

# Performing Piety and Perfection: The Affective Labor of Hijabi Fashion Videos

Kristin Peterson

University of Colorado

## Abstract:

*This article examines the work of a popular Muslim woman on YouTube, Amena Khan, who has attracted over 310 thousand subscribers to her channel and runs a successful online boutique. While Amena's hijab tutorials and lifestyle videos might appear to be just about superficial topics like fashion or makeup, this article argues that she does actual labor to not only produce an aesthetic style but to also create an affective condition of what it means to be a Muslim woman living within a neoliberal context. Amena's videos illustrate what Michael Hardt (1999) defines as "affective labor" within this neoliberal economy. Amena might sell hijabs online, but she does not actually produce physical objects. What she does produce is an affective state—feelings around how to properly act within this neoliberal culture while still maintaining Islamic piety. The space of YouTube also allows for Amena to blend different affects and aesthetic styles, such as neoliberal elements of aspiration, creativity and individuality with Islamic ethics like piety, modesty and submission. Ultimately, the reason why Amena can attract viewers and run a successful fashion business is because she works to produce an affective state that seamlessly moves between Islamic ethics and neoliberal values.*

## Keywords:

*social media, fashion, identity, Muslim women, gender*

## Introduction

In a series of commercials for Dr. Pepper, young and innovative individuals are profiled for being "one of a kind" or for doing something extraordinary. One of these 30-second spots profiles Michelle Phan (2014), one of the most popular "makeup gurus" on YouTube. The commercial features visuals of Michelle working as a waitress and then at home creating her famous makeup tutorial videos. Throughout the commercial, Michelle narrates, "Plenty of people start out waiting tables, but not many spend their days

off making beauty videos. Even fewer become famous for them. And now, instead of living off tips, I'm giving them to the whole world. I'm Michelle Phan, and I'm one of a kind." The message of this commercial and others in this "one of a kind" series is that in this competitive neoliberal context, not everyone can post YouTube videos and become famous. There are thousands of other women who post videos in the hopes of also being famous, but there is something about Michelle that is unique and attracts so many followers. In the current digital media context, the opportunities for individuals to become famous are changing and expanding in interesting ways. Michelle Phan did not need to audition for the role of a makeup guru; she earned this title through her work and through attracting millions of followers. In order to be successful, individuals like Michelle need to do real work to create a particular affect that will be shared by the viewers. This is generally a positive affect of pleasure, enjoyment and amusement, which both works to keep viewers coming back to watch more videos and also creates a sense of connection between the video-makers and among the viewers. While YouTube video-makers frequently do work to sell products, the real work that they do is to create an affective state on YouTube. How successful they are at doing affective labor influences how many followers they attract.

Following the example of mainstream lifestyle gurus like Michelle Phan, several young Muslim women in Western countries have begun creating their own versions of the lifestyle videos that incorporate elements of Islam into discussions of fashion, makeup, beauty and relationships. One of the most popular women in this online community of YouTube "hijabis" is Amena Khan or Amenakin, as she is known on YouTube. Amena is a young Muslim woman who lives in Leicester in the U. K. and has created hundreds of videos that focus on hijab tutorials, makeup tips and modest fashion styles. She has over 310 thousand subscribers on YouTube and her videos have been viewed around 27 million times. Amena also runs her own boutique called Pearl Daisy in which she sells modest clothing items, such as her own invention of a hooded hijab, called a "hoojab."

While Amena's hijab tutorials and lifestyle videos might appear to be just about superficial topics like fashion or makeup, Amena does actual labor to not only produce an aesthetic style but to also create an affective condition of what it means to be a Muslim woman living within a neoliberal context. Amena's videos are excellent illustrations of what Michael Hardt (1999)

defines as “affective labor” within this neoliberal economy. She might sell hijabs online, but she does not actually produce physical objects. What she does produce is an affective state that viewers embody as they feel, act and perceive in a certain manner based off the aesthetics of her videos. Amena creates an affect that is intended to shape her viewers through her use of aesthetics and bodily comportment, such as how she dresses, how she looks, her way of talking, her engagement with viewers, and her exhibition of emotions.

The space of YouTube allows for individuals to blend different affects and aesthetic styles, so Amena can imitate the affects and styles of the mainstream lifestyle videos on YouTube while incorporating a particular Islamic sense of piety. While YouTube allows for this hybridization of styles and affects, Amena is particularly astute at blending neoliberal elements of aspiration, creativity and individuality with Islamic ethics like piety, modesty and submission. Amena manages to straddle a difficult barrier between the stringent ethical code of how to be a proper Muslim subject and the flexibility and pleasure of being a neoliberal subject. She is able to be pious while also having fun putting on makeup and buying the newest fashion trends. Ultimately, the reason why Amena attracts so many viewers and run a successful fashion business is because she works to produce an affective state that seamlessly moves between Islamic ethics and neoliberal values. Amena represents a pious Muslim subject who is also a popular leader and entrepreneur. Through her successful use of the affective medium of YouTube, Amena strives to mold viewers into a particular Islamic subjectivity that structures their actions, feelings and sensations.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

In this article, I analyze the affective labor that Amena Khan performs on her video channel, focusing on the overall style of Amena’s videos from 2013-2014. I also provide a more detailed analysis of seven videos, which highlight emotions outside of Amena’s normal upbeat style, such as when Amena exhibited frustration, anger, sarcasm or sadness. The majority of Amena’s videos from these two years serve as a control group of positive affects that are then compared to the distinct style of these seven videos.

I engage with critical discourse analysis and incorporate different theories on affect to understand how the affects, aesthetic styles, gestures and physical embodiments in Amena's videos constitute the subjectivities of viewers and create larger cultural meaning. I apply Gillian Rose's (2012) definition of discourse as a "particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it" (190). Images as well as written or spoken words are all forms of discourse, in that the presence or absence of certain visual images does the work of supporting a particular knowledge regime. Discourse, as it is distributed through images and language, is productively powerful. Discourse produces claims to truth about what it means to be a pious Muslim and what it means to be fashionable, and these claims discipline the behavior and thoughts of individuals.

Discourse analysis, according to Rose, allows for an exploration of how "specific views or accounts are constructed as real or truthful or natural through particular regimes of truth" (2012: 196). The analysis of Amena's videos examines the power struggles within the videos, as Amena uses affects and visual styles to reinforce certain discourses about Islam and to counter other hegemonic discourses. Digital spaces like YouTube have the potential to shift religious authority, thus allowing young Muslim women like Amena the chance to speak to a larger audience about Islamic topics and to question dominant discourses. In their study of Islam online, Mohammed el-Nawawy and Sahar Khamis (2011) found that the Internet creates a more equal community because it "has challenged the vertical channels of communication from the religious elites to the subordinates, and has questioned the exclusive divine authority of the traditional religious institutions" (60). This environment allows for "secularly trained new religious intellectuals" to discuss and debate issues in this new Islamic public sphere (el-Nawawy and Khamis 2011: 47-48). Although Amena would not claim to be an official religious scholar, she still uses the online spaces to counter dominant discourses about Islam, femininity and neoliberalism.

### Debates in Islam over Fashion, Neoliberalism and Piety

Amena's work as an Islamic fashion guru can be examined within the larger picture of how Muslim women balance aesthetic styles and fashion with religious ethics. Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors (2013) approach the topic

of Islamic fashion not by focusing on the debates about public displays of Islamic attire (i.e. “the veil”) but by looking at the debates about fashion within the Islamic community. Islamic fashion can be a way for women to engage with contemporary culture and to appear as hip and modern, but these Islamic fashion movements—Amena’s videos, street fashion, Islamic fashion designers, the Mipsterz video—are never accepted without criticism. It is significant to examine the “ethical and aesthetic concerns expressed through new forms of Islamic fashion” and also the ambivalence that many Muslims feel towards this fashion (Tarlo and Moors 2013:1). Tarlo and Moors present two approaches to ethics and aesthetics within Islam. One is to see the aesthetics of fashion as not superficial elements of Islam but as a way to attract more people to the faith by presenting a beautiful and positive image of Islam. Under this formulation, “Islamic virtue is seen not as external to fashion but potentially integral to it, thereby making the creation and wearing of fashionable styles a form and extension of religious action” (Tarlo and Moors 2013:13). Amena’s work would fit into this category since she presents Islamic aesthetics as beautiful and attractive through her use of visual style and affects. The other approach would be to view ethics and aesthetics in tension and to “see fashion as a means by which Islamic values and priorities become diluted, distorted or lost” (Tarlo and Moors 2013:13). This is what the authors call the “anti-fashion” approach, and this approach would likely be critical of the work that Amena does in her videos.

Although the term “Islamic fashion” has been used in recent times to discuss Muslim women who blend contemporary styles with elements of their faith, it is important to note that the practice of Muslims keeping up with fashion trends and wearing makeup is not something that is unique to the current neoliberal moment in the West. Going back to the time of the Prophet, there have always been discussions within Islam about clothing, makeup and adornment. Creativity, fashion and innovative styles are not necessarily in opposition to living a pious Muslim life. As mentioned above, wearing beautiful and creative clothing can serve as a way to attract people to Islam. What is unique in the current neoliberal context is the increasing pressures on women, both Muslim and non-Muslim, to meet certain standards of feminine beauty. Muslim women like Amena face a challenge as they negotiate how to wear fashionable clothing that highlights the beauty of Islam over the neoliberal standards of beauty.

Additionally, Amena's work online fits into larger debates about what it means to be a proper pious Muslim subject. Amena presents a version of Islamic piety that advocates for women to be positive and attractive representations of the beauty of Islam while at the same time not being too critical or assertive about religious teachings. Muslim women should exhibit through their appearance, behavior and attitudes the positive values of Islam, and independent thinking should be left to the experienced male scholars. While this is hardly a universal understanding of how women should embody Islamic virtue, Amena's version of Islamic piety connects to some of what Saba Mahmood (2005) found in her study of the women's mosque movement in Egypt. Within this movement, Egyptian women chose to embrace more traditional practices: wearing the headscarf, being subservient to men, and acting in a more shy and passive manner. Western liberal feminists might find it difficult to understand Muslim women like Amena, who choose to wear a headscarf and act in ways that appear to be subservient to men, if these feminists assume that women exhibit agency by challenging established norms (Mahmood 2005: 5). The concept of agency can be expanded beyond just resistive acts, so that a woman can assert agency "not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms" (Mahmood 2005: 15). In addition, Amena's embodiment of specific norms of Islamic piety, such as wearing the headscarf and acting in a more passive manner, can be a way for her to cultivate Islamic virtue. Following Aristotelian ethics, a person can become more virtuous on the inside through exterior practices. For instance, there is a connection between the abstract norm of modesty and wearing the veil, "such that the veiled body becomes the necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created and expressed" (Mahmood 2005: 23). Amena embodies piety by ensuring that her inner status matches her outward behavior and vice versa.

### YouTube as an affective medium

Before discussing the concept of affective labor and the work that Amena does on YouTube, it is essential to present some of the theories of affect that might relate to the space of YouTube. The assertion in this article is that YouTube serves as an affective medium, an inter-subjective space in which affects flow between subjects. Amena works to create affects, but how do

these affects shape the subjectivities of her viewers within this affective medium? First, affects are not just emotions that are distinct from cognition. This separation between emotions and intellect has long been deconstructed by feminist anthropologists like Catherine Lutz, Lila Abu-Lughod and Michelle Rosaldo. Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) understand emotions not as private, interior feelings but as social phenomena that are shown through actions and discourse. They argue that we need to understand emotion as a discursive practice that, like other forms of discourse, constitutes subjectivities (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990:10-11). “We should view emotional discourse as a form of social action that creates effects in the world” (Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990:12). They advocate for ethnography that examines discourse, actions and embodiment as manifestations of emotions, which are never private feelings but influenced by one’s culture.

Several contemporary affect theorists, under the leadership of Brian Massumi (2010), take a neuro-scientific approach to understanding affects, so that affects are seen as having a universal impact on individuals and as operating on a level that is pre-cognition. These arguments appear quite convincing when reflecting on how in the post-9/11 environment the Bush administration was able to harness the affect of terror to gain support for the country’s foreign policies. It appears that affect provides a scapegoat to explain how so many people were convinced, against rational argument, that the U. S. had a legitimate reason to invade Iraq. This makes sense to think about how affect can move people to do things without thinking, but this doesn’t help explain smaller affects that we experience on a daily basis and that influence social behavior. For instance, people who watch Amena’s videos do not have a universal response; the viewers think and feel in different ways depending on their social background. Amena may present particular affects in her videos, but the viewers’ interpretations of these affects will not necessarily be the same.

Michelle Rosaldo (1984) was particularly astute at theorizing the connections between emotions and cognition. While Rosaldo does not distinguish the term “affect” from emotions or feelings, focuses on this inter-subjective space that is between the individual self and the social world. The way that individuals think, feel and act is always moving between individual interpretations of cultural meaning and social interactions. Rosaldo defines affects as “cognitions-or more aptly, perhaps, interpretations-always culturally

informed, in which the actor finds that body, self, and identity are immediately involved” (1984:141). As Clifford Geertz (1973) wrote, individuals are suspended in a web of cultural meaning, and Rosaldo adds that individuals interpret this meaning and that their emotions are “embodied thoughts” (1984:143). Emotions are not interior and private experiences, but are instead how people are involved in the society and make sense of their position within this society (Rosaldo 1984:143). Individual subjects are not just passively controlled by their culture, but instead culture influences the thoughts and feelings of subjects. The subjects are able to interact and through these inter-subjective interactions, create meaning. When studying these YouTube videos, the emphasis is less on the individual interpretation of meaning and more on the shared sense of affect within the medium of YouTube. While affect is not this universalizing force that influences all viewers of Amena’s videos in the same way, YouTube is still an affective space that works to mold subjects differently. The viewers are free to interpret Amena’s videos on their own, but the affects in the videos can move the viewers in various directions and create a sense of connection to others.

Anaiese Richard and Daromir Rudnyckj (2009) provide another useful description of affect as a “medium in which subjects circulate” instead of as an object that moves between subjects (59). They describe how “an economy of affect forms a milieu in which subjects find themselves enmeshed” (Richard and Rudnyckj 2009:73). In other words, Affect is not a particular feeling that Amena tries to imbue on her viewers. Instead, Amena and her viewers are all part of a larger affective space. Affect is also distinct from private emotions because the affective medium is an inter-subjective space and not based on individual feelings (Richard and Rudnyckj 2009:61). These theories on affect help to conceptualize YouTube as an affective medium in which subjects are suspended in emotions, sensations, modes of embodiment and discourse. Subjects are shaped by this affective space and their connections to others, but they still have agency to offer their own interpretations of their cultural surroundings.

### The Affective Labor of Creating YouTube Lifestyle Videos

If we understand YouTube to be an affective medium in which subjects are suspended in a space of affects, then it is necessary to also emphasize the work that goes into producing and maintaining this affective medium. Mi-



chael Hardt (1999) writes about the concept of “affective labor” to explain the transition in postmodern, global capitalism from the production of material objects to the production of immaterial objects, such as information, data and affects (90). This transition exhibits a preference towards immaterial labor so that “information, communication, knowledge and affect come to play a foundational role in the production process” (Hardt 1999:93). Hardt acknowledges that feminist scholars have already done significant work to emphasize the immaterial labor of domestic work and family care, but he argues that what is new in this situation is “the extent to which this affective immaterial labor is now directly productive of capital and the extent to which it has become generalized through wide sectors of the economy” (1999:97). Affective labor is now highly valued in this economy, and this explains why corporations are going to YouTube stars like Michelle Phan and, even to a certain extent, Amena in order have the women “sell” their products to the viewers. Amena mostly sells the products in her own boutique, but she is successful at selling these products by appealing to affects of positivity, engagement and confidence. She presents a perfect image of a modest, beautiful and successful Muslim, and her viewers can emulate these affects through buying and wearing one of her headscarves. Individuals like these YouTube stars have become the contemporary “Oprah” figures; they use affects to create brands for themselves, to keep viewers coming back for more, and to constantly hawk the latest consumer products.

Affective labor, as defined by Hardt, is “immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community” (1999:96). The work that Amena does on YouTube perfectly fits into this definition. She attempts to create affects of pleasure, encouragement and fulfillment through her videos. She also tries to create connections with her viewers and also among her viewers, so that they all feel like they are part of a larger community of “hijabis”—young Muslim women who want to maintain pious values while still being hip and wearing the latest fashion trends. Amena’s work falls into the third type of immaterial labor that Hardt says “involves the production and manipulation of affects and requires (virtual or actual) human contact and proximity” (1999:97-98). Amena tries to produce and manipulate affects to shape the subjectivities of her viewers and to form connections among them. While affective labor requires human contact, Hardt acknowledges that this contact can occur

through a medium like a film, TV show, or in this case, a YouTube video (1999:96). Real human contact can occur through Amena's videos.

Amena is also skilled at using certain techniques of the YouTube medium to form tighter connections with viewers. She always recognizes her viewers and makes efforts to interact with them. She begins most of her videos with the phrase "As-salaamu-alaikum ladies," signaling both that the viewers are all connected because they are Muslim women but also that Amena addresses the viewers as her "ladies" or her friends. It is common for YouTube stars to talk about their viewers not as "fans" but as "family" or "friends." Amena also ends her videos with the phrase "tootles," which becomes her trademark word and is another informal connection with her viewers. Amena acknowledges her viewers when she appeals to them in her videos to post comments, to ask questions and to suggest future videos. She will occasionally respond to comments in the comments section, and more frequently, she addresses these comments in future videos. Viewers also have the chance to meet Amena in person when she travels and hosts meet-up visits. If you can't go to the meet-up, you can still watch a video of the meet-up online and feel a sense of connection to Amena and the other hijabis in the videos. Amena creates intimate connections with her fans by filming her videos in her home, taking her camera with her on her travels, and documenting her interactions with friends. She involves her viewers in most aspects of her life (excluding interactions with her children), so viewers feel that they know the real Amena. This is a similar phenomenon to the affects around a celebrity gossip magazine. People read these magazines, in part, to see the "real lives" of celebrities: to see the celebrity walking out of the yoga studio, to find out what type of cereal she eats, or to watch the celebrity hanging out with celebrity friends. Viewers can read these magazines, live vicariously through the celebrity, and feel a connection to the celebrity because she is a real person, like anyone else. Amena effectively uses the medium of YouTube in a similar way to appear as authentic and to connect with her viewers.

Affects also constitute the subjectivities of individuals specifically through embodiment, emotions and discourse, as Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009) describe in their concept of "economy of affect" or a space in which "affect serves as a means of conducting conduct and thus forming subjects" (57).

This concept of an “economy of affect” can be applied to the work that Amena does to produce an affect that shapes her viewers through discourse, aesthetics, emotions and bodily comportment. Affect can be understood as a type of conduct and “a means through which people both conduct themselves and conduct others by structuring possible courses of action” (Richards and Rudnycky 2009:61). Through her videos, Amena conducts herself as a proper Muslim subject-respectful, modest, positive, encouraging and caring—but she also tries to conduct the subjectivities of her viewers through her actions and affective labor.

### Forming Affects through Emotions, Embodiment and Discourse

So far, this article has examined how YouTube can be understood as an affective medium in which subjects are suspended and through which individuals like Amena are able to do affective labor to shape the subjectivities of members of this YouTube community. Next, it is important to elaborate on the specifics of how Amena strives to form a new Islamic subjectivity through her affective labor. Rudnycky’s study (2010) of the spiritual training that occurred in an Indonesian steel company relates to Amena’s video work because in this spiritual training “affective practices and discourses about affect were frequently invoked in connecting Muslim piety to becoming a responsible, productive, and competitive employee” (Richard and Rudnycky 2009:60). The training employed affects in order to constitute a new Muslim subject, who strived to be both a pious Muslim and an ethical and diligent worker. Affects were managed by invoking visible signs of emotions, such as tears; embodied practices that illustrated emotional transformation, such as recreating the actions of participating in the Hajj pilgrimage; and discourses around labor as a spiritual act, such as the concept that God will judge those who are lazy at work and cheat their company out of their labor potential (Rudnycky 2010). While Amena does not train her viewers to do actual labor in a factory like in the Indonesian example, I want to argue that Amena does affective labor by shaping her viewers to act, to feel and to carry their bodies in a way that will lead to success in this neoliberal market. Amena is the representation of this potential success: a pious Muslim with an attractive husband and two loving kids, who is also an entrepreneur with her own boutique. Amena also emphasizes a more

conservative form of Islamic piety that highlights Muslim women's roles as beautiful and positive models of Islamic virtue but more passive participants in sharing religious teachings.

### Promoting Positive Emotions

First of all, Amena does affective labor to produce a particular set of emotions and affects that her viewers can emulate. Unlike some other videos that share confessions or personal religious testimony, Amena's videos don't usually employ powerful affects that would cause emotional responses in the viewers, such as tears or emotion-driven comments. Instead, Amena's videos convey affects of pleasure and enjoyment, in a similar way to the affects of watching a celebrity interview or a romantic comedy. Amena is always smiling and positive in her videos. She frequently gives comments of praise and gratitude to her viewers, other online hijabis, and her friends and family. She rarely says anything negative about anything, and it is unusual for Amena to appear as overly flustered or stressed. In several of her videos, her children can be heard playing in the background, or sometimes they interrupt her filming, but she never appears bothered by their interruptions.

In a recent video, "KICKED OUT OF OUR HOTEL ROOM!" (Khan 2014a), which was taped during a visit to the U. S., Amena is clearly dealing with a lot of stress. She has just arrived in the states and then she finds out that the fashion exhibit that she will be selling her products at has not sold very many tickets. She is driving in the car with her friend and fellow YouTuber, Nye Armstrong, and the two women are laughing while talking about this problem. Amena says, "We have a lot of Pearl Daisy stock [laughter]. We are laughing not because we are amused, not because the situation is funny. It's very sad, and I think we are in shock." The women are upset about the situation, but instead of complaining, they just make jokes about how Nye's father will have to wear all the Pearl Daisy outfits and scarves. Then Amena says, "I'm trying not to express a few things that I feel like, had they been put into place, then this whole situation could have been avoided." She doesn't elaborate on this, but it can be deduced that Amena is upset about the organization of the fashion show, but she does not want to say something negative on camera. The very next clip in this travel video is of Amena, her sister and Nye at the Hershey's chocolate factory, taste-test-

ing chocolate and touring the factory. The earlier concerns are now gone as they have fun consuming chocolates and buying stuff to take home. In the same video, the women then return to their hotel to find out that there was a mistake and their room was double-booked, so Amena and her sister have to leave this hotel. In a rare sign of negative emotions, Amena looks stressed on camera, but then she reflects on the situation with Nye. Amena says, “As far as I’m concerned, personally, like I said, it could be worse. We all have our health, maybe not our uh...” Nye interrupts, “our sanity!” Both of the women burst out laughing. The underlying message of this video, and many of the other videos in this series about Amena’s trip to the U. S., is that when things don’t go as planned, just keep a positive attitude and laugh about it. If all else fails, you can always go eat chocolate or go shopping. Throughout the videos, Amena uses these positive affects, and a lot of her viewers will respond by posting comments of praise, describing Amena as caring, intelligent, enthusiastic, beautiful inside and out, encouraging and helpful.

### Practical Advice on Maintaining Piety and Positivity

In addition to her popular hijab tutorials, Amena creates videos that offer practical advice for Muslim women while still incorporating humor and a positive tone. For example, she created a video called “SHEIKH GOOGLE!” (Khan 2013d) that mocks the trend of Muslims who search on Google for whatever religious teaching or fatwa will fulfill their needs. So if they want to find out whether what they are doing is allowed in Islam, they will just find a teaching that reinforces their behavior, or if they want to prove that someone else is wrong, they will find a teaching for that. Amena’s video is a fake commercial that advertises the service of a person named “Sheikh Google” who will answer all of your questions about Islamic teaching. This video is clearly critical of Muslims who use the Internet in this manner, but the style of the video is more positive than just Amena sitting in front of the camera and criticizing other Muslims. It is a more subtle form of criticism or correction of the behavior of other Muslims. In addition, the “Sheikh Google” video reinforces a more conservative interpretation of Islam, which emphasizes that Muslim women should go to male scholars with their religious questions. Amena stresses that Muslim women should not try to find answers on their own and risk finding erroneous information or critically questioning the teachings of scholars. As Saba Mahmood (2005) discusses

in *Politics of Piety*, Amena promotes a more constrained form of agency that discourages women from being too assertive and questioning religious norms.

In a video about another more traditional topic, “HOWTO NOT TOUCH MEN” (Khan 2013e), Amena uses humor to reenact uncomfortable situations when Muslim women might be forced to touch a man who is not a relative. This practice of touching the other gender is seen as forbidden by some Muslims. Instead of elaborating on the reasons why it is forbidden to touch men, which would be a topic for a knowledgeable scholar, Amena gives practical advice on this topic in an entertaining way through funny short skits. In these two humorous videos, Amena offers practical Islamic information but in an entertaining and positive manner. She exhibits the affects of being a pious Muslim who is also easy-going and cheerful.

### *Affirmation from Others*

Amena’s positive affects are also reinforced when she films videos with other people. She has filmed a lot of videos with her friends and several with her husband, who is just as attractive and positive as Amena is. In a video called “HUSBAND TAG!” (Khan 2013f), Amena asks her husband, Osama, a series of light-hearted questions that viewers submitted on YouTube and Facebook. The couple uses the 12-minute long video to show the viewers the affects of their relationship. They smile and laugh together, are respectful when the other person is talking, flirt with and tease each other on camera, and encourage each other. They show their love for each other through the video. Amena also asks questions that get Osama to reflect on Amena’s personality and emotions. He reaffirms a lot of the emotional qualities that are exhibited in Amena’s other videos. Osama reflects on his first impression of Amena, “I thought she seemed very confident. She minded her own business. She wasn’t like in your face, attention seeking. She was just having a coffee, having a good time, with her sisters, and I liked that. I don’t know why but that’s what attracted me to you first. And you are beautiful obviously, but it comes with the package.” This quote reaffirms the proper affects that Amena tries to convey in her videos: be beautiful, confident and positive, but don’t be too assertive. If you are upset or want to criticize something, then shift these emotions to laughter and positivity. If all else fails, go shopping and buy new products to make yourself feel beautiful. Osama

mentions other emotional traits about Amena throughout the video; he says that she is inspiring, hard-working, caring, and creative. Finally, Amena asks Osama what he thinks her best trait is as a mom. He responds, "I think, uh, when you teach the kids spirituality, teaching them responsibility, teaching them all the good habits to raise them to be good human beings." This quote again reinforces that Amena is a positive and nurturing person who is raising her children to be good Muslims. It could also be inferred that the work that Amena does to teach her children spirituality is similar to her work on YouTube to teach spirituality to her viewers.

### Addressing Serious Topics

While the majority of Amena's videos are about positive and entertaining topics, she does create a few videos about more serious subjects. In a video called "GIVING UP" (Khan 2013a), she reflects on going through difficult periods, such as illnesses, that seem like they will last forever. She encourages viewers to not give up hope. She says that there is a danger in being apathetic, "Or the worst thing of all, of losing hope in the mercy of Allah. We've got to always remember that any hardship that we go through, if anything, will bring us closer to him." She advises her viewers to always look for the silver lining. Again, she encourages others to maintain positive emotions. In another video entitled, "MARRIAGE PROBLEMS" (Khan 2013b), Amena offers advice on dealing with marriage issues. She encourages her viewers to seek help through a third party since she cannot answer these questions. She also discusses the emotions that women need to embody within marriage. She says, "What do you do with something that is sacred [marriage], you deal with it with patience, with gentility, with understanding, with compromise, with forbearance." Amena does make note that women should not just deal with abusive situations. These emotions that Amena lists are what she consistently promotes for her viewers and what she tries to embody through her videos.

Finally, Amena employs distinct affects in her video, "TAKE OFF YOUR HIJAB!" (Khan 2014b), which is formulated as an address to unnamed British politicians who frequently argue that Muslim women are not free when they cover. This video is somewhat jarring because Amena's emotions are significantly different from her other videos. She smiles occasionally in this video, but her overall tone is more serious. She begins and ends the video



with a stern face, instead of her normal enthusiastic greeting of her viewers. Amena's affective performance in this video appears to be formulated for an audience of politicians and public critics of Islam. In all likelihood, the audience for this video is made up of mostly young Muslim women. While the video appears to address critics of Islam, the real purpose of the video appears to be providing the Muslim viewers a powerful retort to opponents of Islam and also encouraging pride and self-confidence in Muslim women. Amena is quite sarcastic in this video; she reads a script that argues her opinion and points out all the contradictions in the politicians' arguments. She says at one point, "So, freedom means to conform to your criteria about what I should wear, right? Do I have that right? RIGHT?" Later on she says, "But of course, it's not about freedom, really? I make you uneasy because my hijab reminds you that I am trying to obey God and not you, and that bugs you." This video is unusual for Amena because of its sarcastic attitude, but Muslim female viewers may still walk away from watching the video with positive feelings of pride and strength in their Muslim identity.

### Embodiment as Affective Labor

Amena also does affective labor to portray how to be a good Muslim and a successful entrepreneur through forms of embodiment, such as pinning the hijab in a particular style, wearing fashionable outfits, applying flawless makeup and employing Islamic phrases. The viewers may have the desire to imitate Amena's aesthetic style and bodily conduct. First, it almost goes without saying, that Amena always presents herself in stylish clothing and a beautiful headscarf. She never films a video of herself in her pajamas or without makeup. Amena does several fashion "look book" videos in which she exhibits different outfits of that season, similar to a fashion magazine spread. She also makes numerous hijab tutorials that feature different methods of tying the headscarf. She always makes these styles look simple, but the tutorials usually feature several complicated steps. In her other videos that are not about fashion, Amena still appears as well put together in unique headscarves and outfits. She always posts links in the videos' description boxes so that viewers can go to the Pearl Daisy store and purchase the items that appear in her video. Amena may be talking about a serious topic, like tips for fasting during the month of Ramadan, but the description box will include links so the viewer can buy the headscarf or necklace that Amena



is wearing. No matter what the videos are about, Amena's appearance and how to imitate that appearance are always front and center.

Amena also does affective labor through her actions and the way that she holds her body. She maintains proper bodily comportment; she sits up straight and makes flowing gestures with her hands. She might laugh in her videos but never in an obnoxious manner, such as a loud cackle or a snort. She talks in a very smooth and calm style, never raising her voice or talking too fast. Her British accent gives her voice a soothing effect. She also edits out any mistakes that she makes when speaking. Her demeanor might be more formal, but she is still open and nurturing, especially when connecting with viewers. Overall, Amena holds her body in a very sophisticated manner, but she still can laugh and have fun, as was shown in the examples above.

Another way that Amena disciplines her body is through her use of language. It goes without saying that Amena would never use offensive language, and she rarely uses language that expresses negativity. She frequently uses Islamic phrases in her videos: *as-salaamu-alaikum* as a greeting at the beginning of her videos, *al-hamdulillah* and *masha'allah* as expressions of praise and gratitude to God, and *insha'allah* to express hope in God's plan for the future. While these are the literal translations of these phrases, often times Amena and her viewers use these phrases out of habit, so God's control over the future may not always be reflected on when saying *insha'allah*. Through her use of Islamic phrases, Amena both signals that she and her viewers are part of a larger religious community, but she also performs a certain form of Islamic subjectivity through the embodiment and affects involved in saying the phrases. The use of Islamic phrases is a way to discipline the body so that one's focus is always on God, even in the bodily action of speaking. When speaking about the future, one says *insha'allah* to remember that the future is in God's hands. Whenever a good thing happens, saying *al-hamdulillah* is a way to thank God. When greeting fellow Muslims, one says *as-salaamu-alaikum* to share God's peace with them. By employing these Islamic phrases in her videos, Amena tries to perform as a pious Muslim subject and use the affects associated with these terms to connect with her viewers.

## Affective Labor through Discourse

In addition to her affective labor through emotions and embodied actions, Amena also does work to form her viewers through discourse. As mentioned before, most of Amena's videos are about lifestyle topics, such as hijab tutorials, fashion trends, makeup tips, travel vlogs, or shopping trips. She discusses some serious topics, such as the reasons why she wears the hijab, advice during Ramadan, and helpful information for new converts to Islam. While a lot of her videos don't have in-depth discussions of Islamic issues, she did create one video titled, "WE ARE MORE THAN WHAT WE WEAR" (Khan 2013c), in which she discusses the pressure for Muslim women to dress in a particular manner. In this video, Amena says that Muslim women should not be judged by what type of hijab they wear or if they don't wear hijab. She discusses meeting women in public and how they are often self-conscious that their hijab is not as trendy as Amena's. She addresses these women in the video, "Sisters, trust me, I don't notice your hijab styles or your hijabs. And I mean this in the nicest way. What comes across above all of the exterior is you as a person." She encourages her followers to focus on wearing the hijab for God and not because of peer pressure, and she explains that wearing the headscarf is just one part of living as a Muslim. She emphasizes that interior character is more important than exterior appearance. She says, "Let your soul shine through, not your hijab style or your hijab color or how trendy or fashionable you are." In this video, Amena tries to reconcile the fact that most of her videos show an image of a Muslim woman who is always beautifully dressed, has flawless skin and makeup, and is wearing gorgeous and impeccably pinned hijabs. The majority of her videos present an image of Islamic beauty that is about maintaining a perfect exterior appearance and exhibiting positive emotions, but Amena uses discourse to argue against the dominant imagery in her videos. She argues that beauty is about what is inside and that women cannot just, as she says, "buy empowerment" by purchasing material things. She directly contradicts the prominent affective message of her videos: that it is through purchasing fashionable clothes and beautiful Pearl Daisy headscarves and through embodying a positive affect that one will become a pious and successful Muslim woman. Amena goes on to say in this video, "The only thing that can empower you is the state of your own soul and the relationship that you have with Allah." Clearly, Amena is aware that viewers frequently interpret

her videos as promoting the exterior elements of being Muslim, and so she attempts to discursively argue that being a pious Muslim is about one's interior. When the majority of Amena's video channel focuses on exterior appearances, it is difficult for this discourse to have a significant impact. The most powerful elements of the affective labor that Amena does relate to her use of emotions and embodiment, which are usually displayed visually, instead of her appeal to discourse about Islamic issues.

### The Impossible Goal of the Perfect Muslim Subject

Through her YouTube videos, Amena Khan does affective labor to produce a particular way of being a Muslim woman living in this neoliberal context. She creates an affective state of how a Muslim woman is to feel, act and embody her Islamic subjectivity. Amena is one of the most successful Muslim women on YouTube because she flawlessly incorporates both Islamic affects of modesty, positivity, prudence and care with neoliberal affects of individuality, self-promotion, authenticity and hard work. Amena works to create this affective state, which is not a universal Islamic affective state. Her videos represent one of many interpretations of how Muslim women should live, feel and act within the Western and neoliberal context.

The contradictions exhibited above between Amena's "WE ARE MORE THAN WHAT WE WEAR" (Khan 2013c) video and most of her other fashion videos represent an important debate within the community of young Muslim women. In most of her videos, Amena presents this perfect image of exterior Islamic beauty but then qualifies in this one video that Islamic beauty is really about what's on the inside. It would be difficult to argue that the rhetoric in this one video is enough to counter the powerful emotions and images in most of Amena's videos. Amena presents a version of life as a Muslim woman that is a goal to aspire to through consumption, but never to achieve. If a viewer just buys the perfect fashionable but modest clothes, wears a beautiful hijab in a unique style, applies makeup perfectly, and maintains a positive attitude at all times, then she will be as happy and successful as Amena. These aspirations can be classified as a version of what Lauren Berlant (2010) calls "cruel optimism," as some of Amena's viewers are motivated to consume more and more in the hopes of finally reaching fulfillment (94). As Berlant explains, "consumption promises satisfaction and then denies it because all objects are placeholders for the enjoyment of

never being satisfied” (2010:111). Viewers may strive to achieve what Amena has through consumption of various products, but in the end, only a few individuals can achieve Amena’s public level of success.

Amena’s videos are part of a larger conversation about what Islamic fashion means for Muslim women, especially in the contemporary context. Several elements of Amena Khan’s work online are unique and have been examined throughout this article. She mostly engages with the space of YouTube, which is an affective medium that allows for the circulation of affects. YouTube is also a flexible space that permits Amena to blend Islamic ethics and neoliberal values. Finally, YouTube is a visual medium that allows for the display of aesthetic styles and for more affective connections to be formed between Amena and her viewers. Through her videos, Amena does significant affective labor to create a certain way of feeling, acting, embodying and displaying Islamic subjectivity. While it may be difficult to measure how Amena’s use of affects shapes the subjectivities of her viewers, as few viewers leave comments, this does not lessen the fact that Amena’s videos circulate among a large audience and construct an affective condition of how to live as a fashionable, pious, confident, successful and positive Muslim woman in the contemporary world.

## References

Berlant, Lauren 2010. Cruel Optimism. In *The Affect Theory Reader*. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. Pp. 138-160. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

el-Nawawy, Mohammed and Sahar Khamis 2011. *Islam Dot Com: Contemporary Islamic Discourses in Cyberspace*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Geertz, Clifford 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.

Hardt, Michael 1999. Affective Labor. *boundary 2* 26(2): 89-100.

Khan, Amena 2014a. KICKED OUT OF OUR HOTEL ROOM! | Vlog 1 #USA MARCH 2014.

Amenakin YouTube Channel, March 21. [http://youtu.be/mRh\\_yLR97\\_s](http://youtu.be/mRh_yLR97_s), accessed May 3, 2014.

Khan, Amena 2014b. "TAKE OFF YOUR HIJAB!" #worldhijabday. Amenakin YouTube Channel, January 31. <http://youtu.be/R3a7ftZZAew>, accessed February 23, 2016.

Khan, Amena 2013a. GIVING UP. Amenakin YouTube Channel, November 27. <http://youtu.be/vf9JOvPGZXs>, accessed February 23, 2016.

Khan, Amena 2013b. MARRIAGE PROBLEMS | Commversations. Amenakin YouTube Channel, October 18. <http://youtu.be/R1BsW-sZrZ8>, accessed May 3, 2014.

Khan, Amena 2013c. WE ARE MORE THAN WHAT WE WEAR. Amenakin YouTube Channel, August 21. <http://youtu.be/O3Qrgd-cfV4>, accessed February 23, 2016.

Khan, Amena 2013d. SHEIKH GOOGLE!. Amenakin YouTube Channel, July 5. [http://youtu.be/\\_cmvCkZxpb8](http://youtu.be/_cmvCkZxpb8), accessed February 23, 2016.

Khan, Amena 2013e. HOW TO NOT TOUCH MEN. Amenakin YouTube Channel, May 24. [http://youtu.be/3y-1RMRn\\_vA](http://youtu.be/3y-1RMRn_vA), accessed May 3, 2014.

Khan, Amena 2013f. HUSBAND TAG! | OsaAmena. Amenakin YouTube Channel, January 10. [http://youtu.be/f\\_nxdCtO5yE](http://youtu.be/f_nxdCtO5yE), accessed February 23, 2016.

Lutz, Catherine and Lila Abu-Lughod 1990. Introduction: emotion, discourse, and the politics of everyday life. In *Language and the Politics of Emotion*. Catherine Lutz and Lila Abu Lughod, eds. Pp. 1-19. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Massumi, Brian 2010. The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat. In *The Affect Theory Reader*. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. Pp. 138-160. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Phan, Michelle 2014 One of a Kind. Michelle Phan YouTube Channel, January 6. [http://youtu.be/WA2U\\_4mz3E4](http://youtu.be/WA2U_4mz3E4), accessed May 3, 2014.

Richards, Analiese and Daromir Rudnycky 2009. Economies of Affect. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15: 57-77.

Rosaldo, Michelle 1984. Toward an Anthropology of Self and Feeling. In *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion*. Richard Shweder and R. A. Levine, eds. Pp. 137-151. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Rose, Gillian 2012. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. London: SAGE.

Rudnyckyj, Daromir 2010. *Spiritual Economies: Islam, Globalization, and the Afterlife of Development*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Tarlo, Emma and Annelies Moors, eds. 2013. *Islamic Fashion and Anti-Fashion: New Perspectives from Europe and North America*. London: Bloomsbury.