

“The Best Damn Representation of Islam:” Muslims, Gender, Social Media, and Islamophobia in the United States

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Abstract:

Islamophobia reached new heights during the 2016 United States presidential election. We applied the theory of intersectionality to 15 in-depth focus group interviews conducted in gender-separated groups with 61 Muslim participants (41 women, 20 men) in South East Michigan between October 2016 and April 2017 to understand the role of gender in their responses regarding Islamophobia during the 2016 United States presidential election and Trump’s first hundred days in office as president. Both, Muslim women and Muslim men, labored to educate others about Islam online, but Muslim women emphasized their efforts to act as exemplars online of what it means to be Muslim in America more frequently and more strongly than men. Muslim women and men often used ignoring and contextualization as coping mechanisms as the number of Islamophobic messages online was perceived as overwhelming. The high amount and ubiquity of Islamophobic messages online has led to a sense of futility and high levels of stress among young Muslims in South East Michigan, particularly for Muslim women.

Keywords:

election, Islamophobia, USA, gender, Islam, social media

Introduction

Islamophobia has a long history in the United States (Cainkar 2009) reaching new heights during the 2016 United States presidential election. In addition to rhetoric singling out and attacking Muslims during his campaign, after seven days in office, newly elected Republican president Donald Trump signed an executive order banning travel from seven countries

with predominately Muslim populations (Stack 2017). Among all religious groups in the United States, Americans consistently have ranked Muslims as the most negative (Pew Research Center 2017). American students have been emboldened to make slurs toward Muslims and immigrants; these groups have expressed fears about what could happen to them during Trump's presidency (Costello 2016). Indeed, in the ten days following the United States 2016 election, the Southern Poverty Law Center (2016) logged almost 900 incidents of harassment, many invoking Trump's name; of those, six percent were specifically anti-Muslim.

Muslims in the United States only comprise one percent (3.35 million people) of the United States population (Pew Research Center 2017), but they are frequent targets of discrimination related to Islamophobia. Islamophobia is defined as "indiscriminate negative attitudes or emotions directed at Islam or Muslims," including "aversion, jealousy, suspicion, disdain, anxiety, rejection, contempt, fear, disgust, anger, and hostility" (Bleich 2012:182). The enactment of Islamophobia aims to maintain existing resource disparities between Muslims and non-Muslims through acts of oppression and violence (Center for Race and Gender 2018). Forty-two percent of Muslim men and 55 percent of Muslim women said they were discriminated against at least once over the past year due to their religious affiliation - with incidents more frequently reported by Muslims who disclosed looking distinctly Muslim in dress, speech, or physical appearance (Pew Research Center 2017), especially via veiling (Droogsma 2007; Kavakci 2004).

Social media has become a new discursive arena, with 88 percent of 18 to 29-year-olds in the United States managing at least one social media account (Pew Research Center 2018). Meanwhile, 35 percent of the United States Muslims population is between the ages of 18 and 29 (Pew Research Center 2017). Their cultural socialization includes both, adopting social media and experiencing discrimination online as Muslims. This cyber Islamophobia includes speech acts that convey an irrational fear of Islam in online spaces (Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez 2016).

We applied these concepts in our analysis of 15 focus groups with 61 Muslim women and men, centered around how Muslim women and men in the United States experience and respond to Islamophobia online. Our study asked the following questions: What impact does Islamophobia online have on Muslim women and Muslim men? How does gender intersect with the Muslim identity in the United States to position Muslim women and men to respond to Islamophobia?

Focus group discussions revealed Muslim women's and men's desire to educate others about Islam through social media and coping techniques such as contextualization and ignoring when confronted with Islamophobia. Particularly women stressed their online efforts to be good exemplars or ideal models, of Islam.

Theory

We analyzed Islamophobia as a gendered discourse as the theory of intersectionality demonstrates that interwoven aspects of humanity such as race, class, and gender have to be examined together to understand the experiences of people who have been subordinated (Crenshaw 1989). Gender is always constructed in conjunction with other aspects of identity, rendering intersectional experience “greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 1989:141). We suggest that the construction of gender in conjunction with religious identity is an adequate lens to analyze Muslim women' and men's experiences of Islamophobia. For instance, in a 2017 representative survey, more Muslim women (83 percent) than men (68 percent) in the United States said there is “a lot of discrimination” against Muslims in the United States (Pew Research Center 2017).

Additionally, intersectionality emphasizes differences among women and among men (Crenshaw 1989), situating individuals in their specific location within their larger “groups” of “women” and “men” and revealing the construction of “good”-“bad.” Further, it illuminates how experiences differ depending on visible markers to express one's identity that can be constructed as Muslim or non-Muslim, such as the hijab. In sum, Muslims

in the United States experience their environments based on identifying with their religion and in a combination of that religious affiliation intersecting with gender.

Literature Review

We focused on women and men in the United States who self-identified as Muslim and the online spaces they used albeit we recognize that any person perceived as Muslim may experience Islamophobia online.

A Pew Research Religion and Public Life (Pew Research Center 2017) study found more adult Muslim women (34 percent) than men (29 percent) in the United States said people acted suspiciously toward them. Women were also more likely to be called offensive names (26 vs 13 percent) and be singled out by airport security (21 vs 16 percent) than men. Similarly, several other studies provided evidence that Muslim women experience attacks and hate due to their religion (Cainkar 2009; Kunst et al. 2012; Van Es 2016; Suleiman 2017). For instance, Cainkar (2009) found that after 9/11 Arab Muslim women in Chicago experienced twice the rate of hate as Arab Muslim men. Perhaps not surprisingly more Muslim women said the United States public would not consider Islam as part of mainstream culture (Suleiman 2017). Women who said they are very religious were far more likely to say this; they were also expressing their religiosity in their appearance. For men, a higher importance of religion did not mean their appearance rendered them more visible as Muslim (Suleiman 2017). Muslim women have been especially concerned with how they are perceived in their religiosity (Mir 2009; Reece 1996; Reece 1997).

Social media have also been used for Islamophobic messages manifested via hashtags such as #jihadi to frame Muslims as violent and extremist (Awan 2014; Awan 2016; Awan and Zempi 2016; Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez 2016; Larsson 2007). In turn, social media have played a significant role in Muslim identity management, activism, and connection (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Sreberny 2015; Chaudhry 2014; Echchaibi 2013; Hebbani and Wills 2012; Aly 2012). With hashtags such as #notinmyname,

#asamuslimwoman, #jesuismuslim, #muslimapologies, and #muslimsreportstuff going viral globally between 2013 and 2016, in the lead up to the United States presidential election, Muslims used social media to speak against terrorism, to ridicule generalizing stereotypes of Muslims, and to offer one another solidarity. Especially middle-class millennial Muslims, and those sharing their attitude to openly and confidently combine faith and modernity, have embraced social media (Janmohamed 2016); using online spaces to create notions of citizenship, identity, and freedom (Hebbani and Wills 2012; Johns 2014).

Muslims in the United States have also used online spaces to better understand how to practice Islam while adapting to cultural differences (Mishra and Semaan 2010; Janmohamed 2016). For instance, first-generation Muslim immigrants use online spaces to connect with in-groups to combat isolation and loneliness stemming from Islamophobia; the more connected respondents were to their home culture online, the less likely they were to embrace United States culture (Croucher and Rahmani 2015). Especially for Muslim immigrant women, social media are tools to enact a “composite habitus”, providing channels to fit in with the culture of their country of origin, their country of residence, “and” their neighborhood (Waltorp 2015).

Few studies have regarded the intersections of online spaces and gender for Muslims (Janmohamed 2016), if so, they focused on women’s and minority organizations activities on websites (Van Es 2016), women with hijabs combining religious expression with fashion statements on Twitter and Instagram (Kavakci and Kraepelin 2017), or considered group blogs offering everyday forms of resistance when Muslim women’s participation in the public sphere was limited (Echchaibi 2013). Similarly, few studies have contrasted experiences of Islamophobia of Muslim women with those of Muslim men in the United States (Cainkar 2009; Pew Research Center 2017; Suleiman 2017) or have teased out the impact of the United States 2016 presidential election on Muslims. This study aims to make these contributions by foregrounding the voices of Muslim women and men themselves.

Method

To analyze if and how Muslim women's sense-making contrasts with Muslim men's accounts, we worked in the Detroit metropolitan area where about 200 thousand Muslims reside and "several of the [United States'] largest, oldest, and most influential congregations" (Howell, 2014:1) have developed. Hence, making this an important Muslim community to understand. We followed Krueger and Casey's instruction for comparative focus groups: "If you want to compare and contrast how certain types of people talk about an issue, you must separate these people into different groups" (2015:23). Using this approach, we conducted gender-separated focus groups to contrast how gender may play a role in reflecting on experiences. Following their guidelines, we organized mini focus groups to provide a sense of "not being alone" while also allowing everyone to talk at length about a difficult topic.

We recruited participants through flyers around the Detroit metro area and calls on social media, partnering with a Muslim organization, and using a university's research pool, which provided credit to 37 of 61 participants. Flyers and research pool information asked people to participate who identify as Muslim, are 18 years or older, and interested in discussing experiences of Islamophobia. Before a focus group started, participants filled out a demographic questionnaire. A moderator and two assistants guided each focus group; discussions followed a semi-structured interview guide probing about experiences, emotions, and responses on Islamophobia. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with Atlas.ti. Themes and subthemes emerged after researchers analyzed the first two transcripts resulting in a set of codes that were subsequently applied to all transcripts. Two researchers coded each transcript.

In total, we conducted 15 focus groups with 61 participants, with three to seven participants each¹, between October 2016, shortly before the United States presidential election, and April 2017, after President Trump concluded his first 100 days: eleven groups with 41 women; four groups with 20 men. The higher number of women participants was not anticipated

but most likely due to the higher number of women students enrolled at the university where we recruited. We undertook additional outreach to men yet more women kept participating perhaps indicating higher levels of stress and pressures they experienced and felt compelled to address.

For women, ages ranged from 18 to 50 years; the median was 20 years. The majority held United States citizenship (39)²; two were citizens of Canada and India. Women noted a wide range of ethnic backgrounds: Arab, Arab American, or Middle Eastern (13); Lebanese (9); Pakistani (5); Indian (3); and one each as Bosnian, Bengal, Iraqi, Palestinian, Somali, Yemeni, Sundanese-Indonesian, Chinese, and Asian. Several noted mixed backgrounds such as “Arabic-Russian,” “Pakistani-Indian, and “Arab-Scottish-Italian,” demonstrating the diverse origins typical for Muslims in the United States. An overwhelming majority was single (32), eight were in a relationship, and one did not answer the question. Most described themselves as straight (34), six did not answer the question, and one noted to be pansexual. The majority had some bachelor’s education, an associate or bachelor’s degree (35); three had a master’s degree or some master’s education; three held a high school diploma. During the focus groups, 16 (42.5 percent) wore hijabs, and one a base cap, consistent with national data that suggests roughly four in ten Muslim women wear a hijab (Pew Research Center 2017). All women participants used at least one social media account, most used two to four, most often Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook but also Pinterest, WhatsApp, and Vine.

These social media platforms offer different types of dialogues and levels of publicness. Twitter is a micro-blogging social networking site on which people interact by posting short updates (limited to 280 characters but allowing for images, videos, polls, and links to be included), replies to each other, re-tweets of others’ contents and by marking posts as favorites. People can freely follow each other in the public setting option (fewer people use the private option). In contrast, Facebook allows lengthier word-based posts, similarly including images, video, links, and re-posts as well as marking posts with a variety of like and dislike options. Connections need approval via friends’ requests. Through invitations or open joining,

Facebook groups are a common space to interact. Pinterest, Instagram, and Vine place emphasis on video and photo sharing with brief captions; users can follow each other freely. Snapchat emphasizes chatting and messaging through the use of brief videos and photos with modifications and captions and is perceived as more private as followers need to know precise user-names or snap codes to connect with each other. WhatsApp is a messenger application that allows users to chat and share audio, videos, and images with either one person or a group. The platform uses encrypted messages and is tied to users' phone numbers; users need an invitation to a group or permission by others to join individual or group connections. Youtube is a video-sharing platform where users can upload videos and comment and vote on others' videos as well as subscribe to other users' video channels.

For men, ages ranged similarly from 19 to 56 years with a median of 22 years; the majority also held United States citizenship (17), four were Canadian³. Men noted a similarly wide range of backgrounds: Lebanese (7), Pakistani (4), Arab or Arab American (2), and Indian or Indian-Dominican (2). One participant each said they were African-American, Ethiopian, Moorish-American⁴ or white; one person did not answer this question. All identified as straight; 14 as single, three were in a relationship, and three did not answer this question. The majority of men had some bachelor's education, held an associate or bachelor's degree (16); two had high school diplomas; one held a post-graduate degree; one did not answer this question. Men used at least one social media account; most used two to four, most often Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and WhatsApp.

Findings and Analysis

Of all 61 participants, 47 said they experienced Islamophobia online and 42 face-to-face: of the 41 women, 31 said they experienced Islamophobia online and 28 face-to-face; of the 20 men 16 said they experienced Islamophobia online and 14 face-to-face. This included messages directed to them personally as well as to Muslims in general in the form of comments, posts, and links. Our sample revealed the many nuances of discrimination partic-

ipants perceived in online spaces and an urge to make these discriminations known to non-Muslim and share with fellow Muslims. Below, we detail women and men's sense-making during and responses to Islamophobia.

2016 United States Presidential Election and Islamophobia

Women's sense-making

Minority women specifically voted against Trump, while proportionately more white women voted for the Republican candidate, demonstrating a fracture in the solidarity between minority women and their white counterparts (Cassese and Barnes 2018). During and after the election, women participants viewed social media as having become more politicized, containing more political posts and a high rate of opinion exchanged about Trump. Indeed, during the first 100 days of the Trump as president, he dominated United States news media coverage three times more than previous presidents (Patterson 2017). This coverage was likely amplified by social media, as an 18-year-old American with Pakistani-Indian roots observed: "I just feel like before [the election] social media was just strictly an entertainment thing for me, now I feel like I actually need to be a little serious to read this. ... I can't go on without seeing something about what Trump did or what he's doing or protesting or something of that sort."

Women saw especially the highly public microblog Twitter as having become more political, but also increasingly Facebook, while they perceived Instagram, which focuses on images, as a refuge from political comments. On Twitter, hashtags used to ridicule expectations of Muslims were a source of solidarity, as a 20-year-old American of Yemeni descent said of #muslimsreportstuff, which arose during the second United States presidential TV debate on October 9, 2016.

Everyone was saying, Muslims report that, or, Muslims report stuff and then they would say: "Oh, I went to go eat today" or "I went out to school." Something simple and stupid just to show that we do stuff regularly just like everyone else. We

don't do weird stuff or we're not like different. We're kind of the same world of people. I've seen that and it was really funny.

After the election, social media helped the women participants to connect with others with similar emotions regarding Trump as United States president-elect, as a 19-year-old American of Pakistani descent described:

It was just an awful day for me. I felt very depressed and just numb and just very shocked. So, when I saw people who are close to me, and people who are not close I still follow on social media, that they're going through the same emotions and they feel the same way, it makes you feel that you're not alone and that your feelings are valid and justified.

Especially solidarity across groups helped women to process the election as a 19-year-old American of Pakistani descent explained:

A lot of the activists on Facebook and Twitter ask for organization and solidarity between all minorities. So not just between Muslims, but between Muslims and black people, and that includes black Muslims, and Muslims and Hispanics, and other oppressed groups, including gay people and trans people [...] solidarity is huge, and it's really important and that really motivated me.

Emanating from the United States, the global women's marches on January 21, 2017 (one day after Trump's inauguration as president), and the women's convention in Detroit in October 2017, similarly emphasized solidarity across women. The organizers, with their varying backgrounds - including Muslima activist Linda Sarsour, African-American leader Tamika Malloory, and Latina advocate Carmen Perez - emphasized in person, statements and programming the collaboration between Muslim, African-American, Latinx, Asian, Native American, white, immigrant, disabled, straight, and LGBTQ women, and their allies. Such "organized social relationships from outside the group offer protection from harassment and assault and

from excesses of an overbearing government, while they mitigate the power of those engaged in discourses of demonization” (Cainkar 2009:7).

Such messages and displays of solidarity were important for women participants in the Detroit metro area to know others were supportive as they witnessed an increase in hate crimes after the election, attributing the spike to Trump’s “hateful comments,” emboldening others with similar views to post them. A 21-year-old American of Pakistani background summarized: “Because of the election, most of the Islamophobia is coming from what our president is saying [other woman in group: right] and what the Trump supporters are believing.” His persona was most often connected to Islamophobia by participants and social media were seen to amplify this. Several women said they were so fatigued by the constant Trump coverage and hostility toward Muslims on social media that they took a hiatus from them as for instance a 23-year-old Arab American who deleted Snapchat and Instagram from her phone. The impact on Muslim women was best described by an 18-year-old Arab American of Lebanese-Iranian background:

If I were to sit here and [pause] kind of fight back to every single person [...] that would take a toll on my personal well-being. And it’s not selfish, it’s just I have to recognize I am an 18-year-old college student. I have school. I have work. I have my parents. I have to pray five times a day, you know. It is a very draining thing to be a Muslim in America right now.

This level of exhaustion mirrors Van Es’ (2016) findings that women with a Muslim background who were active in minority organizations from 1975 to 2010 in Norway and the Netherlands said it was difficult for them to muster the time and resources to interact with mainstream news media as it was too stressful and came with the cost of facing hate and threats. Few gave interviews or wrote articles, preferring websites, leaflets, magazines, books, lectures, events, and protests to air their concerns, as this was safer and gave them more control (Van Es 2016). In our study, everyday women social media users who are Muslim expressed a similar level of exhaustion

when interacting on social media as Van Es' participants did when working with news media. That is, our women participants faced stress similar to that of participating in a relentless news cycle. While web 1.0 websites gave Van Es' participants an alternative, more controlled medium for their voice, web 2.0 applications such as social media offered our participants only a relative level of safety and control on how messages were being perceived and responded to in an instant.

Men's sense-making

During the campaign, many men attributed a negative turn in the United States to Trump, as a 21-year-old Arab American argued:

When Donald Trump is running for president white supremacy is on a rise [...] history is repeating itself. [...] We have women fighting for their rights. We have African Americans that are being brutalized by police officers. We have Muslims who are being attacked [...] the whole country itself is in a mess.

Yet, several also said they had a practical approach toward Trump, hoping he would do something to improve the economy. This was plausible given many Muslims own businesses or work in their family business in the Detroit metro area; several men participants related stories to their family store. Similarly, after the election, several men said it would be best to "wait and see" and that Islamophobia online had not increased due to Trump. For instance, a 19-year-old American with Pakistani roots said he did not notice a rise in Islamophobia on his social media accounts as he was in a "bubble" with people who "like Muslims." Nevertheless, he said: "My social media accounts took a hiatus, too, like right after he got elected. I was like, okay, I know it's going to be all about Trump so I don't want to be part of this." After the inauguration, more men talked about the negativity Trump brought for Muslims, as perhaps best put by a 49-year-old American with Pakistani background: "It's no coincidence that people are going around saying that 11/9 [United States election day 2017] is this generation's 9/11. That's how

it's commonly being framed in social media. [...] Clearly, it was a traumatic moment for a lot of people.”

In the fourth men's focus group around the anniversary of Trump's 100 first days in office, a 22-year-old Lebanese American further verbalized this traumatization: “After Donald Trump's election [...] especially through [social] media [...] I've never in all my years of being alive seen such great amount of hatred. It's almost like a coup. It's almost like an uprising to a new era. It's pretty scary honestly.” At the same time, this man said he had voted for Trump believing it would help the economy and despite his objection to Trump's treatment of women as “objects [...] for sexual desires.” Yet, after Trump's first 100 days in office, this participant concluded he felt offended in his intertwined identities as Muslim “and” American:

When you see Trump on the media, explaining how he wants to do better for the country and then turns around and does the complete opposite, that affects me as an American, not only as a Muslim, in a very, very disappointing way because now we're at the point where we can't trust what a president's going to say.

His insistence on being American “and” Muslim was disrupted by Trump's remarks, similar to the years after 9/11 when Arab Muslims around Chicago experienced a sense of insecurity due to their religious identity and “described their citizenship as an inferior one that excluded guarantees and rights accorded to other citizens” (Cainkar 2009:3).

This example also stood out as no women in our study said they voted for Trump. While we did not ask participants to reveal their voting choice, one man volunteered that he voted for Trump. In sum, while women regarded Trump as outright negative from the start, some men participants initially endorsed Trump only coming to realize later that his verbal attacks on Muslims were not confined to campaign rhetoric but translated into harmful policies and everyday encounters. Several men blamed

Trump for emboldening close to them to express racist and anti-Muslim views on social media; a 22-year-old American with Indian roots described:

I have a friend [...] that I've known for a while [...] when Trump was running in the primaries he supported Trump and his ideologies and then when [Trump] became president he suddenly turned into like some sort of Islamophobic guy that I just don't know anymore. And it's really interesting to see that sort of dynamic play out because of this election.

Such *outparty* animus refers to feelings of disdain and discrimination felt against opposing political groups and has been previously found to be the second-largest social divide in American society (Iyengar and Westwood 2015): Americans openly expressed dislike and hostility for people and groups on the other side of the political spectrum; such instances of heightened affective polarization can significantly strain interpersonal relationships. Muslims have been consistently framed as an opposed group by Republicans like Trump. When an attack on a group based on their religious identity is combined with political platform animus the feelings of polarization and hostility could be amplified.

Men also argued that social media encouraged Islamophobia to be internalized by Muslims. Discussed in several focus groups, for instance, a 22-year-old American with Indian roots said Muslims censored Muslims not to speak too boldly against Trump albeit participants overwhelmingly had negative views of Trump. As the election discourse reduced the identity of people with a Muslim background to their religion only, and addressed them collectively as Muslims, individual Muslims have come to understand that they cannot escape this discourse and must speak as Muslims; yet working to normalize and subvert stereotypes while speaking as a Muslim, each one had to do so in an asymmetrical power structure and assess associated risks (Van Es 2016). By counseling each other if-how to speak out, men participants were work-

ing to navigate that narrow space of resistance to break the dominant discourse “and” speaking as Muslim.

Responses to Islamophobia

Women’s Responses

Almost half of women participants described feeling frustrated, helpless, or hopeless when experiencing Islamophobia online: Of those, more than half said they felt angry or annoyed; almost half said they felt vulnerable and sad. This is in line with Muslim women’s emotional responses in other countries who similarly have endured decades of othering and discrimination due to their religion. Van Es’ (2016) historical discourse analysis of Muslim women in the Netherlands and Norway from the 1970s to 2010 mapped their consistent feelings of frustration, anger, and defeat, particularly about stereotypes as being oppressed and backward. Moreover, almost one-fifth of women participants said they felt fear or worry for themselves but also for family members, especially women wearing hijabs. Whether women chose to respond verbally online or not, simply noticing Islamophobic posts online impacted them, as a 37-year-old American said: “We respond to them emotionally if not verbally [...] And they do, you know, affect our cognition.” To cope with the emotions triggered by Islamophobia, women most often used contextualizing, educating, ignoring, and being an exemplar when responding to Islamophobia online. Especially being a role model stood out in their concerns when interacting online. Additionally, they avoided content and used humor and solidarity.

Contextualizing

Almost a third of women in six focus groups contextualized Islamophobic comments online directed to them personally or toward Muslims in general, meaning they examined the situation to understand why a person may hold Islamophobic views. For instance, an 18-year-old Arab-American woman attributed Islamophobic behaviors to a lack of proper teaching, which was echoed by a 19-year-old Lebanese woman: “I get [that]

they grew up in an environment where they were taught certain things. So, they're clueless about reality."

Educating

Two-thirds of women in 10 focus groups said they tried to educate others when faced with Islamophobic behavior. Yet, attempts to teach frequently resulted in frustration; hence, women were selective to educate only when they felt it would be effective, as 20-year-old Arab woman described one situation: "They'll be like, 'Oh yeah, Muslim women are oppressed because they wear the hijab.' And I'll be like, 'Well, you know, I kind of picked this on my own. I don't think I'm oppressed at all.'" Especially seemingly never-ending debates around oppression in relation to hijab have been tiring women out (Janmohamed 2016; Van Es 2016); a proliferation of this persistent discussion in social media has turned this into an omnipresent frustration for Muslimas.

Ignoring

Almost two-thirds of women participants employed ignoring, which meant "not" to offer a verbal or written response after noticing a hostile comment to avoid feeling a duty to respond, as an 18-year-old Somali-Oromo woman said: "I just keep scrolling, because I know it's not true [...] I can't just sit there all day saying, 'it's not true. It's not true.' [...] I just don't have the energy." Participants frequently described that Islamophobic content can easily be overwhelming and that they are too tired to deal with the ubiquity of such content all the time.

Being exemplars

More than a third of women in six focus groups discussed that they felt they had to be perfect models of Islam, including online. They perceived that it was their responsibility to respond to and stave off Islamophobia by representing Islam positively in their daily lives in physical and Internet spaces. This feeling of pressure was especially true for women with hijab,

which for some was visible in avatars, videos, and photos online. To many women, with and without hijab, this meant displaying good manners and maintaining a positive attitude when interacting with other users online. This was put best by an 18-year-old Arab-American: “You always have to remember, like for all the people you are meeting, you have to think, I could be the first Muslim they’re meeting [...] I could be the only Muslim they know [...] So, I have to be the best damn representation of Islam I possibly can. ‘Cause there’s like-one slip up, and they’re like: ‘Oh, all Muslims do this.’”

Women participants’ strong concerns to be an exemplar of Islam on social media extends Louise Cainkar’s (2009) analysis of Arab and Muslim Americans’ experiences in Chicago after 9/11. She argued that women were punished by the United States public through a high level of scrutiny, verbal and physical attacks while men Muslims were more often systematically targeted by the United States government in the form of registries, arrests, and incarcerations. She argued that Muslim women were attacked in their communities because they were perceived as a threat to the neighborhood on a moral level. As expressions of hostility against Muslims by large groups, such as protests at mosques, were shut down by law enforcement, backed up by formal laws ensuring freedom of religion as a first amendment right, individuals and small groups focused on singling out an individual or small groups of Muslim women. Especially women with hijab were perceived as a threat as “these women openly, even proudly, conform to a set of prescription and values that are interpreted as un-American” (2009:230). Similarly, Van Es (2016), in her longitudinal study on the Netherlands and Norway, concluded that Muslim women “who want to claim their full citizenship need to go to great lengths to represent themselves as being emancipated and not as oppressed” (78) to the ethno-religious majority of the country in which they live but where their belonging is continuously questioned and rejected. One strategy they used was to remind each other that they can set an example as “good” Muslims in their daily behavior (2016).

We extend these lines of argument to social media, which include a vast amount of visual material, and extend public discourse, turning Muslim

women into easy to reach and visible targets - especially when displayed with hijab or other markers of Islam. Social media include an entire landscape of Muslim-produced visual content (Janmohamed 2016) with online celebrities, fashion bloggers, preachers, YouTubers, travel bloggers, dating apps and so on. As women are perceived as carriers of culture and morale (Cainkar 2009), Muslim women's existence and expressions on social media have been contested on a different level than Muslim men who traditionally have been perceived as a threat in the form of being framed as terrorists. Women Muslims in our study anticipated, internalized, and enacted their role as cultural exemplars and worked to counter these perceptions of a cultural or moral threat by a heightened level of self-monitoring of their online behavior: what they posted, who they posted about, how and to whom they replied in which way. They used social media to push the "boundaries of American womanhood" and challenged an "American femininity [that] precluded hijab" (Cainkar 2009:244).

Similarly, Van Es' (2016) concluded that for Islam to become and remain accepted in minority Muslim European countries Muslim women, in particular, have had to demonstrate that Islam is compatible with gender equality. She argued, that Muslim women have had to be perceived as participating in the public sphere, as being strong, emancipated, and free of gendered violence. Only then would they have a chance to belong. We see this dynamic also working in the United States as our women participants used social media to actively participate in public discourse, to counter stereotypes of being oppressed, and to make the case for a peaceful Islam that does not curtail their rights and freedoms as women. By repeatedly demonstrating this level of emancipation to speak publicly, and thus confounding stereotypes of Muslim women in the United States, they ultimately broadened the category of "American women."

Men's Responses

When encountering Islamophobia online, 10 of 20 men said they felt frustrated, helpless or hopeless; eight said they also felt fatigued, annoyed or angry. Overall, comparatively more men spoke about encountering Islam-

ophobia online than women, indicating that other than in Cainkar's (2009) findings that women faced more scrutiny and hate in public spaces than men after 9/11, social media are subjecting Muslim men to perhaps the same levels of Islamophobia originating from individuals and small groups that previously mostly women Muslims encountered in physical public spaces. Men participants in our study most often used contextualizing, educating, and ignoring in response to Islamophobia while they rarely tried to act as an exemplar in online contexts.

Contextualizing

Contextualizing was the most common response to Islamophobia online among men in all focus groups (17 of 20 men) as a 22-year-old American Indian described:

That's like one of the first things I learned about the Internet, you should never take anything you see on the Internet at face value. You always have to see every side of the story. Especially with things like Islamophobia where people who are just mindlessly listening to media sources and are believing these things they say about Islam and Muslims, and ISIS.

Similarly, a 21-year-old Arab-American said he always considers a poster's background when experiencing Islamophobia online: "When I see comments from a more conservative perspective, I understand it as these individuals are more cocooned in their society."

Educating

Almost a third of men, across all focus groups, said they tried to educate others when they noticed Islamophobia online. Similar to women participants, they emphasized they only did so when they perceived people as willing to learn. A 20-year-old Lebanese man said educating others was part of his religious responsibility: "I come from a very, very religious family, so I was taught always at a young age for those who are ignorant

around me, for me to educate them. And I take that as my mission.” Men referred to educating in terms of correcting and teaching “after” being prompted when they saw an incorrect post about Islam while the idea of anticipating and preventing anti-Muslim sentiments by being the ideal Muslim on display online all the time was by far more often discussed by women participants.

In educating, men, as well as women, applied the Islamic concept of *darwa* to their behavior on social media, asking Muslims to bear witness to their religion and to invite others to learn about Islam. We did not ask about the concept of *darwa* in discussions directly but participants frequently brought it up themselves in examples. As *darwa* means interactions with other people; especially on social media may become a perceived “constant” duty, as an increased number of channels to communicate also increases ways to do *dawa*. As the former president of the American Moslem Society mosque in Dearborn, Michigan, Mahdi Ali, put it, since 9/11 Muslim scholars have put more pressure on Muslims to do *dawa*, affecting especially younger generations: “in order for you to spread the message [of Islam], you cannot do it while you are isolated” (Howell 2011:158).

Ignoring

More than half of men participants, across three focus groups, said they ignored Islamophobia online due to the overwhelming number of Islamophobic posts and a perceived recalcitrance of anti-Muslim views, as a 21-year-old Arab American best described:

You can't be a Facebook keyboard warrior. You can't go on every comment and just say: 'Hey, you've got the wrong perspective,' because people who have this conservative perspective are themselves radical. They are just as radical as ISIS, they invested in their mind is 'I am great, and these people are inferior.' So, there's nothing that you can really do about it.

Being exemplars

Compared to many more women, only one man, a 19-year-old American of Pakistani descent, said his mother always taught him patience and to prove people wrong by the way he leads his life: “instead of using social media to directly attack those people, I can use social media to show what I do, what my life is like [...] I can show how I am as [a] person, and that I feel like is a better way to [...] contradict to what people say about Islam and how they feel about Muslims.” Social media allowed participants to create posts with photos, videos, and longer texts showing themselves going about their daily lives, hobbies, and activities. As Janmohamed (2016:95) described for Muslim millennials: “During Ramadan, people ‘tweet the Qur’an’. During hajj there are passionate Twitter feeds offering emotional and intimate accounts of what it’s like to be present. Both give people around the world the opportunity to engage with important rituals and to share their experiences.”

Discussion and Conclusion

Virtually all women and men participants saw the outcome of the 2016 United States presidential election as negative. But while several men before the election appeared still cautiously optimistic or displayed a pragmatic point of view this vanished after the inauguration. In contrast, women participants never entertained any positive notions about Trump. Indeed, a majority of different minorities (African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics) compared to fewer whites reported that the outcome of the 2016 United States presidential election was a significant source of stress to them, with women reporting higher levels of stress than men, further increasing in 2017 whereas the level for men decreased (American Psychological Association 2017).

Similarly, our study finds young Muslim women and men in the United States who are regular social media users suffered high levels of stress as a minority due to the ubiquity of Islamophobia online during the 2016 United States presidential election, especially Muslim women: as a minority

within the minority - women are only 35 percent among Muslims in the United States. (Pew Research Center 2014) - they bear a higher burden by interacting online and being exemplars of their religion. This stress is compounded by exhaustion and frustration they endured by simply being on social media (Reinecke et al. 2016). Young Muslims are between a rock and hard place: engaging online is essential for professional and personal life and to connect with the *e-ummah*, the global Muslim nation connecting through the Internet (Janmohamed 2016), while at the same time this increases the probability to experience Islamophobia, undermining their sense of citizenship and belonging and facing pressures to respond in ways that are in line with living their faith, especially for Muslim women of whom more were compelled to act as exemplars online. In order to normalize Muslims, participants self-essentialized and spoke first and foremost as Muslims.

Social media can be a tool of expression and solidarity for Muslims but only if they can afford the energy, time, and emotional labor to cut through the Islamophobic clutter. Often, this was too high a burden for participants, especially for women whose level of self-monitoring their online behavior was higher due to the pressure to act as role models of Islam. This substantially limits how Muslims can take advantage of social media to make their voices heard and begs the question if social media are worth engaging in for certain minorities, at certain times, especially women who face a higher level of certain types of online harassment such as sexual harassment (Eckert 2017). More research is needed to map withdrawal practices and disadvantages to counter prevailing rhetoric that credits social media as a mostly positive, change-bringing tool for minorities and women as it can also come at great cost for their well-being.

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Notes

¹ Only one had two participants due to an unexpected no show that day.

² Several held dual citizenships with Canada, Egypt, Russia and Lebanon.

³ Several held dual citizenships between the United States, Canada, Lebanon, and India, making numbers not add up to 20. One participant chose not to answer this question.

⁴ Moorish Americans distinguish themselves from Black Americans seeing themselves as descendants of Moors from Morocco, offering Black Americans an “alternative identity to that of the oppressed negro” (Howell 2014:83).