

***Three Things You Should Know About My Hijab: The Art of Youth Media  
Activism on YouTube***

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### Abstract

This collaborative visual ethnography inquires into a video made by three Muslim, female YouTubers from the Somali-Canadian community. These youth media activists draw upon the affordances of video as multimodal identity text to speak back to dominant understandings circulating in the spaces of schooling and popular culture. *Three Things You Should Know About My Hijab*, deploys visuals, sound, movement, space, gesture, spoken text, and comedy to represent their lived experience from cultural, critical, and creative perspectives. Analysis of aesthetic elements highlights how video technologies open up new modes of meaning making, with transformative possibilities for youth, their communities, and global audiences. The making and sharing of this video exemplifies a critical digital literacy practice, and provokes a rethinking of literacies and curriculum. Educators and researchers should pay attention to New Literacies practices youth are engaging with outside of school, for these richly inform teaching and learning in the digital classroom.

Keywords: racialized Muslim female youth; YouTubers; New Literacies; critical digital literacy; video as multimodal identity text; humor as youth media activism

### Introduction

We are not asking anyone for space; we are just claiming it (Fartousa Siyad)

We use crazy camera angles, lively music, goofy props, and colorful make-up to surprise people and make them laugh. We make fun of a serious issue. We want to show people we are not at all like the Muslim women they usually see in the mainstream media. (Kayf Abdulqadir)

This paper inquires into a video produced by three Muslim female YouTubers living with structural risk from the Somali Canadian community. These youth draw upon the affordances of video as multimodal identity text to speak back to dominant understandings circulating in the spaces of schooling and popular culture. In this award-winning video, shot in a single afternoon, Kayf Abdulqadir, Hodan Hujaleh, and Fartousa Siyad creatively deploy language, visuals, sound, space, and gesture to produce a comedic multimodal text that represents their identities and lived experience from their own creative and cultural perspectives. Their work is light-hearted and they have fun with the media making and sharing process. At the same time, these YouTubers use humor to challenge assumptions about Muslim women. This multimodal analysis of, *Three Things You Should Know About My Hijab*, focuses on their use of aesthetic elements to highlight how access to digital video technologies opens up powerful modes of meaning making to youth at risk of marginalization, with transformative possibilities for them, their communities, and global audiences.

When it first appeared in 2005, YouTube was envisioned as an alternative public cultural space where seldom heard voices might find expression (Jenkins et al, 2006). While we remain cautious about commercialization, privacy issues, fake news, and overstating the democratizing potential of new media for communities at risk of marginalization, for Kayf, Hodan, and Fartousa producing and sharing videos on this social media site has had an enormous impact on their lives and sense of identity as media activists. They contend their work has influenced not only how they view themselves, but also how Somali Muslim females are viewed by others, both in their own communities and beyond. Through

engagement with YouTube they are able to enter into conversations on difference that otherwise would not have been available (Hobbes et al., 2013), at the intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, racialization, sexuality, and religion. Their media making and sharing exemplifies a critical digital literacy practice (Ávila & Zacher Pandya, 2013), and provokes a rethinking of literacies and curriculum in the digital age. Educators and researchers can learn much from the New Literacies (Leu et al., 2013) practices youth are engaging in outside of school, for they richly inform our efforts to innovate teaching and learning in the digital classroom.

### The Research Context

This research draws from a two-year collaborative visual ethnography (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Milne et al., 2012; Pink, 2013; Rose, 2016), which inquires into the media making practices and sense of identity of Kayf, Fartousa, and Hodan. Growing up in Ottawa, they did not see themselves represented in the Ontario provincial curriculum, or in the spaces of popular culture. They had to negotiate this absence in the school curriculum as well as stereotypical representations of Muslim women in the unofficial curriculum of the mass media (Awan et al., 2010; Kassam, 2008; Watt, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2016). Access to YouTube provides them the opportunity to represent their identities and perspectives not only to friends and family, but to a global audience. Hodan, Kayf, and Fartousa are the first females in the Somali Diaspora – and among the first Muslim women – to create and share comedic content on YouTube (Videos can be found on our research website: [www.muslimfemaleyoutubersspeakback.com](http://www.muslimfemaleyoutubersspeakback.com)). Their groundbreaking work inspires conversations on difference and provides a window into everyday youth literacies (Sanford et al., 2014) and their significance for education.

Over a three year period Kayf, Hodan, Fartousa and I (Diane) formally and informally discussed a broad range of topics, including: what it was like growing up in their particular families; their high schooling experiences; representations of Muslim women in the mass media; their video making processes, practices, and texts; audience response; and what making and sharing videos online means to them and their sense of identity. We conducted, recorded, and transcribed one-on-one and group interviews, and collectively analyzed the content of their YouTube videos. Our research is intended to

promote social justice and advocacy goals (Shields, 2012), so our main objective was to share their experiences with educators, researchers, and community audiences. We have done this by speaking with teachers, presenting at academic conferences, publishing articles, leading video production workshops for youth and educators, and through the production of short documentaries that we screen to live audiences and disseminate on our research website. Co-producing documentaries to share their videos and stories involves multiple levels of meaning making: video as mode of inquiry, video as mode of representation, and as video mode of dissemination (Mitchell, 2011). We have chosen to analyze, *Three Things You Should Know About My Hijab*, because of the ways it challenges assumptions about Muslim females through the strategic use of multimodality.

#### Literature Review

Literacy is now considered to be a repertoire of emerging practices for communicating in diverse and multiple social and cultural contexts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Leu et al., 2013; Kalantzis & Cope, 2016; New London Group, 1996). This broadened notion accounts for the expanded role digital technologies play in everyday life. Critical literacies (Freire, 2000) focus on the ability to read power relations and underlying meanings constructed through texts. The issue of who is represented and who is not, for example, is of ongoing concern for education. Advances in digital technologies now permit individuals to “engage with, respond to, and create both text-based and multimodal forms of literacy” (Ávila & Zacher Pandya, p. 3). The use of the term “critical digital literacies” thus marks a shift to include a focus on digital tools and spaces. We theorize the video production practices of Kayf, Fartousa, and Hodan as a critical digital literacy practice, which involves those skills, knowledges, and dispositions that enable one to critically read and create digital, multimedia texts.

Digital technologies have become an integral part of our socio-economic and political landscape. Mobile devices and editing software make it possible for anyone with access to technology to shoot and edit video. A national survey (Steeves, 2014) of students in grades 4 to 11, confirms Canadian youth are enthusiastic users of digital technologies outside of school. This includes video production, which in the past required specialized equipment and expertise most homes and schools did not have. Internet access is

now universal and youth are highly connected. They routinely construct their identities through a combination of text, image, and video. YouTube is particularly significant for inquiries into outside-of-school youth literacy practices because as a user-created content community its size and popularity are unprecedented (Burgess & Green, 2009). YouTube is extraordinarily popular among Canadian youth, with 75% reporting it to be their favorite website (Steeves, 2014). Recent research also tells us that YouTube is used by nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults and 94% of 18- to 24-year olds (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Experts have observed for some time now that the screen is replacing print text as the dominant form of communication (Kress, 2003). In fact, Manjoo (2018) argues, “[t]he defining narrative of our online moment concerns the decline of text, and the exploding reach and power of audio and video” (n.p.).

Being literate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires critical engagement in these digital environments. As “sounds and images become the universal language,” (Manjoo, 2018) educators need to acknowledge the centrality of sites such as YouTube to expand possibilities for minority and other youth to express perspectives absent in the school curriculum and public sphere. Sanford et al. (2014) use the term “everyday youth literacies” to highlight that youth engage in multiple literacy practices in a vast array of contexts. Digital technologies provide new sites for youth identity positioning and construction. In the context of new literacy practices, youth discursively position themselves within the texts they create, using a range of multimodal resources as they continuously construct and negotiate their identities (p. 2). Access to the Internet and digital tools potentially allows children and youth to connect directly to the world and share texts with their peers and other audiences. Digital technologies are transforming the way they learn and share information. Many of their texts demonstrate there is now a “blurring of education, entertainment and civic engagement, [and youth insist] on being taken seriously as they engage in meaningful social issues” (p. 4). Given their ubiquitous use of social media such as YouTube, educators and researchers need to better understand the New Literacy practices being taken up by youth outside school (Jocson, 2013; Sanford et al., 2014). Our examination of one YouTube video provides an example

of how youth draw upon the multimodal affordances of video to critically and creatively communicate their identities and cultures in-between their local communities and global audiences.

### Multimodal Analysis

Multimodality is “an orchestration of multiple modes to communicate, represent, and express meanings” (Rowse, 2013, p. 7). Multimodal analysis (Jewitt, 2006, 2011; Jewett et al., 2016; Kress, 2003, 2010) lends itself to our inquiry into a video and how it conveys meaning in particular contexts. In the short video, *Three Things You Should Know About my Hijab*, Kayf sets out to communicate what it is like to be a Canadian Muslim teenager constantly questioned about her hijab and her identity. This video humorously responds to what these young women consider to be three of the most common questions female youth get about wearing hijab. The use of color, music, props, camera angles, and gestures interrupts the hijab as a signifier of the discourse of the oppressed Muslim woman.

Rowse (2013) describes a “mode” as “a unit of expression and representation” (p. 4). She explains that if something is able to express and communicate meanings that are recognizable within a particular community, it meets the criteria of communicational mode. Jewitt (2009) similarly describes a “mode” as “the outcome of the cultural shaping of a material” (p. 300). Rowse explains that transmodal elements in texts are those that reach across modes, such as the interdependence between visual and sound modes in a film. She underlines that there is “an art to gathering and assembling modes,” to this “layering of semiotic, social, and critical complexities during meaning making” (p. 4). Kress (2010) refers to this as “aptness” or “fitness for purpose” (p. 156). Our analysis takes place mainly at the site of production (Rose, 2016). What are the material qualities of the video and what meanings do they construct? We examine the work of each mode and how they work together to construct a powerful message that speaks back to dominant understandings of Muslim females in the North American context (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). The modes we discuss include linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal (New London Group, 1996). By considering the specific design choices made by successful YouTubers from a community at risk of marginalization, educators and researchers may gain an understanding of contemporary out-of-school youth literacies practices and possible implications for

the classroom.

*Analysis of Three Things You Should Know About my Hijab*

As team leader, Kayf provides artistic vision for their videos. She is also a masterful director and editor. However, the video making process is very much a collaborative effort. When they are involved in a project, the ideas fly in-between them. Hodan and Fartousa have both been actors in their videos, and contribute scripting, technical support, and creative input. In a single afternoon, *Three Things You Should Know About My Hijab* was shot in and around the apartment where Kayf lives, and it was edited the same evening. The project began when Kayf heard about the *Plural Plus Youth Video Festival* (sponsored by the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations and the International Organization for Migration), a few days before the deadline for submission. She and Hodan brainstormed ideas and decided to take on an issue relevant to them in their everyday lives – being questioned about wearing the hijab. They sketched out a rough script, gathered props from around their homes, and found a friend to act alongside Hodan. This is typically how they work. Once they have an idea, they plan, shoot, edit, and share the resulting video within a short period of time. Kayf explains that she thrives under pressure, when an idea is fresh. This is when she feels most creative. Much their work involves improvisation, and Kayf, Fartousa, and Hodan generate a great deal of enthusiasm when they are collaborating on a video. All three love the excitement of working with this medium and making something new. After a flurry of activity, they managed to send off their entry to New York in time to be considered for the competition.

A few months later Kayf received notice that their video had won three international awards, and they were invited to workshops and award ceremonies at the Paley Centre in New York City. Although they had already gained notice from the mainstream media for two previous viral videos they had made, these awards provided another significant source of validation for their work. From among the winning entries, theirs was the only one to use humor to engage some of the difficulties related to being Muslim and female. While in New York, they were also invited to screen their video at special panel hosted at New York University. A few weeks later, it was publicly screened in Times Square as an entry in another youth video festival. This was truly a big moment for the team. Kayf was subsequently invited to screen

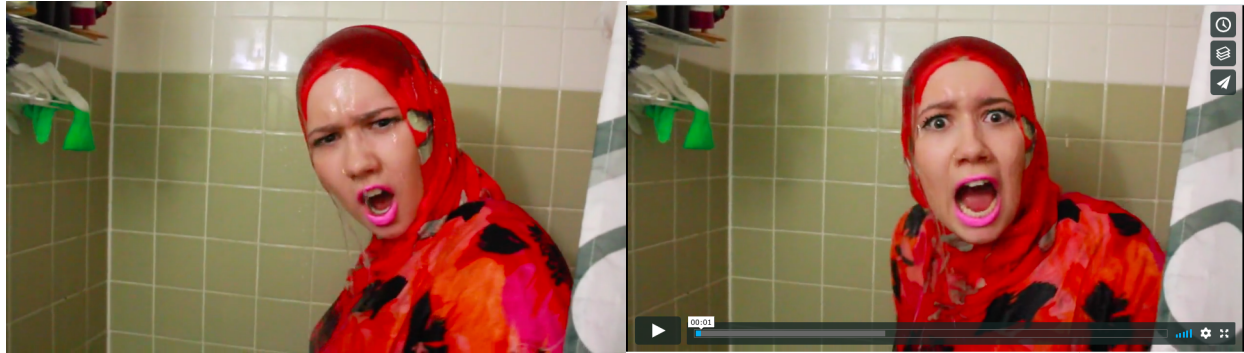


the video at the Hamptons Film Festival, and to participate in United Nations Conferences in New York and Azerbaijan.



Screening in Times Square, New York.

The opening seconds of, *Three Things You Should Know About My Hijab*, immediately capture our attention. We meet Sara, who is in the process of taking a shower. Strangely, she is dripping wet, fully clothed, and wearing hijab. When her eye catches the camera's/our gaze, her exaggerated facial expressions rapidly shift from shock to disgust. Yanking the shower curtain closed to reclaim her privacy, she verbally scolds us to, "Get out!" In two short seconds, we are surprised to find a fully clothed Muslim woman in the shower; we are simultaneously called out for looking. There has not been time to process this scene as a critique of our entanglement in veiling discourses and the narrative of the oppressed Muslim woman. In fact, the unusual circumstances of finding a covered women dressed in an orange in the shower, accompanied by upbeat music in the background, suggest a certain playfulness. What is going on here? Do we dare laugh? We are thrown off balance by the mixed visual and auditory messages, and by our implication in the meanings being constructed in this video.



Sara's facial expressions communicate shock and disgust in the opening scene.

In *Three Things You Should Know About My Hijab*, the two actors – Hodan and Sara – dramatize three of the most common questions Muslim females are asked about wearing hijab. Submissions to the *Plural Plus Video Festival* had to take up intercultural themes in some way. Reflecting on their own lived experiences as Somali-Canadian Muslim females, Kayf and Hodan decided to focus on questions they and their friends have had to negotiate about the hijab. Many people cannot understand how a girl or young woman who has grown up in Canada would choose to cover, and assume that anyone dressed this way is being forced (Watt, 2011b). Rowsell (2013) reminds us that storytelling is not simply a matter of creating social meanings or a personal message. It is a matter of “private and public interests coming together in a text...[T]here are always traces of the producer in the final product” (p. 9), and many ways to tell a story. Access to digital technologies such as video open up access to more modes and media than ever before, so that there is a much “greater latitude for expression” (p. 9).

Sara is dressed in a colorful orange hijab and shocking pink lipstick, and looks gorgeous. These colors were purposefully chosen as a way to speak back to the covered, black, Muslim female bodies routinely on display in the mass media (Watt, 2011a; 2011b; 2102). As we watch the video, we compare this Muslim woman to others we have seen, and these intertextual connections create dissonance and may begin to challenge us. Color is thus used to interrupt stereotypes. Kayf asserts: “We wanted to show our audience that those media portrayals do not represent us.” These YouTubers are “violating the norms and routines of standard language” (vanLeeuwen, 2015, p. 431) to transgress limited identity categories available to Muslim females. This does not only apply to the norms of the dominant culture, but also

those within Islamic communities. The depiction of a covered women in the shower could be interpreted as a lack of respect given that the hijab is a sign of religious devotion. Kayf's team discussed this issue, knowing they were taking a risk by including this scene. In the end, they felt their own devotion to Islam, and the importance of getting their message out to a non-Muslim audience, overrode any criticism they might receive for creating a video perceived as un-Islamic. As racialized black, Canadian, Muslim females, they have become adept at negotiating the complex and sometimes conflicting social, cultural, and religious spaces they inhabit (Watt, 2011b; 2016).

Careful attention is also given to Hodan's physical appearance in the video, but for different reasons. In the role of questioner, her garish attire includes a colorful t-shirt, bejeweled plastic cat glasses, and a pink feather boa. These costume choices are meant to underline the playful, comedic tone of their storytelling. All their videos draw from personal experiences, and Kayf, Hodan, and Fartousa believe that comedy is the best way to challenge assumptions and initiate conversations on difference. By acting silly and making fun of themselves, these YouTubers create a conversational space that feels safe for others to enter into. Besides this, they also stress that, "Somalis are just very funny. People from our culture are always making jokes and laughing. It's who we are" (Fartousa). This may be not what we are expecting given the limited range of Muslim female identities we meet in the mass media. We seldom see Muslim females having fun or laughing in news stories, films, or other popular cultural sites (Watt, 2011a; 2011b; 2012). That being said, in some cultures and Islamic communities, women may be expected to comport themselves in a more serious manner, which may not include laughing on the street, or in a video shared online. Cultural and religious norms are always complicated and constantly shifting, and Kayf, Fartousa and Hodan's YouTube videos push against the boundaries they negotiate in their everyday lives (Watt, 2016).

In the second scene of the video Sara is sitting on a sofa. She announces to the audience there are three questions she often gets asked that "grind her gears." A variety of camera shots are used "to make the scene quirky" (Kayf). The first is a head and shoulder shot with Sara looking directly at the camera, which quickly zooms to a close up. Then next shot points down on Sara from above, and the scene ends

with a shot looking up at her from below. Kayf explains how watching MTV inspired her own camera work. The numerous camera angles, sense of movement, and use of space signal liveliness and engagement, and keep us interested in the story. These shot decisions are not decided upon in advance, but occur as part of their improvisational video making process. Kayf directs and shoots according to what “feels right” in the moment, with input from her team.



Shifting camera angles make use of space to change perspective through movement, which creates a “quirky” effect that destabilizes the viewer.

which

The story then moves to a bus stop where Sara sits, looking at her cell phone. Hodan arrives, fanning herself, and sits down. She turns to Sara and asks: “Oh my God! It’s so hot. Aren’t you, like, hot in that?” Hodan’s facial expressions and hand gestures add to the sense that it really is hot. The camera then shifts to Sara, who answers, “Ah, yaaaa,” as she casts an exasperated glance in Hodan’s direction. The same music continues throughout the video, which helps to maintain the comedic tone while creating continuity and coherence.

In the next scene Hodan is dressed in the pink boa and cat glasses. She tells us they are at a slumber party, and enters through a bathroom doorway. Pulling off her glasses, she squints her eyes in an accusatory fashion, and addresses Sara: “Quick question. Are you, like, bald under there, or what?” The camera lands back on Sara, who is now standing at the sink with her hijab off. The reflection in the mirror

behind her gives us another view of her flipping her long hair around as she turns to answer Hodan with, “What do you think?” Sara is obviously annoyed yet again, with Hodan’s latest inquiry. The script is simple, but in combination with choice of setting, the actors’ body language, costumes, and facial expressions, Kayf is able to capture on video what it feels like for Sara to be questioned about the article of clothing she wears on her head.

The video then switches to Hodan brushing her teeth at a sink. She suddenly stops as if an important thought has come to mind, turns to Sara off-scene and asks, “Do you, like, shower in that?” The camera fixes on Sara sitting near the shower in deep reflection. She turns to look up at the shower to contemplate Hodan’s latest question, and the scene cuts to imagining she is taking a shower fully clothed, and wearing hijab. This is a return to the clip we see at the beginning of the video. When the camera shifts back to Sara reflecting outside the shower, she smiles and shakes her head. “Nooo,” is her response to another ridiculous question. To film her actually taking a shower in her clothes emphasizes how silly this question seems to the filmmakers.



Hodan wears accessories for comedic effect.

The action then moves outdoors, where Sara is now wearing a leopard print headscarf. She is stuck, and shakes to get her large headscarf untangled from a fence. She walks along the sidewalk, reflecting on how, even though at times it may be inconvenient, she loves her hijab. “It makes me who I am today.” Kayf uses voice over here, so Sara is not talking directly to the audience. The choice to wear

hijab is a personal matter, and she made the choice to wear it through careful consideration. The scene changes to Sara sitting on a bench with her young daughter, who adorably pulls the leopard print scarf over her head.

In the final scene, Sara is back on the sofa, wrapping up her story of the three questions she often gets asked. In a friendly (rather than exasperated) voice she tells the audience to “just ask” if we have any questions about the hijab. This seems to contradict the message constructed during the rest of the video regarding always having to justify your identity. However, Kayf points out, that for her, questions are really about context and tone. If someone asks a question that demeans or excludes you, it is not acceptable. However, she welcomes sharing the reasons why she chooses to wear hijab as part of a respectful conversation.

Audience response to this short video has been extremely positive. People do laugh, and a good number are surprised at seeing a Muslim woman represented as funny, strong, thoughtful, and not wearing black. Audience members have suggested to Hodan, Kayf and Fartousa that they are courageous to make a video like this. When they first started producing and sharing videos on YouTube they did find it difficult to deal with some of the negative feedback they received (which they describe as about 10% of the comments posted online). Over time, they have learned to “represent themselves in the manner they choose and to be okay with that” (Fartousa).



“It makes me who I am today.”



“Just ask!”

### **Implications**

This multimodal analysis demonstrates Kayf, Hodan, and Fartousa’s ability to represent their

identities and critical perspectives through the creative choices available to them via the affordances of digital video. They understand “the multimodal communicative potential of aesthetic signifiers” (van Leeuwen, 2015, p. 432), and clearly possess a high degree of aesthetic literacy. In *Three Things You Should Know About My Hijab*, these YouTubers deploy a number of modes that work together to construct a powerful digital text that speaks back to dominant meanings about covered Muslim women. Even more than this, their multimodal text invites important conversations on difference by having the audience laugh with them.

Unfortunately, there is a growing gap between the New Literacies practices youth engage in on their own outside of school, and those taken up in most classrooms. Kayf, Fartousa, and Hodan are self-taught. They developed most of their technical skills, and honed their artistic practice, outside of school. As Rowsell (2013) suggests, teachers and researchers need to expand their understanding of meaning making and what counts as literacy today. One way to do this is to invite children and youth to bring their out-of-school literacies practices into the classroom, and be willing to learn with and from them (Watt, Abdulqadir, Siyad & Hujaleh, forthcoming). Teachers also play an important role in making sure their students develop critical literacies. Of course, traditional print literacies remain important, but they are no longer enough on their own. Multimodal pedagogies (Miller, 2010) and digital authorship (Miller & McVee, 2012) can be engaged through video production, and should be part of learning to read and write at all levels. To this end, educators and researchers can learn a great deal from the exciting media making practices of YouTubers such as Hodan, Kayf, and Fartousa.



Fartousa, Kayf, Hodan, and Diane at  
Paley Center for Media, New York.

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#### Resources

*Three Things You Should Know About My Hijab* (original video, 1:15) <https://vimeo.com/100903430>

*The Making of Three Things About My Hijab* (documentary, 7:12) <https://vimeo.com/125138358>

*Muslim Female YouTubers Speak Back* (documentary, 21:40, and Educator's Discussion Guide)

<https://muslimfemaleyoutubersspeakback.com/our-documentary/>

*Muslim Female YouTubers Speak Back* (research website)

<https://muslimfemaleyoutubersspeakback.com>

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