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Effective Countering Islamophobia Strategies in the Digital Age: Three Approaches

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ABSTRACT: One of the most serious challenges which is still threatening Muslims globally is the surge in Islamophobia, or negative attitudes and excessive fear towards Islam and Muslims. The digital age became a double-edged sword when it comes to the threat of Islamophobia. On one hand, it opened the door for anti-Muslim campaigns to spread widely and quickly online. On the other hand, it provided modern Muslims with much-needed opportunities to resist such hateful campaigns using the very same digital tools. This article sheds light on three important strategies which have been successfully deployed by modern Muslims to resist Islamophobia in the digital age. The first is the effective utilization of humor to resist some of the most hateful anti-Muslim campaigns and misrepresentations in cyberspace and present successful counter-narratives. The second is putting faith in action, through Muslim philanthropy and communal giving, especially amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been done by using digital tools to spread and amplify these good deeds, while resisting Islamophobia simultaneously by correcting some of the false images and skewed misrepresentations about Islam and Muslims and replacing them with positive ones. And the third is boosting the visibility of Muslim women's identities and amplifying their voices, which shatters the negative stereotypes about Muslim women as silent and helpless beings and counters their misrepresentation and marginalization, while countering Islamophobia in parallel. In discussing each of these strategies, the appropriate context is explained and relevant examples are provided to illustrate the arguments made throughout this paper.

THE DILEMMA OF ISLAMOPHOBIA AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS

A number of parallel phenomena have been on the rise lately, namely the influx of Muslims who are living in the diaspora outside of their Muslim-majority countries, mostly in the West; the proliferation of new digital tools and techniques in the age of cyberspace; and the rising wave of Islamophobia internationally, across offline and online boundaries (El-Nawawy and Khamis 2009). A deep study of these interrelated phenomena, and the connections between them, necessitates providing clear definitions of the concept of Islamophobia, its causes, and its varied manifestations.

Islamophobia is commonly defined as “an exaggerated fear, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims that is perpetuated by negative stereotypes resulting in bias, discrimination, and the marginalization and exclusion of Muslims from social, political, and civic life” (Gallup 2018). Its spread has prompted “an increasingly visible ‘backlash’ against Muslims across Europe and the United States” (Tyrer 2013, 3). The term “backlash” encompasses all negative messages received by Muslims, and all harmful acts against them, whether physical, psychological, or both. This includes the controversial cartoon drawings of Prophet Muhammad

by Danish artists in 2006, which triggered negative reactions among many Muslims and some non-Muslims, as a report published by BBC News indicated (Asser 2010).

Some authors also define Islamophobia as “an unfounded hostility towards Muslims, and, therefore, fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (Conway 1997), while others define it as, “an allegedly irrational fear of losing life or liberty to Islamic rule merely because the laws, sacred texts, and traditional practices of Islam demand the submission of culture, politics, religion, and all social expression” (Armstrong 2016, 188).

In all countries in which Muslim populations make up a minority most Muslims experience some form of marginalization, if not outright discrimination, bias, or even hatred. The problem of Islamophobia defined as “the prejudices, negative attitudes, and hostility towards Islam and Muslims” (Abdulla 2007, 1) worsened significantly after the September 11th, 2001 attacks, however. After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, a lot of Islamophobic rhetoric started spreading against Islam and Muslims. This affected the lives of not only American Muslims, but also diasporic Muslims living in the West, in general, as they had to endure massive verbal harassment, discrimination, and even physical attacks because of the widespread false stereotypes that all Muslims are terrorists and extremists. This changed the reality of many Muslims in the West, as many of them started to feel that they not only had to protect themselves and families, rather they also had to protect, or even justify, their religious beliefs and defend their own faith.

Moreover, the false and harmful perceptions of Islam and Muslims did not just proliferate immediately after 9/11, rather they, unfortunately, created long-term lingering effects on Muslims in the West amid consecutive waves of Islamophobia which followed. One of these recent and serious waves of Islamophobia was witnessed during the era of former President Donald Trump, who adopted anti-Muslim policies such as “Muslim Travel Ban One” and “Muslim Travel Ban Two,” which created massive detrimental effects for Muslims around the world who were negatively impacted by such policies and others (Khamis 2018).

THE COMPLEXITIES OF ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE AGE OF CYBERSPACE

Mainstream Western media played a crucial role in contributing to the proliferation of Islamophobia, through negative stereotyping and misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims, two categories which are often wrongly conflated and misperceived as interchangeable and synonymous. Additionally, oftentimes terrorist attacks are covered extensively, and disproportionately, on national media in the West if the attacker happens to have an Arab or a Muslim name, creating an association in the minds of Western audiences between Muslims, Arabs, and acts of violence and terrorism, when only a very tiny fringe of the world’s 1.8 billion Muslims support terrorism, let alone engage in it (Khamis 2021).

The role that Western media plays in the proliferation of Islamophobia reminds us that Islamophobia could be defined as a form of cultural racism. “This form of racism causes hatred and enmity based on religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and ethnic origin. Hostility toward Muslims is manifested by cultural and religious factors” (Green 2015, 27). Additionally, “anti-Muslim racism is characterized by the re-articulation and politicization of a huge archive of metaphors, stereotypes, and images constituted by the long history of Orientalism” (Müller-Uri and Opratko 2016, 121).

Cyberspace became a double-edged sword for the dilemma of Islamophobia. The internet, with its many applications, instant and unfiltered nature, wide outreach, and multiple usages, provides both the best platforms to spread Islamophobia, as well as the ideal tools to

counter it, simultaneously (Khamis 2018). On one hand, “The widespread use of social media is directly proportional to the widespread practice of spreading Islamophobia in the digital realm, especially in Western societies whose understanding of Islam or Muslims is primarily based on negative media stereotypes” (Fawzy et al. 2022, 220). On the other hand, however, social media also provided unprecedented opportunities for Muslims, especially those who are young and technologically savvy, to counter digitally based Islamophobia-inspired campaigns through presenting alternative counter-narratives using various effective strategies and techniques, as will be fully discussed in the rest of this paper.

In this section, however, the focus is on presenting a number of examples of how social media provided platforms for anti-Muslim rhetoric to spread digitally. Some of the unmonitored and unchecked internet platforms and interactions could be considered one of the main factors behind the spread of Islamophobia internationally, as they provide an ideal environment for the spread of rumors, unchecked messages, misinformation, and disinformation (Khamis 2021).

One particularly dangerous phenomenon is the spread of “Cloaked Facebook Pages,” which are “created to spread political propaganda by cloaking a user profile and imitating the identity of a political opponent in order to spark hateful and aggressive reactions” (Farkas et al. 2017, 1850). One example of this harmful and dangerous phenomenon has been the creation of fake Islamist pages on Facebook under false Muslim names to spout hatred against non-Muslims and to spread radical, extremist ideologies, thus triggering negative and aggressive reactions from non-Muslims online, and perpetuating anti-Muslim hate speech (Farkas et al. 2017). This ongoing vicious cycle contributes significantly not just to anti-Muslim hatred online, but also to anti-Muslim actions offline in everyday settings.

The internet also provides unfiltered platforms which help spread toxic content and hate speech. This is especially harmful to Muslims, as it negatively impacts their images and reputation. One example is Islamophobic Twitter campaigns, such as #BanIslam. This campaign fueled anti-Muslim sentiments, through warning against the dangers of so-called “Islamic extremism,” thus instilling fear and hatred in people’s hearts against Islam and Muslims. Some of the comments which circulated under this hashtag #BanIslam included tweets such as, “A 24-year-old resident of an asylum seeker center in Holland has been arrested after going on a stabbing rampage injuring seven people inside the center. The motive for the stabbing was not immediately clear. Poor WiFi signal maybe. #BanIslam #ReligionofPeaceLOL,” and “Continuing the policy of appeasement with the Iranian regime is a very dangerous thing, and they should know that if they do, Iranian terrorists will open the doors of their homes in the United States, and that is why the world must stand up to them #BanIslam” (Khamis 2021). Also, a woman using an account named “IAmNotABotIAmAmericanPatriot” tweeted “The Mullahs blood lusts are insatiable. We’re already witnessing the results of embracing their ideology here in our great country and the exposure to it is taking a dreadful toll. #BanIslam #NoSharia” (Khamis 2021).

Of course, these are just a few examples among many. Unfortunately, in today’s digital world where information exchange occurs instantly and simultaneously at a very fast pace, it is impossible to stop or censor these types of campaigns entirely, especially taking into account the speed and ease with which they could be shared and re-shared many times in cyberspace. This makes it especially important to come up with effective alternative narratives and successful countering Islamophobia strategies and techniques, as will be fully discussed in this article.

HUMOR AS AN EFFECTIVE COUNTERING ISLAMOPHOBIA STRATEGY

It is possible to say through humor many things which, otherwise, could not be said in a serious conversation. Therefore, humor is a particularly excellent tool for tackling difficult issues and navigating sensitive conversations. Thus, unsurprisingly, the deployment of humor was proven to be a very effective technique when it comes to countering Islamophobia online.

One good example is the reaction by Muslims, and some non-Muslims, to the #Muslimrage which started in 2012, as these things often do, as a publicity play by *Newsweek*, which was trying to promote its new cover and to attract readership (Garber 2012). Yet this attempt failed miserably and even backfired when many readers were united in their rejection of *Newsweek*'s premise that "Muslim rage" is something to be talked about, under the magazine's brand, on Twitter. "Which is also to say: People rejected glibness. They rejected cynicism. They rejected reductive branding. And they did so, specifically, by reappropriating the hashtag *Newsweek* had proposed. They treated #Muslimrage not in the way *Newsweek* had framed it, but instead as exactly what it was: a joke" (Garber 2012).

The hashtag was meant to host a rather more serious discussion sparked by a *Newsweek* feature written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, describing "how she survived Muslim rage—and how we can end it" (Chappell 2012). However, "inspired by the all-caps headline 'MUSLIM RAGE' on the cover of *Newsweek*, irreverent tweeters who happen to be Muslim gave a glimpse of what really ticks them off—or at least, what makes them irate enough to make a joke" (Chappell 2012). Here are a few good examples of the funniest and most sarcastic jokes they tweeted, as part of the #MuslimRage campaign, which went viral on Twitter. A hijabi Muslim woman tweeted "I'm having such a **good hair** day. No one even knows. #MuslimRage." Another Muslim woman tweeted "Lost your kid **Jihad** at the airport. Can't yell for him. #MuslimRage." And a Muslim man tweeted "Just saw my friend Jack on the plane, but can never yell **Hi Jack!** #MuslimRage." (Chappell 2012).

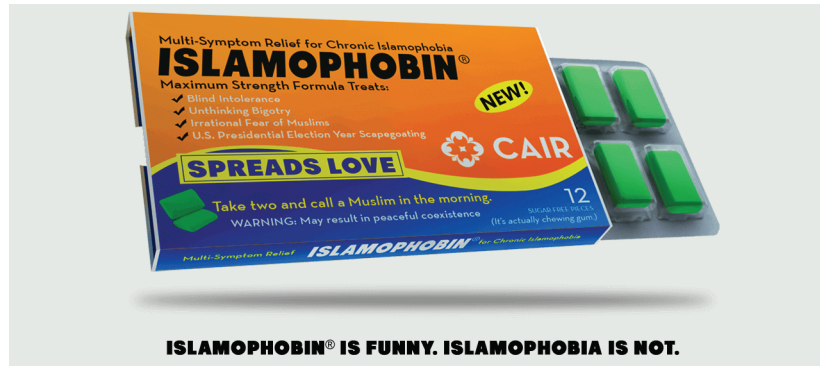
Through sharing these sarcastic and funny tweets online, it could be said that these Muslim audiences turned the magazine's own cynicism into something better—something funny and meaningful and insightful and real. They turned *Newsweek*'s "scripted experience" into something they wrote on their own (Garber 2012).

By appropriating the meme #MuslimRage in the funniest, wittiest, and most sarcastic ways, they were able to successfully ridicule Islamophobia, while telling their own stories and narratives in their own voice. There is no better way to counter anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Newsweek's provocative action and the successful laughter-provoking and thought-provoking online campaign in response to it triggered some solidarity in support of Muslims and some criticism to *Newsweek* as well. For example, one woman tweeted "*Newsweek* went from #BlackRage in 1985 to MuslimRage in 2012. I feel sorry for #BlackMuslim friends."

Another good example of the deployment of humor was the #Islamophobin pill campaign which was launched by CAIR (The Council on American-Islamic Relations) in 2016. It was a hilarious, sarcastic, witty, and tactful campaign, suggesting that those who exhibit symptoms of Islamophobia, diagnosed as excessive and irrational fear of Muslims, should seek treatment from this disease by taking the make believe #Islamophobin pill, until all their Islamophobic symptoms are cured. Featuring the mock pill in an online video and on various social media platforms, the campaign indicated that "#Islamophobin provides a multi-symptom relief for chronic Islamophobia. The maximum strength formula treats blind intolerance, unthinking bigotry, irrational fear of Muslims, and U.S. presidential election year scapegoating" (CAIR 2016).

Here are some images from CAIR's successful #Islamophobin online campaign:



What is ISLAMOPHOBIN®?

ISLAMOPHOBIN® is a multi-symptom relief for chronic Islamophobia.

The maximum strength formula treats:

- ✓ Blind Intolerance
- ✓ Unthinking Bigotry
- ✓ Irrational Fear of Muslims
- ✓ U.S. Presidential Election Year Scapegoating

Packa



THE STORY OF ISLAMOPHOBIN

We believe that a little humor goes a long way. With Islamophobia on the rise in the U.S. and other parts of the world, what better way to help dispel the bigotry and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims than through satire? We developed Islamophobin to help "cure" this rampant pandemic.

Help us chew away at Islamophobia by sharing Islamophobin with everyone you know. Get yours today!

This campaign was inspired by the efforts of the Muslim community in Sweden.

A third online campaign which also effectively deployed humor was #MuslimsReportStuff. When presidential candidate Donald Trump answered a question by a Muslim woman during the second presidential debate in 2016 about the potential danger of Islamophobia and what he is planning to do about it, he responded with an Islamophobic answer, suggesting that American Muslims should always *report* anything they witness that may seem remotely suspicious. This triggered the Twitter campaign by Muslims, #MuslimsReportStuff, which was hilarious, witty, sarcastic, and bitterly funny. It included tweets such as, “Attn: FBI and CIA: my 4-year-old cousin called Aryana Grande. ‘Ariana GRENADE.’ I’ll keep monitoring his behavior. #MuslimsReportStuff,” “I am Muslim. Want2 report six Americans won the Nobel prize this year in various sciences. ALL of them immigrants. #MuslimsReportStuff,” “I took an extra pack of free peanuts at the car wash this afternoon. #MuslimsReportStuff,” and “My husband did the dishes today ... suspicious activity? I’ll keep an eye out. #MuslimsReportStuff” (Khamis 2021).

The strategic deployment of humor in the previously mentioned campaigns was effective in creating a strong, powerful, and far-reaching impact. Such examples illustrate the power of the internet, social media, and citizen journalism, when properly used and effectively deployed. They also exemplified some of the effective strategies needed to counter Islamophobia, including combining technological savvy with cultural competency, wit, humor, intelligence, and immediacy, in addition to selecting the right message, the right medium, and the right time to reach the right audience (Khamis 2021).

Indeed, the successful deployment of humor turned out to be a powerful weapon in the battle against Islamophobia and its varied and complex manifestations.

PUTTING FAITH IN ACTION: MUSLIM PHILANTHROPY AMID COVID-19

One of the most important principles of effective public relations and positive image building is “doing good and telling people about it.” In this section, there is a special focus on how the good efforts extended by various Muslim groups during the COVID-19 pandemic helped counter the negative image of Islam and Muslims, especially when they were publicized through various avenues, especially digital platforms.

The tradition of charity and charitable giving is deeply entrenched in the Muslim faith and in Muslim communities. There are many different ways that philanthropy is practiced, and defined, by Muslims. The most general forms of almsgiving include “helping the poor, sick, elderly, and homeless” as well as dedicating time to mosques and other organizations (Siddiqui 2010, 39). Such practices have their roots in the Islamic tradition of *zakat*, the practice of almsgiving that is viewed as a requirement for Muslims to serve God (Singer 2008, 34), and which is one of the five pillars of Islam.

One of the significant moments which illustrated these Islamic values of sharing and caring was the COVID-19 pandemic. When the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly swept the world in 2020, it caused a plethora of unexpected effects which impacted various aspects of life, including, but not limited to, education, employment, travel, health, the economy, and even media consumption, information-seeking, and information-sharing. It also widened the gaps and magnified the disparities between the haves and have-nots, whether between one country and another or even inside the same country, in the various economic, social, and digital domains. This necessitated intervention, assistance, solidarity, collaboration, and community building, while providing unprecedented opportunities for various communities to step up their humanitarian relief efforts and to extend their support to others, locally and globally. One of the communities which stepped up its charitable and philanthropic efforts significantly amid the pandemic is the global Muslim community, especially Muslims living in affluent Western countries (Khamis 2022a).

For example, the American-Muslim community has been one of the most active philanthropic communities amid the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath in a number of meaningful and tangible ways. According to an ISUP (Institute for Social Policy and Understanding) 2020 report, the American-Muslim community provided medical support, through medical clinics, doctors, and nurses, who were brave first responders amid the pandemic, in addition to helping those in need maintain food security and receive all the needed supplies. These efforts were not just confined to helping other Muslims, rather they extended far and wide beyond the Muslim community to help “Others” from different backgrounds (Alsoofy and Coplen 2020).

One of the most important factors which aided this accelerating process of global Muslim philanthropy amid the COVID-19 pandemic is the phenomenon of digitalization, or the reliance on new digitally based communication tools and technologies. These more modern ways of giving which were made possible through internet-based practices facilitated digital almsgiving across the boundaries of culture, region, religion, and geography. One good digital example is “GoFundMe,” which facilitates giving a helping hand internationally and reaching out to people in need throughout the world via social media (Khamis 2022a).

“Muslim philanthropy is moving beyond the local to reach the global. This global outreach, which exacerbated in the midst of the pandemic, wouldn’t have been possible without new digital tools and internet-based applications,” Osman Dulgeroglu, the executive director of the charity “Embrace Relief,” explained in an interview. “It is an absolute necessity in the age of globalization to expand all forms of charity and acts of philanthropy to reach as many people as possible in all corners of the world. This became even more crucial amid the pandemic, with all the hardships which came along with it and the increasing demand for help and support globally. None of that would have been possible without the internet” (Dulgeroglu 2020).

The same opinions were shared by a number of Muslims affiliated with several organizations which are actively involved in charitable and philanthropic efforts, such as Islamic Relief and others. They all emphasized the vital importance of internet-based services and digitally based outreach efforts amid the global health crisis of COVID-19, in terms of facilitating both online fundraising and donations and reaching out to those in need of services. They also stressed the value and significance of this surge in digitalization in terms of enhancing the image of Islam and Muslims worldwide, especially since they served both Muslims and non-Muslims globally (Khamis 2022a).

These parallel processes of digitalization and global outreach were effective in countering the many negative effects of the pandemic and the spread of misinformation and disinformation related to it, on one hand, as well as fighting and correcting the negative images and misrepresentations about Islam and Muslims internationally, on the other hand. They ensured that the right aid and the accurate information reached the right people at the right time, along with a nuanced and deep understanding and appreciation of Muslim communal ethics and charitable practices (Khamis 2022a).

It is safe to say that while Muslims resorted to social media campaigns and other forms of digital communication to counter dangerous waves of global Islamophobia, actions always speak louder than words. Therefore, the impressive acts of charity and philanthropy which Muslims from different countries, backgrounds, races, genders, and ethnicities initiated and contributed to worldwide during the pandemic could be considered the best and most effective weapons to fight Islamophobia through enhancing the image of Muslims globally and boosting their positive representation, both online and offline (Khamis 2022a).

This is especially important since the COVID-19 pandemic was accompanied by the dual pandemic of escalating Islamophobia. “In 2020, during the pandemic, information was

spread that Muslims could not understand the current situation in the world and, in general, did not follow hygiene rules. There were rumors that they were spreading the virus on purpose. During this period, posts with offensive content were published, for example, ‘Most Muslims are dirty’, ‘Muslims do not follow the rules of hygiene’, and ‘Let them infect each other’” (Rose 2021, 19). Such hateful rhetoric, unfortunately, resulted in the escalating harassment of Muslims and the increase in physical and psychological violence against them (Tandilashvili 2021).

An equally important point is preparing the Muslim leaders of the future who can serve as exemplary role models in the parallel realms of leadership and philanthropy, moving forward. “The pandemic was an excellent opportunity not just to exemplify and illustrate the great Islamic values and traditions of charity and generosity, but, most importantly, to go a step further to train and prepare the new generation of Muslim philanthropic leaders and role models of the future. We need more than one Muslim Bill Gates. That’s how we can counter the skewed narratives about Islam and Muslims and fight Islamophobia” (Yunus 2020).

Moreover, the significant and prominent roles played by Muslim women as caregivers, philanthropists, nurses, and doctors during the pandemic provided excellent examples of communal service locally and internationally, across all racial, demographic, and ethnic groups, as well as across national and international borders and cross-cultural boundaries (Khamis 2022a). This was an effective countering Islamophobia strategy, as it helped shatter some of the negative images and skewed stereotypes about Islam, in general, and Muslim women, in particular.

One good example is the women-led non-profit organization “American Muslim Senior Society” which extended its services and support not just to Muslims but also to non-Muslim seniors amid the pandemic. According to the founder and executive director of this organization Ms. Mona Negm:

All the Muslim women volunteers in this organization went out of their way to provide a wide range of services to those who need them the most, especially seniors in isolated and marginalized communities. These wraparound services included scheduling medical checkups, accessing healthcare services, providing medical supplies, such as masks and sanitizers, in addition to mental health monitoring, and even distributing hot halal meals, as part of an initiative known as “Halal Meals on Wheels” (Negm 2020).

Ms. Negm explained that her active team relied on both online and offline outreach efforts to identify the communities and individuals in dire need amid the COVID-19 pandemic, reach out to them, and provide them with the best possible services. She added that her organization extended much-needed services to some marginalized non-Muslims as well who were in need of help and support during the pandemic (Khamis 2022a). Here again, since actions always speak louder than words, extending these vital services to those in need, regardless of their religious affiliation, amid a global health crisis is a much more effective countering Islamophobia technique than words and campaigns alone.

Another bright example of both Muslim charity and philanthropy amid the deadly pandemic and also Muslim women’s activism and community engagement was the important efforts by some African-American Muslim sisters to help their community which was impacted the worst by the deadly virus. Nisa Muhammad, a PhD candidate in the African Studies Department at Howard University and the Assistant Dean for Religious Life at Howard University, commented on the important role played by Black American Muslim women to support the most vulnerable in their community.

In the early days of the pandemic, little attention was placed on the risks to Black Muslims who were impacted the most by the pandemic. Muslim Wellness Foundation partnered with the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative to launch the National Black Muslim COVID Coalition on March 23, 2020. Both of those organizations are led by Black Muslim women. They brought their skills and talents to these new initiatives to provide the necessary advocacy, research, and resources which are most needed for the Black Muslim community. (Muhammad 2020).

Highlighting the power of communication and digitalization she also added that

The coalition's other projects include the publication of the Black COVID Survey and report, and the establishment of the "Wisdom of the Elders" project to address the devastating impact of social isolation, loneliness, and disconnection from the community amid the pandemic. This is an intergenerational storytelling and documenting project. They also organized the American Muslim COVID Loss Survey to gather information about deaths in American Muslim communities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. All of these projects are also led by Black Muslim women. (Muhammad 2020).

Such humanitarian efforts were exemplary not just in serving communities in dire need during the pandemic, but, most importantly, in defying the false narratives, skewed misrepresentations, and negative stereotypes which cloud Muslim women's true identities and mask their lived realities and which contribute in large part to the challenge of Islamophobia (Khamis 2022a). This, in turn, contributes to defying many Islamophobic attitudes which are grounded in false narratives about Muslim women's oppression, silencing, and invisibility, as will be discussed.

MUSLIM WOMEN'S ONLINE VOICES, VISIBILITIES, AND RESISTANCES

Any Google search of the term "Muslim women" generates hundreds of photos of women totally cloaked in black garments from head to toe, and even artistic images of women confined to the harem, in a Shahrazad-like, fairytale fashion. These images rarely exist in a vacuum and are not generated by coincidence. Rather, they are reflective of long-held and deeply rooted, stereotypes (Soltani and Thinyane 2019) about Muslim women, who have been traditionally falsely depicted as submissive, repressed, and silenced, or as overly sexualized objects, or both, from a purely Orientalist, ethnocentric, Western perspective.

To defy these faulty and oftentimes toxic images of marginalization, helplessness, and silence, Muslim women started a number of important campaigns online. One of them was the 2016 viral #CanYouHearUsNow Twitter campaign in response to Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump when he insinuated that Ms. Ghazala Khan's religion might have stopped her from speaking at the Democratic National Convention when she stood silent beside her husband, Mr. Khizr Khan, on stage. Soon after, Ms. Khan stood up for herself and spoke out in a televised interview, explaining that she remained silent only after seeing a displayed photo of her martyred son, a Muslim American fallen soldier, which made her very emotional (Khamis 2018). Ms. Khan, the mother of the fallen soldier, even wrote an Op-Ed in *The Washington Post* under the title: "Donald Trump said I had nothing to say. I do."

Soon after, in response to this incident, other Muslim women started a far-reaching Twitter campaign using the hashtag #CanYouHearUsNow to show just how powerful, strong,

vocal, and outspoken they are, exhibiting clear examples of their successes and achievements in various professional fields. In other words, they effectively, and powerfully, countered and *resisted* the distorted stereotype of the silenced, oppressed, and marginalized Muslim woman by making their *voices* heard, loudly and clearly, through this Twitter campaign (Khamis 2018).

Many of the tweets in this massive campaign went viral on Twitter, spilling over into mainstream media. Here are a few examples, among many. A tweet from the Washington DC-based group Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights: Karamah, which means dignity in Arabic, proclaimed: “Today we raise our voices for Muslim women around the world who empower their community #CanYouHearUsNow.” American-Muslim activist, Hind Makki, commenting on a photo of 80 American Muslim women speakers at the ISNA (Islamic Society of North America), declared, “Check out all these Muslim women speakers NOT silent at a major American Muslim conference #CanYouHearUsNow.” In a post displaying an image of Wonder Woman, Faiza N. Ali tweeted: “I’m an organizer, activist, public servant fighting 4 dignity & respect. Pretty much Wonder Woman #CanYouHearUsNow.” Rim-Sarah Alouane provocatively asked, “@realDonaldTrump I’m a #humanrights scholar, trying to make sure rights and freedoms are protected. What do you do? #CanYouHearUsNow.” And Dalia Mogahed who is the co-author of the book *Who Speaks for Islam?* exclaimed: “Muslim women ‘not allowed to speak?’ I gave a @TEDTalks and got a standing ovation #CanYouHearUsNow.” Prominent Muslim activist Linda Sarsour tweeted: “We raise Nobel Peace Prize winners, we are Nobel Peace Prize winners. #CanYouHearUsNow.” Muslim journalist Rowaida Abdelaziz tweeted “I’m an outspoken, Muslim female journalist because I’m tired of mainstream media defaming, misrepresenting & silencing us. #CanYouHearUsNow.”

Interestingly, and refreshingly, some non-Muslim women expressed their solidarity with Muslim women who launched this online campaign to amplify their voices and boost their visibility, as the following tweet clearly illustrates: “I’m not a Muslim woman but I love and respect you #CanYouHearUsNow contributors! Keep up the great work!!” (Aziza 2016).

In commenting on this influential online campaign, some mainstream media outlets described it as a powerful and effective effort to showcase the diverse voices, talents, and successes of Muslim women who—as journalists, activists, academics, and more—demonstrated how they regularly speak out to make the world a better place (Khamis 2022b).

The campaign was also praised for helping Muslim women take back their own *narratives*—especially at a time when their (mis)perceived oppression under Islam is exploited as a means to implement discriminatory policies, and when they are the most frequent targets of hate crimes and bias incidents. The public impact of this campaign also revealed how social media democratizes voice share if used properly: amplifying voices often ignored by mainstream media while, at the same time, encouraging reporters and journalists to pay attention and communicate accurate stories. Other media outlets commended Muslim women for amplifying their voices, broadcasting their strength, and, most importantly, reclaiming the narrative from Trump while exposing his Islamophobic, sexist, and misogynistic rhetoric in a simple, agile, effective, and powerful manner (Aziza 2016).

Such powerful examples signified an important, and much-needed, spillover from the realm of citizen journalism to the realm of mainstream media, which contributes to rectifying some of the skewed misperceptions and stereotypes about Muslim women in Western media, while countering their underrepresentation in these media outlets simultaneously.

Here is an image from the #CanYouHearUsNow Twitter campaign which is worth a thousand words:



Another powerful example of Muslim women's digital efforts to resist Islamophobia is the online campaign #HandsOffMyHijab which started in France to resist the decision taken by the French government in 2021 to ban girls under the age of 18 from publicly wearing the *hijab* (Islamic headscarf), and prohibiting mothers wearing the *hijab* from accompanying their children on school fieldtrips (Reuters 2021). The amendment to an 'anti-separatism' bill designed to strengthen France's secular values and which applies to girls under 18 has drawn outrage and prompted an online protest under the hashtag #HandsOffMyHijab (#PasToucheAMonHijab) that went viral beyond French borders (Reuters 2021), because it succeeded to frame its mission as "a campaign to stop religious discrimination globally #HandsOffMyHijab."

France, a country where approximately 5 million Muslims live has laws that many, not only Muslims, consider as anti-Islam laws. These laws are related to French secularism—laicism, which is often perceived as a tool used by the state to legitimize Islamophobia in the country. Bans in the country apply to religious symbols, including Islamic headscarves. In 2010, wearing the *niqab* and *burqa* was banned in France (Tandilashvili 2021).

In 2021, the French Senate proposed to ban the wearing of the *hijab* in public places by girls under the age of 18. Along with this, the ban will affect the wearing of *hijab* by women, mothers of students, and the wearing of religious symbols by public officials on school trips. It is natural that this law caused a reaction from Muslims, and not just Muslims, and the #HandsOffMyHijab campaign went viral on social media ("Law against Islam" 2021). In October 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron said that Islam is a religion that is

experiencing a crisis all over the world today, and in France, it was necessary to free Islam from foreign influence (Yeung 2021).

Such a hegemonic discourse is not only Islamophobic, it also resonates with the infamous so-called “save the Muslim woman syndrome,” whereby “Others” strive to allegedly protect Muslim women by choosing what is best for them. This is one of the main reasons for Muslim women’s objection and opposition to such top-down measures by the French government which they perceive as infantilizing them, taking away their freedoms, and discriminating against them.

A 16-year-old devout Muslim girl living in France commented on this decision saying “It’s part of my identity. To force me to remove it would be a humiliation. I cannot understand why they would want to pass a law that discriminates” (Reuters 2021).

Another young female medical student living in France commented “(The politicians) want our emancipation, they want to save us from this imaginary oppression, but it is they who are oppressing us,” while another French Muslim woman remarked “(It is) symptomatic of the constant policing of women’s bodies, choices and beliefs that we have in France, as well as the instrumentalization of Muslim women” (Reuters 2021).

To express their objection to this infringement on their religious freedom and their right to choose their attire, a group of young French Muslim women started running the #PasToucheAMonHijab (#HandsOffMyHijab) campaign from the living rooms of their families’ flats. They have drawn support from social media influencers, a US lawmaker and Ibtihaj Muhammad, the first American woman to wear a hijab while competing in the Olympics, among others (Reuters 2021).

Thanks to the framing of this campaign as a protection of Muslim women’s basic human rights, including their religious freedom and the freedom to choose their attire, although this campaign originated in France, it quickly went viral online, spreading like wildfire across various social media platforms, while triggering wide international reactions in support of Muslim women’s human rights and civil liberties.

Here are some images related to the #HandsOffMyHijab Twitter campaign:





Such bright examples illustrate how Muslim women were able to effectively exercise their agency online, through effectively utilizing the opportunities made possible for them in cyberspace to *resist* misrepresentation, stereotyping, profiling, and marginalization. Through engaging in these gendered struggles in cyberspace, it is apparent that Muslim women are fighting two parallel battles: One against the negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims, in general, and another against the false misrepresentations and misperceptions of Muslim women's identities and lived realities, in particular. The two struggles are certainly closely intertwined, thus the responses to them should be equally interrelated, as the above examples clearly illustrate.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The above discussions clearly illustrated the complexities and nuances of the concept of Islamophobia, by situating it within the appropriate historical, social, political, and cultural settings, as well as the appropriate temporal and spatial contextualization. Like all forms of discrimination and xenophobia, it is always an evolving, multifaceted, and elusive process, which takes different forms, and is expressed through various manifestations, based on a multitude of underlying factors and shifting influences. However, we can argue that the continuous efforts to counter Islamophobia are also constantly evolving and taking on different forms, shapes, and directions.

In tackling the complex issue of countering Islamophobia in the digital age and its multiple manifestations and implications, this article paid special attention to the successful efforts exerted by modern Muslims to utilize the very same tools which have been used against

them to resist their marginalization and misrepresentation. The first strategy of deploying humor online proved to be especially successful in raising awareness about the complex and multifaceted challenge of Islamophobia and its far-reaching implications in a way which is easily accessible to a wide audience. By including funny, sarcastic, and witty messages, whether in a written or visual form, or both, many of these campaigns went viral and proved to be very successful and effective.

The second strategy of putting faith in action through the diverse philanthropic efforts and activities by different groups of Muslims in various domains, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and its many social and economic implications, illustrated how such efforts contributed to challenging the negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims and countering the rising tide of Islamophobia.

The third strategy of amplifying Muslim women's voices and raising their visibility proved to be especially helpful in achieving the dual goal of countering Muslim women's invisibility and misrepresentation, while fighting Islamophobia at the same time.

Through unpacking the complexities and nuances of this unique amalgamation of interrelated phenomena, and the overlaps and crossovers between them, we can learn a lot about the dynamics of modern Muslims' shifting identities, lived realities, and the challenges facing them, including the challenge of Islamophobia, and how these dynamic and evolving phenomena are taking new forms and heading in new directions in the age of cyberspace.

The article paid special attention to how the internet which became an important platform for the spread of Islamophobia also offered unique opportunities to counter Islamophobia by providing some of the fastest, most effective, and most powerful tools to fight it, through organized mediated online campaigns. Some of these campaigns which have recently been launched by young Muslims online went viral and became visible and effective. However, there is still a dire need for more systematic and continuous efforts to counter this toxic phenomenon in the future.

It is only wise to predict that, moving forward, new generations of young and technologically savvy Muslims will certainly explore and deploy more innovative strategies and techniques not only to react to Islamophobia and resist it, but also, most importantly, to be proactive about spreading positive images and accurate representations about Islam and Muslims globally in the age of cyberspace with its unlimited possibilities and emerging capabilities. After all, being the fire preventer is always better than being the fire fighter. This is certainly true when dealing with the complex issue of Islamophobia and its far-reaching implications.

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