

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Media is well-established in constructing and promulgating certain perceived social and cultural beliefs pertaining to appearance ideals, particularly thin body for women. It is safe to say that the appearance ideals have been acknowledged to pervade both traditional and social media content (Conlin and Bissell, 2014; Tiggemann and Zaccardo, 2018, as cited in Cohen et al., 2019), and are generally unattainable for most women. In response to that, a new trend on social media in the last decade, ‘body positivity’ (or BoPo), aims to challenge narrow societal prescriptions for female beauty in favor of a broader conceptualization of beauty, body acceptance of all shapes and sizes, and body appreciation (Cohen et al., 2019).

On social media platforms, body-positive content has grown in popularity, notably on Instagram. An investigation of the hash tag #bodypositive on Instagram obtained from 6,064,145 posts (Instagram, June 2018, as cited in Cohen et al., 2019). Similar hash tags of #bodypositivity and #bopo generated 1,880,753 and 671,063 posts, respectively. These posts cover a “variety of quotes, images, and captions, ranging from selfies of women proudly displaying their larger bodies with

captions like ‘it’s possible to love your belly rolls, it’s possible to have a favorite spot of cellulite’, before and after photos of ‘real’ bodies encouraging awareness of the use of digital alteration in mainstream media, positive quotes like ‘you are more than a body, go show the world more’, and images focusing on body functionality,” (Cohen et al. 2019).

Saguy & Ward (2011, as cited in Zavattaro, 2020) provide an understanding that body positive movement representation is often intersectional. It is rooted from Intersectionality framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages (Chandler, 2017). Chandler states on one web page that intersectional theory asserts that people are often disadvantaged by multiple sources of oppression: their race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, and other identity markers (e.g. “woman” and “black”). Therefore, it should be potential for body positive movement to embrace diverse identities that are often exclusionary. However, under the same matter of marginalized body, hijab-wearing Muslim women remain having a long way to go to be included in the movement.

Body positivity portrayals generally cover women in small clothing or nudity to show their body shape and patterns (Alentola, 2017). Hijab women, on the other hand, put on loose, long garment and head-covering that seal approximately 85% of their body, embracing modesty and serving them full concealment. The context is forcing them to be neglected.

Regardless, their hijab is inherent to their body, and thus to their identity. Stemming from the capability of the movement to embody multiple identities, accordingly, the movement should be equally available to women who adhere to modesty. In her online article, Mariam Khan (2021), the writer of *It's Not About the Burqa*, offers a fact of the current body positivity movement within the Western sphere, especially within the UK, has been repackaged in white feminist discourse and centered a specific type of woman, usually; white, straight, cisgender: people whose gender identity and expression conform to the biological sex they were assigned when they were born (McIntyre, 2018), able-bodied, and women who are not visibly of faith. In one research, Alentola (2017) showed body positivity on Instagram rarely includes women of color, Muslim women or disabled women, and even there's only one woman representing hijab. One Muslim woman told in the interview in Alentola's research that she couldn't accept the idea of taking the clothes away to show body positivity. Building on the aforementioned statements claiming body functionality is in the movement, it is acceptable to say hijab body, along with other marginalized bodies, do not establish women's competences. The concept of body positivity should be more inclusive for all women because, as Khan (2021) asserts, body positivity cannot be considered as a movement for women if it continues to set aside different intersectionalities women have to carry out.

Across the pond, as part of Islamic culture, the presentments of hijab in Western media have been occupying objectionable terrain to construe its values. Ahmed and Matthes (2016) collected 345 specific studies of media representation of the Muslim faith for almost two decades since 2000. Many of those studies have provided the fact that media depictions of Islam include stereotypes and even delve into what many researchers have labeled “Islamophobia.” Ahmed and Matthes claim much of the portrayal of Islam, for instance, relates to migration, terrorism, and war. Kumar (2012, as cited in Moore, 2018) unfolds a key myth about Islam in the West is that it is somehow uniquely sexist, and Western media tend to portray Islamic women as victims (Haque, 2010, as cited in Moore, 2018). Zine (2006, as cited in Moore, 2018) also emphasizes that Muslim women are victims of a “dual oppression,” given that they experience racism and Islamophobia from Western outsiders and sexism from Islamic insiders. Starting from the inherent, stereotypical sexist and misogynist imputation, the characterization of Muslim women in the Western imaginary as veiled would adhere to subjugated value: restricted both by veils and the supposed brutalization from Muslim men (Bahrainwala & O’connor, 2019). Likewise, veiling or head covering “...is often interpreted as a symbol of...political statement of sympathy with violent Islamists” (Hwang & Kim, 2020) or terrorism, which, as stated formerly, is a severely condemned image tied to Muslims.

In regard to this, it is worth mentioning that Islamophobic predisposition has never halted to reach finish line. Four years back, America, as the most influential and powerful (Western) country, was preoccupied with some furors regarding hate crimes towards Islam and refugees. Even though the Islamophobic movement was long preceded, the anti-Muslim xenophobia was increasing that year, following Donald Trump's presidency. On January 2017, Trump signed an Executive Order that banned foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries from visiting the country for 90 days, deferred entry to the country of all Syrian refugees indefinitely, and prohibited any other refugees from coming into the country for 120 days (*Timeline of the Muslim Ban*, n.d.). However, other than the rage emanated merely from Muslims around the world, counter protests were charged domestically, evoking outcries from the Americans who took stances on Muslims regarding the freedom to adhere to any beliefs and to put an end on the ban. One of the "locals" that counterattacked the Islamophobic narratives was Nike, the global iconic giant brand from America.

Amid the domestic revolt, Nike unexpectedly released an ad promoting encouragements for Middle Eastern women to overcome the longstanding barriers in sport and highlighting the potencies they have to join the arena. The ad was published on Nike Women Youtube channel under the title of *What Will They Say About You?* on early March 2017. Middle Eastern women on the ad represented in contextual narratives in

relation with social and cultural discriminations they have experienced when they decided to compete in sport. It was a prelude to acknowledge Nike's upcoming product that was narrated to be the first hijab sportswear ever made by giant sport company, the Nike Pro Hijab. A year later in 2018, Nike launched Victory Swim Collection to include hijab women to the next level in aquatic sport as the collection provides tunic, legging, and hijab swimsuits. Nike admittedly received belligerent public attentions that lauding the movement for innovating on alienated Muslim hijab and denouncing it for launching such product that legitimizes oppression towards women (Spector, 2017, as cited in Moore, 2018). Similar contentious activities occurred almost in all Nike's advocacy for inclusive representation; Equality campaign, Black History Month, Collin Kaepernick's Dream Crazy.

On its web page, Nike blatantly declares its intention to use sport as a power for diversity, equity, and inclusion for people, dedicating its products to advocate people's various needs (*Nike Purpose: People*, 2021). Speaking of advocacy, Nike has riveted attention for several statements, campaigns and actions that address social justice issues concerning gender, cultural, and racial inequalities (Waymer & Logan, 2021). Nike's emphasis on the importance of unity, equality, and inclusion underscores its attempt to engage issues of social justice with legitimized position and power in its Corporate Political Advocacy (CPA). The concept of CPA delineates a possible corporate response to societal phenomenon

(Hoffmann et al., 2020). Waymer and Logan states that “Nike’s moral stance on social justice matters might be welcomed by marginalized groups because marginalized persons paradoxically find themselves often challenging powerful institutions and organizations, entrenched in dominant ideologies that they often endeavor to resist. Simultaneously, they may view aligning with a powerful organization that appears to be an ally supporting their cause as a strategic way to magnify oppressed voices, where they might otherwise be silenced,” (2021). Reiterating the discourse of marginalized bodies, therefore, this Nike invention to cover hijab product can be seen as a body positivity movement towards hijab-wearing Muslim women as the product is aimed to accommodate them in breaking the repressive boundaries towards women in athletic terrain, encouraging and inspiring other Muslim women to take actions professionally or merely exercise regularly. In one article journal discussing body positivity, fat activist Virgie Tovar noted: “It’s the embodiment element, it’s the witnessing element. When someone has a body that is like yours, or close enough to yours, and you see it doing things that you’ve been told you cannot do, that bodies like that do not do, it becomes part of a body of evidence” (McGregor, 2017, as cited in Zavattaro, 2020). However, several previous studies provide reasons to not be sympathetic towards Nike’s hijab sportswear.

Waymer and Bradley (2018, as cited in Waymer & Logan, 2021) ask the readers to be suspicious when a company that benefits directly

from the sale of sports apparel, the sponsorship of athletes, and the commodification of athletes' bodies begins to speak out on social justice issues. Sport is major business, especially in the United States, where multimillion-dollar corporate sponsorships of great players are prevalent. Some sources and journalists took a more practical view to this, considering Nike's intention to enter the Muslim market as "business as usual" (Moore, 2018). The New York Post suggested that this issue has to do with demographics, with more than 600,000 Muslim women under the age of 20 living in the United States, back in 2017 (O'Neill, 2017, as cited in Moore, 2018). In terms of global statistics, another quoted source simply stated that one out of every four persons on the planet now is Muslim (Spector, 2017, as cited in Moore, 2018). Evidently, the question whether this quarter of the population has disposable income has been confirmed by the fact that NBC News, using Thomson Reuters report, projected Muslims would spend more than \$300 billion on clothing by the year of 2020 (Constante, 2017, as cited in Moore, 2018).

Bahrainwala and O'Connor (2019) even offer a critical deconstructive understanding of Nike Pro Hijab invention in an upside-down way. Despite considering it as a benevolent movement to advocate Muslim women' body positivity, through several theoretical frameworks given, they suggest the act was a subversive attempt to gain profits by making hijab palatable for Americans. Indeed, what Nike did was a business venture amid the current Islamophobic and xenophobic

backlashes in America. Therefore, endeavoring to preserve its prolific Muslim market and simultaneously evade protests from the natives, Nike was suspected to “tame” the perceived imagery of hijab in Americans’ imagination to the new form of moderate, secular Nike Pro Hijab through commodification. In conclusion, not the least bit approaching the term of body positivity in athletic realm for Muslim women, what Nike did was “surreptitious” body undermining for them.

Additionally, modest sportswear products were surely not framed as “mainstream,” until the arrival of the Nike Pro Hijab (Moore, 2018), suggesting that corporations have tremendous power. Corporations control the media, according to scholars, and the media that arises from this influence is overwhelmingly conservative. Although media deference to a major corporation was evident in the case of Nike's debut into Muslim clothing and the mainstream media's coverage of it, it would be difficult to term the final consequence of such deference "conservative" (Moore, 2018). As Foster and McChesney (2014, as cited in Moore, 2018) suggest, the scenario appears to demonstrate a triumph of commercialism. Moreover, as McChesney (1999, as cited in Moore, 2018) predicts, this commercialism tends to favor corporate conglomerates such as Nike, stepping into a market that smaller companies had been slowly developing for some time, just like this Pro Hijab.

Stemming from the importance of how media representations construct the image of hijab, news articles that cover this Nike's

inclusivity movement will be analyzed to see how the representation of hijab shift to more positive or negative level. This study investigates eight news articles from U.K. and U.S. as to their review regarding Nike Pro Hijab's influence on Muslim women. The news articles from UK and US are selected as both countries are considered to be the representatives of Western first world countries. As news articles serve information with textual and visual modes, Appraisal theory by Martin and White (2005) is deployed in this study for the textual analysis, alongside Social Semiotics by Van Leeuwen (2005), in his book *Introducing Social Semiotics*, for the visual one.

1.2 Research Questions

- How expansive the scope the news articles represent the women' body positivity movement for Muslims in evaluating Nike's Pro Hijab innovation?
- How do the pictures correspond with the news articles' stance(s)?

1.3 Research Objectives

- To analyze the scope of western news articles coverage in representing Nike's Pro Hijab innovation as a body positivity movement for Muslims.
- To reveal the role of the pictures in emphasizing/undermining the standpoints of the news articles.

1.4 Scope

This study will cover news articles from several U.K. and U.S. news companies, regarding the representation of their attitude toward the emergence of Nike Pro Hijab product as a body positivity movement for Muslim women. Words, phrases, and sentences of the news articles will be analyzed to disclose the news articles' stances.

1.5 Significance

The significance of the study is to provide a new perspective of how the invention from giant western brand like Nike is potential to affect western news companies' standpoints to see hijab as an empowerment, or body positivity movement, for Muslim women.

