

How Firms Fail at D&I: Inclusion, Hegemony, and Modest Fashion

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the impact that inclusive marketing practices might have on society using modest fashion as a case study. The study employs an ethnographic approach to critical discourse analysis and explores the impact of modest fashion in reshaping the boundaries of exclusion and belonging in the United States. Throughout the paper, the author argues that as firms try to become more inclusive in the marketplace, they inadvertently reproduce existing power dynamics wherein non-threatening forms of diversity are assimilated into a safe "new normal" while subversive "others" are further excluded.

Key words

Modest Fashion, Diversity and Inclusion, Race, Islamic Marketing, Muslim

1 Introduction

In recent years, diversity and inclusion (D&I) professionals have stressed the difference between reactive and proactive approaches to D&I, shifting the paradigm from compliance to competitiveness. This shift can be seen,

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for instance, during the Society for Human Resource Management and Cornell Industrial and Labor Relations seminars for their Diversity and Inclusion professions certificate program in 2017 and 2018.¹ Demographic and societal trends are slowly changing our workforce and, from a workplace perspective, Diversity and Inclusion are about hiring and maintaining top talent within the firm. D&I, stemming from Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action, is deeply embedded in the HR function (Wieczorek-Szymanska 2017). A parallel but much less developed conversation in the D&I space, however, should be about firms' ability to create value for investors while serving historically marginalized communities. This is especially the case given that companies are striving for more racial and ethnic diversity (Shankar 2013). A holistic approach to D&I should look at the marketplace — that is to say, at the potential products and advertisements companies might develop to address untapped needs, but also the effects of those products and related marketing choices — as much as it looks at the workplace and the workforce. And while the literature on consumer culture and advertising is not lacking in critical approaches, there seems to be a general disconnect between this and the D&I function, with the work of Shankar representing one of the few exceptions (2015).

D&I practitioners often make the case for D&I referring to the untapped market needs of a changing society, but we pay too little attention understanding the outcomes of “inclusive” marketing practices. Inclusive marketplace approaches give firms the opportunity to profit from new market segments, while serving the needs of communities that have been traditionally overlooked. We can make the argument that this allows for the normalization of liminal identities and the redefinition of belonging and inclusion in positive ways. Shankar, for instance, observes that minority focused advertising agencies began shifting the public perception of Asian Americans from model minority to model consumers. In this process, advertising contributed to the circulation of a more complex model of Asian American subjectivity, thereby challenging representations shaped by anti-immigrant sentiments of previous ads (Shankar 2012;2013). However, the making of an ideal Asian American consumer also rendered diversity invisible, specifically alienating low-income, working class individuals (Shankar 2012;2013). Similarly, in the case of Latinos, an increased visibility in advertisement and media representations was accompanied by a process of sanitization and whitening that intentionally excluded non-profitable subjectivities

¹ Cornell offered a series of seminars for D&I professional in 2017 and 2018. Those were: “The Law of Equal Employment Opportunity”, “Fundamental of D&I Initiatives”, “Inclusive Diversity and Inclusion Talent Management”, “Effective Diversity and Inclusion Councils,” “Diversity and Inclusion Education and Trainings”, “Competencies to Advance Diversity and Inclusion Strategies”, “Emerging Trends: Recalibrating Diversity and Inclusion.”

without taking into account representativeness or empowerment (Davila 2001). It seems therefore important, especially for D&I practitioners, to raise questions regarding the effect that inclusive marketing practices might have on society.

Semiotics teaches us that, in any act of communication, meaning is negotiated between a sender and a receiver who might not share complementary repertoires. Some companies struggle to translate their brands to “diverse” audiences, adopting ethnocentric perspectives that assume privileged readings while overlooking the interpretative frameworks of the marginalized individuals they are trying to reach. For example, Pepsi’s advertisement in which Kendall Jenner offers a can of soda to a policeman and transforms a protest march into a party, completely misses its intended target audience, trivializing the Black Lives Matter movement and suggesting that racial inequality could be solved by drinking soda. Similarly, H&M was accused of reproducing racial stereotypes when they portrayed a Black child wearing a hoodie with the words “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle.” Nevertheless, ethnocentrism is only one of the many reasons why advertisements might fail. Advertising, for instance, might be adapted to a particular audience whose position shifts over time (Malefyt 2017); alternatively, conflicts within the advertising agency might result in strategies that are less consumer oriented (Malefyt and Moeran 2003).

Advertising has been widely criticized for generating a multitude of negative effects. It has been deemed to encourage materialism, promote unhealthy behaviors, corrupt values, and manipulate individuals (Pollay, 1986; Pollay and Mittal 1993; Pollay, 1997; Malefyt and Morais 2017). Pollay (1986) and Leiss et al. (2005) discuss further the questionable ethics of advertising that reproduces partial and distorted representations of society, relying on “ideal types.” Such advertising excludes undesirable identities, thereby creating feelings of inadequacy among minorities. It is not uncommon today, however, for firms to engage with their customers and create long-lasting relationships with them. Advertising is successful especially when it accurately represents the target audience (Malefyt 2013). In such successful advertising, customers are involved in shaping and agreeing upon discourses of power and belonging that are used to create advertisements (Malefyt 2017). Furthermore, in some cases, advertising has been found to enhance social bonds and promote positive social relations (Malefyt 2012).²

Product development and advertisements reflect a firm’s implied audience. Advertising links together ideas, words, and images with an audience’s assumed needs, preferences, social status, and desires (Malefyt 2012). Even in those cases in which choices regarding segmentation and

² For more information regarding the positive impact of advertising, see Malefyt and Morais (2017).

targeting motivate product development and advertising, both products and advertisements take on a life of their own as semiotic practices that contribute to reproduce meanings regarding specific goods, the individuals who use them, and their place in society. Advertising, nevertheless, does not create a completely new way of making sense of reality. Semiotic repertoires already available in society are often blended and adapted to make a product resonate with a specific audience (Leiss et al. 2005). Accordingly, advertising can be regarded as a cultural system that informs us about the dominant system of meaning within a culture (Barthes 1957; Sherry 1987).

For firms trying to holistically leverage diversity and inclusion as a competitive advantage, it is vitally important to question ethnocentric and partial approaches when it comes to designing and advertising products. Further, firms that lack a clear understanding of superdiversity and intersectionality — the former originating with Vertovec (2007) and adopted here to describe an increasingly complex society and social categories — risk perpetuating oppressive dynamics of exclusion through their efforts. In the following pages, using modest fashion as a case study, I highlight some of the unintentional outcomes produced by inclusive marketing practices in the United States. I will argue that as mainstream firms try to reach new markets and adapt to changing demographics, they inadvertently perpetuate existing systems of belonging wherein non-threatening forms of diversity are assimilated into a new normal, and “subversive” others are further marginalized, mirroring already existing systems of dominance which regulate hierarchies within marginalized groups.

The recent interest generated in multinational firms and the US public sphere by a new, fast-growing segment of Muslim consumers makes modest fashion an ideal case. Modest fashion generated \$254 billion in sales in 2016, making it the third largest market for Halal products behind Halal food and Islamic finance (Thompson Reuters 2017). Unlike food and finance, modest fashion has an increasingly high public profile as a consequence of mainstream fashion designers, high-street brands, and various media featuring modest clothing and covered femininities.

The need to conform to “modesty-requirements” is common to several faiths and cultures, hence the term, modest fashion. The term broadly applies to a variety of global and multi-denominational clothing practices concerned with covering the body while making use of mainstream western styling, presenting, and designing repertoires. It is not unusual, then, to see the term used by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim fashion enthusiasts, especially in the US. The meaning of modesty can vary greatly between and within religious communities. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to modest fashion as a commodity and a

performance (Moeran 2009; 2017) pertaining specifically to Muslim women³.

This study, which aims at analyzing the impact that inclusive marketing practices might have on society, employs an ethnographic approach to critical discourse analysis (Blommaert 2005). Critical discourse analysis, here, is intended as an approach to the study of text, language, and communication — in their verbal and nonverbal forms — aimed at exposing the way social inequalities and power are reproduced in society (Van Dijk 1993; Woodak 2001). This approach is critical in nature and the criticism is reflected in data selection and analysis. CDA has no privileged methodological approach and allows the use of a variety of techniques for data collection and analysis (Van Dijk 1993). In this study, a mixed methodology was applied and ethnography was combined with the analysis of texts produced by major institutional actors, more specifically, mainstream fashion brands, media, religious authorities, and fashion personalities. Ethnographic data allow for a deeper contextualization of institutional discourses. Furthermore, they provide insights into the perspective of marginalized individuals. Data were collected between 2015 and 2018 and consist of interviews, observations, and artifacts gathered from online and offline resources. This includes 13 semi-structured and 34 unstructured interviews, six off-line marketplace observations, participation in the DC Fashion Week Haute and Modesty Show in 2015, the DC International Couture Collections Show in 2016, and the Muslim Business Council International Tradeshow in 2017. Data were also collected during four mosque visits, a private women's gathering, and also three observations at the America's Islamic Heritage Museum and Cultural Center — one of which took place during the preparation of a local modest fashion show. Data analyzed for this study also include 14 online e-store visits, over 50 articles from mainstream magazines (such as *Vogue*, *Allure*, *Marie Claire*, but also *Forbes*, *the New York Times*, and *the Huffington Post*), all copies of *Azizah* (a cross-denominational magazine targeting Muslim American Women) issued in 2015 and 2016, two paper copies of *Virtue* (a women's magazine targeting women from the Nation of Islam) issued in 2015 and 2016, and all entries on *Virtue's* main editor blog between 2010 and 2018. Materials analyzed also include all copies of *Halal Consumer Magazine* issued between 2015 and 2018, articles from e-magazines catering specifically to Muslim women in the US (such as *AltMuslimah*, *MuslimGirl*, but also *Hurt2Healing*, which targets women in the Nation of Islam), blogs and YouTube videos of modest fashion influencers, advertisements, Facebook posts, and tweets (for instance #blackandmuslim #modestfashion #ourthreeboys #notmyhijab). My perspective is further informed by

³ For more information on Modest Fashion as a multi-faith phenomenon, refer to Lewis (2013).

previous and ongoing engagements based on professional and personal interactions with Muslim communities in the US and abroad.

With regard to semi-structured interviews, a hybrid approach based on purposive and snowball sampling was used to identify African American Muslim women involved in the modest fashion scene, such as bloggers, event organizers, designers, business owners, scholars, and modest fashion enthusiasts. The sample sought to maximize variance and take into account the perspectives of different Muslim denominations (Sunni, Shia, Nation of Islam, non-denominational Muslims, and Muslims from the Warith Deen Muhammad community). The perspectives of two imams and one male community leader were also integrated to reflect authority discourses regarding modest fashion and American Muslims in mosques and community centers. The sample takes into account race and ethnicity as meaningful categories. It also integrates the perspectives of two first and second generation Arab American Muslims and an Arab immigrant on a temporary visa. Unstructured interviews were carried out with fashion show participants, expositors, trade show attendees, and presenters, as well as members of different Muslim communities in Washington DC and South Carolina. The sample includes interviews with Asian Americans, African Americans, and Arab Muslims. It also includes a white convert and a Hispanic Muslim. Most niche magazines, blogs, and hashtags were selected based on informants' recommendations. In a few cases, the author relied on previous work to identify meaningful blogs, stores, and magazines. Data were analyzed thematically with a view to identifying key themes in depictions of Muslim identities and reactions to those portrayals. The second stage analysis involved recoding the data to refine descriptive categories and confirm previous coding.

2 Modest Fashion and Semi-Globalization

There is a direct link between globalization and the emergence of opportunities in the halal sector; market liberalization and the development of new communication technologies had a crucial impact on the development of the Muslim consumption-scape, which can be readily observed by looking at the development of the modest fashion industry. During the 1980s and the 1990s, countries such as Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia underwent substantial reforms aimed at transitioning their economies towards a free market system. Privatization, the easing of international trade policies, and an increase in foreign investments contributed to the economic growth of several Muslim-majority countries, which in turn led both to the emergence of a religious middle class with unique needs and desires and to the development of pious forms of capitalism, which melded religious ethics and neoliberalism (see Atia 2013; Rudnycky 2010; Göriacksel and Secor 2010; Sandikci and Ger 2010; 2011; Navaro-Yashin 2002). Predictably, there was an increase in faith-

based products and services across different industries such as personal finance, banking, entertainment, food, and fashion from the late 1980s onward (Temporal 2011; Sandikci and Ger 2011). The 2.0 revolution and increasing access to the internet in the early 2000s exponentially increased the number and variety of available products and services targeting and originating from, faith communities. By early 2000, Sandikci and Ger estimate that in Turkey alone there were more than 200 modest fashion firms, some of which were already operating on an international level (2002).

One of the main debates in the Muslim community since modest fashion started emerging has centered on the permissibility of fashion and the commercialization of faith. Tekbir, one of the first modest fashion brands, endured substantial criticism for selling modest attire and in 2008 was sued for using religion to legitimize its business. Mustafa Karaduman, founder and former CEO of the clothing company, made the case that serving untapped needs in the Muslim community was a way to spread Islam while modernizing its look (Tepe 2011). Some Muslims have condemned the idea of modest fashion as antithetical to Muslim values. These opponents perceive modest fashion as frivolous and argue that such fashion is actually immodest; they take the view that the commercialization of fashion and similar practices encourages sinful behaviors such as extravagance and wastefulness, which undermine the moderation and balance taught by Islam (Lewis 2015; Navaro-Yashin 2002). In some instances, the commercialization of modesty is also regarded as detrimental for Muslim women because it promotes enslavement to western ideology and standards of beauty (Tepe 2011).

A similar discussion also takes place in the US. Critical stances against fashion as an anti-religious practice that enslaves individuals, for example, emerged during one of my interviews with an Arab American imam whose mosque is known in the community for having a traditionalist approach to Islam. Talking about fashion, he stated:

Islam means submission, submission not to my desire, submission to the will of God. When you become surrendering yourself to almighty God, you free yourself from anything else and anybody else, so I am not going to be a slave or dedicate by fashion, by society, by men made laws, by fame and game...you understand.... I want to be subject to what leads to almighty God. So, now I need to be a slave of God... and this will make me the master of everything else. So, if I free myself of God, I will be the slave of many, many things...I will be a slave of my desire, slave of money, slave of a woman, slave of a men, slave of customers, slave of fashion...like women who tell you that they like to buy shoes... How things enslave you ...in a way that...it is because you want to appear to people in a certain way...so somebody else, their god is dollar, it doesn't matter, he might steal, he might kidnap, he might be

gambling....and all [these things are] wrong, this is the problem...when people free themselves from God, they become a slave of many things...There is nothing of fashion in Islam, but true Muslim women must acknowledge, is not going to get all sense to you about how she is supposed to dress and how to put a flower on that side, and what kind of make-up that she knew...this... a true Muslim woman who is educated about Islam, she knows that God had designed for her, because it is temptation... God has created mankind...men to love women, also women love to men...and they desire each other, so if he leaves the [door] so open to them it will be a disaster...so God made this desire in us for purpose of marriage, and children...So when someone said, I am telling you about fashion and yes, wearing a pants, and wearing shorts, and showing this and showing that, [they] are giving you their own culture or their own concept...not Islam.

Possibly because of the sampling technique adopted, discussions regarding the permissibility of fashion itself were limited to this specific interaction, and it might be worthwhile to observe that this is not necessarily a position shared by all religious leaders. Some mosques and Islamic cultural centres in the US are, in fact, quite involved in organizing and supporting modest fashion shows. For instance, the non-denominational mosque MAPS, in collaboration with *Azizah Magazine*, held a large fashion show in 2016 and Atlanta Masjid — which is affiliated with the WDM community — regularly hosts the fashion show “The Sealed Nectar: Creating Virtue, Value and Vogue”. Furthermore, a non-denominational Muslim non-profit named FAITH has held several modest fashion shows (“Fashion with Compassion”) to raise funds to assist victims of domestic violence.

Other religious authorities are also supportive. Louis Farrakhan, leader of the Nation of Islam, views fashion as a Muslim practice. Khadijah Farrakhan, the spouse of Louis Farrakhan, was herself a modest fashion designer (Gibson and Karim, 2014) and on several occasions, Nation of Islam outlets — such as *The Final Call*, *Virtue*, and *Hurt2Healing* — published positive statements regarding NOI modest fashion designers. For instance, before the Islamic Fashion Week organized by NOI members, which took place in Atlanta in 2016, Ebony Safiyyah Muhammad wrote in *The Final Call*:

Since the inception of the Nation of Islam in the West, the class of women who are called Muslim Girls’ Training and General Civilization Class (M.G.T. and G.C.C.), have always been known for their way of covering. The garment, designed by Master Fard Muhammad and implemented by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad for the women in Islam, is not only a fashion statement unmatched

by any other woman in or outside religion, but is a direct declaration of war against the negative ideals of Western and European styles of so-called fashion.

The call of the 10, 000 Fearless Women backing the 10,000 Fearless Men in Islam has been given, and on that night approximately 10 Islamic fashion designers will open the gates of righteous coverings for the entire world to witness. This evening, the world will behold the truth of cutting-edge fashion, trends that are timeless in essence and women who are in love with covering themselves beautifully.

The Islamic fashion weekend will cause other so-called fashion weeks to pale in comparison. If one was ever asked to image the face and presence of God in the feminine, it would be perfectly captured in this dispensation of time, in the finest of wardrobe...

... During an exclusive interview in Hurt2Healing Magazine, published by Ebony Safiyyah Muhammad, the question was posed to Sister Carmin of what thoughts crossed her mind that inspired her to organize the first Islamic Fashion Weekend. She responded, "This is something that has to happen. I've got to do something where I bring together Muslim women designers and have our own fashion week. We premier to the world who WE are through the clothing line.

Within the Nation of Islam, however, modest fashion clearly presents itself not as a clothing practice employing the repertoires and mannerism of mainstream western fashion, but as a political act through which dominant ideologies are contested and belonging to a political and religious group is reinforced. Often, NOI brands, such as Queen Amina and Al Nisa, design apparel inspired by the traditional uniform women of the Nation wear to ceremonies and services. Through their creations they contribute to shape and circulate new repertoires of meaning regarding Muslim women, Islam, and fashion. Therefore, in this context, modest fashion is not only moral; it becomes an act of resistance aimed at re-appropriating the discourse about who Muslims and women from the Nation are.

As veiling became a symbol of resistance and anti-capitalism in the '70s (Amer 2014; Almila 2018; Çınar 2008), some Muslim women today still look at this practice as way to resist the consumerism and beauty standards imposed by patriarchal societies. These discourses, however, are not necessarily against the idea of modest fashion as a form of self-expression; rather, they call for value-driven forms of consumption and attention to ethical aspects of the fashion industry, such as environmental impact and sourcing. *MuslimGirl*, for instance, has published extensively on the topic. In that same e-magazine, Zahra Khosroshahi, wrote:

For a lot of Muslim women, the choice to dress modestly is part of something larger than fashion. It is based on personal, cultural and religious values that many of us hold dear to our hearts. And for many of us, it is an assertion of our identity — a way to reject the beauty ideals that are prescribed to us through the media. For me, the choice to dress modestly also has to do with my stance against patriarchal and capitalist institutions that want to tell women what is deemed as “fashionable” and “beautiful” ...

The idea behind modesty goes beyond covering our bodies. It's based on a value system that rejects materialism as a means of elevating us from the world of consumption. There is something inherently spiritual about the practice of modesty. That said, the world of fashion, for many of us, offers an outlet to express ourselves. It gives us a sense of agency that gets all the creative juices flowing. But there has to be a balance. The fast fashion industry is part of a wasteful and exploitative system with one thing in mind — to make money at any cost. The wellbeing of its workers, the environment, fair wages or quality are not anywhere near its radar. Clothes, as well as lives, have been made disposable. When we promote modest fashion, we must also remember the value system it rests upon...

Attention to ethical sourcing, meaning focus on the quality of final products, careful selection of manufacturing facilities, and screening for child labour, also emerged during one interview with the owner of an accessories brand. Asma has developed a Corporate Social Responsibility Program and has committed to devolve 10% of her revenues to charities focusing on youth and education in Tanzania and Nepal. Ethical sourcing and ecological impact, however, do not necessarily seem to always affect individual purchasing behaviours and most of my informants seemed more concerned about style, pricing, and convenience — which, in this context, means ability to find modest options.

According to a Thompson Reuters report, by 2016, Muslim consumers accounted for about 11% of global fashion expenditures, and this number is projected to grow by 6.8% per year until 2022 (Thompson Reuters 2017). Notwithstanding its size, its global reach, and being discussed by hijabinistas (hijabi fashionistas) with millions of followers across the globe, the phenomenon of modest fashion reflects the ambiguities of semi-globalization⁴ and has created substantial challenges for multinational corporations trying to navigate a complex consumption-scape. The semiotic heterogeneity brought forward by the circulation of people and ideas across national borders has made it possible for more persons in the world to consider a wider set of possibilities (Appadurai 1996:53). For instance, Muslim women living in the US today consider a

⁴ For more on semi-globalization see Ghemawat (2007).

wide variety of modesty options as it comes to their wardrobe and the meaning of modesty. Asma, for instance, explains that she doesn't look at modest fashion as monolithic. She says: "A lot of times African American women wear their scarf behind their ears; it goes back to the Nation of Islam, so a lot do it today. You just borrow from different people, like the abaya. There are so many cultures that use it... there are a lot of different styles. And the turban that African Americans have been wearing for years... people now start wearing it that way". Aliyyah also referred to the "Turban" traditionally worn by African Americans as a new fashion trend that is now becoming popular among other Muslim communities. In fact, they both have started seeing it featured by several Indonesian modest fashion bloggers and personalities and it seems to have become quite mainstream, sometimes even among non-Muslims. But what is usually referred to as the "global Islamic market" is a largely heterogeneous environment. The top five markets for modest clothing in 2016 were Turkey, the UAE, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia (Thompson Reuters 2017). These nations, however, share few commonalities when it comes to cultural interpretations of religious sources. As one might expect, interpretations and eventual regulation of "modest" attires also vary greatly. Furthermore, minority markets in Western Europe and North America (WENA), where governments have often policed female Muslim attire, are responsible for about 25% of modest fashion consumption (Lewis 2015). Challenges for multinational companies interested in the global modest fashion market include administrative, geographic, and economic differences. It should also be observed, however, that as global artifacts and voices generate new discourses about modesty, modest clothing, and femininity, local systems of meaning remain in place. Inevitably, modest fashion is assigned multiple definitions across Muslim denominations, countries, cultures, sub-cultures, and generational groups (Gökarıksel and Secor 2010b). Non-Muslims often imagine Sharia to be a set of well-defined rules and behaviors, but the "path" needs to be interpreted in light of religious sources; Islam, however, has no central authority establishing which exact sources need to be interpreted, by whom, and how. Throughout the years, a multiplicity of interpretative approaches to Islamic Law (i.e. Fiqh), often embedded in specific local realities emerged, each generating a variety of beliefs and behaviors regarding women and their clothing (Brown 2009). This means, even within the same denomination, there is no one single religious authority that businesses can use to legitimize their products. Accordingly, the significance of features such as color, length, and the shape of garments, might vary from context to context. In the US, for example, the hegemonic discourse within Sunni communities sees specific items of clothing, colors, and ways to wrap headscarves associated with Middle Eastern culture as more Islamically acceptable (see Karim 2009). Meryem, a second-generation Hispanic Muslim from the North East, for instance, explains that Muslim women who had the opportunity to grow up in a

Muslim community are quite skilled at recognizing people's ethnicity and religious affiliation based on clothing. However, these associations are not in any sense universal, and religious authorities and heritage are only some of the many voices shaping this conversation.

Rather than imagining modest fashion as a top-down discourse that emanates from religious leaders, I argue that it is more appropriate to look at this phenomenon from a multi-polar perspective wherein religious leaders and faith communities represent one of many poles. If we consider how garments are represented and spoken about, how and where they are circulated and acquired, and how and by whom they are created, discourses about modest fashion are actually shaped and circulated by a variety of global and local actors. These actors include state laws and regulations (including those of secular states), law enforcement, family traditions, small entrepreneurs, multi-national companies, and both Muslim and secular media. The Web 2.0 revolution further fragmented the landscape by bringing modest fashion bloggers into the picture, which meant that Muslim women's voices were heard for the first time in the public sphere with regard to setting social norms about modesty and garments (Lewis 2015).

This polyphony emerges in daily practices. Today, people make sense of their identities by actively engaging with discourses that emanate from different centers of normative power, but which give rise to seemingly incoherent and paradoxical behaviors, a logical outcome of superdiversity (Blommaert 2010)⁵. For example, the decision to wear a headscarf and how to style it are seemingly simple decisions that are in reality impacted by numerous factors. Blogger Dina Tokio explained in an interview with *Vice* that she "used to wear [her headscarf] the traditional way, not really traditional, but when you are clearly more Muslim and wrap it around under your chin. [But now she wears it] turban-style [because] it just looks easier on the eye for some people" and she is not automatically identified as Muslim (2017). Furthermore, the need to balance different discourses about faith and belonging emerged during most of my interviews. Sana, for instance, talking about her personal choices, said:

⁵ Hybridity didn't seem an adequate framework to describe how individuals make sense of their identities as Muslims living in Western societies. Hybridity assumes the creation of new identities in-between already established cultural paradigms (Bhabha 1994). In today's society, however, we witness an increasing degree of diversity that makes the use of terms such as African-American or Muslim-American or African American Muslim to describe groups' internal values, norms and behaviours (Vertovec 2007). Superdiversity, as a framework of reference, seems to better explain the data presented. Individuals, rather than talking about a new culture, seem to make sense of themselves and their behaviours by taking into account a variety of discourses. Rather than performing one identity, thus, they seem to perform a variety of identities, defining themselves in relation to different contexts and spheres of life (Blommaert and Varis 2011).

Some men say that women aren't supposed to dress in a way that is eye catchy... But an all black abaya...that is eye catchy to me! The male population doesn't have to dress that way. They have to have a beard...and that is in fashion. It's not a statement, there is nothing that men have to do to identify as Muslims. I like to wear make-up. Sometimes I like to wear skinny jeans. My intention is not to attract male attention, but to be comfortable and identify with my faith. It is different. I want to look good with myself and every morning I struggle with how I should identify myself. Some even say that women are not supposed to wear pants but there's nothing in the Hadith or the Sunna about it. And there is nothing about Black [clothes] as well. People, when they see me first of all, they see a hijab. And then they see an African American and they already have preconceptions about who I am or what I like. I hate to use the word normal, but I am normal. I like shopping, I like to dance, I like to get my hair done. I have been a business owner. I am a certified scuba diver.

In the case of Sana, clothing choices are clearly balanced and take into account a variety of discourses that include faith, feminism, racism, and islamophobia. Not only does she identify as a Muslim, she makes choices regarding her appearance by considering a wider array of needs that go from physical safety to a collective assertion of her individuality, passions, and professional achievements. Indeed, Sana's choices and outlook appear to be representative of many Muslim women who also orient their practices depending on context and context-specific discourses. Aliyyah, for instance, explains that since she is on curvier side, it is a struggle for her to find clothes, and while she selects more covering options when she goes to the mosque, she still wears $\frac{3}{4}$ lengths during her daily life and doesn't wear abayas to work because it is a "professional environment" (sic). Along similar lines, it could well be challenging for people with very curly hair to wear a veil rather than a turban. Physical activity and hobbies also pose difficulties: Malika explains, for example, that running while wearing a headscarf and larger fitting clothes is not very practical, but since running is so important to her, compromising on modesty and wearing leggings is acceptable in this instance. Therefore, clothing choices are fully dependent on context and the narratives that shape different domains of an individual's life, such as faith, career, family, community, and health.

For companies, however, this semiotic richness also means further uncertainty. Navigating a heterogeneous, faith-based consumption-scape inevitably means that clothing brands can't gain legitimacy through single interpretative approaches of religious sources, nor can they present themselves as Islamic authorities making decisions about what modesty should and should not be. Some high-street brands, including DKNY, Zara, Mango, and Tommy Hilfiger, have recently tried to

navigate these complexities, but not without criticism, releasing special “Ramadan Collections” that target Muslim consumers in the Middle East without further defining modesty in relation to garments. Their marketing campaigns largely feature unveiled models who could eventually be interpreted as being indoors, thus giving space to different definitions of modesty. Even when products and advertisements are developed for local communities, they still maintain a global component and circulate beyond the markets they target and the geographic and cultural borders in which they were conceived. So, Ramadan collections successful in the Middle East and North Africa, have been met with some concern among modest fashion bloggers in the WENA region, specifically regarding the suitability of specific clothes for particular occasions, their general immodesty, but especially for their geographical target, which some bloggers (for instance Dreid 2018, Tokio 2018; Aljabri 2016; Haute Muslimah 2015) contend intentionally overlooks Muslim minorities in Europe and North America. Aljabri wrote on *Refinery 29*:

...Many Muslim women have expressed that these collections have missed the mark ...They’re inappropriate for the occasion, improper for the religion, hyper-focused on a small segment of the Muslim population, and inconvenient for most Muslim women to actually buy...

...The end of Ramadan is marked by a huge celebration called Eid, where we dress up and gather for an early morning service followed by a full day of socializing, eating, and gift exchanging. Despite this rich and complex tradition, brands have relied mostly on limited market research which has led them to believe that Muslim spending is concentrated in the Middle East where Muslims spend their Ramadan evenings shopping in malls...

...Ramadan collections have only been offered in stores in the Middle East, which only contains 20% of the world’s Muslim population. The vast majority of Muslims have no access to the Ramadan collections, since they are not offered online. Additionally, most price points also cater to the “oil rich” myth of [high-spending Middle Easterners](#). Most Muslim people don’t have lavish clothing budgets...

The unsolved tension between the global reach of modest fashion and its local significance also shaped reactions to Dolce and Gabbana’s first hijab and abaya collection — Dina Tokio covered the topic with an overtly critical post in 2016. While the luxury collection mostly targeted Middle Eastern consumers, the brand was accused by modest fashion bloggers in the West of appropriating traditional garments intentionally allowing for only one culturally-specific definition of modesty (i.e., the Gulf countries’ preference for neutral tones, hijabs, and abayas) while excluding Muslims living in other parts of the world and furthermore, for

promoting the idea that the only Muslims who deserve to be included are “the wealthy ones” (see Haris 2016). Aleen Anjun, a Huffington Post contributor, wrote the following on this topic:

Why should D&G be applauded for something that is at its core, primarily just a calculated business move devoid of any real intention to change the fashion world to be more inclusive of its Muslim audience?... They are profiting from the pseudo “incorporation” of a cultural and religious piece of clothing into their line that normally, they would take offense to and would label as an oppressive uniform...We hear this argument time and time again when it comes to the dress choice — keyword: choice — of Muslim women. Yet when you sprinkle some crystals to the sleeves, stitch some lace to the fringes and stamp your name, label, and price tag on it, it’s seen by the mainstream media as “fashionable”, “beautiful” and not “oppressive” or “backwards.”

Another problem that the fashion house is posing with its new collection is that it is marring the line between the Middle Eastern consumer vs. the Muslim consumer. The two are not the same, but according to D&G, culture and faith are the same thing. It’s quite clear that the fashion line is being marketed to the wealthy cohort of Middle Easterners in the Gulf and Arab states as opposed to the millions of Muslims living in the other parts of Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and the West...

Anjun, pointing at incongruent perceptions of abayas, highlights the magical nature of fashion. Fashion, according to Moeran (2009; 2017) is not so much about clothing oneself, but is, instead, a symbolic and performative process that involves numerous actors from designers to models, to photographers and fashion editors. So, even if the object portrayed is an abaya — and abayas have an history of being associated with oppression and traditionalism — what specifically makes D&G abayas fashionable are rituals, such as fashion shows and fashion articles, that enchant the audience into believing that they can be desirable, beautiful, and fashionable. This, however, doesn’t necessarily apply to other abayas or modest clothing items designed by less visible or less networked designers. As a result, in a certain way, it might seem like mainstream fashion magazines and brands have the prerogative to decide what is fashionable and what is not, since they contribute to the performance of fashion. It is worthwhile remembering, however, that this process of enchantment is not always successful (Moeran 2009; 2017) and consumers still have some agency when it comes to a product’s success in the marketplace.

3 The Discovery of Modest Fashion in the US

Despite the fact that its history goes back to the late 1980s, modest fashion in the US has only recently become visible. In late 2014 DKNY released its first Ramadan collection. Brands such as Mango, Dolce and Gabbana, Uniqlo and Tommy Hilfiger quickly followed suit in 2015. In the same year, H&M also engaged in a first attempt to target Muslim consumers with an advertisement featuring Mariah Idrissi wearing a headscarf. H&M followed up with a Ramadan collection for the US market in 2018, which, alongside the “Verona collection” released by Macy’s that same year, was the first of its kind. The media also began to acknowledge the existence of a Muslim fashion market. Following the publication by Thomson Reuters of the first Global Islamic Economy Report in 2014, the US media also brought their attention to the phenomenon. In less than two years, modest fashion became a popular topic and was discussed on mainstream outlets such as *Fortune*, *Vogue*, *Glamour*, *The New York Times*, *CBS news*, *The Huffington Post*, *Elle*, and more. At the same time, hijab-wearing women also started populating the American public sphere, whether on television, in shows like *MasterChef*, *Project and Runway*, or in print magazines such as *Playboy*. It would be erroneous, however, to assume that modest fashion didn’t exist before in the US. *Azizah*, a magazine for American Muslim women in early 2000s, was already populated by several advertisements of modest clothing companies and small- to medium-sized modest fashion brands, which had been operating in local communities for years. DC Fashion Week, already featured a “Haute and Modesty” event in 2013, and modest fashion shows were already taking place as early as 2003 (Haddad et al. 2006) while NOI designers like Khadijah Farrakhan, funded modest fashion brands already in the ‘90s. Multi-faith online retailers, furthermore, have served the modest fashion market for a decade at least, offering ready-to-wear attire as well as and customizable models (Lewis 2013). The Muslim designers and entrepreneurs I met — which includes importers, shop owners and stylists — all started their businesses because they recognized a need for modest choices in their communities. These however, remain niche phenomenon. Aliyyah and Sana, for instance, explained that the modest clothing brands tend to be quite expensive and, especially at the beginning, these brands catered to the needs of a more mature audience and focused on selling very embellished pieces that were not suitable for everyday wear.

Most of my informants expressed some degree of frustration with the options available to modest shoppers. Meryem, who currently lives in a rural area with limited access to mainstream retailers, for instance, explained that when she was younger she really liked shoes, but she was not very interested in clothes; spending one hour looking at racks to find out that there was nothing she could wear was just a waste of time. Similarly, other women, like Sana, describe the same process of going to

stores and looking at racks, only to select from the few items touching the floor since those items were likely long enough to offer decent coverage. However, things have started to change. Sana and her friends the first time we met explained that shopping, especially in the '90s when crop tops and miniskirts were dominating the fashion scene, was not easy. Kate Middleton inspired clothing and increased attention to modesty from mainstream fashion clothes, however, made it easier to find suitable options. And while today people in more isolated areas like Meryem might still decide to buy most of their clothes online, several of my informants in the DC area shop at mainstreams stores. This is not always a possibility, however. Tall or curvier modest dressers like Aliyyah, for example, still have difficulty finding appealing modest options.

One of the main merits usually ascribed to high-street fashion brands catering to Muslim consumers is their ability to combine both business and inclusion of previously marginalized individuals. Such collections have often been praised for their ability to serve untapped needs within this market. Maha Syeda, for instance, wrote in *Allure* in 2018:

...It felt surreal for such a major brand to recognize that there was an untapped market of Muslim women looking to buy clothes specifically created for them. I was starting to see more brands recognize the potential in modest fashion and join in. Soon enough, retailers like American Eagle, DKNY, Nike, and Uniqlo were launching collections to appeal to that customer base, and some of them even featured Muslim women in their ad campaigns. And before I knew it, there was finally a place for me... It feels great to be able to dress in a way where I'm comfortable without appearing outlandish or being questioned about my attire...

Although most of my informants agreed with regard to the positive outcomes of this change, they also agreed that the phenomenon was not exactly conducive to serving “unmet” needs. Muslim women, as has been explained above, already had access to modest options, and in many cases, they have been buying from high street brands like Zara or H&M for years; they have also always had the option to select items with more covering or, alternatively, to use layering. Furthermore, it is worth noting that most of those “Ramadan collections” praised for their inclusivity are not always easy to access from the US, and when some of my informants tried purchasing them, they were simply not available. What my sources regarded as a positive change, rather, was a shift in the representation of Muslim women. For them, given the current political climate, seeing Muslims publicly recognized by fashion brands and favorably portrayed on main media outlets was an empowering experience. Aliyyah, for instance, stated:

... when you see hijabi people in mainstream stores it kind of makes the community at large more familiar with us so that it's not as scary when you see a woman with a scarf on and you don't equate her with all the anti-islam stuff that's going on...it's like normalizing it to society...like you know, the model with H&M, I thought that it was great...

According to the Pew Research Center, assaults against Muslims peaked during the 2016 US presidential campaign (Kishi 2017). At a time when president Trump called for a ban on Muslims entering the US, mainstream fashion brands contributed to changing the narrative about Muslim women. Modest fashion brings together seemingly incompatible discourses: one about covering, with its historical associations with political Islam, and one about fashion, with its links to modernization, capitalism, and consumerism (Gökarıksel and Secor, 2009; 2010b). In the '70s and '80s, veiling in particular, became a symbol of traditionalism and resistance against Western imperialism. Adopted by Islamist movements in countries like Egypt, Iran, and Turkey, covering came to be associated with anti-capitalism and anti-secularism (Amer 2014; Almila 2018; Çınar 2008). In the US public sphere, covered Muslim women, especially after 9/11, have often been portrayed as oppressed and powerless. Their clothes, as opposed to western clothes, came to signify annihilation of individuality and conformity. Their alleged lack of freedom represented by the veil was understood as a non-choice, and emphasized imagined differences between a democratic West and a violent East, further reinforcing the idea that Muslims do not belong, are from somewhere else, and can be sent back (Sahar 2014; Ruby 2018). At least two of my informants, especially when wearing abayas and niqab, have experienced verbal assaults. Several also reported being insistently asked about their nationality or ethnic origin. So, when media and fashion brands present Muslim women as individuals who express their identities through the mainstream fashion system, it creates a cognitive dissonance that challenges previous repertoires of meaning and raises new questions about who Muslim women are. As mainstream brands utilize the repertoires of Western fashion to represent Muslim women, they seemingly transform covering into an apolitical practice. The commercialization of faith-based practices and the promotion of individualistic behaviors based on consumption, however, can just as readily be interpreted as a statement against anti-capitalist forms of Islam and a challenge to the authority of conservative religious leaders. From this perspective I would then argue that modest fashion can be regarded as apolitical only from the perspective of the dominant culture.

Robinson (2015) claims that Modest Fashion bloggers are more easily assimilated into mainstream American culture because of their socio-economic positions. I would instead argue that Modest Fashion's palatability is primarily due to its disconnection from political Islam and

anti-capitalism. Further, the semiotic shift pertaining to covered Muslim female bodies and the repackaging of Muslim women in a safer format can be interpreted not only as an act of inclusion, but as a further marginalization; a subjugation of “other others”. What mainstream portrayals of modest fashion show is as important as what they do not show, and they seem to almost exclusively picture young, wealthy, White, or racially ambiguous Muslim women; representations which are equally prevalent within the Muslim community. Inclusion, then, seems to be limited to and reflective of discourses about power and belonging at the intersection of race, socio economic status, and political and religious identity, and African American Muslim women seem to be deeply aware of this dynamic. Keziah Ridgeway writes the following in *AltMuslimah* (2015):

...From the very beginning, hijabinistas created a symbiotic relationship between their followers and the showcasing of Muslim or Muslim friendly companies/products. With this explosion of Islamic fashion internationally and domestically, these fashionistas in a hijab have gained more notoriety... Companies who recognize the inherent value in having a well-known hijabinista be the face of their product tap into that potential. As a result, we see many of the more popular bloggers working with and advertising the products of major companies and events thus bringing notoriety to the product and an increased following. It’s a mutually beneficial relationship for those who get to participate, but what about those who don’t?

Unfortunately, there seems to be a hierarchy of desirability that leave many hijabinistas/models of African American descent out in the cold... In addition, many of the models used to promote the products geared towards Muslim women tended to always be one note. The lack of diversity was glaring but what could be causing it? Why were/are Black women hijabinistas, models and media personalities so poorly represented/promoted? One could argue that it’s a matter of personal preference and has nothing to do with race. However...it would be hard to ignore the blatant and latent forms of racism that often times manifest itself in more “superficial spheres” such as blogging and social engagement...When only two of the numerous popular Muslim clothing brands...can readily be named who feature visibly Black models, there’s a problem...

My African American informants also acknowledged an overall lack of inclusion of African American Muslim women within the Modest Fashion industry. According to two of the modest fashion entrepreneurs with whom I interacted, gaining recognition within the overall Muslim community was often challenging. The limited representation of African American women in the modest fashion scene didn’t go unnoticed by some of my informants. For example, Aliyyah explained that she

experienced some difficulties getting shares as an African American Muslim blogger:

...That is one frustration I found as blogger...they have all these hijabi fashion pages...but then someone mentioned to me that it is not diverse at all...and I didn't notice at the beginning because I don't like to play the race card...but when I looked and I started scrolling, all the girls looked the same type, there is no diversity at all. So, someone suggested, when you start blogging share your pictures with some of these fashion pages and they will repost it for you...so I dm-ed a couple of my pictures to these companies and one of them actually said to me: 'you don't have the look that we post on our page'. And I didn't even notice that they had a look but when I went there and checked all were very fair, with the Turkish looking kind of scarf...

Shankar (2012; 2013) and Davila (2001) have observed that normalization and inclusion of new subjectivities in popular culture seems to go hand in hand with a process of sanitization in which idealized others become the only acceptable ones. Similarly, the modest fashion experience seems to imply that the belonging of Muslim women, both in the public sphere, but also in their faith communities, is conditioned upon their race, socio-economic status, and implied affiliation. African American Muslim women are excluded, not only because of their race, but also because of their presumed faith, class, and political identity. And the apparent normalization of Muslims through the marketplace and public sphere reflects hegemonic and micro-hegemonic discourses about race, socio-economic background, and faith that cannot be easily disentangled. Addressing these issues, Leahvernon writes in *MuslimGirl* (2018):

"But what—or who—do people see in their minds when they think of Muslim women? There are notable hijab-wearing authors such as [Tahereh Mafi](#), activists like [Linda Sarsour](#), on-air personalities like [Noor Tagouri](#) and bloggers including [Dina Torkia](#).

These women have become the face of Muslim women in the United States, the United Kingdom, and of all Muslim social media. And that's a problem.

They are all what I call "straight-sized"—not plus-sized—Muslim women who appear European or Middle Eastern. Celebrating these women—and only these women—paints a narrow picture of the majority of Muslim-American women. It paints a picture of a diverse group into one that seems like a monolith. Just as the media, the beauty industry, and countless other platforms exclude women of color, this representation of Muslim women does too.

The media and many Muslims love to focus on certain kinds of Muslims—acceptable Muslimahs, I like to call them. For the media, it's often the "oppressed Muslim." She's the Middle Eastern girl who

is forced into an arranged marriage, isn't allowed to drive, and covers in all-black with gloves. They also adore the "good" and wholesome hijabi blogger. She's usually a size small, wears pastels and has about a million online followers. Her photos are perfect, and her husband makes fashionable cameos on her feed. The activist Muslim is usually draped in an abaya or loose-fitting clothes and always with hijab. She can be found making *salat* or praying on the grass at a rally for Trump's latest Muslim ban. And, let's not forget, she's a fair-skinned woman with roots in the Middle East.

This kind of subtle, and sometimes blatant, prejudice and racism are a problem within Muslim communities....

Although it is entirely against Islam to judge someone based on the color of their skin, it happens more than you think. I've experienced racism from Muslims. One time, I went into a hijab store in Dearborn, Michigan, and the owner completely ignored me. When a woman of Middle Eastern descent came in the store, he immediately greeted and assisted her. I've also gone to pray at predominantly Middle Eastern mosques and been stared at as if I didn't belong because of how I looked. There are also countless stories of Muslims not allowing their children to marry a Black or African-descent Muslim solely based on their heritage.

As a Black Muslim woman, I have to fight for accurate representations of Muslim Americans. Unfortunately, this means I have to fight within my own religious community to hear the stories of Muslims who are African-American, Latina or African....

There's a superiority complex that a Middle Eastern Muslim is better, more authentic and that anyone else is a "copy" or "unauthentic." In my experience, too many Muslims play into the stereotypes of African-Americans: that we are lazy, less educated, promiscuous and aggressive..."

Modest fashion today seems to have first and second-generation Middle Eastern — and sometimes Asian — American Muslims who on average are wealthier and more educated than black Muslims as its implied audience⁶. They are also more likely to live in white

⁶The American Muslim experience embodies a great variety of religious practices, from the four theological schools of Sunni Islam, to different Shia currents, Sufi tariqas, Ahmadiyya, non-denominational forms of Islam, and homegrown denominations such as the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Imam W. Deen Mohammed community. Today in the US Muslims identify with at least 75 different national origins and roughly three quarters of Muslims are immigrants or second-generation Americans. The vast majority of foreign-born Muslims originate from South East Asia, the Middle East, or Central Asia. It is not surprising, then, that the American ummah is also extremely diverse from a racial perspective, with about 45% of Muslims identifying as White, 41% as Asian, and 20% as Black or African American (see Pew Research Center, 2016). African American Muslims are much more likely than any other racial group to be born in

neighborhoods, attend white schools, have white collar jobs, pass as white, and reproduce white discourse about power and belonging in their communities of faith⁷. Immigrant Muslims often perpetrate anti-Black racism, whether through lack of solidarity with the African American Muslim experience — as for instance denouncing Islamophobia only when it impacts non-black Muslims, and assuming that African American Muslim victims aren't necessarily innocent — or because of prejudice towards the purportedly inferior religious education of Black Muslims. On twitter, for instance, several users posted messages denouncing the overall lack of interest of the Muslim community in the killing of three African American Boys just a few months after three Arab students were murdered in North Carolina (#ourthreeboys #ourthreebrothers). More notably, however, most of my informants admitted experiencing racism within their mosques and communities. One explained:

African Americans are constantly left out of demographics. There is also a photographer. Langston Hues —who travels all around the world and take modest fashion pictures, but you never see a woman of color. It is kind of like we don't exist. We are left out of marriage, we are left out of so many things I cannot tell you why. I have friends from different groups, Bangladeshi, Indian, Pakistani, but I never fully feel welcome, treated like family. And no one wants to talk about it. If you talk about it, people try to bash their friend for what they are experiencing. The Muslim community is silent. We talk about whenever something happens in Palestine, in Syria, but no issue that has to do with black and brown skin, it stays silent. I have been raised up to always be prepared to people not willing shake my hand, to not being welcomed at homes, to no one marrying me. Even if we pray and fast the same way, we just get left out... and it is rare to find an African American leader or sheik, and if so, you rarely see other groups attending that mosque.

On the one side, exclusion might be attributed to the tension between immigrant communities and US-born Muslims. My informants explained that immigrant and second-generation Muslims, who come from historically Muslim countries and families and are sometimes native Arabic speakers, commonly imagine themselves as better believers, questioning the authority of African American Imams and pointing at the

the US to American parents. Some of them are converts, but many of them are the descendants of African Muslim slaves and are much more likely to practice Sunnism or identify with non-denominational forms of Islam. Currently, only 3% of the African American Muslims population currently identifies with Farrakhan's NOI (see Curtis 2014).

⁷ Arab American have historically had an ambiguous place in American racial classifications and during the first decades of the 20th century they found themselves having to prove their whiteness. Deemed White by law, though, in recent years, though, the Arab American community has questioned its whiteness pressing the government to add Middle Eastern to the US Census as racial category. See for instance Theranian, (2009) and Kayyali, (2013).

fallacies of African Americans' faith. This lack of inclusion and solidarity goes beyond religious hermeneutics, however. Immigrant Muslims often, and not always implicitly, reject African Americans' faith as true Islam and this exclusion echoes discourses about Blackness and Islam from the 60s and 70s that aimed at delegitimizing the Nation of Islam. And even though today only 3% of Muslims identify with NOI, within the Muslim immigrant community African American Muslims have continued to be associated with racial-separatism, black supremacy, violence, political Islam, and "untrue" faith (Brent Turner 2003). During our interviews, for instance, an Arab imam who relocated to the US over 20 years ago stated:

First of all, we have to understand the problem, if a problem exists, [it] is due to ignorance. Because the same thing you understand that you became a teacher...and you had to be schooled, you had to be trained, you had to go through exams, to get degrees, and the same is, the problem of people assuming responsibilities without being qualified...and in America here you can be anything you want as long as you go downtown...and you get to understand business licenses for whatever you want to open. And this includes churches, mosques, synagogues, whatever it is...but they are not going to ask you, are you qualified to be a minister or not...If we are talking about all these communities that you mentioned (WDM and NOI), where did their leaders had to study? And it is not enough being of color...in Islam there is no color, people are equal...(...) now, talking about communities like them, if I am blind and I am leading you to cross the street what do you expect to understand, how am I going to lead you? But someone who sees can take a blind man and take them to cross the street (...) so those people who started those organizations, we have a simple question for them...where did they study? Because they say, people interpret...First of all you need to know the language. So, if you don't know the language itself...(...) so people who go to school and they learn Arabic, or those who are Arabs, and then they have to go through different trainings, courses to study (...) so if people can't do this how can we trust them with what they are saying? So yes, they are in number... big number, they are doing things, some of that match what Islam is supposed to be but their belief is not correct, or their practice is not correct or their teaching is not correct....so if they need assistance I will assist them but I can't acknowledge them leaders, as part of Islam unless we have a common belief...

4 Discussion and Conclusions

Unlike Equal Employment Opportunities or Affirmative Action, the main driver of diversity and inclusion is not compliance, but competitiveness (Thomas 2004; McMahan et al. 1998; Wiczonek-Szymanska 2017). The

demographic shift and the emergence of a new middle class has brought companies to consider new opportunities outside of their comfort zone. The mantra you hear at D&I conferences and events is that inclusion is good for business and is good for people. Companies, however, rarely seem to consider the repercussions that inclusive products and services might have on society, and the case of modest fashion clearly shows the paradox of inclusionary efforts. D&I practitioners, at professional conferences, trainings, and within their organizations,⁸ are impelled to present the “business case” for diversity and inclusion, but that message implicitly suggests that the only deserving other is a wealthy, assimilable individual who is not threatening mainstream values within society. Current models of organizational maturity regarding diversity and inclusion merely focus on the internal, HR-specific domain (see for instance Moore 1999; Podsiadlowski et al 2013) but these approaches, especially where we want to focus on D&I as a source of competitive advantage, lack holistic understanding of firms’ real commitment to a truly diverse society as they overlook what companies are doing in other areas that have nothing to do with employees, but that still have to do with people, power, and inequality. There seems to be a cognitive disconnect in the D&I field that makes us assume that what makes a company excellent from an employee perspective is also what is going to allow that company to generate value for traditionally marginalized individuals in society. However, hiring people that mirror companies’ customers is not enough if there is no monitoring over the discourse that firms are generating and perpetrating through product development and marketing.

What we learn from the modest fashion phenomenon is that inclusive products might be superficially successful in redefining belonging and normalizing diversity. However, when this effort to be inclusive combines with unchecked ethnocentrism and more critical reflections about power dynamics, modest fashion risks becoming a proxy for the creation of “new normal” that can easily be assimilated into society while undesirable forms of diversity are further marginalized, thereby reflecting societal power dynamics and systems of belonging rooted in hegemonic and micro-hegemonic discourses about religion, class, race, and citizenship. Inclusive marketing, thus, as diversity management (see for instance Holck et al. 2016; Tatli and Özbilgin 2012; Zanoni et al. 2010), might become a form of societal control, reproducing dynamics of exclusion that, because of their complexity, might be difficult to attribute and challenge.

⁸ In this case, the author talks as an observant participant. Observations are based on 6 years of professional activity in the D&I sphere.

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