

POST A COMMENT BELOW: AESTHETICS AND AUTHENTICITY  
IN THE YOUTUBE HIJABI COMMUNITY

by

KRISTIN M. PETERSON

B.A., Dominican University, 2007

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Post a Comment Below: Aesthetics and Authenticity in the YouTube Hijabi Community  
written by Kristin M. Peterson  
has been approved for the Department of Religious Studies

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Dr. Deborah Whitehead  
Religious Studies

---

Dr. Ruth Mas  
Religious Studies

---

Dr. Nabil Echchaibi  
Journalism and Mass Communications

Date \_\_\_\_\_

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
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Peterson, Kristin M. (M.A., Religious Studies)

Post a Comment Below: Aesthetics and Authenticity in the YouTube Hijabi Community

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Deborah Whitehead

#### ABSTRACT

Islam has become one of the fastest growing religions in the U.S., particularly among young white women. As these women have turned to online media for information about Islam, a burgeoning community has emerged, specifically on YouTube. This study analyzes elements of this community: the aesthetics of the videos, the women who are creating the videos, the narratives within the videos, and the interactions that occur in the comment sections. These videos are about more than just sharing a conversion narrative, but also the women in the videos are able to embody Islamic material forms and to visually represent themselves as Muslim. The viewers can post comments that reinforce this Islamic identity. While the religious subject is still constituted through material forms and discourse, the affordances of the YouTube medium, particularly the aesthetic style and authentic interactions, allow for the video-maker to represent herself as a Muslim.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction and the YouTube Form**

In a three-minute-long compilation video posted on YouTube, five young women sit in front of cameras in their homes or cars and share what it means to be a Muslim woman. The women assert that they are not terrorists, are not forced to wear the hijab, are not foreigners, and are not mistreated by their husbands. They make statements like, “I decide what I show and what I cover, not society,” and “This oppression that you speak of—I have only ever felt it when people insult my choice to wear hijab.”<sup>1</sup> The video, entitled *I am a Muslim Woman*, has been viewed over 100,000 times and has garnered close to 500 comments, mostly positive feedback for the women. The women featured in this video—Amena, Heather, Nye, Jonnie and Rebecca—have all posted other videos on YouTube that share their experiences as Muslim women living in the West. All of the women, except Amena, are converts to Islam and live in North America. In addition, most of these women actually became friends through interactions online, and they have formed a community of young female Muslims both online and off. This community of women testifies to the fact that new online social networking sites have made it easier for converts to Islam to find information and support online.

The medium of YouTube is central to the experiences of many of these female converts. One of the women, Nye Armstrong, discusses how YouTube was “pivotal” to her experience as a convert to Islam, because she was able to find more information on YouTube, share her story through videos, and meet other Muslims. She says in a video about her conversion, “I really have an utmost love for YouTube because of it. Firstly, because I could share my story. In the

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<sup>1</sup> IntlHijabiPosse, *I am a Muslim Woman*, video, 2:45, February 3, 2012, <http://youtu.be/F9VF6jRsHtg> (accessed May 3, 2013).

beginning, people would give me so much support and information.”<sup>2</sup> She found this active community of women in which she could belong, and she could also contribute to this community.<sup>3</sup> The comments on her conversion video testify to the work that she has done in this community. One viewer wrote, “I want to say thank you for your videos i just recently converted to islam on april 4th and stumble across your videos while searching for information on here you have made me feel so comfortable with my choices with wearing hijab, as well as answering question that i was thinking [*sic*].”<sup>4</sup> Another convert wrote, “I am so glad that I have a places [*sic*] like this were [*sic*] I can come and build a relationship with other sisters similar to me. Thank you so much for documenting your journey so women like me can learn as well.”<sup>5</sup> These videos not only provide practical information, but they also help to form a community, a place where other converts to Islam feel that they can belong.

New media forms, such as YouTube, have the potential to shift the way a religious subject is constituted and how a community is developed through the mediation of religious discourse. In this situation, the medium of YouTube allows for individuals to speak publicly about their conversion to Islam and to perform exterior and interior acts of Islamic piety. The viewers of these videos are also formed into a community through the watching of the videos and the interactions in the comment sections. In the previously mentioned video, all five of the women are using the video as a medium to discuss Islam and dispel stereotypes. Through this

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<sup>2</sup> Nye Armstrong, *(Convert)sations*, video, 6:52, April 19, 2012, <http://youtu.be/DYnsEru6AuE> (accessed November 16, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> All the comments cited in this study have been copied exactly as they appear on YouTube. As is common in the online media, many of the comments contain typos, spelling mistakes and grammar errors. Despite these errors, I believe that the meaning and significance of these comments can still be ascertained.

<sup>4</sup> mizundastood2830 [pseud.], comment on *(Convert)sations*, comment posted around May 2012, <http://youtu.be/DYnsEru6AuE> (accessed November 19, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Scissorqueen7 [pseud.], comment on *(Convert)sations*, comment posted around June 2012, <http://youtu.be/DYnsEru6AuE> (accessed November 19, 2012).

process of speaking about Islam and performing as a Muslim, the Islamic subjectivity of these women is constituted, but this understanding of Islam is shaped by the medium of YouTube and what that medium allows. For instance, the aesthetics and structure of YouTube provide the opportunity for a physical performance, a particular visual style, and engagement with viewers. While these women maintain connections to traditional structures of authority and Islamic teachings, a new discourse on Islam is emerging through these YouTube videos. In a similar way to previous studies, these videos constitute the individual subject and form a community through the embodiment of physical forms and actions, through an appeal to emotions, and through shared aesthetics. Additionally, the unique aesthetic style and authentic interactions that are specifically possible on YouTube are constitutive of a new religious subject and this subject is formed into a community. The specific aesthetics and affordances<sup>6</sup> of the YouTube form are essential to analyze in order to understand the new ways that religion and religious discourse are being mediated online.

This paper will proceed by first exploring the medium of YouTube and what it provides for religious subjects and communities that is unique from other media. This will move into a discussion of previous scholarship that has been conducted on the constitution of religious subjectivities and the formation of religious communities. The theoretical focus will be on how aesthetics, materiality, embodiment, and emotions all operate to constitute the religious subject specifically through mediated forms, and also how this subject is then molded into a larger community that is connected through material things and aesthetic styles. Then, each chapter will

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<sup>6</sup> The term affordance is used to define the specific actions, styles, forms, etc. that are possible within a particular medium. This understanding of the affordances of the medium is influenced by the recent writings of Stewart Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, in which they explore the mediation of religion online and what affordances are provided as religion moves into this “digital third space.” See Stewart M. Hoover and Nabil Echchaibi, “The ‘Third Spaces’ of Digital Religion,” in *Finding Religion in the Media: Work in Progress on the “Third Spaces of Digital Religion*, (Boulder, CO: The Center for Media, Religion, and Culture, 2012).

examine specific YouTube videos to understand how these elements of the medium are shown in the different videos.

The focus of this study is on YouTube videos that have been created by young American women who have converted to Islam. These women are part of a larger trend of young, mostly white American women who are choosing to convert to Islam.<sup>7</sup> These women have taken to YouTube and other online media as a way to share their personal stories but also to share practical information for other converts. I have chosen, for the sake of clarity, to call these women “video-makers,” although they would likely have other terms to describe their work. In addition, I use the terms “convert” and “conversion” to discuss these videos, instead of the Islamic terms “revert” and “reversion.” This is done in order to use a standard religious studies term of “convert,” which can be applied to other religious contexts.<sup>8</sup> This study fits into the larger work that has already been done on conversion to Islam, specifically Western women who have converted. Scholars like Carol Anway, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, and Karin Van Nieuwkerk have all conducted ethnographic studies that examine the reasons why women would “choose” or “embrace” Islam.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A 2007 Pew Research Center Study estimated the number of adult U.S. Muslims to be around 1.4 million. In regards to converts, the study found that 23% of the Muslims they interviewed had converted to Islam, and 59% of those converts are African American, 34% are White, and 7% are of other races. If these numbers are projected onto the whole Muslim population in the U.S., there are around 110,000 White converts to Islam. This number has most likely grown since 2007 but provides a good starting point to understand this population. See Pew Research Center, “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,” May 22, 2007, <http://www.people-press.org/2007/05/22/muslim-americans-middle-class-and-mostly-mainstream/> (Accessed April 26, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> For examples of studies of religious conversion, see Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier, *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003); Lewis Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> Anway’s research was survey-based, Haddad conducted interviews, and van Nieuwkerk studied online written conversion narratives. See Carol L. Anway, *Daughters of Another Path: Experiences of American Women Choosing Islam* (Lee’s Summit, MO: Yawna Publications, 2002); Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “Quest for Peace in Submission: Reflections on the Journey of American Women Converts to Islam,” in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*, ed. Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006): 19-47; and Karin van Nieuwkerk, “Gender, Conversion, and Islam: A



The video-makers that have been chosen for this study are among some of the leaders in the online hijabi community. The term “hijabi” simply means a woman who wears a headscarf, but online it is a label that is used by mostly young women to identify as Muslim but also as stylish and hip. For example, the International Hijabi Posse is the YouTube group that produced the *I am a Muslim Woman* video mentioned above. This group also runs a blog, which features several young female converts, including three women featured in this study.<sup>10</sup> The women featured in this study, along with the numbers of their subscribers and videos views, include: Nye Armstrong (9,744 subscribers and 1,189,966 views), “Amenakin” or Amena (78,433 subscribers and 21,970,566 views), Heather Sandouga (3,041 subscribers and 130,143 views), and “Jewelize444” or Jewel (1,965 subscribers and 219,126 views).

This study builds upon larger work that has been completed in religious studies and media studies on topics such as religious subjectivity, conversion, Islamic outreach (*da'wa*), aesthetics, material religion, the mediation of religion, and emerging digital technologies. While studies have been conducted on each of these separate topics, this study attempts to present a more complete picture of how these female converts to Islam are using the medium of YouTube to represent themselves but also to share Islam with others. YouTube videos allow for a space to emerge that was not possible before. Previous to the explosion of “Web 2.0” technology, a woman who was interested in Islam would have to speak to a Muslim friend, read a book, consult an online message board, or visit a local mosque—if there was one close by. Now these videos offer a whole new outlet in which women can find practical information, visually see other Muslim women embodying piety, express their own identity, interact with other converts,

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Comparison of Online and Offline Conversion Narratives,” in *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006): 95-119.

<sup>10</sup> “International Hijabi Posse,” <http://www.intlhibiposse.com/> (accessed November 18, 2012).

and feel a sense of connection within this community. While some may question the authenticity of religious communities and religious expressions that exist online, the religion that is mediated through these YouTube videos is a very real and significant element in the lives of these women. The YouTube video is a medium through which religious sensations, discourses and aesthetics can be absorbed by the viewer—a young woman sitting behind her computer screen, searching for information on Islam.

### Affordances of the YouTube Medium

The medium of YouTube offers certain affordances that are unique from other online media and previous methods for religious outreach. Anyone with a webcam, camera phone or video camera can create a channel on YouTube and begin posting her videos. Videos can be posted publicly on YouTube, marked as private, or only shared with certain viewers. The video-maker can close the comment sections on the videos or allow viewers to leave comments. The form of YouTube allows the video-makers to share personal stories and real emotions through the videos, and the viewers can interact through the comment section and also by posting response videos. While there are numerous commercially produced videos on YouTube—both authorized videos and pirated versions—the focus of this study is on the field of amateur videos, those created by people with little to no multimedia experience. In his book on YouTube, Michael Strangelove discusses the specific elements of amateur videos. First of all, the YouTube viewers demand authenticity from the video-makers. He makes a comparison between YouTube videos and punk music. “In a similar way video diarists forgo sophisticated forms of storytelling and productions so as to be more real.”<sup>11</sup> The form of YouTube allows for a more informal

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Strangelove, *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 65.

aesthetic style, such as low-quality web camera footage and unedited footage, and this feeds people's desire for authentic, real-life videos. Strangelove writes, "The real you within YouTube is fostering an emerging aesthetic value, an expression of a desire for something other than the highly produced, glossy reality of commercial media."<sup>12</sup> Because the aesthetics of YouTube are less formal and polished, people view these videos as being more authentic. In addition to the informal aesthetics of the videos, YouTube videos also feature moments of self-examination and confession. Viewers seek out and locate within videos particular markers of authenticity, such as when a video-maker appears to be confessing her intimate thoughts and revealing her true, authentic self. Strangelove writes, "Perhaps the massive outpouring of self-reflection and video confessions on the Internet is an indication of a contemporary crisis of the real, the self, and the authentic."<sup>13</sup> In other words, these videos are ways for the video-maker to examine her authentic self and for the viewer to satisfy her desire for the authentic.

In addition to developing and displaying one's authentic self, the form of YouTube also allows for the video-makers to construct and assert their identities. Strangelove writes that, like other online media, YouTube allows video-makers to represent themselves outside of the normal structures of authority. "Online diaries stand alongside many other forms of Internet-based representational practices that disrupt authorized versions of reality. Throughout YouTube, individuals are seen challenging normative notions of what it is to be gay, black, male, female, and so forth."<sup>14</sup> While these female video-makers might be challenging assumptions of what it means to be a Muslim woman, their videos are not created outside of a discursive tradition. Strangelove writes, "Even in the privacy and solitude of their bedrooms, video diarists'

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 70.

performances are influenced by their awareness of other YouTube diaries, confessional television shows, and the feedback that they receive in the commentary section of their YouTube channels.”<sup>15</sup> The subject is constituted in relationship to other discourses and aesthetic styles. In particular, the YouTube form allows for interactions and discussions, which shape the individuals and the communities. The structure of YouTube provides a space for dialogue to occur in the comment sections and through video replies.<sup>16</sup> In their study of YouTube, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green specifically point out the interactions that occur in reaction to personal video diaries or vlogs. “It seems that, more than any other form in the sample, the vlog as a genre of communication invites critique, debate and discussion,” they write. “Direct response, through comment and via video, is central to this mode of engagement.”<sup>17</sup> Video-makers frequently acknowledge their viewers and create videos that are in direct response to feedback that they receive from viewers. Strangelove calls this a “co-creation,” as the video-makers work with the viewers and other video-makers to create new videos.<sup>18</sup> Video-makers are also constantly imitating media forms, discourses and styles that they observe in other videos and in the mainstream culture. Amateur video-makers become the producers, consumers and critics of culture.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, the medium of YouTube allows for religious subjects to be formed into communities. These online communities are fluid and dynamic and are often connected to larger offline communities. People need not be connected physically to a community, nor do they need

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009), 54

<sup>18</sup> Strangelove, *Watching YouTube*, 76.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 14.

to see each other face-to-face. Strangelove writes, “To ask if there is a real community behind virtual relations is to miss the point of what communities are—a shared imagining.”<sup>20</sup> Online communities, like a lot of offline communities, are based on shared values and ideas. People may form a community on YouTube based on shared interests, but these community connections are often able to go far deeper. Strangelove writes, “Amateur online video practices bring strangers together and often turn them into friends.”<sup>21</sup> In a similar way, it will be shown throughout this paper how community plays a significant role in the lives of female converts to Islam both on YouTube and in real life. YouTube video-makers like Nye Armstrong effectively form a community of other young female Muslims through videos and other social networking sites. This community does not simply exist online; Nye also facilitates “meet-ups” with her viewers when she travels to new cities. In addition, she makes videos with other video-makers, like Rebecca and Amena, and these informal “chat” videos allow the viewers to feel connected to the women through their on-screen friendship. These ideas will be explored in more detail later in the paper, but it is important to mention that these communities are malleable as they move between the online and offline space. Additionally, these communities are united by aesthetic styles and material forms just as much as they are connected through values and ideas.

In addition, the video-makers who are most successful at creating a sense of community are the ones who have the most authentic styles. By appealing to an aesthetic style of authenticity and intimate engagement, video-makers like Nye create a community that exists as if all members are united in the same physical space. Even though most viewers have not met the video-makers or other viewers face-to-face, the aesthetics of YouTube can create a feeling among the viewers as if they know each other as close friends. In a study of evangelical Christian

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 124.

parenting blogs, Deborah Whitehead also explores how the community behind certain blogs is tied to the authenticity of the bloggers. The audience demands “authentic self-disclosure” in the blogs, and the writers respond by sharing the most “real,” even if at times embarrassing, experiences of motherhood.<sup>22</sup> The mother bloggers who are viewed as being the most authentic are also the ones who are granted the most authority by readers, and a community of loyal followers is created around these bloggers. “The more raw, forthcoming, honest, even transgressive the confession appears, the more ‘real’ a blog and its author seem to be,” Whitehead writes. “Mediated confessional authenticity, then, becomes a primary way of creating community and increasing readership.”<sup>23</sup> In a similar way, video-makers like Nye create a community of loyal followers by opening themselves up and sharing intimate stories, both positive and negative, of their conversion to Islam. Just as these blogs allow readers the chance to peek into the often chaotic and untidy homes of mothers, so also do these YouTube videos allow viewers the opportunity to learn more about a genuine religious conversion. Instead of just learning about Islam from scholars and experts, viewers can see in these videos how Islam is lived out in someone’s day-to-day life. Whitehead also discusses how blogs—which can also include the video blogs on YouTube—have a “democratizing effect” in how they grant expertise to people who are discussing a topic. She writes, “The blogosphere, then, is changing not only how we talk and think about motherhood and parenting but also who is acknowledged as having authority and credibility to be considered an ‘expert,’ and who is not.”<sup>24</sup> These YouTube video-makers are viewed as experts who can speak about Islam based on their life experiences and not on formal religious training; the space of YouTube authenticates these women and their stories.

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<sup>22</sup> Deborah Whitehead, “The Evidence of Things Unseen: Emotional Fraud and Authenticity in the Blogosphere,” unpublished article, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

### Constitution of Religious Subjects on YouTube

Previous scholarship has examined how religious subjects are constituted in relationship to discourse, physical forms, embodiment, emotions and aesthetics. As Islamic subjects, the women in these YouTube videos are influenced by these elements, but the medium of YouTube also allows for new elements of subject formation, specifically through the opportunities for an authentic style and interactions. The aesthetic style of YouTube molds religious subjects into larger communities, united by material forms, emotions and appearances. It is useful to examine some of the work that has already been done on the constitution of religious subjectivities and the formation of communities through various mediated forms. For instance, Karin van Nieuwkerk conducted a study of online written conversion narratives of Western female converts to Islam a few years before the creation of interactive “Web 2.0” technology. In this study, she explored how the converts conveyed their new subjectivities as Muslims both by constructing and sharing their conversion stories and also by participating in a larger community online. Van Nieuwkerk found that the written narratives were constructed after the fact, they were collectively constructed under the influence of the community, retelling the narrative was often part of the conversion process, and the context of the narratives was also important.<sup>25</sup> She discovered that the written online conversion narratives tended to be more “depersonalized” and “standardized” than the in-person interviews she conducted.<sup>26</sup> She also found that “the idea of the logical, scientific, and rational character of Islam is dominant in most accounts.”<sup>27</sup> She concluded that this standard narrative is repeated so that the focus is on Islam itself and not the

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<sup>25</sup> Van Nieuwkerk, “Gender, Conversion, and Islam,” 97-98.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

individual.<sup>28</sup> The hope is that these written narratives “can result in standardized narratives of the ideal (religious) self used as a device to convert others.”<sup>29</sup> Van Nieuwkerk understands the power and influence that these conversion narratives can have both on the individual convert and on those who read the narratives. The narratives serve as a way to constitute what it means to be an Islamic subject. On the other hand, the form of YouTube transforms these narratives of religious conversion. With the written narratives, the goal was to convince the reader through written rhetoric that Islam was a logical and rational religion, but with these YouTube videos the creators share their understanding of Islam through the visual elements and the interactive features of YouTube. The viewer is able to see how the female converts are embodying Islam, to sense the emotions of these religious moments, to connect to the women because of their authentic style, and to interact with the women and other viewers through the comment section. While there is a long tradition of individuals sharing conversion stories in mediated forms, the medium of YouTube offers new opportunities for the religious subject to share her conversion experience through visual aesthetics, an authentic style and interactions.

In addition, van Nieuwkerk examined the role of the online space in providing a place of engagement and a community of support for converts. By looking at these conversion narratives, she found that the Internet could serve as a source of helpful information about Islam and also a community in which converts can belong. In the online medium, converts to Islam can both “enact a version of themselves in which they make happen what they think they really are or should be” and “bring about a form of online community that most of them lack offline.”<sup>30</sup>

Online media like YouTube provide a community and a place to enact one’s identity. “Converts

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 113.



can realize themselves not only by testifying to their conversion, but also by finding a place to belong.”<sup>31</sup> While the written conversion narratives allow converts the chance to share their conversion story and to become a part of this online community, the visual nature of these YouTube videos allows the women the opportunity to physically perform their new identity as a part of this community. Instead of just talking about the wearing of modest clothes, for instance, the women can visually show themselves wearing a headscarf on camera. Their physical and visual transformation legitimizes their interior change.

The material nature of the YouTube videos lets the women display for viewers how they are embodying Islamic piety through their words, language, appearance, personality, dress, etc. There is a back and forth motion as the exterior behavior influences the interior piety of the women and vice versa. Saba Mahmood emphasized similar ways of embodying piety in her study of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt. The women in this movement are focused on “the cultivation of those bodily aptitudes, virtues, habits, and desires that serve to ground Islamic principles within the practices of everyday living.”<sup>32</sup> So the women seek to cultivate virtues like modesty, piety, humility and shyness through physical actions like prayer and the wearing of a headscarf.<sup>33</sup> The headscarf, for example, is one way that the virtue of modesty is both enacted and expressed.<sup>34</sup> By wearing the headscarf, the women are able to both mark themselves as pious and to embody piety and shyness.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the exterior physicality of the headscarf affects the interior piety of the women. Mahmood writes, “a modest bodily form (the veiled body) did not

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>32</sup> Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 45.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 158.

simply express the self's interiority but was the means by which it was acquired."<sup>36</sup> This emphasis on the role of embodiment in actualizing ethical behavior comes from Aristotle, who stated that virtue is acquired through habituated practices of ethics. One's ethical virtue is manifest in one's actions.<sup>37</sup> Mahmood goes on to explain that for women in the mosque movement physical behaviors like wearing the veil, fasting and prayer should not become cultural habits or just identifying markers. These forms of embodiment must be a way for people to cultivate Islamic virtues and "contribute to the formation of an ethical disposition."<sup>38</sup> The women in the mosque movement seek to form their own ethical disposition and also the ethical disposition of other Muslims, mostly women, through their actions and appearance. Likewise, the women in the YouTube videos that I analyze here are using physical forms like the headscarf and pious behavior to express their ethical disposition, but they are also asserting their authority to speak publicly on Islam. These two groups of women, the Egyptians and the Americans, are both trying to embody Islamic ethical values such as modesty and humility, but they interpret these values differently when it comes to speaking publicly on Islam. The Egyptian women in the mosque movement understand *da'wa* or Islamic outreach as the charge to correct the impious behavior of other women and to set a good example of piety through their actions and appearance. They are not speaking in public, nor trying to spread Islam to the masses. Although the Western video-makers do defer to Islamic scholars on particular issues, they usually have no problem speaking in the public medium of YouTube about their personal and emotional experiences as Muslims. Again, it is the authenticity of these women that grants them the authority to speak because they have gone through these real experiences.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

In addition to the embodiment of Islamic physical forms, the religious subject is also constituted in relationship to emotional sensibilities. For example, Charles Hirschkind recently conducted a study of Islamic sermons that had been recorded and posted on YouTube. Even though the videos are not usually visually engaging, he found that the tuning of the emotions was done through the sense of hearing. In a similar way to his analysis of cassette sermons in Egypt, Hirschkind evaluates how these YouTube videos create an ethical disposition in people through the use of aural techniques. By examining the comment sections, Hirschkind concludes that people watch and listen to these videos in order to experience a “pious affect.” The videos tune the viewers’ senses so that they are refocused on God.<sup>39</sup> Through comments, people express prayers and praise to God, illustrating how the video has refocused their attention towards God. These YouTube sermons are examples of what Birgit Meyer terms sensational forms because they are bonding people to each other and to the transcendental by appealing to the emotions and the senses.<sup>40</sup> Religions have “distinct sensory regimes” that form the subject by tuning the senses and appealing to certain emotions like fear, regret or joy.<sup>41</sup> The affect of these videos works to constitute the subject in relationship to others and to God. In a similar way, the YouTube videos of young Muslim women also make appeals to emotions, although the emotions may be distinct from what Hirschkind observed in the sermon videos. Either way, the emotional styles of both types of the videos serve to influence the emotional reaction of the viewer and also the viewer’s subjectivity. The videos may change how the subject is constituted within an Islamic sensory regime. While Hirschkind’s analysis is focused on how an individual’s subjectivity is constituted

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Hirschkind, “Experiments in Devotion Online: The YouTube *Khutba*,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44 (2012): 16.

<sup>40</sup> Birgit Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations: Media, Religion, and the Senses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 13.

<sup>41</sup> Birgit Meyer, “Religious Sensations : Why Media, Aesthetics and Power Matter in the Study of Contemporary Religion” (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2006), 22.

through these emotional styles and sensory mechanisms, Meyer is more concerned with how sensational forms mold subjects into communities that are formed based on emotional and material styles.

Both Mahmood and Hirschkind are focused on how material forms, such as modest dress and audio sermons, influence religious discourses and subjectivity, but the work of Meyer is particularly helpful in understanding how new features of religion are emerging through aesthetics and materiality. Meyer sees media, like these YouTube videos, not in conflict with religion but as a way that the religion becomes mediated to the public. She understands religion as mediation in that religion serves as a bridge that connects the people to the transcendental.<sup>42</sup> The YouTube sermon videos that Hirschkind studies are not simply video-recordings of sermons but instead are illustrations of how religious discourses can be mediated. People respond emotionally to these videos, and they leave prayers in the comment sections, testifying to the validity of the religious experience. The YouTube videos created by female converts to Islam are other examples of the mediation of religion. These videos serve as religious mediations because they convey how the transcendental is experienced by these women. The women in the videos offer praises to God and prayers for their viewers. The mediated form of the YouTube video does not prevent the power of this prayer from reaching the viewer. Material objects such as the computer screen and the images of the video actually become sensational forms, and the viewer can “experience the presence and power of the transcendental” through them.<sup>43</sup> The viewer can also respond by offering prayers and praises in the comment section. In addition to appeals to emotions and the embodiment of physical forms, Meyer also points to the important role that aesthetics plays in forming subjects into communities. In her definition of what she calls

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<sup>42</sup> Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Meyer, “Religious Sensations,” 9.

“aesthetic formations,” Meyer writes, “in this sense, ‘aesthetic formation’ captures very well the formative impact of a shared aesthetics through which subjects are shaped by tuning their senses, inducing experiences, molding their bodies, and making sense, and which materializes in things.”<sup>44</sup> Through the use of a shared visual style, emotions, and material forms, the individual subject is shaped and formed into a larger community. The women in these videos appeal to a visual style that illustrates the authenticity of the video-makers, an emotional style that creates connections with the viewers, and material forms that borrow elements from Islam and mainstream culture.

As can be seen, this study seeks to expand upon the work that has already been completed by scholars on the constitution of religious subjectivities and the formation of religious communities in relation to material forms. The unique features of the form of YouTube push this analysis to also focus on how these YouTube videos are allowing for new discourses on religious subjectivity and community to emerge. While Hirschkind evaluated how the Islamic sermon can be mediated through YouTube, his analysis of these videos focuses on how a preexisting mediated form (the sermon) can continue to do the same work as in previous media (cassette tape, TV broadcast, etc). These YouTube videos of female converts did not exist in the same form prior to YouTube and were created with the affordances of YouTube in mind. Certain elements of YouTube mark these videos as unique, such as the opportunity to create an authentic and intimate space in the videos and the chance for interactions and connections to form through the comment section. These religious subjects are still constituted through aesthetics, embodiment, and emotions, but they are also now formed into communities through connections to other young Muslims within this authentic and intimate space. The next sections will explore

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<sup>44</sup> Meyer, *Aesthetic Formations*, 7.

specific examples of how individual video-makers have used the medium of YouTube to provide useful information about Islam, to represent and embody their identities, and to create a community of support.

## **Chapter 2: The Evolution of a YouTube Video-Maker**

In a seven-minute-long video posted on YouTube, American Nye Armstrong shares her story of how she converted to Islam. She discusses how her Muslim husband tried to share information with her, but she stubbornly refused to listen. During the month of Ramadan in 2010, Nye decided to practice the fast and to wear the headscarf as an act of solidarity with her husband. She explains, “My scenario is not typical at all. The first day of Ramadan was the first day I started wearing hijab, and I wasn’t even Muslim. I would have classified myself as a Christian wearing hijab.”<sup>45</sup> Wearing the headscarf and fasting were the first steps in her process of becoming Muslim. During this period of “testing out” Islam, Nye turned to YouTube for more information about the beliefs and practices of Islam and also about practical things, like how to tie a headscarf and tips for fasting. More significantly, Nye also used YouTube as a place to chronicle her experiences during her first Ramadan. In a 19-video “My First Ramadhan [sic]” series, Nye documents her transition into a Muslim, and these videos mark the beginning of what has become a very active YouTube channel. Over the last three years, Nye has posted over 140 individual videos about a variety of topics and has become one of the most popular young American Muslims on YouTube.

By analyzing Nye’s videos from her first Ramadan series to her more recent videos, it is clear that her videos have become more polished and professional, and Nye herself has gained more confidence and authority. This transition can be attributed to the fact that Nye is able to embody and enact Islamic piety, while the interactions with her viewers reinforce Nye’s Islamic subjectivity. In her first videos, Nye is in essence “trying on” Islam by wearing the headscarf, fasting and praying, and then she publicly shares these experiences on YouTube. The

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<sup>45</sup> Armstrong, *(Convert)sations*.

encouragement that she gets from commenters reinforces that she is effectively living as a Muslim. For example, during her first Ramadan series, one commenter affirms that she has the faith of a Muslim:

Very interesting videos! :) especially because you are non-muslim. you have the iman (faith) that is necessary of a muslim. If you believe in Allah and you believe that Mohammad is the last messenger you are a muslim and should do a formal shahada. if you feel its too hard to be muslim well its better be a muslim than not a muslim at all... these things like exterior factors we can all work on...[sic]<sup>46</sup>

Nye is constituted as an Islamic subject because she embodies Islamic material forms but also because her followers view her as and reinforce that she is an Islamic subject. During her first Ramadan videos, Nye discusses her reasons for wearing the hijab and begins to mark a moment of transition. She says, “It’s one thing to be wearing hijab for a video experiment, which is what this started out being, and another thing is sort of a way of life, which is what it’s ending up being.”<sup>47</sup> She is no longer just acting out elements of Islam in these videos, but now she is living as a Muslim in her daily life. What starts out as a habit for Nye, putting on the headscarf every morning, now begins to form her as an ethical Muslim. It is the embodied, habitual actions that constitute Nye’s Islamic subjectivity.

In addition, the medium of YouTube allows for Nye to share her personal emotions during this conversion experience. These video diarists are expected to exhibit real emotions in their videos, especially when discussing a significant moment in life, such as converting to a new religion. For example, in one of her first Ramadan videos, Nye starts to cry as she is discussing her reasons for wearing the hijab and her family’s reaction to her conversion. She is clearly

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<sup>46</sup> yazyh. [pseud.], comment on *Ramadan 22 | Death Threats | School | Hijab Friendly*, comment posted around March 2011, <http://youtu.be/0FbT3KezajM> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Nye Armstrong, *Day 20 of Ramadan | Hijab | Thanks | Recipe Books*, video, 10:33, August 30, 2010, <http://youtu.be/czGok2QZDXs> (accessed March 29, 2013).



uncomfortable with these emotions, and she giggles to try to lighten the mood.<sup>48</sup> Even though this is embarrassing, she does not edit out the emotional moments, and in the next video she offers an explanation for her tears:

Yes, I did get emotional. Yes, I did start crying, well, not crying, tears. But I did get emotional where my eyes sort of, you know, clouded up. And I feel that to give an honest portrayal of my life during this time, I wasn't going to change or re-edit that video. I'm not proud of my tears, but I am (pause) strong enough to show them. And if you think it is weakness to show tears, then, really, I don't know what to say to that. I think to get an honest portrayal of what somebody's going through. I mean, I got emotional talking about God, and I got emotional talking about my family and my situation there. Those things do make me emotional. I am a strong woman. I am going to keep speaking my mind. No death threats or misogynistic comments are going to change that.<sup>49</sup>

Nye understands that her videos must be sincere, and they must show what it is really like to be a convert to Islam, struggles and all. Even though most of Nye's videos feature humor and are positive about her experiences with Islam, YouTube still encourages an aesthetic style that is honest and authentic. The videos do not need to be polished, and the experiences do not need to all be wonderful. The viewers expect, and some even search out, these moments of struggle. In response to the video in which she cried, several commenters write about how the video inspired them. A few write that they cried while watching the video, and others who have converted expressed going through similar challenges. One wrote, "You brought me to tears and thank you for not editing the video."<sup>50</sup> Another wrote, "You and I are going through the same thing. ... Thank you for posting this video. The process we go through can feel soooo lonely!"<sup>51</sup> People expect emotional moments to be a part of these YouTube videos, and these moments can be

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Nye Armstrong, *Ramadan 22 | Death Threats | School | Hijab Friendly*, video, 7:49, September 1, 2010. <http://youtu.be/0FbT3KezajM> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Realitybeckons12 [pseud.], comment on *My First Ramadhan*, comment posted around March 2012, <http://youtu.be/czGok2QZDXs> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> ZakiyyahRahman [pseud.], comment on *My First Ramadhan*, comment posted around October 2010, <http://youtu.be/czGok2QZDXs> (accessed March 29, 2013).

inspirational to the viewers. These comments also encourage Nye to continue to share her stories in these videos.

Partly because of the support and positive feedback she receives from viewers, Nye develops a more confident style to her videos. Her first videos share experiences that are reflected in the stories of other converts to Islam; she struggles to fast, to properly tie a headscarf and to speak confidently on Islamic teachings. These factors change as Nye creates more and more videos and learns more and more about Islam. On a superficial level, she improves in her scarf-tying techniques and makeup application. She is also more self-assured regarding Islamic issues, such as saying Arabic phrases, speaking on the Qur'an, referencing *hadith* and giving Islamic advice. She creates a series of popular videos with fellow convert Rebecca about numerous topics for Muslim women, such as modest clothing, how to tie a headscarf, prayer, ritual washing, makeup, feminism, and how to share Islam with others. The most popular video on Nye's channel is entitled *Parents Not Muslim ... But You Are?* and features Nye and Rebecca giving advice on this topic. No longer is Nye the hesitant woman in front of the camera, only confident enough to talk about her own experiences. Now, Nye and her friend Rebecca are the "experts" and can give advice from their own experiences and from the Islamic tradition. Rebecca references what she has learned about Islam when she says things like, "Islam teaches us to maintain relations with our family and friends," and "Our parents are so important and are held in such high regard in Islam." She is referencing Islamic teaching on these topics. Nye also talks about how the *sunnah* and the *hadith* must be followed, but that parents can give good advice that fits right into these teachings. Again, Nye is confident enough in her knowledge of Islamic teaching to use this as a reference point for her advice.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Nye Armstrong, *Parents Not Muslim... But You Are?*, video, 10:42, January 8, 2012. <http://youtu.be/X7bRDNN503k> (accessed March 29, 2013).

In her more recent videos, Nye is so confident in her Islamic identity that she spends less time specifically discussing Islam. She has a whole series of videos that are just about her trip to Florida. Nye is comfortable wearing her headscarf alongside her mom and sister who are not Muslim. When she runs in the Disney half-marathon, she fashions a jeweled headband to wear over her hijab so that she will look like Princess Jasmine from the Disney film *Aladdin*.<sup>53</sup> She wants to have fun and not worry about what others will think of her. As she develops more confidence and her videos exhibit this authentic style, Nye also develops more of a supportive group of followers. When Nye first started out on YouTube she said that she received negative feedback, rude comments, and even some death threats.<sup>54</sup> Now, Nye has a large network of followers who post mostly supportive comments. A practical reason for this is that Nye will delete comments and block followers, but this trend of positive comments also shows that viewers feel a connection to Nye because she is viewed as an authentic Muslim and a genuine person. The physical embodiment of Islamic forms and the interactions with viewers both operate to constitute Nye's subjectivity and also create a community of her followers. Through speaking about these issues and embodying these forms, Nye gains the authority to speak on Islam.

As Nye's outreach expands and she develops more ways to engage with her followers, such as her Facebook page and products that she designs and sells, Nye's authority also expands and develops. Nye becomes the source that people go to for information on Islam. As a way to perform this role as a leader, Nye recently held two live video chats, one with her friend Rebecca and one with fellow YouTuber Amena. She promoted the upcoming live chats on her Facebook

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<sup>53</sup> Nye Armstrong, *My Disney Half Marathon 2013*, video, 5:25, March 13, 2013. <http://youtu.be/iys1uDpvFAw> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>54</sup> Armstrong, *Ramadan 22*.

page for several days and solicited questions from her fans. During the live videos, viewers could also ask questions on the spot. The popularity of these videos illustrates the authority that Nye now embodies. Nye's authority to speak on these topics does not come from any formal training in Islamic studies but instead from her experiences as a convert to Islam and as a popular YouTube star, and also from the reinforcements of her viewers. In addition, Nye's reputation and authority grow immensely after she was featured in videos with Amena—one of the most popular young, female Muslims on YouTube. It is through her gaining confidence on YouTube and the support of her viewers that Nye is able to evolve into one of the leading American women in this emerging hijabi community on YouTube.

### **Chapter 3: Pious Behavior and Attitudes**

Many of these female video-makers use the space of YouTube to exhibit their new Islamic subjectivities. Because these women have undergone significant personal transformations, they are attempting to show how Islam has changed them. There is a back and forth relationship as the interior of a person changes and this influences their exterior behavior, but also the exterior behavior, such as wearing a headscarf, can help the women to internalize Islamic piety. A video by Heather Sandouga is the best example of how converting to Islam changed her interior emotions and exterior behavior. Heather has only posted 14 videos, but her conversion video, entitled *Why I chose Islam*, is by far the most popular with over 82,000 views. Her videos were all posted a year or more ago, but Heather maintains an active blog site and Facebook page.<sup>55</sup> Through the online community, Heather became friends with other video-makers like Nye and Amena, and the women will frequently make reference to each other in their videos.

In her conversion video, Heather is trying to exhibit how much she has changed after converting. She begins her video by saying, “I’m sure that all my old high school pals who searched me and found me on Facebook were like, ‘What?!’ Because this that you see now (gesturing toward her headscarf) is *definitely* not what you saw back then. It’s not just the covering; it’s that I have faith, because I was a very outspoken atheist back in the day.”<sup>56</sup> Immediately, she is setting up the idea that her transformation to Islam was not just about exterior changes but that it also changed her interior. She continues on with her story of how she went through difficult times and turned against God. Throughout the video, Heather portrays

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<sup>55</sup> Heather Sandouga, “Delusional Mom,” <http://www.delusionalmom.com/> (accessed May 3, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Heather Sandouga, *Why I chose Islam*, video, 9:18, August 24, 2010, <http://youtu.be/wAZAIQ292IQ> (accessed May 3, 2013).

herself as a tough woman who doesn't get pushed around, but one area where she clearly struggles to maintain her behavior is with her language. She tries to be pious in her speech, so she calls her high school boyfriend (who got her pregnant) a "donkey" instead of any number of choice words. At this point in the video, Heather has inserted a pop-up comment that says "I'm trying to think of a word that's not a swear..." She also describes herself as being "scared poopless" at one point.<sup>57</sup> She is clearly self-monitoring her language and behavior because her exterior behavior should reflect that she has a pious disposition.

Even though Heather wants to show her Islamic piety, she is very careful not to appear as being brainwashed into converting. Her attitude throughout the video is one of assertion and independence. She came to Islam through her own self-study, and no one coerced her to convert. She says quite forcefully, "I have a brain. I used my brain, and I studied." She was also very skeptical of the beliefs of Christianity. "I could not believe that Jesus was the Son of God. He's God, why does he need a son? He's God. Is he going to die that he needs a son?" she asks. "And Jesus walking around on earth and eating and pooping. That's very ungodly to me."<sup>58</sup> After learning more about Islam from her boss and reading more information, she decided on her own to convert. "When you are faced with the truth, it is absolutely undeniable. And that was undeniable to me," she said. "I knew that I had found the religion that I had been searching for."<sup>59</sup> Heather is conveying that the truth of Islam is what convinced her to convert and not another person who tricked her or forced her to convert.

In this video, Heather is asserting her identity contrary to accepted discourses on what it means to be a Muslim woman in North America. She is responding to discourses that Islam is an

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

irrational religion, that people are brainwashed into converting, and that women only convert because of their Muslim husbands. Her discursive strategy is to address many of these assumptions, so her video is less about sharing personal and emotional stories, but instead is about rationally proving Islam to her viewers. By focusing on the rationality of Islam she is both trying to convince others to convert and also claiming that her decision to convert was a rational choice. She presents some of the irrational problems that she had with Christianity. She also lists all of the religions that she looked into on her quest, so that the viewer can see how much thought went into this process. Heather is formulating an account of her identity that is counter the established discourses on Muslim converts. In an article on Islamic movements in France, Ruth Mas analyzes a series of petitions that a few groups produced to articulate their identity as “secular Muslims.” The petitions attempt to constitute the secular Muslim subject in contrast to the discursive political system of France. Mas explains, through the theories of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, that the subject is constituted within a structure of established norms and discourses, but individuals still try to assert an identity outside of this structure.<sup>60</sup> Muslims, like these petitioners in France and video-makers like Heather, must fight against established discourses about Islam in order to be heard in the public sphere. By looking at the discourse in the petitions, Mas writes that “we can understand ‘secular Muslim’ as disrupting normative understandings of ‘secular’ and ‘Muslim’ at the same time as it draws upon the conditions of those very understandings in order to do so.”<sup>61</sup> In a similar way, Heather is disrupting assumptions about what it means to be a female convert to Islam in the West. Instead of being a passive woman who converted for her husband, Heather portrays herself as assertive and

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<sup>60</sup> Ruth Mas, “Compelling the Muslim Subject: Memory as Post-Colonial Violence and the Public Performativity of ‘Secular and Cultural Islam’,” *Muslim World* 96 (October 2006): 602.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 603.

independent. Instead of being an overly emotional convert who is tricked into becoming an “extremist,” Heather focuses on how rational and straightforward Islam is. In both of these situations, Heather draws on the stereotypes about Muslim women as counterpoints to her own assertions as a way to make her claims most effective. In the same way as the French Muslims are using the petitions to identify themselves as secular Muslims, so also is Heather using this video to claim her identity as an assertive Muslim woman.<sup>62</sup>

While Heather portrays herself as an independent woman, she is still self-correcting her behavior that may not exhibit Islamic piety. At the end of her video, she threatens viewers who might want to post hateful comments on her video. She says, “All you haters out there, if you are going to ask me rude disgusting horrible questions or say horrible, disgusting comments, they will be deleted, ok? Because this is my story, and I’m not going to have you go all nasty on my stuff. If you don’t like it, don’t watch it.”<sup>63</sup> In the end, Heather closes the comment section of this video, but it is not clear if it was deluged with comments from “haters.” This quote exhibits how Heather’s independent and sassy personality can come through. Islam may have changed certain elements of her behavior, but she remains a strong and independent woman. Even though Heather disabled the comment section on her video and it is not possible to observe the viewer interactions that can be seen on Nye’s videos, Heather’s video is still an important part of this online community. Her video exhibits specific markers of authenticity that allow viewers to connect to her. The style of her video is casual. She sits in her living room, doesn’t edit out the pauses, and her children can be heard playing in the background. Her rhetorical style is confident but honest; she allows her true feelings to be shown. Although Heather’s discursive strategy is to focus on the rational elements of Islam and, in a sense, to “prove” Islam, the style of her video is

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 604.

<sup>63</sup> Sandouga, *Why I chose Islam*.



far more personal and engaging than the written narratives that van Nieuwkerk studied. This video is still a way for Heather to express her personal story of conversion, which includes rational elements of proof but also exhibits her individuality. This video exhibits Heather's personality, and part of her personality is her intelligence and the way she rationally approaches a topic.

### Chapter 4: Islamic Aesthetics

YouTube also provides a space in which converts to Islam can create a new hybrid Islamic style that borrows elements of mainstream culture and the YouTube medium and infuses them with Islamic sensibilities. This fusion can best be illustrated by examining a recent video created by Nye Armstrong titled, *Husband Does My Makeup And Hijab*, which Nye films with her husband Elhassan. First of all, this video is one of several that Nye creates which are imitations of larger trends on YouTube, also known as “tag” videos. Other tag videos that Nye makes are “Outfit of the Day” videos in which she discusses what she is wearing and where she purchased her clothes, “Haul” videos in which she shares new products that she purchased, and “Couples tag” videos, which are similar to the Newlywed Game, where both members of a couple answer questions about each other. The “boyfriend/husband does my makeup” videos are some of the most popular tag videos on YouTube, with several of the videos hitting over a million views. YouTube is full of channels, created by mostly young women, which are devoted to makeup, fashion and lifestyle. Many of these women also create these more humorous videos in which their boyfriends or husbands apply makeup to their faces, usually in a garish fashion. The most popular of these videos, garnering over 12.5 million views,<sup>64</sup> was created by “JennaMarbles,” a young woman who makes a living off her YouTube channel.<sup>65</sup> It is important to understand the background behind Nye creating such a video, since this video is part of a larger trend on YouTube that exists outside of her small female Muslim community. Nye takes this form of a YouTube video and then makes it more Islamic. The original makeup videos tend to be more crass, irreverent and sexually charged, and they are created for pure entertainment.

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<sup>64</sup> JennaMarbles [pseud.], *My Boyfriend Does My Makeup Tag*, video, 9:27, August 2, 2012, <http://youtu.be/5XLZwO1OkIA> (accessed April 21, 2013).

<sup>65</sup> Amy O’Leary, “The Woman With 1 Billion Clicks, Jenna Marbles,” *New York Times*, April 12, 2013, Fashion & Style section, National edition.

Nye's video is significantly different. While the "JennaMarbles" video features her attractive and toned boyfriend, whose YouTube name is ironically "MaxNoSleeves," Nye's husband remains off-camera. Nye incorporates her husband in a few of her videos, but he always wishes to remain off-screen. In this video, and others with her husband, Nye is visible on-screen, smiling and laughing, while the viewer hears her husband offer feedback. Nye also has her husband apply a hijab after he finishes the makeup, which marks the video as distinctly Islamic. While her husband is applying the makeup, the two of them discuss ideas of Islamic beauty and whether Muslim women should wear makeup. Even though the video is a fun exercise, there is more substance in what they are discussing. Nye is taking a tool of Western modernity—YouTube—and features of contemporary culture—makeup tag videos—and adding a particular Islamic style and message.

In addition to creating an Islamic form of popular videos, this makeup video also provides Nye and her husband the space to discuss Islamic beauty and aesthetics. In a previous makeup video that Nye made with Rebecca, they established Islamic beauty as simple makeup, which enhances the natural beauty that is already there,<sup>66</sup> but then in this later video Nye flips this idea and has her husband apply excessive makeup to her face. Even though Nye's husband, Elhassan, doesn't like Nye wearing a lot of makeup and Nye doesn't usually wear a lot of makeup, she still thinks this would be a fun video for the two of them to do together. Throughout the 10-minute video, Nye is positioned on-screen while her husband applies makeup from off-screen. All that is visible of her husband is his hand, and his voice is audible as he talks to Nye. As her husband applies the makeup, Nye tells the viewers the names of all of the beauty products. Nye also asks her husband what he thinks about makeup. He says that he thinks

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<sup>66</sup> Nye Armstrong, *Talk about Makeup*, video, 12:42, March 13, 2012, <http://youtu.be/256oKnKCfX8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

makeup is a “lie,” and Nye responds, “I think makeup gives women a little extra boost of confidence.”<sup>67</sup> Even though he may find makeup to be deceptive, he still plays along for this video since he knows that Nye does not regularly wear this much makeup. Nye also asks Elhassan if he thinks makeup is *haram* or forbidden in Islam. He says that God does not forbid makeup but that it is disliked:

What you are saying is, “This is how I should be to be beautiful.” You are putting something else on your body. Instead of God creating you as complete and beautiful, you are just putting more stuff on yourself. You are saying, this is how I should be made to be beautiful. You are just telling God how to do his job.<sup>68</sup>

Elhassan’s understanding of Islamic beauty is that it should be natural and should reflect how God has made the person. After Elhassan applies all the makeup in this video, Nye looks very unnatural with dark eye shadow, mascara, bright red lipstick and blush. If Elhassan and Nye both agree that makeup should only be used to slightly enhance the natural beauty of a person and not to change the person, then why would they create this video? The video serves as a way for them to imitate a form of beauty that they have observed in other cultural forms and then to discuss what beauty means in Islam. It is a way for them to try on these ideas of beauty and perform this for a wider audience. Nye is seeing what it would look like to wear all this makeup, but then her husband is bringing her back to the Islamic ideals of natural beauty. Nye is using her body as a public stage to assert what it means to be a Muslim woman and how Islamic beauty should be displayed. YouTube provides the space for women like Nye to explore how they will present themselves as Muslim women.

Most of the comments on this video reinforce Nye’s natural beauty with or without the makeup. People comment about how beautiful she is but also about how great of a personality

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<sup>67</sup> Nye Armstrong, *Husband Does My Makeup And Hijab*, video, 10:38, February 3, 2013, <http://youtu.be/Kk9eIPrXlp8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

she has. One person says, “you look beautiful! also [*sic*] love your sense of humor, you guys are great together.”<sup>69</sup> Others comment about her natural beauty like, “You are so pretty without make-up, nye [*sic*] :)”<sup>70</sup> and “You have such gorgeous eyes, with or without make up mash’ Allah!”<sup>71</sup> One commenter posts a rude comment about Nye’s appearance, and several other commenters defend Nye. One person addresses this rude commenter and says, “I don’t know who could have watched this video & not fallen in love with her [Nye’s] spirit. This is the sweetest couple who simply compliment each other. This lady (I’m sorry I forgot ur [*sic*] name), is beautiful inside & out.”<sup>72</sup> The comments all reinforce the particular Islamic aesthetic style that Nye presents—a style that focuses on the God-given natural beauty of a person both on the inside and outside.

Additionally, this makeup video has another important function. Besides allowing Nye and Elhassan to discuss an idea of Islamic beauty, the video also provides the space to enact their relationship for a wider audience. The two of them flirt back and forth, which illustrates their connection as husband and wife. When Elhassan wants Nye to stop talking so her can apply eye shadow, he quips, “I said stretch your eyes, not your mouth,” and Nye bursts out laughing.<sup>73</sup> Nye teases Elhassan, “You are being very nice in letting me talk you into this,” and he responds by complimenting how beautiful she looks.<sup>74</sup> Most of the comments that this video receives are not

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<sup>69</sup> TheMarjanthelion [pseud.], comment on *Husband Does My Makeup and Hijab*, comment posted around March 29, 2013, <http://youtu.be/Kk9eIPrXlp8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>70</sup> Marlo C.A. [pseud.], comment on *Husband Does My Makeup and Hijab*, comment posted around March 2013, <http://youtu.be/Kk9eIPrXlp8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>71</sup> SameenK93. [pseud.], comment on *Husband Does My Makeup and Hijab*, comment posted around March 2013, <http://youtu.be/Kk9eIPrXlp8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>72</sup> Tiffany Ahmed, comment on *Husband Does My Makeup and Hijab*, comment posted around February 2013, <http://youtu.be/Kk9eIPrXlp8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>73</sup> Armstrong, *Husband Does My Makeup*.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

about the beauty of Nye's makeup but are instead about their relationship as a couple. Many people comment about how cute of a couple the two of them are. Viewers post comments such as "The most real video I have seen from a husband and wife you two are so funny mashallah,"<sup>75</sup> "you too [*sic*] are adorable together,"<sup>76</sup> "Hassan is so sweet! It really comes across that your marriage is full of love and laughter,"<sup>77</sup> and "Masha'Allah you and you husband have a beautiful relationship. May Allah keep your love strong. Ameen."<sup>78</sup> The viewers reinforce that Nye and Elhassan have an authentic relationship and that they are both truly genuine people. The form of YouTube allows for viewers to feel these connections between Nye and Elhassan, and as a consequence, viewers feel more connected to Nye herself. This occurs because YouTube videos are able to capture these authentic interactions between people. Nye sits down in front of the camera and performs this video experiment with her husband. Presumably, they haven't rehearsed this video, and they don't edit out mistakes. The camera rolls as the two of them naturally interact. The form of YouTube allows the viewer to feel that she knows the real Nye, and in turn she feels closely connected to Nye because of these appeals to authenticity.

This video is not simply about applying makeup; it also addresses issues of Islamic beauty, the ethics of wearing makeup, and the relationship of Nye and Elhassan. Again, the form of YouTube allows Nye and the viewers the chance to explore the meaning of Islamic beauty. Nye is using the popular tag videos on YouTube to create something new: a video that blends YouTube forms with an Islamic style and a deeper message. In addition, this video is one

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<sup>75</sup> TheKellog80 [pseud.], comment on *Husband Does My Makeup And Hijab*, comment posted around March 2013, <http://youtu.be/Kk9eIPrXlp8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>76</sup> MrHamid1988. [pseud.], comment on *Husband Does My Makeup and Hijab*, comment posted around March 2013, <http://youtu.be/Kk9eIPrXlp8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> shadowswallow. [pseud.], comment on *Husband Does My Makeup and Hijab*, comment posted around March 2013, <http://youtu.be/Kk9eIPrXlp8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

<sup>78</sup> KillaCand. [pseud.], comment on *Husband Does My Makeup and Hijab*, comment posted around March 2013, <http://youtu.be/Kk9eIPrXlp8> (accessed March 29, 2013).

example of how amateur video-makers like Nye, who are able to use YouTube as a medium for authentic self-representation, are also able to form a deeper sense of community among viewers. Nye is successful at molding a community of followers because of her genuine, engaging and effervescent style.

### Chapter 5: Emotional Connections

Another way in which the form of YouTube is able to create connections among viewers and video-makers is through appealing to an emotional style. In several of the videos, it is common for the women to get emotional as they discuss their reasons for converting to Islam. In one popular conversion video, which has been viewed over 100,000 times, the video-maker “Jewelize444” or Jewel shares her story of how she became a Muslim. At the beginning of her video, Jewel prepares her viewers for what will be an emotional story. “This may be a long video. I hope you are sitting down,” she says. “You are going to need the following things: Kleenex, tissue, a nice warm drink. ... But definitely the tissues because I might actually need some myself.” She then jumps into her story of living in New York City and falling in with the wrong crowd. She was using alcohol and drugs, had pushed her family away, and was no longer practicing her Christian faith. She felt that she was living in darkness and wanted to find a way out. She called out to God for help and said, “I don’t like how I am living now. Why is this happening to me? I want to change.” She was searching for a way to purify herself from all of these vices. She was searching for something that could help her, and then someone gave her a copy of the Qur’an. She just read the *fatiha* (the opening chapter), and she says, “My eyes inside and outside opened. My ears cleared. This is what I have been looking for.”<sup>79</sup>

At the end of her video, Jewel gets overwhelmed with emotions and appears to be at the brink of crying. This video is a medium through which Jewel is expressing her emotions, and some viewers reciprocate these emotions in the video’s comment section. Jewel is expressing how Islam was able to save her from this horrible life that she was living. She is not just telling a neutral story; she is bringing out deep emotions that are inside of her. The viewers respond by

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<sup>79</sup> Jewelize444 [pseud.], *How I Came to Islam*, video, 13:45, June 9, 2011. <http://youtu.be/I5xnfq42P-o> (accessed November 16, 2012).



leaving emotion-driven comments. Many commenters offer praise and blessings on her conversion, and a few people who were raised Muslim comment about how her story inspired them to be better Muslims. One writes, “That was powerful! Conversion stories never get old for me, I absolutely love them, masha’Allah. I’ve been Muslim all my life, so it [*sic*] really amazing to hear how people discover Islam. Your story is very inspirational, masha’Allah.”<sup>80</sup> Another fellow convert comments about the authenticity of her emotions, “Youre [*sic*] emotion and sincerity really touched me and made me feel grateful also for reverting to islam [*sic*] 3 years ago.”<sup>81</sup> Finally, another commenter discusses crying. “Mashallah Sister, I really want to HUG you right now, I’m crying so hard right now and it’s probably for the fact that I’m so much like you, I was the same way before I discovered and reverted to Islam.”<sup>82</sup>

These comments, along with numerous others on the site, indicate that this video is expressing a certain emotional style to which the viewers are responding. People are having emotional experiences while watching the video, and this is triggering Muslims, both converts and born-Muslims, to refocus their emotional efforts to praising and thanking Allah. This video is an example of how religion can be mediated through a form like YouTube. The YouTube video is not a barrier that prevents people from experiencing religious enlightenment, but instead a medium through which people can have authentic religious experiences. Charles Hirschkind found the same emotional tuning of the religious subject in his study of YouTube sermons. He found that viewers want to experience a “pious affect” while watching these sermon videos, and this affect is the “images, voices, sounds that engage with and ramify pious sensibility, or ethical

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<sup>80</sup> waoOoma [pseud.], comment on *How I Came to Islam*, comment posted around November 2011, <http://youtu.be/l5xnfq42P-o> (accessed November 16, 2012).

<sup>81</sup> aannffii [pseud.], comment on *How I Came to Islam*, comment posted around November 2011, <http://youtu.be/l5xnfq42P-o> (accessed November 16, 2012).

<sup>82</sup> Amerikkahz5nUK [pseud.], comment on *How I Came to Islam*, comment posted around November 2011, <http://youtu.be/l5xnfq42P-o> (accessed November 16, 2012).

feeling.”<sup>83</sup> This pious affect then creates a devotional space on YouTube, so the comment section becomes a space where people can express prayers, praise Allah, or share emotional responses.<sup>84</sup> This is also the case for videos like Jewel’s in which new Muslims share conversion stories; people frequently respond to these emotional stories by leaving comments of praise to Allah: *masha’allah, alhamdulillah, allahu akhbar*. Other people offer personal prayers for the video-maker. Even when offensive comments appear on the site, most viewers ignore them and continue leaving devotional comments. The emotional impact of the video is still maintained, and the community still maintains its pious disposition.

In addition, the emotional style of Jewel’s video is also able to create a connection between her and the viewers and also form a community among the viewers. In the similar way to Nye’s videos, by opening up and sharing a personal story, Jewel is able to present herself as a genuine person. The viewers recognize that she is placing herself in a vulnerable position, and they feel more connected to her because of her emotions. Also, Jewel sets up her video to be a casual chat with a friend. At the beginning she tells the viewers to prepare themselves for a long and emotional story by getting some tissues, finding a comfortable spot to sit and preparing a nice warm drink.<sup>85</sup> Instead of just jumping into her story and sharing the facts, Jewel wants to set the scene so that the viewers feel that they are intimately connected to her. The viewer can imagine that she is sitting on a couch next to Jewel, sipping tea and listening to her story. The aesthetics of YouTube allow for these intimate moments to occur because the videos appear as casual, interactive and intimate. A viewer can watch a video and feel that she is listening to the

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<sup>83</sup> Hirschkind, “Experiments in Devotion,” 16.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>85</sup> Jewelize444 [pseud.], *How I Came*.

video-maker while sitting in her home, and then the viewer can interact with the video-maker by posting a comment.

YouTube allows for these potential intimate connections, but not all amateur video-makers are able to engage in this aesthetic style. For example, another video-maker, “MrsHamdulila” shares her conversion experience in a three-part series. She does not prepare her viewers for the story; in fact, she rarely acknowledges her viewers. Throughout the video, she is clearly reading from a pre-written script instead of telling her story “from her heart.” She also makes numerous jarring cuts in the video. She is holding a baby at one point, then in the next cut the lighting is different and the baby is gone. Instead of coming across as a warm and relatable person, she appears as harsh and impersonal. The comment section includes fewer comments about how people feel personally close to her or about their emotional reactions to her video. Some people do post comments of praise and congratulations for her conversion, but a lot of people post theological challenges to what she said. Commenters also get into theological debates with each other over Islamic doctrine. The comment sections on her videos are far from “devotional spaces,” and instead they are spaces for debate mostly between Christians and Muslims about theological issues.<sup>86</sup> In summary, by examining the conversion videos of Jewel and MrsHamdulila, it is clear that the medium of YouTube does not automatically create authentic videos. The video-makers must effectively use the affordances of this medium to portray themselves as authentic, to make connections with the viewers, and to mediate religious discourse through the videos.

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<sup>86</sup> MrsHamdulila [pseud.], *WHY I Converted to ISLAM p1 of 3*, video, 6:21, February 18, 2010, [http://youtu.be/hBlw3\\_ZtSGA](http://youtu.be/hBlw3_ZtSGA) (accessed November 16, 2012).

## Chapter 6: Authentic Communities

Several of Nye Armstrong's videos feature her having a conversation with other young Muslim women. As Nye displays her friendship on screen with different women, the viewers are also able to feel connected to Nye and her friends through these displays of friendship. In the same way that people can relate to celebrities when they find out that two famous people are friends with each other in real life, so also can viewers of these videos connect to their favorite video-makers who are also real-life friends. For example, Nye frequently mentions other video-makers in her videos, such as Heather, Rebecca and Amena. In a video that Nye makes when Amena visits the U.S., the two women discuss how they met each other. Nye explains that she first saw Heather's videos and knew from her personality that she had to meet her.<sup>87</sup> Then it was through Heather that Nye was able to get connected to Amena. Heather even comments on this video, "I am the glue that brought you together!"<sup>88</sup> The friendships between these three women mostly exist online since they live in three different countries, but this does not delegitimize their friendship. The women are still connected through common Islamic values and similar experiences, and YouTube provides an avenue for these women to connect to other similar women. Without online media, these women would only be able to connect to people in their local community, so YouTube expands the field of people with whom these women can connect. When the videos visually display the friendship of the video-makers, the viewers feel connected within this same community.

For example, British YouTube video-maker, Amena, visited the U.S. in spring 2013 and hosted meet-ups in various cities. Amena started her own hijab fashion company called Pearl

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<sup>87</sup> Amenakin [pseud.], *ON HUSBANDS, HIJAB & HOW WE MET*, video, 5:27, March 29, 2013, <http://youtu.be/S1KZIFNTfiw> (accessed May 11, 2013).

<sup>88</sup> delusionalmom [pseud.], comment on *ON HUSBANDS, HIJAB & HOW WE MET*, comment posted around April 2013, <http://youtu.be/S1KZIFNTfiw> (accessed May 11, 2013).

Daisy and also posts “how to wear hijab” tutorial videos on YouTube, as well as numerous other videos. When Amena visited the U.S., she videotaped her meet-ups with women from all over the country—loyal “Amenakin” followers on YouTube and proud Pearl Daisy hijab wearers. In New York, Amena met up with Nye for the first time and the two of them created some casual videos together. The women visit tourist sites in the city, they joke around with each other, they laugh, they have a conversation about their friendship, and they talk about YouTube. All of these moments are captured in videos that are posted on both of their channels.<sup>89</sup> While watching these videos, the viewer feels as if she is part of the friendship as well, traveling with the women, laughing along with the jokes, and hearing their conversations. The viewer feels connected to these women because of the intimate style of the videos (filming as they are walking around the streets of New York and in the private space of a hotel room), but the viewer also connects to the women because they are sharing personal elements of their friendships and their lives on camera.

In one of the videos, the two women sit down in Amena’s hotel room to share how they met each other and just to chat about their day in New York. The conversation is very informal, and the women laugh a lot. They clearly enjoy spending time with each other. Towards the end of the video, the women say good-bye, but then they continue to talk with each other for another minute or so. Amena says, “Hey, we’re doing what we always do, which is we say bye and then we just carry on talking.”<sup>90</sup> As good friends, the two women never run out of things to say to each other, and the viewer feels like she is able to catch a glimpse of some secret, behind-the-scenes conversation. The viewers comment about their friendship and how enjoyable it is to

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<sup>89</sup> See Amenakin [pseud.], *ON HUSBANDS, HIJAB*; Amenakin [pseud.], *NEW YORK! | America Vlog 2*, video, 5:30, March 27, 2013, <http://youtu.be/JSGgLB-UXpQ> (accessed May 11, 2013); Nye Armstrong, *NYC w/ Amenakin*, video, 2:04, April 2, 2013, <http://youtu.be/nu5N8nCCGtM> (accessed May 11, 2013); and Nye Armstrong, *Accent Tag with AMENAKIN*, video, 4:34, March 27, 2013, [http://youtu.be/kDdHVkfvD\\_E](http://youtu.be/kDdHVkfvD_E) (accessed May 11, 2013).

<sup>90</sup> Amenakin [pseud.], *ON HUSBANDS, HIJAB*.

watch the two of them interact. One viewer writes, “This video was so cute! Had me smiling the whole time. I love the way you bounce of [*sic*] each other when you tell stories - shows what great friends you are :).”<sup>91</sup> Another person writes, “Couldn’t stop smiling! You guys have a lovely relationship :-) May Allah keep you this close forever.”<sup>92</sup> The viewers are reinforcing the authenticity of Nye and Amena’s friendship but they are also participating in this community. While the viewers may feel connected to Nye and Amena, they have most likely never met the women in real life. Despite this fact, the viewers can connect to the women through online media, and there is the potential to meet-up with them when the women travel. In Amena’s meet-up videos, you can see other women who have the opportunity to meet Amena in person. In addition, whenever Nye travels she posts a request to meet-up with any other women in her destination city. In other words, the medium of YouTube is not the end of the community; it is one way for women to further connect with this community.

About a year ago, Nye created a series of videos with her friend Rebecca, another woman she met online. In these videos the women talk about a variety of topics that would be helpful for young women who have converted to Islam. The style of these videos is usually very informal; the women sit in the living room of one of their homes and chat back and forth with each other. They don’t usually have a scripted plan for what they will talk about. While this lack of a structure to the videos can lead to more rambling, it also allows the viewers to see what may be the true personalities of the video-makers. The women appear as more authentic when they are just having a casual conversation with each other. The normal interruptions of daily life are also part of creating this authentic space. During Nye and Rebecca’s videos, several interruptions

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<sup>91</sup> salamallow [pseud.], comment on *ON HUSBANDS, HIJAB & HOW WE MET*, comment posted around April 2013, <http://youtu.be/S1KZIFNTfiw> (accessed May 11, 2013).

<sup>92</sup> slaughterthedaises [pseud.], comment on *ON HUSBANDS, HIJAB & HOW WE MET*, comment posted around April 2013, <http://youtu.be/S1KZIFNTfiw> (accessed May 11, 2013).

occur in the background: the dog barks and runs into the screen, someone comes home and the women greet him, a clap of thunder sounds outside and the two ladies giggle. After the brief interruptions, the women continue on with their stories. They don't edit out all of these interruptions in order to make their videos more real. In a more recent venture, Nye and Rebecca created a live video in which viewers can interact and ask questions. The women respond to the questions live, and then the video is posted on Nye's channel after the fact. The questions cover a variety of topics such as fashion tips, resources for new Muslims, marriage and dating, struggles as a new Muslim, and personal questions about Nye and Rebecca's lives.<sup>93</sup> Again, this informal style presents these women as more relatable; the viewers feel like they are close friends with the women. In response to one of Nye's videos, a viewer commented, "I <3 youtube too, and I feel like I've grown so close to some of you like Amena, Hether, Titli and the sewist. I know it's weird because you don't know me, but it's still special."<sup>94</sup> Through the aesthetics of the YouTube space, these women are able to create a sense of community. The viewers feel connected to the video-makers and to each other because of the informal style of these YouTube videos.

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<sup>93</sup> Nye Armstrong, *Becca & Nye Chat Live (Recorded Live)*, video, 2:13:45, April 28, 2013, <http://youtu.be/lAd1tglHMf0> (accessed May 11, 2013).

<sup>94</sup> naseerahvj [pseud.], comment on *(Convert)sations*, comment posted around April 2012, <http://youtu.be/DYnsEru6AuE> (accessed November 19, 2012).

## **Chapter 7: Conclusions**

As can be seen in these video examples, the affordances of YouTube allow for the religious subject to engage with religion in new ways and for new communities to form. While elements like materiality, discourse, emotions and embodiment function to constitute the religious subject, the particular aesthetics of the YouTube medium mold the subject into a larger religious community. The medium of YouTube is not an ideal space, and there are obvious restrictions in this space. The comment section, for example, is notoriously difficult to monitor and to regulate in order to prevent distasteful and hateful comments. Nye Armstrong also discusses on her Facebook page how she wants her videos and social media sites to be private, women-only spaces, which is next to impossible. Despite some of these limitations, the form of YouTube does provide new opportunities for Nye to represent her identity as a Muslim and to discuss Islam, and this in turn has an influence on Muslims and the Islamic community. Specifically, the aesthetic style of YouTube provides these female video-makers with the opportunity to blend traditional Islamic aesthetics with mainstream cultural forms such as confessional videos and the more vacuous fashion and makeup videos. As a result, a new hybrid aesthetic style emerges. In addition, the authentic style of these videos allows for the viewers to feel a close connection with the video-makers and other viewers. As has been illustrated, these videos are not just a continuation of previous religious mediation, but instead new religious subjects are constituted within an emerging aesthetic formation on YouTube. This emerging YouTube form makes possible a unique space in which women can express an understanding of themselves as Muslim through an authentic, confessional, embodied and interactive style.

The constitution of a religious subject within a community can be best illustrated by examining Nye Armstrong's experiences with YouTube. Before she converted to Islam, Nye



sought out information on YouTube and also found an encouraging community. Because of the visual nature of YouTube, she was inspired to share her experiences “trying-on” Islam through a series of videos. YouTube provided Nye with the chance to express personal emotions, to embody Islamic material forms and to represent herself as a Muslim in front of an audience. Through the use of an aesthetic style and emotions, Nye was asserting her position as a member of a community of other young female Muslims. Material forms like the headscarf and Islamic phrases serve to authorize Nye’s membership within this community. In addition, the feedback that Nye receives from viewers publicly reinforces her Islamic identity.

Once Nye is accepted within this community, she goes on to mold and reform the aesthetic style that unites this community. Through several of her videos, she creates a new aesthetic style that combines elements from the form of YouTube, mainstream culture and Islam. For example, in her makeup tag video she takes a popular YouTube video form and infuses it with Islamic sensibilities. She not only provides an example of how Islam can engage with Western culture, but she also provides the space in which viewers can discuss and shape Islamic aesthetics. Nye is also effective at appealing to markers of authenticity to form a community of followers around her and her videos. As Michael Strangelove wrote, the space and aesthetics of YouTube provide for more authenticity and many viewers demand it. When video-makers effectively use the form of YouTube to portray themselves as genuine and effervescent as Nye does, or to show themselves as sharing deep emotional experiences as Jewel does, then the viewers are more likely to grant these women the authority to speak. In addition to viewing these women as having a great deal of authority, the viewers also feel connected to video-makers like Nye. Through the authentic style of her videos, viewers feel as if they are close friends with Nye. Viewers also make connections with other viewers, and a larger community is formed around

these videos. Members of this community do not just interact on YouTube, but they also engage with each other through other media and in their offline lives. The individual subject is not only constituted within a community, but the community itself is molded and shaped through the new religious discourses that emerge in these videos.

This study has attempted to weave together theories from Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind on the formation of religious subjectivities along with Birgit Meyer's ideas on the molding of subjects into communities based on aesthetics and material forms. With the ever-constant emergence of new digital media, it is essential to study how these new media forms are influencing religious discourse and shaping how people experience religion. Building on research work in both religious studies and media studies, this paper is a contribution to this emerging field which acknowledges that religion has always been mediated through material forms from ancient iconography to YouTube videos. This study is the first of its kind to provide in-depth analysis of the videos of female Muslim converts, not just focusing on the conversion narratives but also examining how the visual aesthetics of YouTube provide new affordances. The women are able to visually exhibit their new identity, to express personal emotions, to engage with viewers, and to feel connected with other women. Because of the capricious nature of online media, new YouTube videos are posted constantly and new video styles emerge all the time. More work is yet to be done to analyze additional conversion videos and other videos created about Islam. It would also be beneficial to look at other communities that have formed on YouTube based on aesthetics, such as the Bronies (men who create My Little Pony videos) and ASMR (those who enjoy listening to whisper sounds). More significantly, very little research has been done on YouTube celebrities, people like JennaMarbles and Amenakin who make their living through YouTube. These individuals are going outside the traditional barriers of the

entertainment industry and are successful at appealing directly to what the viewers desire: authenticity, self-disclosure and intimate connections. Not every viewer is searching for a deep and transforming personal experience, and the majority of YouTube videos are produced for pure entertainment. Recently, I had a casual conversation with a woman about my research on these videos, and she confessed that she was obsessed with watching certain YouTube women who post “makeup tutorial” videos. She said that she could care less about the makeup tips, but found that after a long and stressful day, these familiar faces on the videos were extremely comforting and provided an escape. This story illustrates that it is hard to know the motivations behind the viewers of these Muslim convert videos, except for those who leave comments. Whether it is for entertainment, comfort, to feel connected to others or for religious enlightenment, something is driving people to search out these videos, click on the links, and watch.

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