

The Unruly, Loud, and Intersectional Muslim Woman: Interrupting the Aesthetic Styles of Islamic Fashion Images on Instagram

KRISTIN M. PETERSON
Boston College, USA

This article explores the concept of a *social media interrupter*, one who engages with the visual style and discourse of social media influencers while incorporating a subversive critique of the ways that social media spaces perpetuate injustices and marginalize voices. This concept of social media interrupter is discussed through an analysis of Islamic fashion iconoclast Leah Vernon, a self-identified fat, Black Muslim woman who uses her position as a fashionista on Instagram to insert her biting critique of both Islamic fashion and social media influencers. Instead of standing outside, she interrupts and disrupts Islamic fashion on Instagram by constantly bringing up concerns of body image, fatphobia, colorism, racism, economic inequality, and mental health. Leah's intersectional feminist critique, I argue, gains power and visibility because of how she effectively interrupts the aesthetic style of Instagram by inserting her unruly body and her concern for social injustices.

Keywords: Islamic fashion, Instagram, influencers, intersectional feminism, body image

Over the past several years, Islamic fashion has been growing in public prominence as Muslim leaders use the presence of modest but stylish women to illustrate Islam's compatibility with Western, modern life. At the same time, progressive, but often misguided, non-Muslims tout fashion as a way to help modernize and liberate Muslim women from their dour, backward religion. In social media, Muslim fashion influencers occupy a large territory, especially on Instagram and YouTube, where they promote modest fashion styles and some Islamic values, but at the same time easily reflect the "postfeminist sensibility" (Gill, 2007) that infuses social media spaces such as Instagram (Peterson, 2017). One of the main aspects of this sensibility, according to Gill (2007), is a focus on how the feminine body is both seen as a "source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling" (p. 149). Social media spaces such as Instagram self-portraits highlight this constant work on the physical body and interior self, as well as the presentation of this self-work for evaluation by viewers. As Duffy and Hund (2015) discuss, fashion bloggers on Instagram and other social media spaces often promote the postfeminist ideal of "having it all" while hiding the real work that goes into creating these images (p. 2).

Popular Muslim fashion influencers display this postfeminist sensibility when they emphasize their perfection as pious and modest Muslim women, inside and out, but also their achievements as entrepreneurs who brand and sell their lifestyles on social media. This postfeminist sensibility along with

Kristin M. Peterson: petersub@bc.edu

Date submitted: 2019-07-19

Copyright © 2020 (Kristin M. Peterson). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

the visual nature of Instagram (Abidin, 2016b; Duffy & Hund, 2019) and the pressure to self-brand (Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017) encourage a prominent strand of Instagram influencers: mostly young women, who post perfectly composed images of beautiful faces and thin bodies, highlighting that success and happiness can be achieved through consumption and constant self-work. At the same time, these perfect Instagram icons also negotiate their performance of authenticity, as influencers carefully insert some messy "getting real" posts but still appeal to an audience of consumers (Battan, 2019; Duffy & Hund, 2019). Although there are other styles and communities on Instagram, this article focuses on Islamic fashion influencers and how their images feature beautiful faces and attractive bodies that are covered in modest but stylish clothing. These Muslim influencers often display their position as style icons, as well as their perfection of interior beauty and Islamic virtues.

In contrast to the social media influencer who promotes an ideal but unachievable form of femininity, this article explores what I term a *social media interrupter*, one who engages with the visual style and discourse of Instagram fashion influencers while incorporating a subversive critique that points out the ways that this influencer industry perpetuates injustices and a neoliberal focus on individual solutions. Rather than influencing followers' decisions of what to wear and consume in order to perfect their appearance, an interrupter raises concerns about those who have been marginalized, particularly those left out of social media influencer spaces. A social media interrupter is similar to what Ahmed (2014) terms a "feminist killjoy" or "the one who gets in the way of the happiness of others or, more simply, the one gets in the way" (p. 224). Ahmed describes these individuals as "affect aliens" because they feel alienated from happiness, but they also alienate others through their concerns for unhappy topics such as racism, classism, and misogyny. Whereas Ahmed addresses the circulation of emotions and how certain individuals kill joy as they block the flow of positive affects, the concept of a social media interrupter focuses on individuals who use the affordances and styles of digital media to cleverly insert social critiques that are often unwelcome in the positive spaces of social media influencers.

This article examines this concept of social media interrupter by critically examining the digital work of Islamic fashion iconoclast Leah Vernon, a self-identified fat, Black Muslim woman who uses her position as a fashionista on Instagram to insert her biting critique of both Islamic fashion and social media influencers. Leah's status as a fashion leader, who has worked in the industry and developed an online following, grants her more authority to offer a critique from within the fashion community. Although Leah has fewer followers than the most popular Islamic fashion leaders, she is the only fashion influencer who is plus-sized, dark-skinned, and Muslim to have such a following. In addition, Leah has a high interaction rate with her followers, posting responses to most of the positive comments that she receives. Instead of standing outside, she interrupts and disrupts the space of Instagram and Islamic fashion by constantly bringing up concerns of body image, fatphobia, colorism, racism, economic inequality, mental health, and domestic violence. Leah is certainly not the only social media interrupter in online spaces, but she is one of the few Muslim Americans with enough influence and a unique perspective to point out the flaws in Islamic fashion culture online.

Through her digital advocacy on her website, Instagram fashion photos, and written commentary, Leah visually and rhetorically dismantles the ideals of pious Muslim femininity at the same time as she facilitates a space of belonging and support for individuals who have been deemed unruly and flawed. Leah's intersectional feminist critique, I argue, gains power and visibility because of how she effectively interrupts

the aesthetic style of Instagram by inserting her unruly body and the collective struggle for gender, racial, and economic justice. These fashion images not only demonstrate Leah's inherent value, but also point out the hypocrisy within Muslim American spaces of the claim that only certain bodies can represent pious femininity: those that are light-skinned, properly modest, middle class, thin, and attractive. This pressure for Muslim women to appear in certain ways is hypocritical given that Islamic teachings focus on the inherent equality of all people. A Muslim should not be judged as more or less pious based on immutable factors such as skin color, body shape, or gender.

Digital Advocacy as a Fat, Black Muslim Woman

Leah Vernon grew up in Detroit, Michigan, and began style blogging in 2013 in part because she wanted to expand the fashion images circulating online. Due to her own struggles with body dysmorphia, mental health, and eating disorders, she wanted to create a space where "all' bodied women feel worthy despite their culture or size" (Vernon, 2015, para. 11). She identifies on her Instagram profile as a "Muslim feminist" and "inclusive content creator," along with her work as a model, speaker, and writer. Leah maintains the website "Beauty and the Muse," where she shares blog posts, photos, videos, and podcasts. She has also attracted a wider Muslim following through her thought-provoking articles in *MuslimGirl*, a popular online lifestyle magazine. Instagram is the main space where Leah shares her fashion styles and updates with her 48,000-plus followers. She posts images and short videos almost daily, and most of her posts get more than 1,000 likes and sometimes garner hundreds of comments. In addition, Leah released a book about her experiences in October 2019, titled *Unashamed: Musings of a Fat, Black Muslim*. Her work has attracted a fair amount of press coverage in *The Huffington Post*, *CBS Detroit*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Bustle*, *Detroit Free Press*, and several specialty fashion publications.

The analysis in this article draws on a selection of Leah's recent images from November 1, 2018, through March 31, 2019. Leah posted 133 times during this time, indicating that she posts almost daily. Of these posts, 17 are short videos and the rest are single photos or galleries of a few images. After doing an overview assessment of the posts from September 2018 to May 2019, I selected this five-month timeframe as a representative sample of the types of topics and images that Leah shares. Her posts over the last year do not differ much in tone or theme, so a five-month timeframe represents a sample of her recent work. In addition, this timeframe includes posts from two different seasons along with different personal and cultural events. The larger group of images enables the analysis of trends in Leah's style, and a few key photos are analyzed to highlight the main themes of Leah's work.

I also categorized the captions into several different topics and highlighted a few of the captions in my analysis. In addition, I examined a few articles on *MuslimGirl* in which Leah discusses her experiences as an outsider to Muslim American circles because of her race and appearance. Finally, I conducted an open-ended interview with Leah on July 11, 2019, through video chat software, in which we discussed her visual style and digital advocacy work. Although this study is limited to a select timeframe of images, future studies might benefit from examining multiple timeframes to see how Leah's work has changed over her seven-plus years of fashion blogging. Additional studies could be conducted that focus on the discussions within the comments sections of Leah's posts.

In my analysis, I focus on how Leah uses her images and written reflections to respond to and contradict larger conversations around Islamic fashion. Within the images, I concentrate on how Leah engages with similar styles as Instagram fashion images and Islamic fashion shoots, but also how she accentuates her unique style. Within the comments and articles, my interest lies in how Leah critiques dominant discourses around how Muslim women should appear, especially as pious representatives of Islam within society. In these critical writings, Leah also addresses issues around gender, racial, and economic justice within Muslim communities and wider society.

Rose's (2012) formulation of critical discourse analysis with a focus on images is particularly relevant to this study, as this method emphasizes how dominant ideas are constructed as true through discourse, both visual and written. As Rose writes, "Discourse is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it" (p. 190). Furthermore, Rose elaborates that visibility is the way that certain discourses are made visible while others remain concealed (p. 191). Leah's intervention into the visual realm of Islamic fashion is an attempt to enter into what Hall (1993) significantly writes about as the space of struggle within popular culture. The visibility of Muslim women in such cultural spaces as Instagram reinforces that modesty and piety are only achieved by women who are thin, attractive, and light-skinned. Leah enters into this space to bring visibility to the experiences of a wide spectrum of Muslim women.

Islamic Fashion and Instagram Influencers

To understand the ways that Leah's work is interrupting the aesthetic spaces of Muslim fashion influencers on Instagram, it is useful to lay out some of the theorization of Islamic fashion and social media influencers. The wearing of modest clothing has been discussed as an ethical action to formulate the pious disposition of Muslim women (Mahmood, 2005). In this case of online Islamic fashion, my focus is less on the formation of ethical subjects and more on how the modest fashion industry provides practical tools for Muslim women in Western contexts to incorporate their faith and tenets of modesty with an interest in contemporary fashion trends. A common refrain is that the emergence of modest clothing styles allows Muslim women to interweave fashion and faith. In a study of Canadian converts to Islam, Mossiere (2012) found that the "polysemy and flexibility" (p. 116) of fashion styles allow the women to blend and incorporate "their religious identity as pious and veiled Muslim women as well as their position as modern and Western citizens" (p. 117).

In her volume on Islamic fashion in the United Kingdom, Lewis (2015) examines how the practices of debating fashion styles online and in person can be a way for young Muslim women to develop their agency as religious subjects. Rather than reject fashion as an inherently negative element of Western neoliberalism, Lewis argues that "the possibilities of Internet commerce and commentary combine with offline practices in modest fashion to foster women's agency in the making of new forms of Muslim habitus" (p. 18). Online spaces allow women to develop the authority to determine how they will incorporate a pious subjectivity with Western neoliberal culture. Similarly, Bucar (2017) examines how Muslim women's decisions of what to wear are part of negotiating norms around identity, piety, aesthetics, and consumption. Bucar writes, "More than just a veil, this is pious fashion head to toe, which both reflects and creates norms

and ideas related to self-identity, moral authority, and consumption" (p. 2). Bucar finds that fashion grants Muslim women some agency within social, political, and religious structures (p. 18).

Moors and Tarlo's (2013) work on Islamic fashion is particularly relevant because of their emphasis on how clothing style can be a political statement for Muslim women in Western spaces. Leah and other Muslim women frequently talk about how they are silenced in public spaces, so fashion provides a mode of speaking back. Muslim women are often viewed with stereotypes of being "dull, downtrodden, oppressed and out of sync with modernity" (p. 20), but Moors and Tarlo argue that the public presence of Muslim women in styles that combine their faith and contemporary fashion presents an alternative view. Furthermore, other work has examined how the hybridity of Islamic fashion in YouTube videos provides a productive in-between space to contest binaries and stereotypes of Muslim women (Peterson, 2016). In addition, El-Tayeb (2011) engages with queer theory to explore how Muslim feminists who wear the headscarf perform a political act by their mere refusal to fit into one side of the binary between oppressed, covered Muslim woman or liberated, progressive woman.

Although this scholarship examines the various angles on Islamic fashion, from personal piety to negotiations with capitalist consumption to the productivity of hybrid styles, Leah Vernon's digital advocacy brings to the surface a glaring element of Islamic fashion that is often left out in this academic work: The public face of Islamic fashion within Western contexts is represented by a select group of women. Particularly in digital media spaces—style blogs, YouTube videos, and Instagram shoots—the women who dominate are almost all skinny, attractive, middle class, and light-complected. @amenakhan, @dinatokio, @noor, @mariaalia, @dianpelangi, and @hautehijab all have hundreds of thousands of followers, if not millions. They all are flawlessly attractive; wear flowing and stylish garments that properly cover their thin bodies; apply impeccable makeup; and, although not usually of White European origin, have light complexions. These White European beauty ideals infuse a lot of Muslim communities, but this article examines how these ideals are particularly prominent in Western cultural spaces such as Instagram and fashion and in turn impact Muslim communities within North American societies.

The prominence of these perfect Muslim fashion icons demonstrates the effect of a social media influencer aesthetic that enables success in this neoliberal industry. Abidin (2016a) offers a definition of these "microcelebrities" who are referred to as influencers:

Everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in "digital" and "physical" spaces, and monetize their following by integrating "advertorials" into their blogs or social media posts and making physical paid-guest appearances at events. (p. 3)

These influencers find success by engaging with an authentic, intimate style and maintaining a close connection to followers that can be deployed to sell products. A delicate balance must be maintained between appearing too perfect and hence fake or appearing too flawed and thus not worthy of the influencer moniker. Abidin (2016a) specifically discusses the practice of taking selfies and how influencers are hyperaware of how their bodies appear and the potential problems to solve through camera angles, lighting,

makeup, and even filters and photo altering. Rather than seeing selfies on Instagram as frivolous activities, Abidin asserts that selfies allow “influencers to partake in quietly subversive acts, by reappropriating the selfie for self-branding, financial gains, and self-actualization pursuits” (p. 16). The emergence of social media influencers illustrates the desire among mostly young women to assert their agency and authority. Unfortunately, as Leah’s work points out, this authority is mostly used to promote a neoliberal focus on the perfection of the individual subject through consumption.

In addition, Beta (2019) builds on Abidin’s work on influencers to examine the ways that Muslim influencers in Indonesia incorporate this perfection of the individual self with religious values. By developing the concept of religious influencers, Beta considers “how the representations of piety and ideal womanhood are used by the religious influencers to garner following and also to mobilize their followers not just for commercial reasons, but also encouraging their followers to ‘better’ themselves” (p. 7). The focus here is on becoming a better, more observant Muslim woman by managing the self to achieve success; being a good wife, mother, and family member; running an Islamic-inflected business; wearing the veil; and having friendships with other good Muslim women (p. 10). Beta discusses how social media influencers in Indonesia promote these Islamic values through images that use visual themes of “softness” and “femininity” (p. 12). Beta’s work illustrates the interconnections between the Islamic desire to cultivate a more ethical and pious disposition and the neoliberal pressures within social media spaces to present an authentic but perfect image.

As a social media interrupter, Leah Vernon’s digital work interferes in these spaces of Islamic fashion and social media influencers by raising issues that most Muslims would rather remain hidden. First, Leah’s work interrupts the bubblegum, positive glow of these Islamic fashion images to point out that dark-skinned and differently shaped bodies are not welcome in these spaces. Furthermore, the prominence of thin, light-complected women illustrates racist, colonialist, and misogynist beliefs about the inherent superiority of light skin and bodies without curves. In a reflection on the work of plus-sized fashion leaders like Leah, Lewis (2019) addresses the White supremacist and imperialist beliefs that reinforce the intrinsic immodesty of larger, dark-skinned bodies (p. 15). Leah’s work calls out the hypocrisy of these beliefs circulating within Islamic circles, especially given that these ideas run counter to the Islamic belief in the radical equality of people. Although Islamic teachings do promote the value of beauty, both inside and out, Leah’s images and commentary articulate that the beauty dominating social media influencer spaces is not a deep beauty, but rather a superficial focus on unachievable standards, often based on White, European, and American norms.

Second, Leah’s images disrupt the social media influencer industry by pulling back the curtain and revealing the labor that goes into being an influencer. In her posts, Leah discusses the economic pressures that she faces as she constantly juggles multiple freelance gigs and sponsorship opportunities. She shares details about all of the work that goes into her posts to demonstrate that being an influencer is not this relaxing, carefree job. Leah also repeatedly calls out the perfection ideals on Instagram by sharing pictures of herself without makeup or stylish clothes while also honestly discussing her experiences with body dysmorphia, depression, and eating disorders. Leah’s work dismantles these ideas of the neoliberal subject who easily uses products to improve the self and achieve success by emphasizing the endless labor that is required and the fact that relatively few people can achieve this success. In addition, Leah’s work addresses

the compounding feelings of depression and exhaustion that arise from serving as a public representative of a fat, Black Muslim. She shared with me that being this token dark-skinned, fat, and Muslim woman in many different spaces is “very heavy” and that this role is difficult on herself financially, mentally, and physically. Leah told me, “I wish that there were more advocates that told the truth about their current situation like me, that were dark-skinned or fat or just like different.” Leah recognizes the hardships of this work, but still continues to be one of the few voices interrupting the social media spaces to share these marginalized perspectives.

Aesthetic Intervention Into the Fashion of Instagram

While Islamic fashion has become a popular mode of presenting Muslim women—and in turn, Islam—as positive, happy, and far from oppressed, Leah Vernon offers a significant intervention into these conversations by pointing out that only certain bodies can become these symbols of pious Muslim femininity: those that are light-skinned, thin, properly modest but still attractive. As a Black woman with curves, Leah asserts that she will never be considered modest enough or pious enough to represent the Islamic community in North America as well as the international Islamic fashion community that is active online. In response, Leah takes on the role of a social media interrupter by flaunting her unruly body and disrupting the aesthetic expectations of Instagram fashion photos to claim that her body is equally beautiful. The strength of Leah’s rhetoric rests in her astute use of the aesthetic styles of fashion and Instagram.

Going back to Hebdige’s (1979) influential study of punk culture and style, scholarship in cultural studies has examined the items that people wear and the significance that they have to the individual and society. Barnard (2002) frames fashion as a mode of communication: “Fashion, clothing and dress are signifying practices, they are ways of generating meanings, which produce and reproduce those cultural groups along with their positions of relative power” (p. 38). But what people wear is more than just what the clothing symbolizes. Entwistle (2000) asserts that getting dressed is an “embodied activity” (p. 10); it is a way to prepare the body to interact in society (p. 7). Furthermore, fashion allows individuals to negotiate various identity positions and membership in different social groups. Kaiser (2012) discusses how fashion allows people to illustrate intersectional subject positions: “Especially compelling are the overlapping or ‘in between’ spaces, through which fashion subjects exercise agency and articulate more than one subject position simultaneously” (p. 37).

For Leah, fashion provides avenues for her to negotiate and articulate her intersections as a fat, Black Muslim woman. In our conversation, Leah confidently asserts that she “look[s] good in anything,” but that she chooses to wear colorful outfits that will place her in the center of attention. “Muslim women like Black women, fat women, disadvantaged women have always been told to back up, always being told to be secondary, to kinda lurk in the shadows, like how dare you come in the center,” Leah explained to me. “My style is definitely a statement and a testament to, I’m gonna rock the boat and do the most. So, you’ll see bright colors, you’ll see lace, you’ll see big turbans, you’ll see almost drag queen type makeup at times” (personal interview, July 11, 2019). Leah seeks to use her fashion to counteract dominant discourses that silence and minimize women like her.

Leah's work specifically interrupts the dominant Islamic fashion trends on Instagram by highlighting her distinct style: a sophisticated but colorful look, featuring jumpsuits, high-waisted trousers, skirts with blouses, and dresses. Most of these outfits feature bright, bold colors such as red, yellow, and blue, with the occasional purple or pink. She sometimes wears patterns such as flowers or animal prints, but she rarely wears natural tones. Along with the bright colors, she also wears ensembles of black, white, and gray. Another common style to her images is when Leah wears more casual jeans, a black leather jacket, and a T-shirt, usually with a political message such as "Black Lives Matter," "fearless," or "black & fat & perfect." Her outfits are noticeably different from the common North American Muslim fashion styles, which often feature pastel and natural colors of fabrics, long tunics or baggy sweaters over leggings, maxi skirts and dresses, or flowing layers of fabric. Leah's fashion styles are still modest, as they cover her arms, legs, and chest, but they are clothing items that flatter Leah's body shape and coloring rather than the typical thin, light-skinned model. Although she does employ a lot of colorful outfits, Leah's style is generally sophisticated with the use of airy fabrics that move around her body but do not hide her form. She often wears similar styles of high-waisted pants and jumpsuits that illustrate her curvy body but are still chic and professional.

Leah's fashion, like her personality and body shape, is big, loud, and hypervisible. Instead of using natural colors to fade into the background or covering her body in excessive layers of material, she uses bright colors and wears clothing that accentuates her curves. In a photo on January 31, 2019 (Vernon, 2019d; see Figure 1), Leah stands in the middle of a street with both hands, making the peace sign, over her head in a celebratory gesture. She is wearing bright red trousers, a red polka-dotted blouse, and a red hijab. Her face is making a big smile with bright red lipstick. She's clearly a person not to be missed on a city street. In another image on January 5, 2019 (Vernon, 2019a), she wears a neon pink, blue, and purple leopard skin skirt, a purple shirt, an orange faux-fur jacket, and a magenta hijab. Although some Muslims make claims in the comments that wearing clothing that draws attention to one's body is the opposite of modesty, Leah's fashion style appears to be a way to draw eyes to herself. Instead of hypersexualizing her body with revealing clothing or suggestive poses, Leah makes her style hypervisible to demonstrate the beauty of her body shape and skin color. At first glance, Leah's work in these images reflects the dominant practices of visibility, which Banet-Weiser (2018) discusses as central to popular feminism. At the same time, the representations of feminist causes that are most visible are often the ones that "do not challenge deep structures of inequities" (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 11). By occupying the space of Instagram fashion influencers, Leah's images of her larger, Black Muslim body along with her written captions call attention to structural forms of inequality that damage her body.



Figure 1. Red outfit in city street, January 31, 2019.

In addition, Leah's use of her body and her occupation of space within the frame and in urban locales assert that her body and fashion style belong in these spaces. In a lot of the images, Leah imitates similar gestures from mainstream fashion shoots: She has her hand gently placed on her head or glasses, she stands slightly off centered, or she leans on walls. The use of similar gestures enables Leah to work within the cultural space of Western fashion to offer a critique using the same visual language. On the other hand, she engages with gestures that counter these weak and passive feminine codes often found in mainstream fashion images (Jhally, 2010). In several images, she has a wide stance and her hands are straight up in the air, or she makes the Black power gesture with her closed fist raised. She also frequently stands in a power pose with her feet solidly on the ground and her hands on her hips. Unlike the common fashion trope of the weak, waiflike, and off-balanced woman who could be knocked over by a breeze, Leah is firmly grounded in most of her images.

Similarly, Leah displays strength through her facial gestures and her use of eye contact. In a photo from March 11, 2019 (Vernon, 2019e), her head is slightly turned up and away from the camera, and her eyes look down at the camera. As opposed to a high-angle shot that weakens the subject, Leah is shown as powerful and in control of the gaze. In the majority of her images, Leah has a neutral, serious facial expression that resembles a common style of fashion shoots. Contrary to the serious look, a few images show Leah in a moment of laughter, exuding confidence and control. Just like how she is not afraid to highlight the visibility of her body through her fashion styles, Leah is fearless in how she takes up space in her images. In one series of images posted to her website on December 15, 2018

(Vernon, 2018e), Leah appears wearing red velour overalls in a landscaped garden. In each of the images, she takes up as much physical space as possible; she stands with a wide stance, and her hands are positioned on her head, on her hips, and raised over her head. In all of the pictures, her chest is pushed out, emphasizing her strength and confidence. She's not one to be pushed over, moved aside, or hidden from view.

Another common layout of her images is for Leah to appear taking up almost the full frame of the photo with her body. In a photo posted on January 8, 2019 (Vernon, 2019b; see Figure 2), Leah stands with her hips slightly off-center, her arms are holding a scarf across her shoulders, and her head is cocked upward. She wears sunglasses, and her gestures display an indifference to the camera, which is located at a lower angle to her body. Leah writes in the caption, "When I saw this photo, I immediately was taken aback by how powerful it is without even saying a word." Instead of gestures or framing that would make Leah look small or hide her large features, Leah puts her body front and center. She is clearly aware that her physical appearance turns heads in public and elicits criticisms from Muslims who do not view her as properly modest. In response to this attention, she highlights her original style, employs colorful outfits, and takes up as much space as she wants. Leah employs these aesthetic tactics to demonstrate her value in the face of people who have dismissed her as inherently flawed because of her race and body shape. She also challenges the assumption among some Muslims that only thin and light-skinned women can represent Islam. Instead, she inserts her hypervisible, bright-colored, and boldly fashioned body into the visual space of Islamic fashion online, forcing viewers to reconsider the standards of modesty and beauty within Islamic fashion.



Figure 2. Power gesture with scarf, January 8, 2019.

Commentary on Intersectional Experiences and Struggles

Alongside the colorful and innovative fashion that Leah Vernon features in her Instagram page, her written commentary interrupts the positive and successful space of social media influencers by bringing up difficult issues, such as institutional racism, the shaming of fat people, and problematic beauty standards (see Table 1). Unlike most Instagram influencers who promote different designers, style trends, and beauty products in their comments, Leah demonstrates her role as a social media interrupter by refusing to take on the role of a perfect icon of Muslim femininity for followers to idealize. Leah's posts might address topics that are relevant to her followers, but she does not seek to be a popular feminist leader, representing certain issues. It is impossible for her to ignore her own intersectional experiences of oppression, as she brings up daily experiences of discrimination and fat shaming, the negative consequences of unachievable beauty standards, and personal struggles, both financial and emotional, with working as a fashion icon on social media.

Table 1. Categories of Instagram Captions.

Category	<i>n</i>
1. Body image/fatphobia/shame	45
2. Racism/Islamophobia/intersectionality/discrimination	18
3. Economic struggles/poverty	5
4. Critics within Islam/modesty standards	9
5. Unachievable levels of perfection in social media	10
6. Confidence/self-love/empowerment/encouragement	36
7. Mental health	8
8. Other	2
Total	133

The dominant discourses promoted by social media influencers reflect what Banet-Weiser (2018) terms *popular feminism*, as they often emphasize individual empowerment and circulate feminist messages that do not threaten neoliberal capitalism. This brand of feminism is popular because it is positive, promotes solutions through the consumption of products, and focuses on fixing the individual woman, who is assumed to be White, straight, middle class, and cis-gender. In the shadow of popular feminism, the concerns of intersectional individuals about structural inequalities are deemed too abrasive and threatening. As Banet-Weiser writes, "This is the popular feminism that seizes the spotlight in an economy of visibility and renders other feminisms less visible" (p. 13). Popular feminist messages circulate and gain visibility while they silence the less palatable messages from individuals such as Leah who point out intersectional forms of oppression rooted in patriarchy, White supremacy, and neoliberal capitalism. Banet-Weiser (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2019) explains, "I see popular feminism as existing along a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structure and systems of racism and violence are obscured" (p. 7). In Leah's written posts, she often reflects on the fact that her intersectional position makes it impossible for her to ignore her daily experiences of discrimination, harassment, and injustice. Of her 133 Instagram posts during this five-month period, 18 address intersectional experiences of oppression and

discrimination as a Black Muslim woman. Furthermore, nine of her posts address the criticism that she often faces from other Muslims over her appearance and intersectional identity.

In an Instagram post on March 20, 2019 (Vernon, 2019f), Leah discusses how she started fashion blogging out of a simple interest in clothing styles: "I never set out to be political. I wanted to be sent clothes and invited to events and be pretty with the nicely edited photos like the others." Instead, Leah ran into so many barriers from Muslims who said she was not modest enough, fashion bloggers who said she was promoting obesity, and clothing companies that said she was not attractive enough. In the face of this pressure, Leah decided to embrace who she is and live unapologetically. She writes in the same post, "I became political once I started to outwardly be myself." Leah does discuss making herself visible—a hallmark of popular feminism in the social media age—but this focus on the empowerment that comes with visibility and representation is distinct from empty signifiers such as "girl power." Instead, Leah places her unruly body—a body that brings up unhappy political issues of racism, colorism, and misogyny—into a space that is esteemed to be of highest beauty and positivity. There is a different sense of empowerment when Leah inserts her values and concerns into the spaces that have so often dismissed and demeaned these issues. Leah's work is not a self-centered form of popular feminism that stops at becoming visible. In fact, Leah's body is already hypervisible and overscrutinized whenever she enters public spaces. Instead, Leah uses her body and her physical experiences to challenge patriarchal, racist, and neoliberal structures of inequality.

In another Instagram post on January 21, 2019 (Vernon, 2019c; see Figure 3), alongside an image of Leah wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt, she writes about how she does not have the privilege to ignore political issues because her body marks her as other:

I wondered how it was to live in such a safe sheltered Caucasian bubble, to live not in fear of your life, afraid to call the cops that end in deaths of young men and women. I often wondered how it felt to not be judged based on your color, stereotyped and typecast as ghetto, loud, aggressive or uneducated. Lazy. Hypersexual. A monkey. A slave. I try so hard not to be that angry Black Muslim lady but I am constantly reminded that I am not equal.



Figure 3. Black Lives Matter, January 21, 2019.

Rather than hide behind her pretty fashion images and talk about saccharine ideas of empowerment and equality, Leah brings up the embodied and psychological experiences of racism and social injustices. In our conversation, Leah discussed how most of her posts focus on identity issues, but these issues are not only symbolic, but have physical repercussions. "I feel like a lot of people are afraid to be who they are," she stated. "And they are afraid for a reason because as we see, we have hijabis getting their hijabs ripped off their heads, or Black boys getting stabbed for listening to music, and trans people getting killed." Leah's work seeks to go beyond a positive visual portrayal of Muslim women to instead use social media as a jumping-off point for greater social change. Leah is aware of the structures of inequality that she is struggling to disrupt and the limitations of social media, but she attempts to use the small amount of social impact that she has online to raise up marginalized voices and chip away at these structures. As she told me, "I just want to be able to influence but not in the mediums which have become commercialized. I want to create social impact on the ground." Leah is hypercritical of other Muslim women online who co-opt social movements such as Black Lives Matter to enhance their personal brands rather than promote marginalized voices.

In addition, Leah interrupts the perfect ideals of Instagram influencers and Islamic fashion leaders by celebrating her unruliness, imperfections, and struggles. Forty-five of her Instagram posts from this timeframe address something related to body image, eating disorders, and fatphobia, and another 36 posts promote self-love and encourage her followers, no matter their appearance. Leah frequently discusses how beauty standards that focus on thin, White models promote destructive psychological and physical effects. Trying to meet these high beauty standards is "extremely tiring," Leah explained to me. "There's a lot of

self-hate involved, a lot of eating disorders involved. A lot of me trying to erase my Blackness, my fatness, me trying to erase everything about me that made me unique to fit into these standards." While Leah tries to break down these beauty standards, she also rejects the role of a social media influencer that followers admire and emulate. She specifically calls out the perfection ideals, perpetuated in social media, in 10 of her posts. She writes on November 2, 2018 (Vernon, 2018c),

I hope in my heart that with each photo that I post, each caption that I write that you never say "I wish I was Leah V." I hope that you take a piece of my fierceness and use it to reignite your own becoming the best possible version of yourself.

In an article for *MuslimGirl*, "The Deletion of the Perfect Instagram Hijabi," she directly addresses this pressure for Muslim women to be practically perfect. In the face of a feed of flawlessly beautiful but still modest Instagram fashion hijabis, Leah hopes to be an "ally" for the majority of Muslim women who do not fit this ideal mold. She criticizes these Muslim influencers for presenting unachievable standards and ignoring real social injustices. Leah writes, "Dear Instagram Hijabi, YOU make your followers feel as if they aren't good enough, that they aren't Muslim enough" (Vernon, 2018b, para. 15). In addition, Leah calls out the hijabis for ignoring issues of "sexual abuse, misogyny, racism and body-shaming." She continues, "Of course, this is because those kinds of topics don't fit into their pastel social media aesthetic filled with fancy doughnuts and lavish trips to Dubai" (para. 13).

One significant way that Leah interrupts what she sees as the "pastel social media aesthetic" that proliferates Islamic fashion influencers on Instagram is by writing honestly about her own financial pressures in five posts and struggles with mental health in eight posts. Unlike the majority of online influencers and fashion entrepreneurs who go on exotic vacations and purchase expensive clothing without worrying about money, Leah is realistic about the struggles of living in this gig economy and feeling overwhelmed. She writes about growing up in a working-class family in Detroit and her current struggles to keep things afloat as she manages multiple freelance jobs. In a post on December 7, 2018 (Vernon, 2018d), she writes honestly about the challenges she has faced over the last few years:

I was severely depressed and disappointed in myself. I was putting in all the work but no one wanted to work with me or pay me despite all that things I'd accomplished. How can one have so much but nothing at all? How can you be poppin on the internet but be broke, on the verge of homelessness. I didn't even have enough to cover rent. I was on government assistance on food stamps buying groceries. Depression hit me like a ton of bricks. No matter how hard I worked, nothing good was going to happen for me. I'd wake up tired even before the day started and just stay in bed.

Leah's well-composed self-portraits with elaborate makeup and stylish outfits are often accompanied by captions, such as the one above, that give a glimpse into the "backstage behaviors" (Goffman, 1959) and challenges of being an online fashion influencer. Unlike other online influencers who might display small moments of performed authenticity, such as "no makeup selfies" or "getting real" posts (Battan, 2019), Leah brings up uncomfortable struggles with finances and institutionalized racism. Leah's intimate and honest moments may still be a performance of authenticity, but her posts are unique for their ability to shake followers

out of the bubblegum glow of social media influencers to consider the psychological wounds of years of intersectional oppression. Later in the same post, she expresses gratitude for her followers' support, both financially and emotionally, during this difficult time. Leah does include links at the end of her posts for the clothing companies featured in her images, but she never posts overt or deceptive ads for sponsored products, a practice that has become ubiquitous among influencers. Leah is not naive about the need for financial support in this industry, but her work reinforces that this struggle for more representative beauty ideals is a collective struggle that requires activists to support each other emotionally and financially.

In addition, this emphasis on a perfect ideal of Muslim femininity silences the voices of Muslim women such as Leah who do not fit the perfect mold while also perpetuating racist, misogynist, and colonialist ideas within Islam. In another article for *MuslimGirl*, "Muslim Women Are Trending, but Some of Us Are Still Invisible," Leah critiques the prominence of light-skinned, skinny, and attractive women, mostly of Middle Eastern origin, who are given the privilege to represent Islam. Leah writes that Muslims do not want to address the racism and colorism within Islamic circles: "However, no one likes to talk about that because they don't want to add to the rising Islamophobia since 9/11 or want to focus on 'unity' in a divisive the Trump era" (Vernon, 2018a, para. 10). The prominence of light-skinned, skinny representatives of Islam feeds into White supremacist and misogynist ideas. Leah continues,

We live in a Eurocentric society that already tells young girls that they aren't worthy unless they have fair or white skin. Our fatphobic society tells us that we aren't beautiful if we aren't a certain weight. It tells us that if we decide to wear hijab, we are oppressed. (para. 15)

Here Leah is calling out her fellow Muslims who she sees as incorporating colonialist, White supremacist ideas into Islam around who is considered attractive, who can be modest, and who has equal value. This practice of propping up certain women as representatives is problematic on a deep level, as it degrades the inherent value of Muslims based on immutable, physical features.

In the face of this dominant ideal of feminine beauty and Islamic modesty, Leah uses her Instagram feed to celebrate the variety of body shapes and colors, flaws and all. In a post on December 30, 2018 (Vernon, 2018g), she writes about her goal to expand beauty to include the disabled, queer, and dark-skinned bodies, as well as body imperfections such as scars and stretch marks (see Figure 4). She frequently encourages her followers to share their own stories around issues such as body image, racism, and misogyny. Alongside a close-up photo of herself with the words *SLUT* and *UGLY* written on her face, Leah writes about the importance of showing up and holding your head high in the face of insults (Vernon, 2018f). She talks about being a figure of strength and confidence for other women who have been dismissed and insulted. At the end of the post, she calls on her followers to share their stories of being labeled with insults and how they have used these moments as a source of empowerment. Leah does not see her role as an influencer with followers or fans, but as an "inclusive content creator" who facilitates a larger community in which people can contribute and benefit from the experiences of others. "It's creating a forum, and people are also sharing their own stories and sharing stories is healing," Leah stated. "We're doing healing, talking to each other, meeting other people, they are supporting me. I'm trying to support them." Leah's approach is not to prop up herself as an exemplar, but instead to be honest about her imperfections and experiences of marginalization and to encourage her followers to work collectively to support each other and to address social injustices.



Figure 4. End of the year goals, December 30, 2018.

Conclusion

Through an analysis of Leah Vernon's Instagram images and comments, this article has explored the concept of a social media interrupter, a person who engages with the aesthetic and discursive expectations of social media influencer spaces in order to insert critiques of social inequalities embedded in these spaces. As Leah has been deemed unruly, imperfect, and even ugly in social spaces, this article has argued that she effectively disrupts the aesthetic and discursive styles of Instagram to foreground her intersectional experiences and the value of her life. Leah inserts her fashion and body into the aesthetic spaces of Instagram to confront viewers with the extremely narrow beauty standards that dominate social media and fashion. Leah's use of fashion styles that are loud, bold, and take up space disrupts both the expectations that fat women should remain unnoticeable, as well as the problematic Islamic standards of modesty that associate thinness and skin tone with religious piety. Furthermore, Leah interrupts the expectations that the captions on Instagram fashion posts must promote brands, products, and lifestyle choices that will make the followers just as perfect as the influencers. Contrary to this neoliberal ideal of achieving perfection through consumption, Leah rejects the role of a perfect influencer and interrupts the discourse by addressing the daily experiences of social inequalities that she and other marginalized individuals face.

The combination of the visuals of Leah's bold, unruly, and large body along with her biting written commentary about social injustices clearly disrupts the "pastel social media aesthetic" that dominates Islamic fashion images. Leah's work is not about celebrating her own perfection as a modest but stylish

Muslim fashionista; instead, she uses Instagram to affirm the experiences of others who fall outside of the White, thin, and attractive ideals of fashion icons. Leah repeatedly writes about experiences of being shamed in public for her size or being feared because of her skin color or hijab. Her appearance might make people uncomfortable, and she uses this experience of turning heads to bring visibility to social injustices. If viewers are compelled to click on Leah's fashion images, maybe they will read her comments and think deeper about issues of colorism and body image. Although in this case, Leah is responding to her particular positionality as a fat, Black Muslim woman in the United States, this concept of a social media interrupter could be analyzed in relation to other individuals who have been labeled as imperfect based on sexuality, gender, race, class, religion, or ethnicity. There are numerous examples of individuals who engage with the aesthetic styles and rhetorical strategies that have made social media influencers so successful at the same time as they interrupt the social media spaces to critique the inequalities embedded in these spaces. Leah and other interrupters insert their unruly bodies and intersectional feminist critiques into Instagram to demonstrate that the lives of marginalized people have value.

References

- Abidin, C. (2016a, April–June). "Aren't these just young, rich women doing vain things online": Influencer selfies as subversive frivolity. *Social Media+ Society*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116641342>
- Abidin, C. (2016b). Visibility labour: Engaging with influencers' fashion brands and #OOTD advertorial campaigns on Instagram. *Media International Australia*, 161(1), 86–100. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X16665177>
- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Banet-Weiser, S., Gill, R., & Rottenberg, C. (2019). Postfeminism, popular feminism and neoliberal feminism? Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg in conversation. *Feminist Theory*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700119842555>
- Barnard, M. (2002). *Fashion as communication*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Battan, C. (2019, October 1). The rise of the "getting real" post on Instagram. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-rise-of-the-getting-real-post-on-instagram>
- Beta, A. R. (2019). Commerce, piety and politics: Indonesian young Muslim women's groups as religious influencers. *New Media & Society*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819838774>

- Bucar, E. (2017). *Pious fashion: How Muslim women dress*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Duffy, B., & Hund, E. (2015). "Having it all" on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115604337>
- Duffy, B., & Hund, E. (2019). Gendered visibility on social media: Navigating Instagram's authenticity bind. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 4983–5002. Retrieved from
<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/11729>
- El-Tayeb, F. (2011). *European others: Queering ethnicity in postnational Europe*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Entwistle, J. (2000). *The fashioned body: Fashion, dress and modern social theory*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Gill, R. (2007). Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Hall, S. (1993). What is this "Black" in Black popular culture? *Social Justice*, 20(1–2), 104–115.
- Hebdige, D. (1979). *Subculture: The meaning of style*. London, UK: Methuen.
- Jhally, S. (2010). *The codes of gender: Identity and performance in pop culture* [DVD]. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.
- Kaiser, S. B. (2012). *Fashion and cultural studies*. London, UK: Berg.
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, "micro-celebrity" and the rise of social media influencers. *Celebrity Studies*, 8(2), 191–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>
- Lewis, R. (2015). *Muslim fashion: Contemporary style cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lewis, R. (2019). Modest body politics: The commercial and ideological intersect of fat, Black, and Muslim in the modest fashion market and media. *Fashion Theory*, 23, 1–31.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1567063>
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Moors, A., & Tarlo, E. (Eds.). (2013). *Islamic fashion and anti-fashion: New perspectives from Europe and North America*. London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Mossiere, G. (2012). Modesty and style in Islamic attire: Refashioning Muslim garments in a Western context. *Contemporary Islam*, 6, 115–134.
- Peterson, K. M. (2016, June). Beyond fashion tips and hijab tutorials: The aesthetic style of Islamic lifestyle videos. *Film Criticism*, 40(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/fc.13761232.0040.203>
- Peterson, K. M. (2017). Islamic fashion images on Instagram and the visibility of Muslim women. In R. A. Lind (Ed.), *Race and gender in electronic media: Content, context, culture* (pp. 247–263). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rose, G. (2012). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Vernon, L. (2015). *Resume*. Retrieved from <http://www.beautyandthemuse.net/resume-1>
- Vernon, L. (2018a, February 20). *Muslim women are trending, but some of us are still invisible*. Retrieved from <http://muslimgirl.com/47449/muslim-women-are-trending-but-some-of-us-are-still-invisible/>
- Vernon, L. (2018b, March 7). The deletion of the perfection Instagram hijabi. *MuslimGirl*. Retrieved from <http://muslimgirl.com/47646/the-deletion-of-the-perfect-instagram-hijabi/>
- Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2018c, November 2). The ideal woman according to billboards, television, movies [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BpsTiBCgPoH/>
- Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2018d, December 7). For the folks that have been following my journey [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BrGgh5aAO5z/>
- Vernon, L. (2018e, December 15). *Fear: Taking leaps and bounds*. Retrieved from <http://www.beautyandthemuse.net/leahvdaily/2018/12/15/fear-taking-leaps-and-bounds>
- Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2018f, December 18). It's so important for me to show up [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BrirYd4A6OF/>
- Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2018g, December 30). My goal for this year was to do more conceptual photo shoots [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BsB44-eAs_I/
- Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2019a, January 5). A lot of times we are so hyperfocused on the "problem areas" [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsRKRdIAW6C/>

Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2019b, January 8). When I saw this photo, I immediately was taken aback by how powerful it is [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BsYqOb9gJOA/>

Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2019c, January 21). I recorded a set of IG stories on how to be a White and/or White passing ally [Instagram photo]. <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bs6I78-gMPx/>

Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2019d, January 31). A friend and I talked about our experiences as big women [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BtT-zwInpgW/>

Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2019e, March 11). I don't think I give my body enough credit [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bu4qGkAnGrm/>

Vernon, L. [@lvernon2000]. (2019f, March 20). I never set out to be political [Instagram photo]. Retrieved from <https://www.instagram.com/p/BvPvQwUn4MR/>