

# Muslimhiphop.com: Constructing Muslim Hip Hop Identities on the Internet

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## Abstract

*Although music is not clearly permissible (halal) nor prohibited (haram) in Islam, many young Muslims today make hip hop music and also portray Muslim identities in their lyrics. The article discusses a case study of how Muslim identity and Muslim hip hop are constructed discursively on an American web site entitled Muslimhiphop.com. The site features Muslim artists from multicultural backgrounds from several different countries. The theoretical framework of social constructivism along with discourse analysis guide the study: identity is seen as contextually and socially constructed.*

*According to the web site's official stance, if the lyrics and the artists follow the principles of Islam, then the music is permissible. Islamic hip hop is argued to be a positive alternative to mainstream hip hop, to strengthen a positive Muslim identity especially among Muslim youth by teaching Islam and to enhance a positive social change for example by fighting stereotypes. However, it becomes evident that many Muslim artists struggle to integrate Islam with artistic creativity as well as commercial success with religious beliefs. Muslims who make and listen to Islamic hip hop have to continuously defend the music to Muslims who shun it as forbidden and to non-Muslims who feel estranged by its religiousness. Muslim identity is constantly negotiated, multidimensional and situational.*

## Keywords

*rap music, Islam, music, Internet, identity*

## Introduction

This article is a case study that discusses how Muslims represent and construct social and religious identities within the global hip hop and Muslim community in an online context, focusing on a single web site entitled Muslimhiphop.com. Muslim hip hop, a mixture of Islam and an American-born contemporary musical style (see for example Chang 2005; Rose 1994), is

a term that can be used to refer to any rap music made by Muslims, or rap music with clear references to Islam and being a Muslim. In this article Muslim hip hop refers to so-called conscious Muslims who clearly bring forward their religion in their music;<sup>1</sup> this is also how the term is used on the Muslimhiphop.com web site. As web sites build representations of Islam and of religious beliefs that Muslims have,<sup>2</sup> they are also involved in the social construction of religious identities, what it means to identify as a Muslim. The Muslimhiphop.com web site contains discursive representations of what Muslim hip hop should be and could be; by creating cultural norms regarding the relationship of music and Islam, it also constructs Muslim identities. Some examples of this will be provided later in this article. Previous studies have acknowledged that Muslim hip hop can unite Muslims transnationally in a new way and that Muslims are using hip hop for example as a way to challenge and deconstruct discourses and stereotypic notions of Islam and build positive identities.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the history of hip hop, this musical style has been able to unite individuals and groups across national and ethnic borders.<sup>4</sup> Besides hip hop's potential positive influences on Muslim identities, the debate on whether Islam and hip hop are compatible or whether music is *haram* (forbidden) according to Islam plays a large role in the construction of Muslim hip hop identities and requires Muslims to justify and negotiate the combination of hip hop music and religion. Popular views about Islam as incompatible with "Western" culture (which hip hop is also often seen to be a part of) also influence Muslims who wish to make or listen to hip hop music. The idea of "Western culture" is notably problematic and cannot be clearly defined because it is essentially a discursively constructed and imagined entity, and something that is in constant fluctuation. In this article, referrals to Western culture are made primarily from the point of view of the material, that is the Muslimhiphop.com web site and the way the idea is represented there. In the material, "Western" culture was commonly seen as problematic from the point of view of Islamic morals.<sup>5</sup>

The main material for this article is the content of Muslimhiphop.com (later also MHH), a website dedicated to promoting Islam and its values with hip

hop music as well as some other music genres. Chosen parts of its content will be analyzed using discourse analysis and based on the hip hop artist interviews, hip hop artist profiles and other relevant sections on the website, the following questions will be explored: how and for what purposes does Muslimhiphop.com construct and represent Muslim identities? How do 'Muslim hip hop' and 'Islamic' music become defined and how do they relate to (and interact with) Muslim identities? How do Muslims negotiate their religious identity with being a hip hop artist? In what ways do Islamic principles and the exigencies of commercial success affect a Muslim rapper? This article focuses primarily on the descriptions and argumentation used on the website concerning hip hop music, Islam and being a Muslim, in other words how Muslim identities are constructed and represented online and in the context of hip hop music.

The following chapter describes the research material, after which the theoretical framework and the method are presented and discussed in relation to the material. Some aspects of Islam's relationship with music will be discussed before the analysis of the research material. Finally, conclusions as well as some questions for further study are discussed.

## The material

The principal material for this article is a website, [www.muslimhiphop.com](http://www.muslimhiphop.com), which was originally created by Michael (Mike) Shapiro in the United States. The material was gathered in 2010 – 2011. In total, the material gathered from the site consists of: 20 interviews, of which four were audio interviews featuring for example the MHH founder; 64 artist presentations; and general (official) website sections that is criteria for artists, history and mission of MHH, links, and a section called 'Music in Islam,' which explains the stance of the web site concerning the relationship of music and Islam. In light of the fact that the focus is on hip hop music I excluded artists of other genres from the analysis even though they were featured on the web site.<sup>6</sup> There were 64 artists classified as being part of the hip hop genre. Out of these 64 artists or groups, 26 were born in the United States,

four in the United Kingdom, two in Canada, one in the Netherlands, one in Belgium, one in Pakistan, one in Kurdistan, one in Iraq, one in South Korea, one in Australia and one in Haiti. One pair of hip hop artists working together came from Mozambique and Nigeria, and another pair was made up of an American-born and a Belgian-born Muslim. For 22 hip hop artists listed on the site, the country of origin was unspecified, but based on their profiles, some were clearly living in the United States and at least a few in the United Kingdom. At least 16 out of the 64 had immigrated at some point or were descendants of immigrant parents.

### Theoretical framework and method

The method or approach for analyzing the material is discourse analysis. As Fairclough (2003) maintains, text and discourse are not synonymous: the former is a spoken or written product of discourse whereas the latter includes the text and the actual social occurrence and process(es) of producing the text.<sup>7</sup> The approach here is essentially that of social constructivism where it is assumed that reality is constructed in social interaction.<sup>8</sup> When I have applied discourse analysis to the material, the research questions were answered by analyzing the function of language use on the MHH web site. This means (1) looking at socially-situated identities ('who') in socially-situated activity ('what') and how they are negotiated in interaction; and (2) analyzing, in terms of the structure of the text, what kind of (grammatical) patterns of meaning construction and organization can be detected, that are differences in language use and argumentation in the texts.<sup>9</sup> This entails looking at ways of classifying meaning, such as synonyms, antonyms, collocation, metaphors and nominalization.<sup>10</sup> I have focused mainly on the analysis of pronouns, nouns, adverbs and adjectives. While nouns are used to name and categorize things, adjectives are mainly used to define or modify them (as attribute or predicate); thus they contain important information about how and for what purpose meanings are represented and constructed, included and excluded. Adverbs are likewise typically meaning modifiers.<sup>11</sup> De Fina (2006) notes that identities that people perform in discourse are "based on ideologies and beliefs about (...) social groups and categories and

about the implications of belonging to them,” while also stating that categorization is an important process in the negotiation and construction of identities because it reflects how people attach features to experiences and make them relevant for their identities.<sup>12</sup> On the MHH web site this can be seen for example in the artist interviews where the rappers describe what kind of hip hop is respectful of Islam and interesting to Muslims.

The theoretical framework, which is used here to discuss and analyze Islam and hip hop music in the context of the Internet, is identity representation and construction of religious group identities. Identities can be described as subjective positions, attachments or representations that one takes and which discursive practices create.<sup>13</sup> Identity and belonging are processes that one constantly shapes and negotiates with decisions, actions and surroundings.<sup>14</sup> During the analysis, the constantly ongoing construction and organizing of meanings by Muslims and how certain socially constructed features are emphasized more than others is explored. However, this does not entail only meaning inclusion; identification also always signifies division, exclusion and difference making between individuals and groups, and sometimes identities are not chosen but imposed as part of social or structural power play.<sup>15</sup> This kind of differentiation through meaning exclusion is clearly seen on the MHH web site, as for example the mission and the criteria for artists later in this article demonstrate. By using this kind of discursive practice, the site characterizes Muslim hip hop as enhancing a Muslim identity and Islamic values and traditions. According to Fairclough (2003), what one commits to in textual interaction is part of who one is and how the world and others are represented; because one’s sense of self is always related to interaction with other people, identities are social and relational also in text.<sup>16</sup>

When discussing Muslim identities, Bayat and Herrera (2010) note that especially after 9/11 and the increased islamophobia<sup>17</sup> which ensued, many youth in Muslim minorities have been labeled as Muslims first and foremost, with any other identity they associate with coming second – such as American for example. In addition some young Muslims have asserted a

clearer identification to Islam as well as a stronger Muslim group identity.<sup>18</sup> The 9/11 events and global Islamic terrorism forced Muslims to answer questions like what is Islam, what does being a Muslim mean, and is Islam an inherently violent religion.<sup>19</sup> Hip hop, among other means of self-expression, became part of this identity negotiation work and also a tool for fighting stereotypes. Also the founder of Muslimhiphop.com, Michael Shapiro, explains in one of his interviews featured on the MHH web site about how he was inspired to fight against stereotypes after reading accusations of featuring pro-terrorism rap on his site.<sup>20</sup>

### Islam, music and hip hop

The Qur'an is ambiguous about the permissibility of music, yet it does not explicitly deny music. In some hadiths (collection of Prophet Muhammad's acts and sayings) the prophet can be interpreted to allow certain music but mostly the hadiths are vague like the Qur'an; this is also due to variance in the interpretation of the meaning of Arabic terms. Many famous Muslim scholars have opposed music during the centuries; for example Ibn Abi'l-Dunya claims it to be a distraction from pious life. Ibn Taymiyya explained the prohibition of music to be due to its capability to incite pleasure and excitement and thus lead away from any rational thinking, stating also that the Qur'an would explicitly state it if music was central to Islam; yet he also allowed chanting of poems and singing at weddings as this was allowed by the Prophet.<sup>21</sup> The Sufis are an example of a group within Islam that has continued their musical tradition as part of spiritual practice and music has remained a central aspect of their religiousness through centuries despite the debate about music's permissibility. Ibn Taymiyya, along with Ibn al-Djawzi considered this heretical.<sup>22</sup>

Many theologians also expressed less harsh views. Ibn Radjab allowed music if the content was chaste. Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali concluded that, based on the analogous and legal arguments, music is allowed but only on certain occasions such as to evoke love of God and bring joy, depending on the circumstances. He considered some instruments (wind and string instru-

ments) as prohibited, and also some music performed by women if its purpose is seductive, listening to music without a specific purpose other than listening as well music that leads to or is associated with the consumption of wine. The text, or poetry in the song, should not be condemned if the content is morally permissible, and if music leads towards God then it is recommended and listening is *halal*, permissible. Like Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Ghazali's argumentation rests on the Qur'an and the hadiths, but he also elaborated on the potential beneficial effects of music. Ibn Abd Rabbihi also argued for the benefits of music, focusing less on whether music is allowed or not. He also links music to poetry which is allowed.<sup>23</sup> Some Muslim theologians, including al-Ghazali and Abu Nas al-Sarj, state that poetry and songs may be more attractive than the Qur'an due to more extensive expressivity in terms of melody and rhythm; however, this has also been interpreted to mean that music competes with the Qur'an.<sup>24</sup>

Two of Islam's American offshoots, Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Five Percenters, have strongly influenced hip hop during its entire history. Hip hop music made by artists who belong to one of these groups has sometimes been termed Muslim hip hop. Hip hop music made by Muslims who do not necessarily include Islam in their lyrics has also been categorized as Muslim hip hop. These two forms of Muslim hip hop are separated here from Islamic hip hop or 'conscious' Muslims that is hip hop made by orthodox Muslims, who explicitly include Islam in their lyrics.<sup>25</sup> During the analysis I have also formulated another way of differentiating between the terms; I frequently use Muslim hip hop when referring to the artists ("Muslim" describing the authors and performers) and Islamic hip hop when referring to the lyrical content. These distinctions are important for at least two reasons: to clarify the focus of this article, and to highlight the plurality of meanings of the terms that are used to discuss hip hop music's affiliations with Islam. Orthodox Muslims may consider the Five Percenters and the Nation of Islam heretical and non-Islamic due to their flexible theological interpretations, absence of structure and often free-minded individualism regarding sex, drugs and other moral related issues.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the lay Muslim views on music, there are many who do not accept music making or listening but clearly there are also those who do, and Muslim hip hop is one example of that. Orthodox Muslims often focus their critique on the many clearly *haram* (forbidden) elements of hip hop made by other hip hop artists, also members of Five Percenters and Nation of Islam, such as blatant sexuality, drug abuse, violence and crime, but also denounce rap's materialism and misogyny as undesirable and immoral.<sup>27</sup> According to Khabeer (2007), Muslim rappers often stress that they want to convey an Islamic message especially to the youth, and base their choice of music genre on the fact that the youth in particular listen to popular music such as hip hop; the youth use popular culture as a tool to make sense of who they want to be, but Muslims are rarely represented in it.<sup>28</sup> Muslim rappers may feel controversial about rapping or even consider it to be against their religion and identification as a Muslim, yet they continue doing it. Some say that only Allah can be the judge of rap's permissibility.<sup>29</sup> The issue of making music is thus not clear-cut, and Muslims cannot be divided simply into those who see music as permitted and those who do not, or even by those who enjoy music and those who do not. Both Solomon (2006) and Shannahan and Hussain (2011) note that some rappers also convey ideas of a shared Muslim identity and show global solidarity while de-emphasizing theological and ethnic differences.<sup>30</sup> Shannahan and Hussain argue that in the case of Islamic rap, it is not only powerful in uniting Muslims across different denominations but also different ethnicities by raising solidarity against poor socio-political conditions, in their study in Tunisia and in Arab countries in general.<sup>31</sup> Similar discourses were visible on the Muslimhiphop.com web site, but, as the discussion above and the analysis below demonstrate, the compatibility of hip hop and Islam as means of self-expression is not self-evident.

### What is Muslimhiphop.com?

Web sites typically have an "about us" section, and Muslimhiphop.com is no exception; the link to this part of the site is titled "What is MHH." It includes four sections that explain the site's purpose: 'criteria for artists,'



‘history of MHH,’ ‘mission of MHH,’ and a section called ‘Music in Islam.’ The stance of the web site concerning the relationship between Islam and music is quite detailed; instead of simply stating that music and Islam are considered compatible, this argument is supported with several lists that discursively render music beneficial and even necessary for Muslims (see further analysis below). To demonstrate what these lists look like, I have quoted two of these sections below.

A section entitled ‘Our mission’ contains the following list:

Promote the message of Muslim artists.

Set the standard and code of conduct for those who partake in Muslim hip hop.

Show Muslims there is a creative outlet for them to express themselves in a *halal* (permissible) way.

Counter the impression given by the media that Muslims are defined by terrorism which Islam condemns.

Prove that Islam and art, music and comedy can have a strong and appropriate relationship.

Speak out against the injustices committed against and by Muslims.

Share Islam with the world through the universal language of music.

Reach out to non-practicing Muslims who would otherwise never here [*sic*] about Islam.

(What is MHH 2011)

The mission of the web site connects several activities with Muslim artistry: *halal* self-expression, condemning terrorism and fighting stereotypes, communicating Islam to others. Several abstract nouns, such as ‘message’ and ‘standard,’ point towards larger understandings about the social value of Muslim-made music and its relation to society, politics and moral issues

(see especially the expression ‘code of conduct’). This is visible also in the last point of the list; the adverbs ‘otherwise’ and ‘never’ are discursive ways of enhancing an underlying viewpoint and of convincing the reader. It appears that two potential scenarios are presented: either the secularized Muslims listen to Muslim hip hop and in this way find Islam, or they do not listen to Muslim hip hop and remain in a state of ignorance. A similar idea is visible, but more implicitly, in the preceding point (about sharing Islam). The mission supports and legitimizes Muslim hip hop and the web site’s existence and their role as teaching about Islam and enhancing a Muslim identification.

The web site has a strict list of criteria for those Muslim artists who wish to be included on the site.

#### Official Criteria for MuslimHipHop.com Artists

- (1) Islamic Content: Lyrics significantly about Islamic topics are what separates Muslim Hip Hop from all other forms. Therefore, MHH does not promote artists that simply happen to be Muslim. Additionally, the message must not employ the use of profanity or senseless violence nor promote sects/division.
- (2) Professionalism: Professional-quality recordings, not dinky beats made with fruity loops.<sup>32</sup>
- (3) Talent: We are showcasing mainstream-quality artists, not OK artists.
- (4) Approach: A “Muslim Artist” isn’t necessarily a career or occupation. First and foremost, it is a role a Muslim takes on to promote an Islamic message through music, only if they first fulfill their financial, familial and other Islamic obligations.
- (5) Public Conduct: Muslim artists promoted by MuslimHipHop.com must behave in agreement with Islamic principles. Any un-Islamic

behavior online or at performances is unacceptable and will result in immediate removal from this website.

(What is MHH 2010).<sup>33</sup>

In criterion one, Muslim hip hop is defined as 'Islamic' lyrical content but it is also distinguished from other types of music. The meaning of 'Islamic' is not directly explained here. However, it is possible to detect meanings that are excluded from Islamic music and being a Muslim: the use of foul language or references to violence, putting a music career ahead of more important values that is family and economic stability, socially reprehensible behavior, advancing division (among Muslims). In fact, every criterion on the list contains some kind of negation. The actual meanings that seem to be referred to are implicit: promoting peace, family values and the unity of Muslims. Also, when looking at the collocation of the adjective 'Islamic' in the list, it can be assumed that the content and topics in Muslim hip hop are related to the message, obligations and principles of Islam. The list above creates an assumption that all artists featured on the web site fulfill these criteria and make *halal* music; this may affect the site visitors' views on the artists.

Even though being an artist is assumed here to be secondary to religious duties, the music must be of the same quality as those who are professional musicians. What constitutes 'professional' or 'mainstream' quality of music is not specified in the list. In the hip hop context, strong beats, a flow in rhyming and insightful lyrical content are often considered important.<sup>34</sup> It seems that these elements are described through meaning exclusion in criteria one, two and three, although 'mainstream' vaguely refers to talent. Michael Shapiro, the web site creator and a Muslim convert, also discusses this issue in one of his interviews.

The abundant use of nominalized verbs and adjectives ('professionalism,' 'approach' and 'removal') generalizes but also replaces activities with constructed entities that are tightly connected to each other due to the list format: identifying both as a Muslim and as an artist is possible, but Islam

precedes other identifications and this norm must be visible in the music. Several adverbs (e.g. 'first,' 'first and foremost') intensify this idea. Music seems to become a tool for the expression of 'Islamic' ideas more than an art enjoyed in and of itself; a Muslim must follow Islamic principles before their artistic dreams.

After the criteria, there is more text on the web site underneath a heading 'Further Explanation.'<sup>36</sup> This piece of text clarifies many of the ideas mentioned in the 'Mission' and in the 'Criteria,' while also referring to larger social issues and problems among Muslims as being the incentive for the creation of the artist criteria and a code of conduct. The view of what Muslim hip hop should be is justified also with a list of reprehensible elements in hip hop lyrics such as violence, profanity and racism, which are assumed to be the reasons why some Muslims consider music as forbidden. The text also mentions non-Muslim artists in order to distinguish Muslim-made or Islamic hip hop from other hip hop, while creating an assumption that currently, Islamic hip hop is not yet equal to other hip hop in terms of quality. The second paragraph draws a picture of Muslim hip hop in a way reminiscent of many nationalist discourses where a common identity is constructed on 'traditions' and 'values,' as here also these same assumed entities are mentioned. This construction seems to imply that there is only one "correct" religious interpretation about Muslim music and its content. However, the opportunity to give feedback about the site and to negotiate this interpretation and the criteria of 'Islamic' music and artist conduct is also offered to the visitors of the web site at the end.

The explanation contains a statement according to which the code is not a discrimination against those who do not abide by it and that the web site is not trying to 'dictate' what Muslim hip hop should be; yet, if discrimination is understood to mean exclusion, this is exactly what the web site claims to do in its criteria. It is also stressed that the web site tries to enhance the quality and public status of Islamic music by encouraging Muslims artists; the text creates an assumption that the quality of Muslim music would remain stagnant without the web site and thus legitimizes the site's existence.

Additionally, Muslim artists are required to communicate justice and morality in their music, a norm that is constructed with the nouns 'righteousness' and 'truth.' However, attaining commercial success is also valued (see expressions "raise the bar," "make a name" and "promote").

The 'What is MHH'-section of the web site creates a framework for a discourse about Muslim hip hop and Muslim music. Muslim hip hop becomes defined as respectful of Islamic values by containing only *halal* lyrics and as a way to express Muslim identities. Summarizing, the criteria characterize Muslim hip hop as enhancing a Muslim identification and Islamic values and traditions and because the web site promotes this kind of music, it, too, enhances these. The ideas that are mentioned above also support the subsection 'Music in Islam' on the web site which explains the web site's stance regarding the relationship of Islam and music.<sup>37</sup> Regarding the theologians' views discussed earlier, al-Ghazali's opinions would appear somewhat similar to those expressed on the web site; if the content of the music is clean and its purpose is to bring closer to Islam, then it is allowed.

The main discourses that are present throughout the web site, and which I will further elaborate on below, are already present in the mission and the criteria: the *halal-haram*-discourse regarding music's permissibility, the education discourse, the discourse encouraging social change and the commercialism discourse.

### Education discourse

Many Muslim artists state that they hope to remind and educate Muslims about Islamic principles and values while offering a permissible form of music which Muslims and even non-Muslims can find enjoyable as well as morally and spiritually uplifting. Several artists featured on the web site specifically mention that by filling their lyrics with Islamic references, they are hoping to make dawah, that means educate Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam as well as support a Muslim identification.<sup>38</sup> On the web site,

Islam is often referred to as the message but also as ‘the truth.’ Douglas Pratt has listed various meanings for dawah which also include ‘propaganda’ and ‘missionary call.’<sup>39</sup> Muslims who are a minority in their home countries, for example in the United States, may also aspire to spread their religion or convert others in order to accommodate their own Muslim lifestyle.<sup>40</sup> Some artists on the MHH web site claim that their music has had an impact on people’s conversion to Islam. I have named these references as the education discourse. Muslim artists are discursively constructing arguments about their own music and Islamic hip hop in general as something that is educational, beneficial and permissible for Muslims and supports a Muslim identity.

Hip hop artists are sometimes portrayed as role models to the listeners of hip hop, and especially the youth because they use hip hop to teach and spread Islam. The below quotation from the interview of Blakstone, a group of Muslims with second generation immigrant backgrounds,<sup>41</sup> indicates some of the reasons why hip hop music in particular is used to educate about Islam:

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What inspired you to do Muslim/Islamic Hip Hop?

BLAKSTONE: The state of Muslim youth here in the UK and in the West at large was our greatest inspiration. Hip-Hop is the dominant culture amongst ethnic minorities here in Britain and the Muslims are no exception to this. But often the lyrical content is so contradictory to Islam that it causes friction amongst the youth who wish to express themselves and find an identity, and the wider Muslim community. The artists become the role models, the lyrics become the teaching ground for behaviour and personality. The result is a whole generation of youth that struggle to balance the values of the streets with the values that their belief aspires to. The change in behaviour is reflected in their view of the opposite sex, the treatment of their parents, essentially the criteria they use to define good and bad is not the

*Halal* and *Haram* but is instead dictated by their desires and the peer pressure they feel. This was the primary motivation for us, reclaiming back our youth and inspiring the future generation of this ummah through a style that they appreciate, love and understand.

(Stories 5 : Blakstone Interview 2010).

Hip hop is portrayed as understandable and appealing to the ‘ethnic’ youth in Britain, where the artist group lives. This is claimed to be due to its dominance in their cultural environment. As Muslims are assumed to be “no exception” when it comes to the power and appeal of hip hop, also Blakstone’s engagement with hip hop becomes justified as an effective means to an end, which appears to be the strengthening of Islam. Hip hop is referred to with the entity noun ‘culture,’ and not only as music, which gives it a more extensive and prominent status. Hip hop culture is constructed as a powerful tool for teaching, and anyone using it as having power to control especially the minds of young people; in this way, its effectiveness in spreading Islam becomes factual. The usage of the adjective ‘dominant’ constructs authority for the artists as well: because they use an effective tool for teaching Islam, the (Muslim) hip hop artists “become the role models” and thus exercise power.

However, mainstream hip hop lyrics are referred to as ‘often’ contradicting Islam and suppressing Muslim self-expression and identity building. The assumed contradiction is further stressed by juxtaposing “street values” (which can be assumed to refer to values usually conveyed in hip hop music) with the values of Islam (see also the terms *halal*, permissible, and *haram*, prohibited, later in the quote; this pertains to the *halal-haram*-discourse discussed below). In the fifth sentence, the active subject is ‘belief,’ an abstract concept, and not the youth. By using words like ‘struggle,’ ‘dictates’ and ‘pressure,’ the youth are characterized as being under several, contradictory demands. They are seen as being in search of an identity, which Islam and Islamic hip hop are implicitly assumed to provide. The description renders the youth passive (see “dictated by”). In this way, the need for Muslim hip hop to help

construct Muslim identities is created. Islamic hip hop is constructed as the permissible and positive alternative also through the characterization of the Muslim rappers: the artists are portrayed as teachers and (their) lyrics as authority for Muslim behavior and even for Muslim personality. The justification of the hip hop activity is topped with the artists' motivation to be "reclaiming back our youth" [*italics mine*]; with the possessive form, the youth are the malleable object of their educators.

### Halal-haram discourse

Many artists on the web site appear to see the combination of Islam and hip hop as positive because together they are argued to become a *halal* (permissible), powerful and educative alternative to the mainstream hip hop, which is claimed to be very often *haram* (prohibited), for example full of references to violence, sex, drugs and profanity. The *halal-haram*-discourse or discourse on Islamic morals and values, what is allowed and what is not, is clearly connected with the education discourse discussed above; both are used to justify Muslim hip hop. Arguing for music's permissibility using the scholarly authority was fairly common throughout the web site, or more precisely, the scholarly division on the matter about Islamic music and Muslim hip hop; for example the section Music in Islam on the web site uses this argument.<sup>42</sup> Links to other web sites are included as references to theological discussion on the matter. One of these web sites cites famous theologians such as al-Bukhari, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and Ibn Hazm.<sup>43</sup> It appears that the 'Music in Islam' section seems to be a disclaimer directed at those who claim that music making or some types of music are not permissible for Muslims to enjoy, by exhibiting that there is no clear prohibition against music in Islam. The interpretation on this site seems to assert that music is allowed as long as it does not contain clearly forbidden (*haram*) elements. As one artist puts his argument concerning music, "but for the most part some will agree if it reminds you of ALLAH than [sic] it is *halal*."<sup>44</sup> It is interesting that although some Muslim artists in their interviews evade criticism about their involvement with music by claiming that only Allah can judge them,<sup>45</sup> this argument is not used in the 'official' standpoints of the web site.



In one of the radio interviews, Michael Shapiro differentiates orthodox Muslims from the members of Five Percent and the Nation of Islam when he defines Muslim hip hop and what is allowed in it. In the transcription of the Radio Islam interview below, he is explaining about how the focus of his web site came about.

Interviewer: (...) Now, I know you started about two years ago and you said you actually shut down for about six months. What led you to shutting the site down for this short period of time?

Shapiro: Yeah, I mean back then I was a little less mature than I am now, I think uhm...

I: Okay.

S: I was twenty-three, and... You know, I just wanted to experiment, see what happens so I basically added any artist that was Muslim. I didn't really care too much about what he talked about or if he cursed or anything like that, and... But then, you know I, as time went on like, the site got really suc-popular and I was like the only one, you know, one of the only guys running things and like I couldn't handle it all and then you know... I don't know, I just lost my focus, like I was like "why the hell, what is this Muslim hip hop, it's just Muslims that happen to be Muslims that happen to rap, I mean that's all it is," so I just said "forget it," so uh... About six months went by, there was actually another web site that came up, uhm, in lieu of mine, and... But I really, you know, I really respected the fact that he tried to put it up but uh... It was totally not, I don't, I think it was totally wrong, the whole approach was wrong because he was having people on that were cursing, that were just like, Five Percent Muslims and Nation of Islam and all these just like, wack people in my opinion, that were totally spreading the wrong message. So, I said okay, I gotta have something up there that's gonna, you know, set a standard or criteria for

Muslims to, to know how to make Islamic music, in a way that doesn't violate the religion, you know? I felt that that was happening so...

(Stories 9 : Radio Islam Interviews MHH a 2nd Time 2011).

Shapiro's response begins with a narrative structure (see the repetition of the adverb 'then'). He explains going through a wearing period stressed with the repetition of the adverb 'only' during which he was in charge of maintaining the web site. With this, and by using the utterance 'you know' several times, Shapiro seems to beg for understanding for his loss of focus and support for his point of view about a standard for music. He makes excuses for his earlier web site and its less conscious musical orientation and blames his young age and circumstances. Shapiro also uses the first person singular along with many verbs of cognition (think, feel, know) throughout the extract, which highlights the subjectivity of his views. The MHH web site and Muslim hip hop in general are perhaps a very personal matter to Shapiro.

The extract further stresses the point of view that Islamic music is something other than just Muslims rapping. His condemnation of the other web site ("the approach was totally wrong") may also be a marketing strategy to enhance his own website and to attain support for his interpretation about Islam and music's relationship. The 'wrong message' of Muslim hip hop, which is here attributed to the Five Percenters and the Nation of Islam, seems to be contrasted with the "right" message that is mentioned for example in the criteria of the web site. According to Shapiro, 'Islamic' music does not violate Islam, which leads the listener of the radio interview to assume that the 'wrong' music (i.e. music made by the Five Percenters and Nation of Islam and which contains cursing) does. Shapiro accentuates his opinion about these groups and the other web site by repeating the adverbs 'just' and 'totally,' which seems excessive as already the value adjective 'wrong' and 'wack' are very powerful in expressing a subjective opinion, in this case condemning what is characterized as non-Islamic music. In this way, he also seems to be separating "good" Muslims from "bad" Muslims, and defines

what it means to be a Muslim and a religiously conscious rapper, what kind of Muslim hip hop is halal and what is not.

However, Islamic hip hop was not born out of nothingness; Muslim rappers have been acculturated into hip hop music, which previously did not have many religiously conscious artists. Part of its rebellious nature and history has always been the use of foul language and controversial topics, such as sexual encounters and drug use.<sup>46</sup> It would be impossible to become a hip hop artist without knowing what hip hop is and has been.

### Social change discourse

There is a significant amount of discussion on socioeconomic and political issues (such as racism, power structures and secretarianism in Islam) on the web site related to Muslim hip hop and its content. These discussions pertain largely to a discourse which I have named the social change discourse; the discourse constructs a shared Muslim identity by creating a need for a positive change to the social and political issues that touch Muslims and Muslim communities. Muslim rappers are portrayed as being at the forefront of advocating this change as they rap about it. The main themes appear to be Muslim unity and fighting stereotypes about Muslims. Both Muslims and non-Muslims are seen as the cause of the current problems, but only Muslims, the in-group,<sup>47</sup> are addressed. Also some immigrants are clearly rapping for other immigrants. Michael Shapiro's argument as to why listening to Muslim hip hop is beneficial is that the Muslim rappers talk about experiences which Muslims are assumed to share: it releases Muslims from their sufferings ('cathartic') as 'outsiders' and 'outcast' and helps also other people with similar experiences to relate to one another.<sup>48</sup>

The social and political issues are also claimed to be central in the music of Blind Alphabetz. The group members were born in Mozambique and Nigeria and have later immigrated to the UK.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What are some of the key issues you are tackling in your songs?

BLIND ALPHABETZ: Mohammed Yahya: we try to tackle the problems that mankind face on daily basis such as oppression by corrupt leaders, weak governing structures, poverty in so called third world countries, the rising of crime rate, the effects of a poor education system, the back lash of broken family trees, but at the same time I like to share what I think are the solutions to all this problems.

(Stories 19 : Blind Alphabetz Interview 2010).

According to one group member, not only does the group discuss the problems, they also offer solutions, which of course are needed for social change; this can make the group's music seem more interesting to many as the issues are global (see also the generalizing 'mankind'). It seems that many Muslims consider bringing up global problems important (instead of focusing only on local level issues), which may be a consequence of a multicultural background; for example, the artists in question have ties to more than one country. This may also be a result of Islam and the centrality of the ummah, the global Muslim community but probably also a result of networks of people that provide information about global level problems (many Muslims are immigrants, some fleeing from a conflict zone). The hypothesis about information networks would seem plausible due to the rappers' immigrant background and also the mentioning of "third world countries."

Also Muslims may stereotype Muslims, as seen above in Shapiro's interview where he discusses Five Percenters and Nation of Islam. Sister Haero, an Iraqi-born Muslim living in the United States and one of the few female rappers on the web site, explains what kind of stereotypes she has faced.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What is it like being a female Muslim artist? Do you get a lot of friction from Muslims?

SISTER HAERO: I love being a Muslimah artist, because so many people have stereotypes about Muslim women (we don't have fun,

we're not allowed to state our opinions or showcase our talents, etc.), and I feel like I'm helping to break those stereotypes every time I step to the mic.

(Stories 7: Sister Haero Interview 2010).

The question contains an assumption that she is rephended by Muslims in particular due to her gender; the assumptions she lists, however, could also come from non-Muslims. The female rapper states that she has indeed had to deal with stereotypes that relate to her religion and gender. By stressing that people frequently stereotype Muslim women with the intensifying adverb 'so' and the adjective 'many,' she legitimizes her own music making as necessary in order to 'break' these stereotypes. She boldly claims to be changing this state of things with her performing, emphasized with "every time." The stereotype she mentions lastly in the brackets ('our talents') sounds informative but is in fact evaluative as it portrays Muslim women as having talent; this assumption further enhances the image of also Sister Haero's music as good because she has previously in that sentence included herself in the category of (talented) Muslim women with the pronoun 'we.' In this way, she asserts a double identification as a Muslim woman and a hip hop artist.

### Commercialism and Islam: Negotiating Muslim identities and hip hop

Besides being Muslims, many of the artists have grown up with hip hop and thus see it as a natural part of their social and musical environment. Some also argue hip hop music to be a modern way of self-expression, and thus even necessary in order to evolve and improve and to avoid backwardness. Several artists on the web site claim that it can remind them and other Muslims about God, which is religiously plausible (see the education discourse discussed above). Many Muslim artists on the web site are African-American, and thus I argue that what Suad Abdul Khabeer has noted holds true here as well: many African-American Muslim rappers, and quite

likely other Muslim rappers, too, seem to believe that Islam's function is not to eliminate cultural heritage such as hip hop music but rather to bring out the positive features of both.<sup>49</sup> In this way, Muslims negotiate religion with hip hop music and artistic creativity. Muslims who have grown up around hip hop culture do not necessarily wish to sacrifice the music for the sake of their religion. This demonstrates that religion is actively negotiated with the social and cultural environments and other possible identifications. In the case of Muslims who make hip hop music and thus engage with hip hop culture, combining both elements, hip hop and Islam, seems to be the only valid option if they wish to create and maintain a positive religious identity.

Suad Abdul Khabeer has noted that many conscious Muslim artists find it contradictory to their religious values to be striving towards mainstream success when the most commercially successful rap is filled with *haram* topics.<sup>50</sup> Combining religious lyrical content with a good quality sound seems to be something that some or perhaps most Muslim artists struggle with in order to find an audience as large as possible.

Appraisal of the artists' religiousness, moral and talent in their profiles is very typical throughout the MHH web site, and it seems to be a marketing strategy. On the other hand, it is emphasized that being a Muslim artist is not essentially about creating a career. Michael Shapiro specifies in one interview that becoming mainstream is not the aim content wise, but on a quality level, admitting that some Muslims have made a full-time occupation out of music as he talks about records sales; yet, when Shapiro wants to create an image of Muslim artists as religious and following Islamic principles later in the same interview, he reduces their career ambitions by calling music a "hobby" while emphasizing their family and other Islamic duties as primary.<sup>51</sup> By perfecting skills, a hobby can turn into a career, however, Shapiro's reasoning seems problematic as in the case of most people it is impossible to reach such a level of expertise and professionalism unless they persistently work hard at it (which would require a full-time commitment).

Shapiro seems to deny this reality in order to support his alleged identification with Islam's values and tries to build an image of the Muslim hip hop genre as respecting Islam. By stating that the artists should be or are at a professional or mainstream level, he creates an image of Muslims as equally talented, skillful and appealing as non-Muslims artists, which encourages people to support, listen to and buy Muslim hip hop music. In this way, the different aspects of Muslim hip hop and Muslim identities are negotiated and constructed situationally, which can easily cause incongruity between statements. Mostly, however, becoming a well-known, mainstream artist is portrayed as something worth striving towards based on the way artists are described at the web site and based on Shapiro's interviews.

Many of the artist profiles contain appraisal of the artists' career and achievements. "Namedropping," that means mentioning famous influences or collaborators, was very common throughout the profiles, and most of these artists that were named were commercially very successful and also 'un-Islamic' in the sense that has been described at the MHH web site. However, contact with non-Muslim hip hop artists can bring Muslims and non-Muslim hip hop aficionados closer together, and in this way, mainstream success may become a reality at least for some Muslim rappers. Some Muslims may not even want to distinguish themselves from Five Percenters and the Nation of Islam or it simply does not matter to them, even if they do consider these two as out-groups. It is also possible that other rap artists are seen negatively in some contexts (e.g. smoking marijuana at their concerts, one well-known example being Wu-Tang Clan) whereas they are seen positively as successful rap artists.

## Conclusions

Islamic hip hop appears to be a result of a negotiation: it is used as a way to express a Muslim identity and identification as a hip hop artist. However, this kind of dual identification is not simple as some Muslims seem to consider that Islam must reign over musical artistry, or that music must

be rejected entirely. The demands of some Muslims, who see hip hop music as affecting Muslim identity negatively, can cause conflicts to artists who themselves consider hip hop music to support their identification as Muslims. It cannot be assumed that engaging in religious hip hop always results in positive self-identification and stronger sense of belonging to a religious group, nor is it a given that the critical voices in the religious community entail the end of Muslim hip hop. In the case of Muslimhiphop.com, the ethnic plurality of the artists on the site creates an image of hip hop as uniting Muslims across borders, but the criteria that the artists have to fill in order to featured there separates the “right” Muslim hip hop and rappers from the “wrong” ones. The division that may result from Muslims making Islamic hip hop appears to be two-fold. Firstly, it can divide Muslims based on their opinions concerning music’s permissibility into those who allow it in some cases, and into those who consider all music forbidden. Secondly, some Muslim hip hop artists are building a distance to non-Muslim hip hop (sometimes including the Nation of Islam and Five Percenters) due to its perceived un-Islamic nature as filled with profanity, sex, drugs and violence. However, artists are not homogeneous or consistent in their relation with music and religion and therefore, the meanings of Islam and hip hop and the reasoning behind their potential separation or combination varies. For example, a Muslim may consider listening to mainstream music or Muslim music generally speaking *haram*, yet he or she may listen to it anyway in some cases.

Islamic hip hop was portrayed on the web site as being positive and having beneficial effects on Muslim identities, such as instilling pride about being a Muslim. These were often the main selling points for Islamic music. However, Islamic hip hop was also heavily contrasted with mainstream hip hop, and the *halal-haram*-discourse was frequently employed in that. Most artists state that they are giving Muslims a *halal* alternative to the existing un-Islamic, *haram* hip hop, which often features morally problematic content. By constructing a general condemning attitude, they build a common identity for Muslims as opposing this type of musical content. *Halal* music serves



as a reminder of Allah, and as such, it also builds and reminds of a shared religious identity. Muslim hip hop was also claimed to represent Islam and Muslims correctly, as opposed to the mainstream media for example, and to fight stereotypes in this way. Yet, although the web site and many artists claim to oppose stereotyping, the juxtaposing of ‘western’ and Islamic and “mainstream” hip hop and Islamic hip hop was a recurrent theme there. Changing stereotypes about Muslims along with bringing Muslim unity were some of the social and political themes on the web site that were discussed using a discourse of social change; the discourse constructs a shared Muslim identity by creating a need for a positive change to the current social and political situation of Muslims and Muslim communities.

The power of music in educating has been noted by many throughout history; thus it appears logical that the Qur’an has been taught through recitation, and now Muslims claim to have turned to rap and other types of music for the purpose of dawah, as spreading Islam was frequently called on the MHH web site. However, it seems that making music, at least for some Muslim artists, is purely instrumental; it was referred to as a ‘tool’ and a ‘hobby.’ This might also be one reason why music is not always “mainstream” quality; however, there are many Muslim artists striving towards mainstream success. The exigencies of commercial success as well as peer pressure experienced by Muslim artists on behalf of the music industry and other Muslims are both important themes for further study.

One should question whether the themes that come up in the artist profiles and written interviews are what the artists themselves wish to bring up or whether they are Michael Shapiro’s selective views on what Muslim artists should concentrate on. The basis for this questioning is that Shapiro has the power to pick and choose the artists of the website, and he evokes many of the same themes in the radio interviews that are mentioned in the artist profiles and interviews. The website contains discursive representations of Muslim identities and Muslim hip hop and as such, it is necessarily partial, situational and subjective. One must be careful not to overgeneralize the

opinions and constructions on the site to represent all Muslim hip hop artists. Further studies should discuss the discursiveness of Muslim identities as well as different notions of what may be termed “Muslim hip hop” or “Islamic hip hop.”

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Khabeer (2007) uses the term Islamic hip hop for this kind of music.

<sup>2</sup> Bunt 2009:1. Although it is tempting to suggest that the whole range of Islam is present online, it is important to note that Muslim immigrants and their offspring in Europe and America have much better access to the Internet than Muslims in other parts of the world, and most of these users are American Muslims. However, Muslim immigrants may also be more active in searching for a sense of belonging and a community such as the (virtual) ummah (the global Muslim community) due to their status as a religious minority amidst religiously and ethnically diverse societies. (Cooke and Lawrence 2005:23; Karim 2002:37, 51, 53; Zaman 2008:467, 470).

<sup>3</sup> Khabeer 2007; Shannahan and Hussain 2011; Solomon 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Chang 2005; Rose 1994.

<sup>5</sup> See also Khabeer 2007. Regarding the stereotyping of Islam in “the West”, see Quinn 2008; see also Said 1981. One example from the MHH web site is the American rapper Tyson: [http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/1.\\_Tyson\\_Interview](http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/1._Tyson_Interview), accessed September 21, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Despite the hip hop focus, the website features also Muslim artists from related music genres (pop, reggae, spoken word) as well as nasheed music (Islamic vocal

music very reminiscent of Qur'an reciting, sometimes accompanied by percussions). The total number of artists in early 2011 was 100. Most of them were male. The total number can change as artists may be removed from or added to the site.

<sup>7</sup> Fairclough 2000:3–4.

<sup>8</sup> Fairclough 2003:8.

<sup>9</sup> Gee 1999:13, 80–81, 99.

<sup>10</sup> Fairclough 2003.

<sup>11</sup> The grammatical definitions of nouns and adjectives here were formulated with the help of Oxford Dictionaries Online: <http://oxforddictionaries.com/>, accessed May 1, 2011. In the analysis, I have relied on Joanne Scheibman's (2002) classifications and ideas about the functions of these grammatical items on several occasions. However, like many sociolinguists, she utilizes R. M. V. Dixon's work (see for example Dixon 1991).

<sup>12</sup> De Fina 2006:354.

<sup>13</sup> Hall 1996:6.

<sup>14</sup> Bauman 2004.

<sup>15</sup> See Bauman 2004:11, 38; Hall 1996:3.

<sup>16</sup> Fairclough 2003:166.

<sup>17</sup> Islamophobia can be defined as a discourse that creates prejudice and hostility towards Islam and Muslims (see Bayat and Herrera 2010: 21).

<sup>18</sup> Bayat and Herrera 2010:20–21.

<sup>19</sup> Roy 2004:23–25, 29–30, 33.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/4.\\_Radio\\_Islam\\_Interviews\\_MHH](http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/4._Radio_Islam_Interviews_MHH), accessed February 24, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Shiloah 1995:31-35; Shehadi 1995:95-102.

<sup>22</sup> Shiloah 1995:35, 40-43; Shehadi 1995:102-110. Trimmingham (1971:242) also mentions Ibn Taymiyya as one of the jurists condemning the practice of music and dance.

<sup>23</sup> Shiloah 1995:35; 43-44; Shehadi 1995:106, 118-130, 132-138.

<sup>24</sup> Shehadi 1995:125-126.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Alim 2006; see Khabeer 2007. The term 'orthodox' here refers to those Muslims who follow Islam as a religion and acknowledge its basic tenets, that means Five Percenters are not orthodox in this sense. (see Miyakawa 2005).

<sup>26</sup> See Miyakawa 2005; Shannahan and Hussain 2011, 39.

<sup>27</sup> Aidi 2004; Khabeer 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Khabeer 2007:128-130, 134.

<sup>29</sup> Shannahan and Hussain 2011:53-54.

<sup>30</sup> Solomon 2006; Shannahan and Hussain 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Shannahan and Hussain 2011:47-48.

<sup>32</sup> 'Fruity loops' refers to a music production software; see FL Studio Online Reference Manual 2013.

<sup>33</sup> When I visited the site May 31, 2013, criterion number four had been removed.

<sup>34</sup> See Rose 1994; see Krims 2000.

<sup>35</sup> Stories 9 : Radio Islam Interviews MHH a 2nd Time 2011.

<sup>36</sup> What is MHH 2010.



<sup>37</sup> What is MHH : Music in Islam 2010.

<sup>38</sup> See for example the group 3ILM (Hip-Hop 3ILM 2013). In the interview of the group Mecca2Medina, who are from the UK, dawah is defined as “delivering the message of Islam” (Stories 2 : Mecca2Medina Interview 2013).

<sup>39</sup> Pratt 2005:194.

<sup>40</sup> See Armajani 2004:58–60; see also Bayoumi (2010) who writes on Muslim living in Brooklyn. Armajani (2004) translates dawah as “the process of converting people to Islam.”

<sup>41</sup> See the group’s artist profile, Hip-Hop Blakstone 2010.

<sup>42</sup> See What is MHH 2010. On the MHH web site, no scholars are mentioned by name. Most links to other web sites were expired or otherwise not working when I attempted to access them on August 5, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> “Are Singing and Music *Haram*?” 2013.

<sup>44</sup> See Hip-Hop DJ Cee Life 2010. I browsed through all the links currently available on the muslimhiphop.com web site’s Music in Islam section and this along with the link to Yusuf Islam’s commentary (formerly known as an artist by the name Cat Stevens) were the only ones working.

<sup>45</sup> See also Shannahan and Hussain 2011:49, 55.

<sup>46</sup> See for example Krims 2000; Chang 2005. Also, if one considers the web site criteria, it only mentions the public conduct of artists, and thus what the artists listen to privately is at least officially not a hindrance for being featured on the site.

<sup>47</sup> In-group refers to the group (or groups) which they consider to belong to, in a complimentary way. The opposite of in-groups are out-groups which are not identified with. (See e.g. Liebkind 2009.)

<sup>48</sup> Stories 6 : KDHR Interviews 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Khabeer 2007:131.

<sup>50</sup> Khabeer 2007.

<sup>51</sup> Stories 9 : Radio Islam Interviews MHH a 2nd Time 2011.