Muslim Period American Period: Millennial Muslim Identities in the Contemporary United States

- Intro – “Made in America #MIPSTERZ” video
  - My project focuses on communities of millennial American Muslims
  - To give you an idea of the people I spoke with for my project, I’m going to show you a clip from the video “Somewhere in America”
  - This video was produced by the group Mipsterz. My thesis research, and this presentation, will focus on the group IllMuslims and people I met through IllMuslims events. However, the target demo of the two groups is really similar.
- This presentation is an overview of my religious studies thesis
  - I hope to illuminate some aspects of how young Muslims in the U.S. are coming to understand themselves, their faith, and their relationship to and role within broader American community.
    - I will discuss some key defining features of IllMuslims and their target audience and explore the potential implications of IllMuslims’ project of representing and bringing together young American Muslims.
    - I explore my participants’ relationship to their American identities, and how they understand the relationship between their nationality and their faith.
- For my thesis, I looked at young American Muslims who are active online
  - The bulk of my research was attending an IllMuslims event in Washington, DC in January and conducting several long-form, semi-structured interviews
    - Quotes in this presentation are from my interview subjects
  - My research was further informed by other social media accounts run by Muslims living in the United States and Canada whom I was not able to interview.
  - Also consulted long-form and blog-style posts from websites created by and for young American Muslims
- Caveat:
  - Although social media use was an integral part of my research process, this study is not about social media itself. Instead, I use social media as a means to access the community.
  - For millennials, social media has become an extension of everyday life and is integral part of millennials’ identity expression and social life.
  - However, social media is also a highly constructed space; usually, users put a great deal of thought into the image of themselves that they portray online. As a primary source, social media posts indicate how posters perceive and understand both their world and themselves.

Being Ill and Muslim
- Who are IllMuslims?
  - Began in 2014 as a way to bring together young Muslims in their late 20s and early 30s
  - In addition to their active social media presence, IllMuslims’ main project is holding BeSocial Events, which are mixers with a DJ, mocktails, and plenty of
space to talk and hang out, as well as other events held around major holidays (both Muslim and American) such as Ramadodgeball

- Goals of IllMuslims
  - Connect creatives to potential collaborators, inspiration, and a market of people eager to consume products
  - Provide a fun space to hang out that allows young Muslims to meet new people and catch up with friends who share their faith, values and practices
  - Represent an alternative vision of what Muslim Americans can look like to challenge stereotypes about Muslims from the non-Muslim community and also signal to other Muslims that there are a variety of ways to live out their faith

- Although the community of millennial American Muslims is extremely diverse, there are some discernable similarities among the people who fall under IllMuslims’ target demographic.
  - Focuses on young professionals and ESPECIALLY creatives (artists, designers, musicians, etc)
  - Have done well for themselves
  - Very fashionable
  - Display all of this online

- Rummi has said that one of the goals of IllMuslims is to present a wider variety of ways to be young and American and Muslim and bring together the entire American Muslim community across ideological or ethnic divides
  - However, some people I talked to feel left out of the IllMuslims group aesthetic/values, even though they should fit IllMuslims’ target demographic
    - Hafsa, a full-time journalism student who is very active on social media and very fashionable, who attended BeSocial DC: The people who are promoted by IllMuslims, they image they promote, is extremely fashionable. But, she says, “If you can’t afford to [spend a lot of money on fashion], if you’re not always going out and eating, and you don’t have really cool photos with really nice nails, and travelling to cool places, you’re kind of irrelevant. You almost have to be like that if you wanna be somewhat popular as a Muslim nowadays. And that really bothers me because I’ve never been about appearances. I’m a writer, so for me, I want people to read what I write and not care about how I look. But…I feel like if you wanna be relevant to people, they need to know who you are or feel like they understand you.”
  - While IllMuslims began in part as a platform to display alternative vies of what a young Muslim person in America could look like, and although IllMuslims is made up of many individuals acting ostensibly independently, the collective image created by IllMuslims’ own social media posts, as well as the aggregate of the “social media influencers” who are actively involved with IllMuslims, has become one of the dominant visions for what an American Muslim can, does, and should look like within certain communities.
Being American and Muslim

- This isn’t just about Muslims online – this is about AMERICAN muslims
  - Being American shapes people’s experience of being Muslim and how they understand their faith
- @UmaKompton tweet – indicative of larger understanding of Muslims as Other
- Samuel Huntington’s 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs* coins term “clash of civilizations”
  - Huntington posits that Western security, democracy, and freedom are irreconcilably in opposition to Muslim people, practices, and ideals.
- This idea is exacerbated with attacks on 9/11 and subsequent actions by the federal government to surveil and even detain American Muslims who were supposed or potential “terrorists.”
  - reinforced the idea that Muslims were naturally violent, potentially terrorists, and certainly not American
- Participants vehemently affirmed their American-ness to me – this is part of their identity
  - Raheem told me about all the times people told him to go back to his country, saying “I was born and raised in Brooklyn, in the hood. So if anything I’m as much of an American as you are. I love my country, I love my state, I’ve always loved Brooklyn.”
  - American Muslim identities are constituted in part by the need to respond to the address of the non-Muslim other
    - Performance of identity is influenced both by American-ness and by need to reaffirm American-ness
    - The people I spoke with implicitly refutes the idea that Islam is necessarily Other by blending what they see as American ideals and values with Islamic values and tradition
- The ways in which my participants understood what it means to be Muslim contribute to their convictions that being American and being Muslim are not at all incompatible.
  - When I asked my participants what being Muslim means to them, their answers focused largely on belief in one God, following the example of the Prophet Muhammad, and adhering to general moral principles.
  - According to Samira, being Muslim means that people can look at her and say “She’s Muslim, Muhammad is her prophet, and she really does follow what she says she does…she has a good character, she’s honest, she’s there when you need her, she has a good attitude about everyday life, and has a purpose.”
  - Overall, the respondents articulate an understanding of Islam as a governing moral force in their lives. It shapes the way they behave and the way they understand their relationship to the world. Being Muslim means being a good person, being moral, being kind, generous, just, and purposeful. Islam is not a set of rules that dictate one’s every action or preclude one’s participation in American society. Instead, Islam provides a set of guiding principles that allow one to be kind and generous, an overall good person, while participating fully in American cultural life.
• Young American Muslims also face criticism from within the Muslim community that they have become “too Americanized,” and are somehow less Muslim because of this Americanization
  o American Muslims who engage in both American and Muslim traditions are simply being themselves, and in order to be themselves they are citing in part the American mainstream culture in which they were raised and which they understand to be their own.
• PHOTOS

The people I talked to are very conscious of efforts to separate Muslims from the rest of American society, to argue that they are irreconcilably other. They express some ambivalence about the idea of defining and discussing the “Muslim American community” because they worry that being Muslim has become the defining element of their identity. According to Hafsa, she would not describe herself as Muslim American, but instead she is “Muslim, period. American, period.”

While no participant denies being Muslim, or downplays the importance of their faith, they do not see any conflict between being Muslim and being American, and they wish to be seen simply as Americans who also happen to be Muslim. At the same time, though, many recognize that in the context of the contemporary United States, where Muslims regularly face hate, discrimination, and violence because of their faith, it is necessary to refer to the American Muslim community as a whole. As the community of millennial American Muslims grows and changes, they will have to navigate between their desires to both come together as a community and fully embrace their Muslim identities, while at the same time become fully integrated into American society. In a way, IllMuslims stands directly in the middle of this conversation. IllMuslims, and other groups that bring together young American Muslims, will certainly continue to grow and change in response to pressures both from within and outside of the American Muslim community. It remains to be seen, however, what new forms such groups will take in the future.

---

1 Zakarison, Interview with Hafsa.