

# Converging Identities, Emerging Discourses: Muslim Female Voices in British Media

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**Abstract:** There is an increasing presence of female Muslim voices in both mainstream British media and minority or community media as greater access has enabled them to create spaces for themselves in print, broadcast and new media. In converging their gender and religious identities, they are generating new discourses that challenge widely held stereotypes and starting new conversations about what it means to be female, British and Muslim. Using interview data from five journalists and examples of media discourses, this paper shows how the articulation of gendered and religious identities is evidence of a growing confidence and continued agency among young Muslim women in the UK.

**Keywords:** British Muslim women, Muslim and mainstream media, discourses, stereotypes, agency

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*Identités convergentes, discours émergents : voix des femmes musulmanes dans les médias britannique*

**Résumé:** La montée des voix féminines musulmanes dans les médias britanniques traditionnels et dans les médias minoritaires ou communautaires montre un plus grand accès leur permettant de créer des espaces dans les médias papier, audiovisuels et nouveaux. En faisant converger leurs identités de genre et leurs identités religieuses, elles génèrent de nouveaux discours qui défient les stéréotypes répandus et entament de nouvelles discussions sur ce que signifie être une femme, une britannique et une musulmane. À l'aide des données issues des interviews avec cinq journalistes et à partir des modèles de discours diffusés dans les médias, cet article montre en quoi et comment l'articulation des identités liées au genre avec les identités religieuses témoigne de la confiance croissante et de la persistance d'agences parmi les jeunes femmes musulmanes au Royaume-Uni.

**Mots-clés:** femmes musulmanes britanniques, médias musulmans et grand public, discours, stéréotypes, agence

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## Introduction

The intersection of gender, religion and media with respect to Muslim women in Britain provides an interesting example of how women's agency and increasing engagement in society is enabling them to carve out new spaces for representation and articulating "our voices, on our terms"<sup>1</sup>. Muslims and Islam have frequently been portrayed negatively and inaccurately in mainstream Western media and women have been doubly disadvantaged because of both their religion *and* gender. These predominantly negative representations accentuate their marginalised position in society and influence how they are perceived by non-Muslims (Poole, 2002). Their portrayal in media has generally been restricted to stereotypical tropes and their voices are rarely heard or if they are, are presented within limited frames. Furthermore, interpretations of religious doctrine and certain cultural practices in relation to gender expectations are often used to limit Muslim women in various spheres, both private and public. Muslim women thus experience marginalisation not only because they are Muslims but also because they are women, and this means that they occupy a unique position in terms of disadvantage and discrimination for multiple reasons, from both within their community contexts and from wider society.

The advent of new media technologies and easier access to the media production apparatus has enabled Muslim women to form new spaces for themselves in the media scene in Britain and by doing so challenge dominant perceptions and expectations of them. New media production and consumption patterns have given women, amongst other groups, opportunities to express themselves where they were previously marginalised both in mainstream and 'community' media. Muslim females are creating an online presence, are prolific bloggers, active users of social media and generators of new debates about being female, British and Muslim (Warren, 2018). This process of challenging dominant representations and creating alternative discourses is an example of how women's agency is contributing to the emergence of new languages (textual and visual), discourses and frameworks for communication and representation. It is about defining and expressing British female Muslim identities in contemporary British society. Whilst these factors have been facilitated in part by developments in media technologies, they can also be attributed to the maturity of Muslim communities in Britain and the changing gender dynamics that have been ushered in particularly by the current generation of Muslim women.

The aim of this paper is to explore how Muslim women have created spaces for themselves in both community and mainstream British media by producing their own publications and working for mainstream media. In converging their gender and religious identities, they have created emerging discourses that are crossing both 'ethnic' or community media as well as mainstream media. The subject matter, outlook and writing style all reflect the experiences and opinions of Muslim women which are different from the traditionally male voices that have dominated media from the 1970s onwards, including publications focused on Muslim lifestyle (Lewis,

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<sup>1</sup> An expression used by Amaliah.com

2015). The paper draws on data obtained from interviews with five journalists/writers and examines how the two key factors that are often used to discriminate against Muslim women – being Muslim and female – are in fact being used as positive markers of identity which are translating into the public sphere.

### 1. Mainstream media representations of Muslim women

Numerous studies have looked at representations of Muslim women in mainstream Western media. The approaches to examining these representations include content and discourse analyses; audience studies and reception analyses; detailed examination of data from corpora, and; critical evaluations of the relationship between governments and media organisations (Al-Hejin, 2009; Byng, 2010; Baker, Gabrielatos & McEnery, 2013 and Said, 1997). The consensus from these studies is that Muslims and Islam are mostly framed and portrayed in negative ways; violent and irrational; fundamentalist or extremist; misogynistic; a security threat; intolerant and alien. The images and discourses associated with Muslim women in mainstream Western media have frequently centred on a few recurring tropes which are often underpinned by a focus on the appearance or attire of Muslim women: the oppressed and submissive victim<sup>2</sup>; exotic, sexualised or erotic, and; more recently, the terrorist agitator. Some of the common frameworks within which Muslim women are represented include the oppressed-terror-bride (Rafiq, 2019); centre on the veil (a fixation that continues from Orientalist and colonial discourses<sup>3</sup>); notions of citizenship and belonging (Modood, Triandafyllidou & Zapata-Barrero, 2006), and; Islam's compatibility with Western or British values. An even more limited range of topics is emphasised in reporting about converts to Islam, whereby they are presented in the frames of cultural threat and terror/violence (including criminality) and are othered for being 'not normal' (Sealy, 2017). Stemming from Orientalist and colonial literature, more contemporary representations have been influenced by the current geopolitical environment and social events. The terror-bride stereotype, for example, has been perpetuated by recent high-profile cases in which young Muslim women from Europe or America have travelled to areas of conflict in the Muslim world<sup>4</sup>.

An international debate has ensued in light of these cases, but numerous domestic or national events have also kept Muslim women in the public eye<sup>5</sup>. Baker, *et al* (2013) examine linguistic patterns around the term 'Muslim woman' and show that one of the most common gender-specific constructions around this term is the

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<sup>2</sup> Navarro's (2010) expression about how Muslim women are portrayed in Spanish media is interesting, 'victims of their own culture and a threat to ours' (p. 98).

<sup>3</sup> Macdonald, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Shamima Begum in the UK and Hoda Muthana in the USA.

<sup>5</sup> Including Jack Straw's and Boris Johnson's comments on the *niqab* and David Cameron's stereotyping of Muslim women being submissiveness.

‘veil’<sup>6</sup>. “The veil is the most frequent topic that is directly associated with Muslim women” (Baker *et al*, 2013, p. 203). Being one of the most visible and obvious markers of Islam or ‘Muslimness’, women’s attire, specifically the headscarf (*hijab*) and face-veil (*niqab*), are projected into public debate through media and have also become key areas for discussion in academic and political circles (Macdonald, 2006). While Britain has its own experiences and attitudes towards veiling in legal and socio-cultural contexts, wider debates in Europe, other non-Muslim majority countries and even Muslim-majority countries (e.g. Turkey) all have a bearing on the place of this overtly religious symbol in mostly secular landscapes. The *niqab* in particular has been a contentious issue in several countries and the debate about whether to ban it in public places continues in several countries<sup>7</sup>. In comparing the gender dimension of representation of Muslims, Baker *et al* (2013) found “that the corpus data occasionally displays a dislike or disapproval of Muslim women, which did not seem to be as salient for Muslim men... Muslim women therefore appeared to be doubly problematised in the corpus, because of their religion and their gender, in a way that Muslim men were not” (p. 229).

These representations no doubt have an impact on both the way non-Muslims view Islam and Muslims and how Muslims themselves negotiate aspects of their identity and modify behaviour in the face of prejudice and discrimination. Dwyer (1997) conducted her fieldwork over 25 years ago and found that even at that time in order to articulate their identities young South Asian Muslim women were negotiating dominant representations and stereotypes and challenging both existing discourses as well as other people’s expectations of them. In examining three important cultural spaces – dress, music and television, Dwyer (1997) showed how young women were contesting, negotiating and constructing different understandings of what it means to be ‘British Muslim’.

## 2. British Muslim identities

The debates that were taking place among young women in Dwyer’s (1997) study have become much more pertinent in recent times. The focus of the discussions relating to Muslims in the UK and other countries with significant Muslim diasporas has shifted to issues of citizenship, identity, loyalty and belonging in the post 9/11 world. As a more distinctly religious identity has emerged against the backdrop of the war on terror, a questioning of the place of this identity in secular, Western countries has been closely tied with security and national identity and Muslims are viewed both as a cultural and political threat (Cesari, 2013).

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<sup>6</sup> For Muslim men the most common term was ‘radicalisation’.

<sup>7</sup> On August 1, 2019, the Netherlands joined France, Germany, Belgium and Denmark in banning (or partially banning) the *niqab* in certain public places. However, its practical enforcement seems unlikely as police, transport and hospital staff amongst others have all stated their reluctance to implement it.

A considerable amount of literature on identity in relation to ethnicity, diaspora and hybridity has spoken about confusion, contradiction and conflict (Khan, 2002). Furthermore, there has been debate on compatibility and a questioning of whether people in Britain can say they are British *and* Muslim. Can these two aspects of identity (more than any others) sit comfortably with each other or is it necessary to compromise one in order to accommodate the other? Research has shown that Islam and ‘Muslimness’<sup>8</sup> are given priority as ‘master signifiers’ (Ansari, 2013, p. 405) for many Muslims, especially those who are younger and from the second and third generations of minority communities. With events such as the Rushdie affair in 1989, a distinctly religious (Muslim) consciousness and identity began to emerge (Meer, 2012). Religion had been of importance to minority communities but it was often subsumed under the label of ethnicity or race. Modood, *et al* (2006) document this transformation of South Asian communities in the UK and of how ‘Muslim’ became a key political minority identity for self-identification and for identification by others. A recent Ipsos MORI report<sup>9</sup> questioned Muslims about attitudes and experiences in relation to issues of identity, belonging and religiosity. Contrary to media portrayals of Muslims being different, key findings of the report include the fact that there are many similarities between the views of Muslims and the general public; that Muslims have a strong sense of belonging to Britain, and; a strong sense of attachment to British identity. It also found that religion plays a far more important role in life for Muslims than it does for others.

If identities are not to be seen as static, fixed representations of ourselves, then it is necessary to problematise and deconstruct the term ‘British Muslim identity’. Clearly there is no one British Muslim identity, just as there is no one ‘British’ identity. “Far from there being a single, clearly defined perception of British Muslim identity, the notion is complex, diverse and equivocal. The result is not a neatly identifiable British Muslim identity but a range of identities co-existing within Britain’s Muslim communities” (Ansari, 2004, p. 394). Enormous diversity can be discerned among British Muslims, along the lines of ethnicity, social class, levels of education and employment, geographical location, language, gender and age. Pihlaja and Thompson (2017) assert that “British Muslim identities are particularly problematic as they are used to cover a wide range of different ethnicities and levels of religiosity. While the category young British Muslim represents a diverse community, identity discourses often take for granted that people from Muslim heritage always privilege the religious element of their identity” (p. 53). Apart from needing to recognise the diversity encompassed under the label ‘Muslim’, the politicisation of this identity often means Muslims are seen first and foremost by their religious subjectivity whether or not they choose this.

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<sup>8</sup> However it is defined, articulated or practiced.

<sup>9</sup> Ipsos MORI (Social Research Institute). Kaur-Ballagan, K., Mortimore, R. & Gottfried, G. A review of survey research on Muslims in Britain. Aziz Foundation, Barrow Cadbury Trust, the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and Unbound Philanthropy.

“As a term “British Muslim” provides not simply the foundation for an identity – strategic or otherwise – but rather an ideological space through which to develop meaning-making. Thus, “British Muslim” as a concept/identity is not singular or static, but exponential and vehicular – it is always contingent and contested, multiple and in motion. Muslims in Britain have seized the label “British Muslim” and are deploying it to advance a series of diverse (and often divergent) political, cultural, social and religious solidarities” (Morris, 2018, p. 418). Morris (2018) argues that the term is this both internally and externally relational; can be used defensively or positively; has been shaped by Muslim agency, and; demonstrates maturation amongst Muslim communities in Britain. Its use must be critically contextualised rather than used unreflectively and as such it must be continually interrogated and problematised, that is, *re-placed*. While there is ample literature and research to show that religion is becoming the primary descriptor for many Muslims who self-identify and want others to identify them as Muslims, this should not exclude other ways of expressing and being for individuals and groups.

### 2.1. *Discursive identities - mediated Muslims*

Community media has reflected the concerns and views of Britain’s minority populations and the changing dynamics of British Muslim communities are reflected in the media output created by them. For the Pakistani community in Bradford, much of their initial community media had a strong diaspora focus with connections to the Indian sub-continent and was the domain of men (Husband, 1998). Editors and writers were male and the readership was also predominantly male creating a gender imbalance. As these communities spent more time in the UK, becoming more rooted in the socio-economic and cultural fabric of Britain, their concerns and focus changed. Earlier publications like *Jang* were anchored in the Pakistani political, socio-economic and cultural environment that was transported to the UK by migrants but later ones (especially post 1989) were conscientiously and overtly Muslim in their identification (for example, *The Muslim News*, *Crescent International* and *Q-News*).

These dynamics also altered the gender balance with increasing contributions from younger females of different ethnicities. As Ansari (2004) noted, “living in a culturally and religiously plural Britain has brought about radical changes in gender relations among Muslims. It is likely that in time British Muslim women, as they pass through the educational system and become more economically engaged, will be in a better position to assert and secure their rights both within and outside their communities” (p. 405). This is clearly evident in the involvement of Muslim women in community media as well as other media platforms and employment sectors.

Just as individual identities are always in a state of flux so too are collective identities - always changing to absorb new, different notions of culture and belonging. Barker (1999) argues, “identities are constituted in discourse or socially shared and regulated ways of speaking. That is, identities are discursive constructions. Indeed, there can be no identity, experience or social practice which is not discursively

constructed since we cannot escape language” (p. 31). In a world of ever-increasing visual communication, this language is more than words; it is what we see around us in various forms of representation. It is Muslim sportswomen competing with their heads covered; it is a Muslim baking the Queen’s Jubilee cake; a young woman wearing the Union Jack or poppy headscarf and other manifestations of Muslimness. Confident use of language that reflects Britain’s Muslim population is apparent in several social and cultural events. The integration of popular cultural artefacts and events, such as, Muslim Lifestyle Expo or Modest Fashion Week, is another example of this phenomenon. There is, however, a danger that simply prefixing such events with the word Muslim continues to ‘other’ minorities rather than seeing them as ‘normal’ and part of mainstream society.

Many examples of editorials or ‘about us’ sections on webpages show clearly that one of the main objectives of setting up publications and media outlets is to provide platforms and spaces where writers can “amplify the voices of Muslim women”. These platforms enable “Muslim women to be heard [in order to] reclaim [their] identities through representation [of] voices that are so often misunderstood or misspoken for”. There is acknowledgement that platforms such as this enable women from diverse backgrounds and with different experiences to be empowered. The categories found on Amaliah.com’s landing page are; identity, fashion, lifestyle, soul, world, beauty and relationships. This demonstrates the discourses that it seeks to engage in, for both its Muslim and non-Muslim users. Started as a modest fashion blog, Amaliah altered its focus after Prime Minister David Cameron’s comments on young Muslim men being vulnerable to radicalisation because of the traditional submissiveness of Muslim women. A Twitter hashtag, #traditionallySubmissive, started trending with thousands of examples of women from diverse backgrounds with different careers and achievements in and outside their homes to challenge Cameron’s comments and assumptions. Though with an undertone of sarcasm, they also carried a serious message confronting the circulation of negative stereotypes about Muslim women. Amaliah found this was the point at which it developed from a fashion blog to something broader enabling them to ‘reclaim our narrative’ and project ‘our voices, on our terms’ with a clear remit of talking about identity.

Whatever the nuances are of the assertion of a Muslim identity in Britain it appears the growing emphasis on religion as a (if not *the*) marker of identity among young British Muslims is tangible (Moll, 2007). Faced with the challenges of living in a predominantly non-Islamic society Muslims in Britain “seek to publicly affirm their Islamic identity within the Western context and through interaction with it, rather than in spite of it, [are] (re)defining and (re)constructing in the process what it means to be British as well as Muslim” (Moll, 2007, p. 2). Muslim community/particularistic media is one important way in which this is done. Moll (2007) examines two publications in her study; *emel* and *Q-News*, in order to highlight, problematise and deconstruct the construction of British Muslims and British Islam. News production; selection/exclusion of stories; privileging of some markers of identity (religion), and; identifying dominant themes such as Muslims/Islam as vic-

tims; the definition and practice of 'real' Islam, and; the compatibility of Islam and the West are examined in her study. "*Emel* and *Q-News* both put forward a similar regime of representation on British Muslims and Islam that effectively privileges some components of Muslim/Islamic identity over others... The identity constructed is a project one in that it not only redefines what being a Muslim in contemporary Britain means, but also seeks to transform imagined notions of Britain to enable the realization of this new self-definition" (Moll, 2007, p. 6).

To emphasise the idea of identities as discursive constructs, the example of another publication illustrates how discourses are creating new forms of British Muslim identity. The pages of the *British Muslim Magazine* (henceforth *BMM*) show how themes similar to *emel's* and *Q-News'* cultural project are being furthered. As with the earlier publications, *BMM* is aimed at young, professional, middle-class, highly educated, upwardly mobile readers, and is unequivocal in tapping into the consumer power of this group of Britain's Muslim population. A continuation of the lifestyle outlook of *emel* can be seen in the *BMM*, explicitly steering away from politics and any political affiliation. This is in contrast to early Muslim publications that centred on hard news from around the Muslim world as well as 'serious' issues affecting Muslims in the UK. The Muslim identity being constructed in more recent publications is one that partakes in a culture of leisure, travel and consumption (with an Islamic twist).

In examining the identity constructed by writers in two recently published texts, Hasan (2015) shows how the female writers have written as 'Islamic' writers rather than merely Muslim writers who often simply reinforce Orientalist discourses. The authors in his study are concerned with the representation of gender and religion in their work and "adopt religion as the central reference point of their identity" while acknowledging that they hold multiple, fluid and hyphenated identities (Hasan, 2015, p. 97). "By presenting Muslim women's identity in such an open and enabling way, Aboulela and Janmohamed write back to multiple discourses that project Islam and Muslim women in a narrow and essentialist way" (Hasan, 2015, p. 102). This writing back is a key feature of the various discourses and representations that Muslim women have made in recent years. These discourses move away from the idea of contested, conflictual and confused identity and embrace confidently the notion of being British and Muslim. For such writers, there is no contradiction in being British and Muslim as the notion of Britishness itself has been challenged and changed to accommodate difference. In the case of Muslims, this has been further interrupted by the existence of 'native', white Britons converting to Islam.

Fairclough (1992) writes about how language is intricately linked to power so much so that it is the primary medium of social control and the means through which ideologies are created and enacted. 'Language' must now include images which are in our post-linguistic world ousting words as the primary means of communication. If we are to see "discourse as social practice" then the Muslim media is decidedly shifting this practice for its readers and at the same time writing to wider mainstream society to state that Muslims are not just to be associated with terror,

violence and oppression but are normal people. Their aspirations, and their concerns, are really no different to the majority of population. In fact, in the cases of *emel* and *BMM* in particular (and other publications to a lesser extent), the invitation to readers from any or no religious affiliation is encouraged. As a lifestyle magazine with a travel agenda, the invitation to a broader audience is clearly identifiable in *BMM*. Moreover, by disrupting the predominantly negative tropes of Islam and Muslims, these topics, words and images are fashioning new ideas of Britishness and Muslimness. They are, like their predecessors, creating a version of British Islam that responds to those questioning the coexistence of Islam and the 'West'. Collectively these magazines are challenging existing discourses by presenting new, alternative ones and are offering what Fairclough (1992) describes as resistance as well as enacting change. While the power of minority media is limited and cannot be compared to that exerted by dominant mainstream media, it is nonetheless important to recognise its potential to influence perceptions albeit subtly and slowly.

## 2.2. *Muslim women's identities - online and offline agency*

Midden and Ponzanesi (2013) argue that a dynamic feminism and more flexible interpretations of agency are possible through an intersectional approach that understands various axes of difference coincide and influence each other. Significantly, they emphasise that gender intersects with religion and religion is 'gendered'. In their group interviews, women underlined the importance of both their gender and religion and that they could not and would not choose between the two. They were both women and Muslim and needed to develop a framework for emancipation accordingly. "It follows that any feminist intervention that begins with the idea that women must give up their religious identity in order to be emancipated is highly problematic" (p. 203). The feminist perspectives that are brought into the public sphere by Muslim women are also influenced by the cultural contexts of diaspora that they find themselves in. The 'third space' which Khan (2002) writes about in which identities are resisted, contested, constructed and negotiated is also the space in which media manifestations of these identities are taking place. A "plurality of ways of performing Muslim identities" is evident as women create new signifiers to express themselves (Khan, 2002, p. xx). Hybrid identities, comprising multiple subjectivities, which define the lives of British Muslim women have been formed by questioning and challenging cultural and religious practices whilst at the same time developing notions of Britishness that support their interpretations of Islam.

The internet has opened up vast possibilities for expression and dialogue for Muslim women. In addition, social media platforms offer an increasing number of channels through which women can communicate, debate and extend conversations about what is important to them. Research has shown that the spectrum of topics and views being circulated online is enormous. Piela's (2011) study of Muslim women's faith and identity in online forums illustrates how the "internet opens up new discursive spaces within which Muslim women from varied backgrounds study and interpret Islamic sources together" (Piela, 2011, p. 139). Not only is the internet a medium that can transcend geographical boundaries but in its virtual spaces differences in

race, ethnicity, class, age and understandings of Islam have been reduced and even eliminated. Critically, these arenas for discussion have changed the gender balance so that women are interpreting and discussing Islam outside of the traditional male frameworks. Midden and Ponzanesi's (2013) study shows how women in the Netherlands use digital media to negotiate their religious affiliation and multiple belongings. Faith and religious practice are key markers of Muslim women's agency as they access media to "present and discuss news, experiences and issues related to their own communities on their own terms. [The internet] also provides them with the opportunity to change how certain topics such as gender equality are discussed" (p. 199). The women's narratives and experiences demonstrate how the internet is providing spaces for discussion and disagreement so that women are able to practice their religion in their own way – encouraging agency in four distinct areas; "rethinking emancipation; multiple critique; fighting sexualisation and living according to strict rules" (p. 202).

Using Stuart Hall's concept of identity, Barker (1999) shows that cultural identities are not fixed but better understood as ongoing descriptions of ourselves, continually changing and always in a process of becoming. This can be applied to British Muslim identities as they are an amalgam of differences and like all identities, continue to be shaped by debates about race, ethnicity, gender, class, generation and such factors. Women are now taking advantage of new media and ICT to reach out to others in different locations and by accessing religious texts that were not previously available, they are rethinking and thus 'reliving' Islam. Muslim voices online vary from the serious aspect of discussing religious beliefs and practice to the more light-hearted aspects of being Muslim. Kavakci and Kraeplin (2016) examine the content generated by three *hijabistas* (*hijabi* fashionistas) as they construct their digital identities around their religious and fashionable selves. A vivid example of hybrid identities that play on both religious and popular Western cultural features, Kavakci and Kraeplin (2016) "found that the digital realm allows for opportunities for multiple constructions of self and that each of our three subjects revealed both an Islamic religio-cultural identity and a fashionable Western identity, at times emphasizing one more than the other, at times combing the two in unorthodox ways" (p. 865). Though privileging their 'fashionable body' over their 'religious body', these women have exploited a culturally Islamic persona which appeals to sections of the population that want to access cultural products that reflect their faith. Unsurprisingly they have also been criticised for dressing up a commercial venture in an Islamic guise to exploit an ever-increasing market whilst, ironically contradicting the principles of Islam, modesty in particular. "In the process of trying to debunk the *hijabi* stereotype by creating a transformed identity, the new Islamofashionista culture has in fact given rise to a new social behaviour that is in conflict with the ideology of modesty. The lines between modesty and immodesty and religion and culture are blurred through the process of mediatization" (Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2016, p. 864).

Voices such as these created for Islamic cultural industries are examples of the challenging discourses against stereotypical portrayals of violent, terrorist or sub-

missive Muslim women. They also show how tech-savvy Muslims clearly understand the marketable value and profitability of sharing personal information in the ‘attention economy’ where they have blurred their private (religious) and public (Western popular cultural) personas (Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2016). The majority of fans of these three *hijabistas* are Muslims but as part of the larger media ecosystem there is potential for them to appeal to a broader market through their promotion of clothing and make-up lines.

The signifiers employed by these online personalities are overtly Islamic and present examples of the mediated constructions of identity visible in the West and Muslim countries. Baulch and Pramiyanti (2018) study Indonesian ‘*hijabers*’ who are sharing images of Muslimah bodies on Instagram in order to fulfil the Qur’anic imperative of inviting to Islam (*dakwah*). They show how “the *hijabers* shape an Islamic-themed bodily esthetic for middle class women, and at the same time present this bodily esthetic as a form of Islamic knowledge” (p. 1). Some obvious differences exist between the *hijabers* in Indonesia and *hijabistas* situated in the West but there are also clear similarities in that both recognise the language and semiotics that will appeal to Muslim audiences and the market; use their platforms to project equality of the sexes (specifically between husband and wife); engage with debates on feminism (however that is defined); understand both the global digital culture and the changing field of Islamic communication, and; tap into the micro-celebrity culture or attention economy. The homogenisation is unmistakable amongst this rising global female Muslim online personality and at the same time it reflects a broader social media phenomenon.

Muslim women in Britain are transitioning in relation to their subjectivities and self-expression and are at the same time modifying the landscapes within which they are represented. The media is the obvious arena in which this is taking place but there is also an impact on the physical environment that reflects the agency and activities of women. Bhimji (2009) examines how South Asian Muslim women’s display of identity and agency are transforming the traditionally male space of the mosque. “The women can be regarded as active agents, expanding the meaning of the mosque to a point where it can be simultaneously understood as a site of leisure and politics, as well as a sacred space” (p. 372). It is not just mosques that demonstrate how women are asserting different aspects of their identity. Social networks and travel are other religious spheres which facilitate and at the same time create new female Muslim identities. “Muslim women engage with Islam in varying ways and construct religious spatialities for themselves within British society. In doing so [...] women create their own discursive space whilst demonstrating agency, as well as cosmopolitan, political and gendered identities within the religious sphere” (Bhimji, 2009, p. 366).

Expressions of British Muslim identity are thus visible in numerous forms and in a variety of settings. Not only are women altering community infrastructures and ways of living Islam but inevitably their engagement and activities are also having an impact on how non-Muslim British communities are evolving. Warren (2019)

shows this using examples of Muslim women as cultural producers in the cultural and creative industries of media and fashion. These women are engaging with issues of identity, belonging and activism to challenge and disrupt not only Muslim and non-Muslim patriarchy but also dominant white spaces and expectations about domestic and workspaces.

### 3. BMF/MFB/FBM/BFM/MBF/FMB<sup>10</sup> Voices

Five female writers/journalists (including one editor)<sup>11</sup> were interviewed for this paper and some of their work on different platforms was also examined. These writers were working for mainstream media (print, broadcast and online) to varying degrees, especially *The Guardian*, *BBC* and *Channel 4*. All but one of them were currently based in the UK (with the fifth having studied and worked in the UK before moving back to Canada). The interview questions focused on the following themes which are also used to present the data obtained during discussions; representations of Islam, Muslims and Muslim women in mainstream media; development of Muslim media; the role and impact of new media technologies in enabling Muslim women's voices; the presence and work of Muslim female writers and its impact, and; how gender and religion affect the work of writers.

#### 3.1. *Media representations of Islam and Muslim women*

As far as mainstream media representations of Islam, Muslims and Muslim women in particular were concerned, the interviewees felt there was still a considerable amount of negativity in British media. "In the current climate, representations of Muslim women remain overwhelmingly negative. They oscillate from 'submissive' – playing a role in radicalisation of Muslim men or ISIS brides to stereotype-breakers. Rarely is there opportunity for them to define their own image on their own terms, particularly in mainstream media" (Haidrani). There was recognition amongst other interviewees that stereotypes were shifting and that terrorism and radicalisation were underpinning much of the debate surrounding Muslim communities with a corresponding narrative of submissive women (reflecting some of Baker *et al's* (2013) findings). TV documentaries focusing on stories about criminality (e.g. drugs, grooming gangs) were seen as further perpetuating stereotypes because of the involvement of some Asian Muslim men in these crimes. Having noted that the overall portrayal of Muslims in mainstream media continues to be negative and that the new discourses are still tinged with historical stereotypes, there was acknowledgement that a difference existed between different types of media, with radio and print being somewhat more progressive and enabling new conversations compared with TV. In addition, the increasing presence and visibility of Muslim

<sup>10</sup> 'Muslim' (M), 'female' (F) and 'British' (B) have been rearranged in different ways to illustrate the multiple nature of identities. One may choose to focus on any one of these aspects at a given time.

<sup>11</sup> Remona Aly, Myriam Francois, Shenaz Kermalli, Layla Haidrani and Natasha Syed (then editor of *British Muslim Magazine*).

women in media has to some degree interrupted this trajectory of negativity. “There is still a lot more room for improvement, but things have definitely changed. Maybe 15 years ago there wasn’t much of a Muslim female presence in the media or TV even. The *BBC* have often had Asian angry men and haven’t given much space to Muslim women but the contacts have been building over the years<sup>12</sup>. For example, when the burkini ban was proposed, I saw so many women speaking out on TV, in articles and on radio, it was so refreshing to see women talking about women’s issues for mainstream audiences. Women in *hijab*, not in *hijab*, all getting their voices heard and that’s hugely important because there are all male panels talking about gender or marriage and that is still happening” (Aly).

There was recognition of some mainstream media initiatives to encourage participation from minority communities and one diversity initiative was mentioned. There was also a realisation that media organisations needed to have representation of Muslims at all levels – especially in editing and production. It was good to *see* ‘difference’ but if this was not in all areas of the newsroom, the impact would be limited and in fact superficial. All the women agreed that newsroom practices needed to change to reflect diversity at all levels, including where decisions are made. Haidrani said overtly that mainstream media organisations should take responsibility for accommodating Muslim women; “It’s frustrating that the onus is entirely on Muslim women to set up their own spaces as the mainstream is yet to accommodate them... they need to actively recruit Muslim writers. There needs to be more of an industry wide shift to encourage those from faith groups that their voices matter”.

The number of Muslims working in media organisations was mentioned by the writers, including reference to the recent statistic that less than 0.5% of journalists in the UK are Muslim but make up almost 5% of the total population<sup>13</sup>. “There needs to be a change at every level and also we need support from within our own community. It would be great not to have these third spaces but unfortunately Muslim women are often being pushed away and they are trying to create their own spaces of autonomy” (Aly). Others agreed that there needs to be change and action from both mainstream media and Muslim communities in terms of engagement with media. Francois noted that Muslim communities need to invest more in the infrastructure of media in general as well as support community media. This is especially pertinent if Muslim community media is going to act as a springboard into mainstream media for which there is ample anecdotal evidence. Community or alternative media is a ‘safe space’ within which writers and journalists can train and enhance their skills before taking on work in media outlets with greater reach. The writers interviewed for this research had all worked for community media (specifically print media, for example, *emel*, *The Muslim News* and *Q-News*).

<sup>12</sup> See Munnik’s (2017) research on how media are diversifying their Muslim sources for news stories.

<sup>13</sup> See Thurman, N., Cornia, A., & Kunert, J. (2016). *Journalists in the UK*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. Available at <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/research/files/Journalists%2520in%2520the%2520UK.pdf>

### 3.2. *Muslim media and new media technologies*

There was no consensus on how Muslim media had changed over the past two or three decades. Some felt that it had not altered radically but others noted that there was change, especially with the introduction of lifestyle genres. The development of television (*Islam Channel* and more recently *British Muslim TV – BMTV*), was a new phenomenon in Muslim community media. Sarah Joseph, former editor of *emel*, now has a series ‘SJ Reflects’ on *BMTV* indicating an industry shift to more online media<sup>14</sup>. All the women agreed that the Internet and social media had brought about considerable opportunities for expression, autonomy and empowerment for Muslim women and other marginalised minorities. The level of activity and participation vary between different platforms but as a whole the spectrum available to Muslim women through new media and ICTs is enormous. The reach of online, especially social, media may not overlap with mainstream media but there are examples of cross-fertilisation. One example mentioned by interviewees was the traditionally submissive hashtag. Kermalli also spoke about leveraging her social media (Twitter) account to raise awareness of issues that she had written about in mainstream media. In this way the two channels were connected to introduce audiences to discourses that they may not have been aware of otherwise. However, there was caution about overestimating the influence of social media and online conversations because when asked about the impact of these non-mainstream channels, one writer felt it was not easily measurable but tangible only in more subtle ways. “I think women feel they are being more represented. Personally, people have said to me ‘I am so glad you are speaking out’ and I know someone who said I went into media because I saw you were there. So it does help when you see women around you who are having a voice and having these roles - it has a ripple effect and so women are feeling more confident about expressing and they are not holding themselves back” (Aly).

*Amaliah.com* was noted as being a prominent online example of a channel for Muslim women’s voices. While the topics and views on such a website are forthright and engage with issues that are of relevance to everyone, one of the interviewees questioned the impact of such a platform. Women’s voices are being projected but who is ‘listening’? In addition, if Muslim media is to have any impact on non-Muslim audiences it is important to undertake research into the demographics of the readership, their perceptions and attitudes. Publications like *emel* and *BMM* were/are available in mainstream outlets such as supermarkets, newsagents, airports and surgeries but examining subscription data will enable a better understanding of who is reading and what difference this makes. The contribution of non-Muslim writers to some Muslim magazines is perhaps an indication of the potential reach of such publications.

### 3.3. *Work and impact of Muslim female writers*

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<sup>14</sup> *BMTV* is available free on Sky and can be streamed online. “The aim of the channel is to make British Muslims feel confidently Muslim and comfortably British”.

A degree of positivity was evident in the opinions and experiences of the interviewees but it was cautious optimism. Francois noted that the mere presence of minorities did not equate with breadth and depth of representation and even if Muslim women were present in media circles, it did not necessarily mean that serious issues were being tackled. They were still being asked to talk about issues that placed them within a narrow set of frameworks. Reaffirming this idea, Aina Khan questioned why it was that as a journalist she was never asked to speak about music or non-essentialising aspects of her personality but always about ‘Muslim’ issues<sup>15</sup>. Aly resonated this when she said she refused to take part in debates about ISIS brides and the *burqa*. “The narratives and frameworks within which Muslims are spoken about, which are often terrorism and extremism, need to change. We need to reset people’s mindsets when it comes to Muslim issues” (Aly). Francois stressed her concern that Muslim women were always asked to contribute through the narrow subjectivity of religion: “Muslim identity is politicised. When you are asked to speak as a Muslim woman you are speaking into a wider political conversation over those identities which you will fit into. That conversation [is used] to advance a particular narrative, that’s why you have been asked to do it... You are a much wider collation of identities which you have been stripped of in order to exploit a particular perspective to confirm pre-existing views about your community”. Similarly, Macdonald (2006) cautions against an optimism generated simply because some liberal sections of the media have provided space for Muslim women’s voices in recent years. “The increased visibility and apparent audibility of Muslim women in the media post-9/11 cannot, as post-colonial theory confirms, be read as an automatic sign that diversity has been achieved” (p 19). Muslim women have been much sought-after interviewees in the wake of 9/11 as the fascination and fear of Muslims has increased.

Whilst the writers were aware of the challenges posed by such issues, they were nonetheless optimistic about opportunities available to them in different media and the potential impact of their voices in both mainstream and community media. Muslim female voices are becoming apparent through publications such as the *BMM* which has taken a mainstream subject (primarily travel) and presented it through the lens of Muslimness. “Our objective was to reach national and international readers and give them a true sense of each destination around the globe without compromising on luxury and style, through a Muslim’s viewpoint” (Syed). She further added that the representation of Muslims is changing for the better and publications like *BMM* represent the real, positive lifestyle of Muslims in Britain.

### 3.4. *Gender and religion*

The paper set out to examine how gender, religion and media are interconnecting in a way that is giving rise to new expressions and articulations of identity. The women interviewed for this research were asked explicitly how gender and religion influences their work as writers and the intersection of these factors is apparent in

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<sup>15</sup> Speaking on ‘Women Like Us’ on *BMTV*, Sunday 4 August 2019.

the discourses they are articulating and engaging with. Issues that affect Muslim women, such as space and access to mosques (Aly) or representations in the media were being discussed in both Muslim and mainstream media. However, interviewees recognised that there is a risk that the focus on ‘British Muslim’ will result in an “overdetermined religious identity” (Morris, 2018, p. 411). Both gender and religion were aspects of identity that the writers acknowledged affected their outlook and therefore their work. Nevertheless, their subjectivities were not fixed and as Aly stated “It’s about the intersectional identity, everything feeds into each other, I don’t see anything as mutually exclusive so my gender, my faith, my cultural identity which is British and Indian, it all is part of the same package... I will write about all of those things and perhaps sometimes place more focus on a certain identity – I have focused on different things at different times but I feel Islam is the overarching feature<sup>16</sup>”. Kermalli also alluded to the intersectionality of identity and said that your thoughts are shaped by your beliefs but it is not always about saying I am a woman or I am a Muslim. It is about being a journalist and about encouraging people to think twice about their own perceptions. Francois further emphasised this issue by agreeing that identity can inform your work as a writer, but that it should not be the reason you are asked to write. Your gender and religion are “necessarily a part of how you look at the world, but that should not be the reason that you are being called for a commission, you should be called for a commission because you are a [good] writer who happens to be a Muslim woman which informs your views in a really interesting way”.

### Conclusion

Research continues to affirm that mainstream media representations of Islam and Muslims are inaccurate, sensationalist and stereotypical. This should not however detract from the fact that Muslim women, including those participating in this research, have been able to write about religion in a positive way. They have brought Muslim voices into the public sphere and have challenged fixed perceptions of themselves, their beliefs and practices. Furthermore, Muslim women are writing about issues that do not fit into narrow prescriptions of being Muslim or even being women. If a recent stereotype of Muslim women has been one of submissiveness, then the presence of their voices contradicts and challenges this assumption. As Syed emphasises, “women’s voices are being heard more than ever. The voices are being elevated through various media platforms. Women in general are representing and leaders in many industries these days – be it technology or large corporations and are from various backgrounds. Women want to make change for the better and it’s time they were heard even more. Women are the future”.

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<sup>16</sup> Remona Aly’s webpage states that she is a “journalist, broadcaster and commentator with a focus on faith, lifestyle and identity”. <https://remonaaly.com/about/>

The media may continue to push a particular type of Muslim and look for writers to reaffirm the views espoused by this ‘acceptable Muslim’ but there are instances where Muslim women are writing about non-religious topics (e.g. rock music, Britain’s history of slavery, human rights, access to cancer screening for disabled people). If Muslim women’s voices are to become part of the conventional media landscape, then they need to be recognised primarily as good writers rather than as Muslims or women. This will result in a more natural mainstreaming of minority voices through Muslim agency and identity politics. As Morris (2018) asserts “these religious trends offer evolving conceptions of how to *be* “British Muslim” - articulations that simultaneously project varied religious subjectivities into the fabric of British society” (p. 419).

Muslim women’s agency is manifesting itself in spatial transformations of religious beliefs and practice; in political activism<sup>17</sup>; is motivating them to make sartorial choices, and; is encouraging them to challenge within and outside their communities. This is also the agency that is helping them to construct narratives about themselves in their own, autonomous media spaces as well as conventional media organisations. “This is markedly evident within a British Muslim identity politics that stretches from institution building, to democratic participation, civic engagement, and cultural production” (Morris, 2018, p. 417). The writers in this research have shown that as ‘representatives’ or ‘spokeswomen’ for Muslims and Islam, certain expectations are placed on them, from both within their own communities and from mainstream society. This may or may not have been a responsibility that they chose or anticipated when they started their careers but the political environment in which they are working has created this reality. Notwithstanding these reservations, the examples presented in this paper demonstrate that there are increasing opportunities for women to engage with and contribute to media and in doing so expand the conversations that exist both within minority and majority communities.

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<sup>17</sup> Lewicki and O’Toole (2017).

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