YouTube videos made by Muslim women between 2015 and 2021 in Spain. To this end, a discourse analysis is performed on the 20 videos with the greatest number of interactions as well as on the interviews with six of their creators. The two focal points around which this network revolves are based on religious and cultural factors. Among the main ideas observed is the hijab, in dialogue with fashion trends that emerge on social networking sites like YouTube and which highlights the cultural hybridisation experienced by first- and second-generation Muslim women born or raised in Spain.

Keywords

Hijab, meanings, YouTube, Critical Discourse Analysis, cultural identity

Introduction: Historicity of the hijab and its place in the context of contemporary Spanish society

In this research, I examine the meanings that Spanish Muslim women generate on YouTube about the hijab. The research is focused on the discourses created by these content creators – converts and first- and second-generation Muslims – for whom this garment has become a relevant element of their religious-cultural identity in a specific context such as the Spanish one, where this religion is a minority and with which there is a historical bond. In this scenario, the hijab is approached as a complex device that encompasses religious, social, political, and cultural dimensions, due to its polysemic nature (Ramírez, 2011; Ahmed, 2011; Checa, 2018). Diverse interpretations are embedded in this garment, making it a liquid and variable signifier, as its meanings are not prefixed and fluctuate according to the context in which they are displayed. But also, because its interpretation depends on the cultural and epistemological framework from which it is approached (Mahmood, 2019; Adlbi, 2016). In addition, it has a high semiotic density, since it has a metonymic symbolic value by serving as an accent of Muslimness and presenting itself as an unmistakable representative element of the community (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Blommaert & Varis, 2015). Therefore, given its semiotic complexity, I briefly approach key religious, political, cultural, and economic elements that have shaped the possible sediments of meaning (Hall, 1997) accumulated by the garment throughout Islamic historicity, particularly in its encounter with the West. Subsequently, I describe the extent and origin of the Muslim community in Spain, the regulation for wearing it, and the elements of identity that may be influencing the perceptions of these women about their identity as Spanish Muslims. Finally, I discuss the main features of YouTube with regard to the creation of video content for this minority in the studied context.

The semiotic density of the hijab:

Between contemporary liquidity and the historicity of its meanings

Examining the meaning of the veil from Islamic prescriptions, specifically the Qur'an, the term hijab is mentioned seven times (7:46, 17:45, 19:17, 33:53, 38:33, 41:5, 42:51), although it is in relation to the concept of a curtain (Gómez, 2009). That is, an object whose function is to prevent the visibility of a given space. The reference it makes is to the limits between public and private space, the profane and the sacred, in a context marked by the incipient development of the community of believers (Mernissi, 2002). Regarding the references to clothing, there are two suras, 33:59 and 24:31. In the context of Azorah 33:59, the verse reads: "Prophet, tell your wives, your daughters, and women believers to make their outer garments hang low over them so as to be recognized and not insulted: God is most forgiving, most merciful" (Qur'an, 33:59). The mention of the use of this garment has the function of identifying women who belong to the community of believers by distinguishing them from the rest, with the aim of protecting them in a context of systematic

violence against them – and therefore, the use of this garment would prevent them from such abuse. The Azorah of Light, An-Nur, 23:31, indicates:

And tell believing women that they should lower their glances, guard their private parts, and not display their charms beyond what [it is acceptable] to reveal; they should let their headscarves drape down so as to cover their necklines and not reveal their charms except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers. (Qu'ran, 24:31)

This is the main verse used to justify the wearing of the headscarf, as it urges women to behave modestly in terms of dress and visibility in the public space, and thus lays the foundation for appropriate behaviour of women as part of the Muslim community.

From an epistemological position linked to mystical logic within Islamic cosmology, Saba Mahmood observed that the practice of wearing the hijab had the potential to empower the women who wore it. This practice, understood as a habitus derived from constancy, can be interpreted as a grammar of practice. Through its mere physical presence, it generates a greater awareness of the wearer's actions, which facilitates a process of self-correction and asceticism, thus bringing the person closer to God. Furthermore, it shows the agency of women in playing an active role within the Islamic religious sphere, taking this space through ascetic practice (Mahmood, 2019).

The hijab has also been understood as a social *dispositif* – an epistemic expression of the Islamic family structure – emerging historically as a mechanism for regulating sexuality to ensure social cohesion and propitiate the continuity of Islamic society (Mernissi, 2011). Serving as a symbolic boundary, it marked the transition from tribal affiliations to a family-centred social model, positioning the household as the foundational unit of Islamic order. This structural logic has persisted, evident in the dress codes of many contemporary Muslim-majority societies (Ramírez, 2011), where normative prescriptions around female modesty – and the regulation of women's bodies – continue to operate as instruments of social control aimed at maintaining political and communal stability (Lazreg, 2014; Eltahawy, 2015) and to preserve the cohesion and values of Islamic communities over time (Mernissi, 2011).

Throughout the twentieth century, the hijab acquired a dimension that transcends the strictly religious, functioning in various contexts as a symbol of political and identity resistance to secularising, colonial, or modernising projects. In cases such as Algeria under French rule, the colonial authorities promoted the removal of the veil as a strategy for Muslim women's emancipation, framed within a broader attempt at cultural transformation (Lamrabet, 2014; Lazreg, 2014). However, a significant proportion of women responded by reaffirming its use as a form of opposition to colonial power, thereby transforming the veil into a symbol of belonging and collective cohesion (Fanon, 1959/1967). In the decades that followed, various political movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Islamist groups in other countries in the region, adopted it as part of a broader agenda aimed at strengthening Islam's presence in the public sphere (Ahmed,

2011). In such contexts, the hijab assumes the role of a multifaceted symbol, capable of conveying both religious affiliation and political positioning.

In the Western context, where Islam is a minority, the veil assumes a symbolic function that serves to make women visible in public spaces and counter the notion of an oppressed, repressed, or muted subject outside of modernity, as constructed by certain discourses (Tarlo & Moors, 2013). Furthermore, it underscores the solidarity and mobilisation within the community when facing acts of discrimination, such as the prohibition of wearing the garment in schools or workplaces (Ramírez, 2011; Adlbi, 2016), or in response to attacks against the international Muslim community (Monturiol, 2011), as evidenced in protests supporting Palestinians in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

In the current era of globalisation, identity politics, and the rise of Islamic capitalism, the hijab is emerging as a powerful cultural artefact that embodies these intersecting dynamics (Gökarişel & Secor, 2009). Driven by growing demands for Muslim identity expression and the expansion of cultural consumption, especially through digital platforms, the hijab is increasingly situated at the intersection of faith, fashion, and market logics (Gökarişel & McLarney, 2010; Rahman, 2015). As an identity marker of Muslimness (Abu-Lughod, 2013), it is becoming central to the Islamic cultural industry and its global reach, particularly in digital landscapes shaped by social media. These platforms not only enable but amplify the performance of hybrid identities, where Islamic ethics are creatively fused with mainstream fashion aesthetics. This convergence is particularly evident among young Western Muslim women, for whom the hijab becomes a means of articulating a modern, urban, and cosmopolitan self, reflecting a sense of ease and empowerment in their hybrid subjectivities (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017; Williams & Kamaludeen, 2017; Tarlo & Moors, 2013).

The hijab in Spain:

In between legal regulation, perceived otherness, and digital re-appropriation

There is no official data on how many women in Spain wear the headscarf. However, estimates from late 2023 indicate that there are approximately 2.4 million Muslims living in Spain, representing about 5% of the total population (UCIDE, 2024). The vast majority (91.6%) are either migrants or descendants of migrants, with individuals of Moroccan origin being the most prominent group (UCIDE, 2024; Gil-Benumeña, 2023). As a result, the presence of Islam in Spain is often strongly associated with migration, shaping both public perception and policy discourse.

With regard to the legal framework on the wearing of the hijab, it is important to note that Articles 14 and 16 in the Constitution recognise and guarantee fundamental religious rights and prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion. However, there is a lack of specific legislation on the use of religious symbols or clothing in the public sphere, which translates into a lack of prohibition or explicit approval (Gutiérrez del Moral, 2020). In practice, regulations governing their use are implemented, albeit at the legal-admin-

istrative level within institutional and local contexts. This prohibition is evident in the internal rules of educational institutions, which may prohibit the wearing of headscarves, disregarding their religious significance and treating them as just another accessory, as they would a cap or any other head covering. Similarly, in the context of the workplace, the imposition of such restrictions is often substantiated by corporate image policies that advocate religious and political neutrality, effectively excluding their use (Mijares & Ramírez, 2024; Ahmed & Gorey, 2021).

In the context of the construction of identity among new generations of Muslim women who make their belonging visible, it is imperative to consider the historicity of the construction of Spanish identity and the role that the Islamic religion and Muslims play in it. In this regard, we must understand the historical significance of Catholicism in the formation of Spanish national identity. During the Franco regime (1939-1975), a period known as 'national Catholicism' (Planet, 2008), an alliance was established between the political powers and the Catholic Church, resulting in the incorporation of Catholic values into all practices of state power. Despite the shift towards secularisation that has taken place in the aftermath of the dictatorship (Pérez-Agote, 2016), it is evident that Catholicism maintains a significant presence in Spain (Planet, 2008). Another key element to consider, which stands in opposition to Spanish identity, is the concept of the 'Moors'. This term was originally adopted to denote the Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula from the 7th to the 15th centuries (Martín-Corrales, 2004; Mateo Dieste, 2017; Binumeya, 2023). Primarily ethnographic in nature, this perspective draws on a prejudiced representation of populations from the Maghreb, centring on physical and phenotypical attributes (Mateo Dieste, 2017). At the same time, it also encompasses cultural and religious characteristics (Gil-Benumea, 2023). This notion has become an entelechy of otherness within Spanish popular culture over time (Martín-Corrales, 2004; Mateo Dieste, 2017; Álvarez-Miranda & Eseverri-Mayer, 2024). More recently, it has been fuelled by fears and anxieties surrounding the increase in migration among the most vulnerable classes, who struggle for resources in a depleted socio-economic context (Álvarez-Miranda & Eseverri-Mayer, 2024). This issue is further exacerbated by the fear generated by the rise of fundamentalist terrorism, with two major attacks in Spain – Madrid in 2004 and Cambrils in 2017 – ultimately bringing the Muslim religion and identity to the forefront of public attention and framing as a threat (Álvarez-Miranda & Eseverri-Mayer, 2024; Gil-Benumea, 2023). The above-mentioned factors have led to the perception of symbols related to Islam and Muslims based on prejudice and racism (Aparicio, 2020; Bayrakli & Hafez, 2023; Álvarez-Miranda & Eseverri-Mayer, 2024). This represents a significant dilemma for Spanish Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab as a customary aspect of their daily dress.

In this scenario, YouTube emerges as a platform attracted by the global reach of a digital space whose audience consumes one billion hours of content per day (YouTube, 2025) and which enables the creation of discourses constructed in the first person by these Muslim women along with the possibility of sharing and commenting within their com-

munity (Papacharissi, 2010, 2018). Consequently, it becomes a digital space of possibility for the emergence of cultural references that can develop narratives and imaginaries in dialogue with the identity, media, and political needs of the collective (Muñoz Morcillo & Walzer Moskovic, 2025). In this context, the present study seeks to analyse the discourses constructed by first- and second-generation Muslim women, as well as female converts to Islam, who address these issues in their videos, in order to unravel the meanings they make with the hijab.

Methodological approach: Critical Discourse Analysis of YouTube videos on the hijab and interviews with their creators

To achieve this objective, a qualitative methodological framework was adopted, centred on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach is grounded in Foucault's conceptualisation of discourse as a *dispositif* that produces and regulates regimes of truth subtly embedded in the social fabric over time (Foucault, 2002; Hall, 1997; Muncie, 2006). From this perspective, discourse operates not only as a linguistic practice but also as a mechanism of power and ideology. CDA, as proposed by Fairclough (1989), aims to uncover these connections between language, power, and ideology by analysing how meaning is constructed and naturalised in specific social contexts.

Methodologically, this study follows the framework proposed by Wodak, which advocates for an eclectic and flexible methodological design, adapted to the specific characteristics of each research project (2001). This allows for a custom-built strategy aligned with the research questions and the socio-historical conditions of the object under study.

The primary objective is to analyse audiovisual discourses produced by Muslim women content creators on YouTube in Spain, exploring how they construct and negotiate the meanings of the hijab as a religious, cultural, and political artefact. These creators – Spanish-born daughters of migrants, early migrants themselves, or Spanish converts – offer a heterogeneous but locally situated lens to examine the garment's symbolism.

The core method employed is Critical Discourse Analysis, applied to both verbal and non-verbal texts. Analysis was carried out through iterative structuring and systematisation of observed concepts and associations, with emphasis on meaning-making processes connected to the hijab. Initial categories were drawn from key academic literature on the religious, cultural, and political dimensions of the veil, from which new themes were identified and developed.

For two videos without spoken discourse, a specialised tool for audiovisual text analysis was used (Muñoz Morcillo, 2022). This categorises variables such as image, sound, editing, and spatial context, allowing a deeper understanding of the construction of meaning beyond language.

The video sample consists of the 20 YouTube videos with the most interactions, selected based on engagement metrics (likes, dislikes, and comments). Selection criteria

included: 1) Inclusion of keywords in the title, such as “hijab”, “hijabi”, “veil”, or “headscarf”; 2) User-Generated Content (UGC) created in Spanish by women residing in Spain; and 3) A temporal scope from September 2015 to April 2021, allowing for a broad and diverse sample that reflects evolving discursive trends. Additionally, six semi-structured interviews were conducted to deepen understanding of the motivations, identity articulations, and production processes behind the videos (although all 21 identified creators were invited to participate, only six agreed to take part).

Finally, this study acknowledges the importance of the researcher’s positionality in the production of knowledge – particularly when the researcher is a male belonging to the country’s majority ethnic group, studying a cultural and religious phenomenon associated with a historically marginalised minority in the Spanish context. This situation, which may place the researcher in an asymmetrical position relative to the object of study, can influence how certain elements are interpreted, prioritised, or even overlooked throughout the research process. Therefore, a critical and reflective stance was adopted in order to minimise potential biases in methodological and analytical decisions, and to ensure a respectful, rigorous, and contextually grounded approach.

Discussion: The hijab as a discursive space – religion, identity, and aesthetics

In a preliminary interpretation of the hijab, when discussed by the content creators in their YouTube videos or during their interviews, the initial idea that emerged can be summarised as follows: “The hijab is a very personal issue for each woman” (Juni, 2018). This statement clearly illustrates the fact that the term has many nuances, as expressed by one of the interviewees: “because for you, it’s a girl who wears a hijab and that’s that. Which is perfectly understandable. But it’s not that simple, because each person wears it for a different reason. That’s just the way it is” (Nina’s Mirror, personal communication, November 22, 2021). This underlines the importance of a historically and contextually situated analysis that can shed further light on this reality (Ramírez, 2011; Ramírez & Mijares, 2021). Furthermore, the majority of the video creators indicated that whether or not someone chose to wear the garment was ultimately an individual decision: “I believe in the freedom of a Muslim woman to cover herself or not. It should be her own decision and she should do so however and whenever she feels like it” (Cintikart, 2019). In addition, they contended that just as there was no obligation to wear it, there should not be any to remove it:

As my body’s my own, I decide what to do with it. I don’t have the right to tell you, “Put this on or take that off”. If neither I nor anyone else has the right to do it, you don’t have the right to tell me to take my veil off either. Because as I’ve said before,

it's my body. It's my decision. And it's my head. It doesn't concern you one bit.
(Aminaperfect2003, 2019)

Turning to the analysis of meaning, it can be observed how the women's discourses revolved around two main ideas. One has to do with the religious meaning of the hijab and the other with the dimension of cultural identity, an idea that is expressed in the following fragment: "The first reason is religious. It's an act of worship to Allah and it also forms part of my identity" (Aicha Fernandez, personal communication, December 28, 2021). This idea was expressed almost identically by another video creator: "It's an act of worship to Allah and, at the same time, it forms part of my identity. Because it shows other members of society I'm a believer" (Cintikart, personal communication, March 30, 2022). In the context outlined, the religious and cultural nuances of meaning shape the conceptual frameworks that allow us to explore the significance of the hijab in contemporary Spain.

The grammar of modesty and asceticism:

Religious meanings of the hijab in YouTube content

From a religious point of view, in accordance with Islamic precepts, one of the central ideas highlighted by the content creators is that the practice of wearing the hijab should be understood in terms of ethical and public behaviour, characterised by decency and modesty (Ramírez & Mijares, 2021). A recurring theme identified in the analysis of the videos is understanding the hijab as a means of concealing a woman's physical appearance in order to preserve modesty. This perspective is reflected in 16 of the 20 videos analysed, as exemplified by the following statement from one of the creators: "The hijab isn't about covering your hair. It's to conceal whatever makes a woman's stand out in terms of beauty" (Cintikart, 2019). This idea was reinforced by another of the video creators:

For me, to dress modestly is to dress according to the Islamic precepts with which I'm familiar, dictating that the parts of the body we call erogenous shouldn't be shown. No showing cleavage. No short dresses or skirts. That sort of thing, okay? So, modesty doesn't only encompass the way of dressing but also the way of behaving. That is, maintaining that respect and that good attitude towards others. (Aicha Fernández, personal communication, December 28, 2021)

These statements demonstrate the importance of distinguishing between, on the one hand, the act of concealing as an aspect forming part of that expected morality and, on the other, modest demeanour as an attitude in the deployment of this social practice, as indicated in the following fragment: "Because, honestly, the hijab's something I'm still working on today, which is modesty. But the headscarf's something I decided to wear one day. And that's what I'm going to tell you about" (Juni, 2018).

Another of the ideas emerging in the interviews involves understanding the hijab as a religious artefact or habitus (Mahmood, 2019), which serves as a sort of guide or reminder

to act in accordance with Islamic principles, thus developing one's spirituality (Mahmood, 2019; Grima, 2013). This idea is emphasised in the following two fragments: "The hijab sort of helped me to perform my prayers properly, to focus on a more spiritual world" (Ramiaschannel, 2020); "As I said, the headscarf helps me to keep my religion in mind. Because as I'm a convert – I became a Muslim when I was 30 – I haven't been a Muslim for the entire 30 years of my life" (Cintikart, 2020). This can also be seen in the following fragment:

Let's say the hijab's made me more focused. It's made me behave better. It's made me think harder before doing something, making me think twice, right? [...] Before, without the hijab, I'd go down the street acting the fool or fooling around or I don't know... dancing... and now I don't do that because I'm wearing the hijab. (AmalStyle, 2018)

Furthermore, the act of donning the hijab was presented as a ritual symbolising a transition typically towards adulthood as a Muslim woman, as can be observed in the following extract in which the content creator discusses how the idea of wearing it came about:

When they gave us our marks. When I planned my whole life. I said to myself... Let's say it was the year in which you decided on what profession you wanted to pursue and what you wanted to study and so on. So, I said, 'Now's the time to change my life for the better'. (AmalStyle, 2018)

This same idea was repeated by another YouTuber: "I started to really wear it when I was 23. At 21, I got married. Then when I started wearing it, I started wearing it for myself. Because I wanted to change something in my life" (Zahia EB, 2020). It is an act also conceived as an offering to God and as a way of honouring one's family:

I decided the day on which I was going to wear the hijab. It was very clear to me. The day of my secondary school graduation was going to be the last day I was going to leave my house without the hijab. Why did I choose the day of my graduation? Because it was like the day on which I was going to end a stage of my life. I was graduating from secondary school. And I thought it'd be like a self-reward for me, for my parents and a thanksgiving to Allah for helping me to accomplish that small goal which, at the time, was very important for me. Right? And so, it was *alhamdulillah* [thanks be to Allah]. (Latifa Fashion, 2020)

This conscious practice, which, in turn, enabled these women to act in accordance with Islamic precepts, was for them also an offering that allowed them to draw closer to God:

So, for me the hijab is an Islamic precept whose aim is to worship Allah. And I do so. I wear it for Allah, just like I fast for Allah. I pray for Allah. So, I wear the veil for Allah, just like nuns wear their habit for God. It's the same thing. (Aicha Fernández, personal communication, December 28, 2021).

By the same token, another video creator noted the following: “Wearing a headscarf is something that brings you closer to God. And that’s something that cannot be denied” (Cintikart, 2020). This was also repeated in another video: “The hijab is another act of worship that we perform for God, as I understand and believe it” (Ramiaschannel, 2020). Consequently, the hijab emerges as a meaningful form of expression for many women, symbolising both spiritual devotion and their insertion into a broader socio-religious paradigm. Within this framework, modest conduct in the public sphere becomes a tangible, embodied manifestation of faith – one that also materialises through symbolic rites of passage into adulthood.

Cultural identity, recognition, and rejection:

The hijab as a marker of Muslim identity in Spain

From a cultural perspective, there are several important aspects in the videos and interviews that warrant attention. Thirteen of the 20 videos discuss the idea of the hijab as an integral part of the identity of a Muslim believer, both socially and personally. This is echoed in the following statement from an interview:

The hijab for me is just another part of me. I don’t see it as a garment. I see it as a part of my being. A part of my faith. It’s what represents me. Whether it’s a religious thing or a personality thing. (Fatinor, personal communication, November 14, 2021)

There are other statements that also stress this identity-related aspect: “It’s more my identity. It forms part of my decisions. If I take it off and look at myself, I feel like I am naked” (Nina’s Mirror, personal communication, November 22, 2021); “I feel very comfortable with my headscarf and I can’t imagine going out without it. I’d feel naked in the street” (Zahia EB, 2020); “The hijab forms part of my identity as a person. Just like my blue eyes. So, I wear the veil as if it were just another part of who I am” (Aicha Fernández, 2019). In these fragments, it is possible to observe a process of assimilation of a religious-cultural belonging as if it were a feature inherent to the Muslim social subject (Foucault, 2002, 2007).

In relation to this process of internalising a cultural fact as an assimilated reality, in the videos made by the YouTubers who are daughters of migrants, it can be seen how cultural identity is gradually constructed in everyday life and in spaces of participation and/or socialisation within the family, in the discourses shared by peers, in religious-cultural celebrations and in language-learning settings. These are spaces, places, and moments in which shared visions, ideas, and expressions are shaped as part of a collective identity (Gramsci, 1982; Hall, 1986), in which the hijab occupies a relevant place.

In one of the videos, the content creator recounts how, for her, wearing it is an important religious tradition in her family: “My family, *alhamdulillah* [thanks be to Allah], is fairly religious. So, since I was little, I’ve always seen my mother, aunts, and older cousins wearing the hijab” (Latifa Fashion, 2020). Along the same lines, in her video, another

creator stresses the relevant role played by her mother in this process – “Although my mother always told me to think about wearing it and to wear it” (Zahia EB, 2017) – in addition to her sister’s influence:

My sister wore it before me because she’s obviously older; and when I wanted to wear it, she was the one who always helped me put it on, until I learned [how to do it]. So, it was my sister who taught me this way of wearing it. (AminaPerfect2003, 2019)

Moreover, there is also the importance of wearing the hijab at religious celebrations and events:

Yes, it was the Feast of Sacrifice [Eid al-Adha]. And I went out with my sister. Here, you can see a photo of my first time wearing it for good. Because before I had worn it like this on a Sunday or a Saturday because I was going to Arabic classes. (AminaPerfect2003, 2019)

On the subject of Arabic classes: “When I was younger, I used to go to Arabic classes in the mosque in my village” (Latifa Fashion, 2020). Another creator, in one of her videos, remarks that, at a certain moment, preachers delivered speeches in favour of wearing the hijab:

At the time, yes, there was also a wave of women who started to veil themselves, to wear the hijab because of the number of preachers there, because of the visual impact and atmosphere of the moment in which we were encouraged to do so. Because I remember that, not in the first years of secondary school but maybe when I was in baccalaureate, there were more and more girls who started to wear the veil. It was also influenced by the social context we lived in. (Ramiaschannel, 2020)

These fragments show how the practice of wearing the hijab was important to several of these YouTubers for keeping company and maintaining relationships in their social circles. Moreover, sociocultural and religious factors are shown to converge in ways that generate expectations within both the family and the broader community, fostering an environment in which wearing the veil is perceived as a moral or social commitment to communal values.

Another aspect has to do with understanding the hijab as a hallmark of Muslimness (Blommaert & Varis, 2015), as evidenced by the following fragment: “So, of course, the headscarf helps me to identify myself and others” (Cintikart, 2020). In Spain where Islam is a minority religion, this gives rise to a number of problems. In one of her videos, this same creator comments on the reaction of her social circle when she started to wear it: “Many people in the Islamic world congratulated me. Many people took it badly in my other world, in my world as a normal Spaniard” (Cintikart, 2018). In relation to the reaction in her social circle, she has the following to say:

My flatmate at that time was a girl from my city who accompanied me there... I mean, she came with me to Barcelona to earn a living. We made the trip together and such. And she didn't like it. When she saw me in the street with the headscarf, she said to me, "If you don't mind, I don't want to accompany you". I was a bit hurt by her rejection of my decision. (Cintikart, 2018)

Wearing the headscarf, on the other hand, meant that she was welcomed by the Muslim people in her neighbourhood:

The butcher's shop where I bought meat, halal meat, was run by Muslims, of course. When they saw me wearing a headscarf for the first time... wow! They talked to me a lot [...]. I thought it was really nice that wearing the headscarf could open the doors to the Muslim community. (Cintikart, 2018)

This idea of incompatibility between Muslim and Spanish identities is expressed in another video: "The fact of experiencing that rejection in France made me take it off. Because I couldn't bear that situation, as I had problems in administrations, offices and so on. They no longer recognised me as a Spaniard" (Ramiaschannel, 2020). This perceived incompatibility between wearing the headscarf and identifying as Spanish is also evident in the following extract:

It happened when I once entered a shop and, because I was wearing the veil, well, you can imagine; they started talking to me as if I were a moron. [...] They had been speaking to other customers in Catalan and when it was my turn, they spoke to me in a sort of sub-language. (Amalstyle, 2018)

This climate of rejection can be better understood in the context of historical processes of identity formation, in which the figure of the 'Moor' was constructed as the antithesis of 'Spanishness' (Martín-Corrales, 2004; Mateo Dieste, 2017; Álvarez-Miranda & Eseverri-Mayer, 2024). At the same time, Catholicism has played a central role in shaping Spanish national identity (Planet, 2018; Téllez, 2014; Téllez & Madonia, 2018). Together, these elements have contributed to a national imaginary that defines 'Spanish' identity in opposition to its 'Islamic-Muslim' counterpart – an opposition that continues to generate contradictions and identity tensions, particularly among new generations of Spanish Muslim women.

In this context, a number of videos explore the reluctance to publicly disclose one's religious affiliation, despite the fundamental right of religious practice being guaranteed. These videos emphasise the challenges encountered by Muslim women, particularly when seeking employment:

I went to an interview. I showed up with my hijab. And they told me I couldn't work there with my hijab. So, I suggested working with a cap or something. And they said I couldn't because I was going to be a cashier. (Latifa Fashion, 2020)

There are also obstacles that they have to overcome to wear it at school:

Because there's a girl in my family, how old is she? Thirteen? She's probably twelve. Because you start school at about that age. So, they haven't let her wear the hijab. Because she only started to wear it a little while ago. And she's surprised that they haven't let her wear it.
(Zahia EB, 2020)

This demonstrates that, while the law guarantees the right to religious worship and practice, in daily life women are influenced by informal norms that compel them to remove their hijabs in order to attend school or get a job. So the law allows for it, but social praxis informally sanctions the public visibility of it (Foucault, 2002). Although from a scientific point of view there is no consensus on the existence of structural racism against Muslims (Bangstad, 2022), several reports have decried the exclusion and racialisation of the Muslim community (Bayrakli & Hafez, 2023; Choudhury, 2021; Aparicio, 2020; Ali, 2021; Zamora et al., 2021).

For Sirin Adlbi, a scholar of Syrian origin residing in Granada, Islamophobia serves as a device for 'otherising' and 'subordinating' Islam and Muslims, the origins of which go back to the process of colonisation carried out by the West. She points out that the hijab-wearing Muslim woman is the representation of otherness par excellence in the Western world, which makes it possible to generate the image of her as a passive and oppressed subject (2016).

In this context, the act of publicly showing oneself as a Muslim becomes a political discourse in itself, since her mere presence confronts and subverts to a great extent the representations revolving around prejudiced conceptions of Muslim women (Adbli, 2016; Tarlo & Moors, 2013). In this regard, the discourses constructed by content creators around the hijab often seek to challenge prevailing prejudices and normalise its use – a purpose made explicit in one of the interviews, where a content creator was asked about her motivation for producing such content:

To normalise it, to make people like it. Even if it isn't to people's liking, to accept it and... I want there to come a time. Although I don't know if it'll come, right? But I have faith that there'll come a time when a person who wears a hijab or a turban or whatever will go as unnoticed. (Nina's Mirror, personal communication, November 22, 2021)

Or as this other creator indicates, "I think the YouTube channel has opened many people's minds, making them see that we are normal people, housewives with children who could perfectly well be your friend" (Cintikart, personal communication, March 30, 2022).

In addition, the discourse surrounding the hijab by these content creators on YouTube functions as a medium for the dissemination of information, the exposure of injustices, the expression of solidarity, and the mobilisation of action in the face of adversity. This phenomenon is illustrated by the following excerpt, which details the case of a female trainee who was obliged to remove her hijab in order to continue her training:

She hasn't renounced her hijab. She preferred to give up her internship. Since then, she hasn't kept quiet. The first thing she did was to share her experience on social networks. A lot of girls have supported her on social networks. They have shared the experience. And they have managed to make her story known throughout Spain. (Latifa Fashion, 2020)

This confirms the importance that members of this group attach to social networks – specifically YouTube – as a means of subverting ideas, reporting, and connecting with the community.

Hijab fashion: A dialogic garment of negotiated belongings

In relation to the digital discourses analysed, the most novel aspect is the proposal to combine the hijab with contemporary fashion. In this regard, 17 out of the 20 videos touch on the aesthetics of the hijab. This expression represents a form of hybridisation, blending elements of Islamic religion with the expressive features of current fashion, in which the headscarf takes centre stage. From an aesthetical standpoint, the most noteworthy video among those analysed is the one in which a woman models different outfits in a variety of venues in the city of Barcelona (Ramiaschannel, 2017). In the video, this visibly negotiated dialogue between identities results in a stylish hybridity (Lewis, 2013; Tarlo & Moors, 2013) in which the hijab is combined with jeans, heels, and make-up. This form of expression reflects the aesthetics of the new subject to which Bhabha refers (1994) and which emerges as an identity-related dialogue of the material and visual landscape reflected upon a complex interplay of identity, faith, politics, ethics, aesthetics, and belonging (Tarlo, 2010). One of the younger creators comments the following when asked about the idea of making fashion and religiosity compatible in the content she produces:

Right, I try to combine them. Sometimes, for example, I do wear very tight clothes, although I know it's not the right thing to do. Nevertheless, I wear them. Let's say, I don't go over the top. But I do indeed try to encourage people to combine clothes or find a bit of inspiration whenever possible. And to share how I wear my clothes. Because I'm not going to wear very loose clothes because it's not 100% my style. But I do try to combine my style with religion and faith. (Aminaperfect2003, personal communication, November 22, 2021)

These discourses appeal to this new social segment in that they construct a positive image with which to identify. As this same creator emphasises when asked if she feels like an influencer: "Yes, for a more Muslim audience or people who want to wear the veil and are afraid of rejection" (Aminaperfect2003, personal communication, November 22, 2021). Moreover, the digital space and the social logics created by YouTube enable these creators to set themselves up as their own references for newer generations in the absence of positive role models and guidelines that address the problems that they experience (Peterson, 2016). In this respect, they highlight the possible ways of negotiating belonging, without having to renounce any of them, breaking with existing stereotypes by projecting the image of urban, sophisticated, and modern Muslim women. In this regard,

it is worth asking whether this is merely part of an aesthetic expression, or whether these practices in fact involve a deeper transformation – one that reconfigures social roles, notions of sexuality and morality, and contemporary understandings of family, autonomy, and religious identity.

Meanwhile, this dialogic approach has been met with internal criticism from within the community, attributable to two interrelated factors: media overexposure, and the aesthetic emphasis placed on the garment, which has gradually shifted towards promoting secularised and liberal identities (Hamdah, 2017, 2018). This shift is regarded by many as being at odds with the religious and cultural values inherent in traditional Islamic morality (Saeed, 2013). The following excerpt illustrates this tension: “I too have been judged, whether I’m wearing too much make-up. Or on the days I wear a turban because I wear it and you can see a bit more of my hair around here” (Ramiaschannel, 2018).

In this respect, it can be observed that these aesthetics are strongly influenced by mercantile logic, as they have emerged in accordance with increased cultural consumption (Banet-Weiser, 2012), resulting in an Islamic cultural industry (Gökariksel & McLarney, 2010). According to the *State of the Global Islamic Report 2023/24* (Liaqat, 2023), the modest clothing industry had a turnover of US\$318 billion in 2023. This industry has encountered in social networks a way of expanding its business (Lewis, 2013), an aspect that can also be seen, albeit to a lesser extent, in the content analysed here. In this regard, three videos promoting modest clothing brands were identified, with one of the YouTubers pointing out the following:

There’s a lot of money to be made and the make-up products are very attractive. But they don’t always take people’s best interests into account, nor do they promote a more diverse image, but are simply out to turn a profit. (Aicha Fernandez, personal communication, December 28, 2021)

Thus, reinforcing the idea that these companies seek to make money out of the beliefs and devotion of the collective:

These companies are using Muslim women to boost their sales. Because they have seen there’s money to be made out there. Because they have discovered a specific audience, but by no means are they taking into account the values and principles of that Muslim woman. Because they simply use her as a copy and paste of their image in order to sell. (Aicha Fernandez, personal communication, December 28, 2021)

Influencer content creators occupy a relevant place in the promotion and expansion of this incipient industry, since, due to their ability to penetrate this market niche, they facilitate the sale of related products (Burgess & Green, 2018). As one of the creators, who was contacted by a modest fashion company after making a viral video about the meaning of the hijab, remarked in the interview:

They sent me their product in exchange for free promotion for the stories to talk about their product. I just had to try it on and showcase it. And if I didn't like it, I didn't have to promote it. (Aminaperfect2003, personal communication, November 22, 2021)

The result of this market-oriented logic is the modulation of expressive forms that emerge in digital media, favouring trends in which the hijab can acquire a value as just another fashion item or accessory. According to one of the creators:

The new generation sees the hijab in a different way, which of course is also very respectable. But to be able to wear it fashionably. To be able to dress, let's say, in a contemporary fashion, in a Western way, so to speak, and wear the hijab. They want to make it fashionable. (Nina's Mirror, personal communication, November 22, 2021)

This trend can ultimately entail the fetishisation of the hijab (Gökariksel & McLarney, 2010; Waninger, 2015):

If there's one thing I've said many a time and which I'll never tire of saying, is that the hijab in the consumerist, capitalist world of image, and increasingly of image, due to the issue of social networks, the fact that we're recording ourselves on video all the time or posting photos of ourselves and comparing ourselves with others, makes it much more difficult to wear it than before. (Ramiaschannel, 2020)

These practices, while potentially reinterpreting the core values prescribed by religious tradition, also render the hijab compatible with contemporary fashion sensibilities. They offer younger generations a means of expressing identities that are both religiously rooted and culturally hybrid, while simultaneously contributing to the normalisation of the hijab in societies where Islam is often met with scepticism or perceived as culturally the Other. The hijab's dual function, and the tensions it engenders, position it as a dynamic symbolic device, insofar as it actively negotiates the evolving sociocultural terrain between Muslim communities and the broader European and Western contexts in which they are embedded.

Towards a conclusion

In the context of the discourses surrounding the hijab on YouTube, by the early 2020s, the phenomenon of the hijab in Spain had evolved into a complex issue immersed within a new sociocultural reality: the emergence of a Spanish Muslim community actively seeking spaces in which its members can be both recognised and accepted for who they are. Within this landscape, digital platforms have become pivotal arenas for identity construction, intercultural dialogue, increased visibility, normalisation, and even activism. These platforms empower Muslim women to articulate the meaning of the hijab – both as a personal expression and as a marker of religious and cultural identity – where these dimensions often intersect and become inseparable due to the deeply embodied nature

of the practice. Moreover, it is essential to acknowledge how these content creators navigate and perform their multifaceted identities, frequently intertwining them with aesthetic choices influenced by contemporary fashion trends and commercial imperatives. Digital media plays a foundational role in shaping their narratives, enabling them to serve as influential figures and role models for younger generations, particularly within a societal context where their presence is often marginalised or portrayed through reductive, negative lenses. In this regard, the aesthetic practices constructed and shared online absorb and reflect the broader dynamics of belonging negotiation experienced by these new generations. These processes are marked by the interweaving of economic, social, political, and cultural factors, giving rise to new sensibilities and redefined modes of being that speak to the complexities of identity in the first quarter of the 21st century, particularly within the context of a multicultural Southern European society.

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