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Muslims Never Bomb on Stage: Audience Perceptions of Muslim Standup Comedy

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

MUSLIMS NEVER BOMB ON STAGE:
AUDIENCE PERCEPTIONS OF MUSLIM STANDUP COMEDY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

PROGRAM IN SOCIOLOGY

BY

BILAL HUSSAIN

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the audience perceptions of Muslim standup comedy by Muslim-American college and university students. The research question is ‘Do Muslim-Americans feel as if Muslim standup comedy is painting a new image of Islam and Muslims?’ There has yet to be any published research that asks Muslim-Americans for their perspectives regarding Muslim standup comedy. Since Muslim-Americans are some of the consumers of Muslim standup comedy, this demographic is necessary to study when it comes to exploring the consumption of Muslim standup comedy. The methodology for this research is a qualitative method that involves semi-structured in-depth interviews with Muslim-Americans. I sampled Muslim-American college and university students from various colleges and universities throughout the Chicago-land and Illinois area. Respondents are between the ages of 18 – 30 years. The respondents were recruited through snowball sampling for this research, since the respondents were interconnected to the same social group. Muslim-Americans provided their own perspectives regarding the role that Muslim standup comedy has with their lives.

CHAPTER ONE

SPILLING THE PAINT

The attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 have dramatically altered the perception of Muslims within the larger American public. Since September 11, 2001 the religion of Islam and Muslims have become a mainstream topic of discussion. As Mucahit Bilici puts it, “Curiosity about Muslims in the United States is not limited to the pages of the *New York Times*. It is shared by neighbors and coworkers, as well as by the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security” (2012: 4).

Bilici’s chapter in the book *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (Bilici 2010) contained a discussion of Muslim standup comedy in relation to people having a curiosity of Muslims. Mucahit Bilici refers to Muslim standup comedy as being “ethnic comedy” (2010:196). This type of ethnic comedy is “a form of code-switching in the face of situations where the language of reason is overtaken by a wrong common sense or common wrong sense” (2010:207). Bilici argued that when Muslims perform standup comedy they are attempting to construct a bridge between Muslims and the rest of American society. This bridge is in the form of comedy and laughter in which both Muslims and the rest of American society can participate (2010:196).

Bilici then went on to discuss the audience admiration of Muslims from the television show *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. He stated that the creator of this television show believes the broader society loves *Little Mosque on the Prairie* because it makes

Muslims look normal or as everyday citizens (2010:205). This use of media that depicts Muslims as normal or as everyday people is similar to the use of Muslim standup comedy. Comedy creates a common thread for both Muslims and the rest of American society where the latter group can laugh at the tongue-in-cheek jokes – if they get the jokes, presented by Muslim standup comedians.

There has been an increase of Muslim standup comedians appearing in America's popular culture. These particular comedians have a unique set of insights that is not typically studied by many scholars in the social sciences, even though many Muslim standup comedians attempt to use comedy as a form of activism. In particular, one thing Muslim standup comedy attempts to do is “promote a better image of Arab and Muslim-Americans” (Amarasingam 2010:470). Take for example a recent film titled *The Muslims Are Coming!* It showcased various Muslim comedians performing comedy in various towns throughout the U.S. According to the film's website, *The Muslims Are Coming!* wants to change the discourse of Muslims by releasing “the power of punch lines in reaching out to middle America! If all you've ever heard about Islam is that it's a dangerous religion, that women cover themselves, and that those shifty eyed Muslims have evil ulterior motives, this movie wants to give you a new stereotype”.¹

Since Muslim-American standup comedians perform their comedy routines in front of Muslim-Americans and non-Muslims, they do so with intentions of shattering stereotypes among Muslims (Amarasingam 2010:467). There are no research publications exploring Muslim-American perceptions of Muslim standup comedy.

¹ <http://themuslimsarecoming.com/about/a-longer-synopsis/>

Instead, the existing research focuses on the content of the jokes and the perception of the messages from the standpoint of the researchers and the Muslim comics.

This research is imperative for a variety of reasons. Muslim-Americans are a salient group to study because they are believed to be one of the audience groups that consume Muslim standup comedy. One way of indicating this is because some of the women are wearing a hijab or a headscarf. They seem to be laughing at the jokes and having a good time with other Muslims.

Studying the audience is important because “audiences are not just a product of technology, but also of social life” (McQuail: 1997:11). Cultural researchers argue that audience analysis explains meaningful cultural identities for the ones who consume the media (Nightingale: 2003). For instance, David Morley (1986) argued that audiences should be studied not as people, but in the contextual relations where they are located. Muslim-American audience members can be understood as being the “people addressed”. The people addressed concept “draws attention to the fact that the creators of messages develop ideas and preconceptions about the people who will eventually engage with their communication, and that these ideas are actively deployed during the writing process” (Nightingale: 2003: 369). Muslim standup comedians “address” topics that relate to many Muslim-American audiences but also to many non-Muslim-American audiences.

As Herbert Blumer noted, the audience cannot easily talk back to those who produce and send them media messages (McQuail 1997:7). Muslim-Americans may not be able to directly “talk back” to the producers of Muslim standup comedy unless they contact them through social network websites, although ticket sales and other measures

of popularity are a form of feedback. However, these websites might prevent Muslim-Americans from speaking openly about their thoughts on Muslim standup comedy. Nevertheless, Muslim-Americans spoke to me about their thoughts concerning the comedy. My research serves as a vehicle to transport their standpoints to the public.

With this research, Muslim-Americans provided their perspectives regarding the implications of Muslim standup comedy. I wondered if Muslim-Americans believed Muslim standup comedy painted a new image of Islam and Muslims. I asked if my respondents found these new images to be positive or negative. Without knowing the perspectives of Muslim-Americans, we are unable to conclude if Muslim standup comedy served Muslim-Americans in the first place. Lastly, this research shows how Muslim-Americans perceived Muslim standup comedy, and what kind of role Muslim standup comedy played in being a Muslim-American.

The research findings showed the “transaction” taking place between the audience and the message. This transaction is between my respondents and the Muslim standup comics who they saw. My research showed that within the “transaction”, Muslim standup comedy is the “middle person” or the intermediary within the transaction. Muslim standup comedy served as a mechanism for the respondents to engage with questions about certain topics (i.e. marriage, ethnic accents, discrimination, etc.) For all intents and purposes, the clips served as a precursor to certain topics. Muslim standup comedy provided my respondents an outlet to discuss their thoughts and opinions on the role of comedy within their lives. My respondents spoke about the use of standup comedy to dismantle stereotypes people have of Islam and Muslims. My respondents were able to

relate with many of the jokes and they discussed why they enjoyed watching certain clips over others. Also, they discussed reasons why they felt uncomfortable by certain clips and certain Muslim standup comedians.

As the research was conducted, certain themes were discovered. Chapter two answers my argument that college age Muslim-Americans think that Muslim standup comedy is painting a new image of Islam and Muslims. Chapter three discusses the attitudes my respondents have of comedian Shazia Mirza wearing a hijab while she performed. My respondents argued that Mirza is challenging the stereotype of Muslim women. Chapter four includes the things I thought would affect attitudes towards the comedy. There was a lack of variation and findings in my interview but my respondents identified with the comedy. This chapter analyzes and discusses the importance my respondents have with their Muslim identities. It discusses some of my respondents being unengaged with non-Muslims in their social networks and how this relates to Muslim standup comedy. Also, I analyze and discuss the relevance of being a Muslim that picks and chooses how she or he participates in Islam. Comedian Ahmed Ahmed joked that Muslims know they are Muslims when they commit particular “sins”, except for eating pork. I then discusses the gender dynamics of being a Muslim-American and the institution of marriage. Shazia Mirza and Maysoon Zayid joked about gender relationships and marriage in their acts. Mirza joked about being unmarriageable, while Zayid joked about her engagement. My respondents shared their thoughts on dating, marriage, and the gender expectations that are planned out for them. Then comedian Ahmed Ahmed joked about the diversity of the Muslim-American population in his act. I

asked my respondents about the way he looks as well as if they found his impersonations to be racist. In essence, Mirza, Ahmed, Zayid, and Ahmed were comedians that used jokes which prompted wide-ranging discussions. These three comedians touched on issues that made my respondents launch into various stories of their own lives. The final chapter concludes with a discussion of the positive and negative sides to Muslim standup comedy, research limitations, future research, what I learned, and the conclusions I drew.

Literature Review

The literature that I reviewed includes literature that has to do with current audience studies and Muslim standup comedy. I chose these articles because they touch on the audience as well as Muslim standup since these were the main two areas that prepared me for understanding if Muslim standup comedy is painting a new image of Islam and Muslims. The authors who studied audience studies regarding the television show *Will and Grace* were Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow (2002). I chose their article, “Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situation Comedy Genre” since it was about how a marginalized group was portrayed in a mainstream television show. Ji Hoon Park, Nadine G. Gabbadon & Ariel R. Chernin (2006) focused their research on stereotypes for the film *Rush Hour 2*. Their article, “Naturalizing Racial Differences Through Comedy: Asian, Black, and White Views on Racial Stereotypes in *Rush Hour 2*” assists in understanding the role of stereotypes in a film and how audience members interpret the jokes of stereotypes. Then I touch on literature regarding Muslim standup comedy from Amarnath Amarasingman, Jaclyn Michael, and Mucahit Bilici. They provided information about the world of Muslim

standup comedy, by first focusing on the comedians, because my contribution would be focusing on the audience of Muslim standup comedy.

Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002) studied how the show *Will and Grace*, often cited as positive representations of lesbians and gay men, in actuality perpetuates stereotypes and promotes heteronormativity. Their article takes a critical approach to examining portrayals of gay characters on television, rejecting the assumption that the mere representation of gay men in primetime television necessarily reflects a huge shift in societal attitudes towards gays and lesbians in America.

The main argument of the article was “*Will and Grace* makes the topic of homosexuality more palatable to a large, mainstream television audience by situating it within safe and familiar popular culture conventions, particularly those of the situation comedy genre” (89). The methods that were used drew upon feminist and queer theory to demonstrate how *Will and Grace* repeatedly places gayness “in opposition to masculinity, pairs its characters in familiar opposite-sex dyads, defuses the most outrageous characters’ threats to heteronormativity, and emphasizes interpersonal relationships at the expense of gay politics”. Battles and Hilton-Morrow used textual analysis and not audience analysis for this research.

Some problems that I found with this research is that it did not focus on the audience that watches *Will and Grace*. It relied on textual analysis of the show to support their claim. Textual analysis does not mean that the research is invalid, but textual analysis is not the same as audience analysis. Not all audience members will interpret *Will and Grace* the same way as Battles and Hilton-Morrow. If Battles and Hilton-

Morrow used audience analysis they would have been able to get their perceptions, receptions, and reactions of the fans of *Will and Grace*.

The main focus of the article by Ji Hoon Park, Nadine G. Gabbadon & Ariel R. Chernin (2006) was to display the textual and audience's analysis of stereotypes in the 2001 film *Rush Hour 2*. The scholars conducted a textual analysis of the film as well as a focus group interview that consisted of White, Black, and Asian respondents. The researchers discovered that their, "study suggests that the generic conventions and textual devices of comedy encourage the audience to naturalize racial differences rather than to challenge racial stereotypes" (Chernin, Gabbadon, and Park 2006:157). In addition to the findings, the researchers did a profound task at highlighting various researchers who study racial stereotypes. Many of the scholars that were mentioned have very captivating articles regarding stereotypes in the media.

Overall, the major findings of Park's, Gabbadon's, and Chernin's research were, "Comedy ultimately controls and limits audiences' critical reflection of potentially racist characterizations, thereby making viewers susceptible to the beliefs of racial difference. Our study suggests that not only do different racial audiences enjoy racial jokes and humor in comedy but they are also much more inclined to see truth in racial stereotypes than to cast doubt on them" (2006:173). Importantly, both of the mentioned studies are critical of comedy for reproducing stereotypes.

I found this study to be accommodating to my own research when it came to finding scholars who also study race and comedy. The findings for this study were regarded as being generalizable. There were eight focus groups with three to eight people

per group. In other words, fewer than sixty people participated for this study. This research was beneficial because it shows how audience analysis is used for a comedic film.

There is a limited number of scholarly articles on Muslim standup comedians. Amarnath Amarasingam (2010) explored the role of Muslim standup comedians challenging stereotypes and misconceptions of Muslims and Arab Americans in the United States. Amarasingam argued that Muslim standup comedians are taking the role of Antonio Gramsci's "organic intellectuals". Amarasingam argued that organic intellectuals are the spokespeople of a particular group of people.

Organic intellectuals must have the ability to convey the needs and desires of the community they represent and must recognize that they are products of this community, which has a vested interest in their representative ability. Organic intellectuals must voice the interests of the group, defend the perception of it in public and 'inspire its self-confidence as an historical actor and to provide it with social, cultural, and political leadership (2010:467).

For his research, Amarasingam used existing interviews of Muslim standup comedians, scenes from their performances onstage, as well as interviews that he did on his own with these comedians. He brought forth an understanding of Muslim standup comedians that illustrates that they hope their comedy dismantles stereotypes of Muslims, Islam, Middle Easterners, and Arabs (2010).

When it came to not having much academic examination of Muslim comedians' cultural and religious significance, Amarasingam argued that his paper, "attempts to fill this gap in the study of contemporary Islam" (2010: 464). He claims that Muslim standup

comedians have something important to say about Islam and Muslims after September 11, 2001 and therefore they should be taken seriously by academics.

Amarasingam analyzed the video footage from the different outlets such as *Allah Made Me Funny*, *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, and *Stand-Up: Muslim American Comics Come of Age (PBS)* (2010: 464). He found various examples that pointed out how the art of standup is being used as a tool or strategy for activism by Muslim standup comedians (2010:468).

While Amarasingam showed how the art of standup was used for activism, not everyone was pleased with the comedy. The reader comments on the website *Muslimah Media Watch* received some negative reviews about a joke “hijab strip show” routine from Tissa Hami (2010:473). Amarasingam addressed Muslim-American audiences and he stated, “Many of these comedians note that Muslims who attend their shows are not only overwhelmingly supportive but also grateful to them for painting a new image of their faith” (2010: 474). This is based on Amarasingam’s interpretation. But he does not have any feedback from Muslim-Americans. I used Amarasingam’s article as a way to understand where the comedians stand with their message. However, I directly investigated the perceptions of Muslim-American audience members.

Identically to Amarasingam, Jaclyn Michael explored Muslim standup comedy as well. In her article, *American Muslims stand up and speak out: trajectories of humor in Muslim American stand-up comedy* Michael argued, “The analysis draws from functionalist theories of the sociology of humor in order to discern the intended social messages of jokes that are meant to entertain and also educate. It shows how Muslim

American comedy intends to influence opinions held not only about Muslims but also amongst Muslims” (2013:129).

Michael also explored criticisms of the jokes by Muslim standup comedians. However, Michael discussed the criticisms about the jokes from Michael’s own observations alone. Michael did not use her analysis of critiquing Muslim American standup comedians from other outside sources such as when Amarasingam illustrated the criticisms from ABC’s *20/20* co-anchor John Stossel, who was critical of Muslim standup comedy (2010:472).

Moreover, Michael displayed a critical take of the comedic discourses that Muslim standup comedians adopt. She stated that at times their discourse marginalizes Muslims themselves, especially Muslim women (2013:150). While her observation critically analyzes Muslim standup comedians, Michael did not touch on the aspect of reproducing racial and ethnic stereotypes about Muslims.

Michael did not investigate Muslim-American audiences by conducting interviews or surveys. All of the perceptions concerning Muslim-American audiences were from Michael’s and the comedians’ own assessments. By not speaking to Muslim-American audiences Michael may not have captured the wider perceptions towards Muslim standup comedy.

The final piece of literature that I discovered was in the book *Finding Mecca in America* (2012) by Mucahit Bilici. In the chapter titled “Funny Jihad: Muslim Comedy Takes Flight”, Bilici traced the origins of Muslim standup comedy; he mainly focused his research on the Axis of Evil comedy tour and the Allah Made Me Funny comedy tour.

Bilici did not state that Muslims were participating in standup comedy long before 9/11. However, there was an upsurge of “Muslim comedy since 9/11 because it created the double conditions necessary for the development of ethnic comedy: *otherness* and *relevance*” (2012:172).

This particular chapter assisted my study because of Bilici’s analysis of the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour and the Allah Made Me Funny Comedy Tour dealt with issues of immigration, and race and ethnic relations. Of course, these two concepts are not the only concepts that have to do with Muslim standup comedy, but understanding Bilici’s analysis can give me an advantage towards discovering the implications of immigration and race with Muslim standup comics.

By and large, these three scholars shed light on Muslim standup comedians in various but significant extents. Their articles are of tremendous use to my research since they have already conducted their own studies on Muslim standup comedians. Even though I extrapolated information on Muslim American standup comedians to fit in with my own research purposes, none of the given articles explored the perceptions of Muslim comedians from Muslim-Americans.

Bilici, Michael, and Amarasingam all described the social phenomenon of Muslim standup comedy. However, they were unable to ask Muslim-Americans of what Muslim-Americans thought of Muslim standup comedy. These researchers’ articles informed my study in salient ways when it came to understanding the content and context of the comedy. However, my contribution to this social phenomenon is an investigation of what Muslim-Americans said about Muslim standup comedy.

Defining Muslim Standup Comedy

The term “Muslim standup comedy” does not have a clear cut definition. Therefore, I define Muslim standup comedy as standup comedy where Muslims make jokes about being a Muslim, other Muslims, and non-Muslims. Essentially, Muslim standup comedy has to do with a Muslim on stage performing standup comedy. The comedy deals with the facets of Muslim social life.

In 2008, Muslim standup comedy reached a new level of popularity. In the same year the Public Broadcasting System released a documentary from their “America at a Crossroads” series titled, “Stand Up: Muslim American Comics Come of Age”. The documentary traced the lives and careers of Ahmed Ahmed, Tissa Hami, Dean Obeidallah, Azhar Usman, and Maysoon Zayid. It discussed the jokes Muslim standup comedians made of their Muslim heritage, cultural upbringings, and most of all the backlash Muslims faced since September 11, 2001.

As I made announcements to the three different colleges and universities about my research I would tell them that my project had to do with what Muslims think about Muslim standup comedy. For some apparent reason I never encountered one person asking me to define the term ‘Muslim standup comedy’. In fact, it seemed as if the term ‘Muslim standup comedy’ was a shared understanding with Muslims.

There was a collective understanding of this term, yet some of my respondents asked me if I was going to show footage of comedians Russell Peters and Aziz Ansari. Peters and Ansari are two comedians were constantly asked about when I recruited respondents in all three colleges and universities. Some Muslim-Americans would

approach me after I made my announcement and ask me if I was going to utilize Peters' and Ansari's material. I would tell them that I was not going to use their clips. In addition, I would tell them that I have not heard if Peters or Ansari were Muslim. I was aware of these comedians, I watched almost all of their standup comedy specials, yet when I researched their religious beliefs or disbeliefs, I could not find any information. Therefore, I did not include them within the set of Muslim standup comedians who I used.

Research Question

In my study I focused on the perspectives of Muslim standup comedy from college age Muslim-Americans. I specifically asked the following questions: A) Do Muslim-Americans feel as if Muslim standup comedy is painting a new image of Islam and Muslims? If this is the case, then what are their thoughts on the image being painted? B) What do Muslim-Americans personally receive from Muslim standup comedy? Do Muslim-Americans enjoy Muslim standup comedy or do they not enjoy it? If they enjoy it, why do Muslim-Americans enjoy it? If they do not enjoy it, then why not?

Data and Method

I used clips of, Dean Obeidallah, Ahmed Ahmed, Shazia Mirza, Maysoon Zayid, Azhar Usman and Preacher Moss.

The first comedian I showed was Muslim Palestinian and Italian-American man Dean Obeidallah. Obeidallah performed in the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour (2008). He joked about Muslims and Arabs being stereotyped as terrorists, Arabs and Muslims being harassed in the airport, Homeland Security, George W. Bush's reading level as well as

being Palestinian and Italian in a non-diverse part of New Jersey. I would ask my respondents why Dean Obeidallah's jokes about Muslims and Arabs being stereotyped as terrorists were funny and if Dean Obeidallah made a good point with his jokes. I chose this clip because Obeidallah joked about stereotypes of Muslims, Islam, and Arabs. His jokes were geared towards non-Muslims and the stereotypes they have of Muslims, Islam, and Arabs. Following Obeidallah was Ahmed Ahmed who made jokes that were directed towards Muslims.

Ahmed also performed in the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour (2008). In Ahmed's comedy set he joked about the hypocrisy of the Muslim community. Specifically, he discussed Muslims coming up to him with their dissatisfaction of him joking about Islam. Yet, they are the same people who commit particular sins (e.g. drink, gamble, have sex). He then goes on to say that a Muslim knows when she or he is a Muslim when she or he drinks, gambles, has sex, but throughout this time they do not eat pork. I chose this clip because unlike Obeidallah, Ahmed's jokes were not about stereotypes, but instead they were about a popular contradiction in the Muslim community. The contradiction dealt with Muslims "sinning", but not eating pork.

The third standup comedian I showed was Shazia Mirza. She is a Pakistani standup British comedian. The clip's content with Mirza showed her discussing her ethnicity of being a Muslim Pakistani-British woman. She discussed her thoughts on Muslim men and women's relationships. She also spoke about her parents' marriage as well as her anticipation of being married to a Muslim man. The things Mirza discussed is much related to what other Muslim standup comedians such as Maysoon Zayid's

comedic work discusses. The difference between British and American Muslim comedy is not *culture bound*. Therefore, the topics that Mirza approaches is found with the works of Usman, Zayid, Obeidallah, Ahmed, and Moss. As she performed her comedy she made a lot of jokes about the gender inequality within Muslim communities. She told these jokes while wearing a hijab which was of particular interest to my respondents. After playing her clip, I would ask my respondents what they thought about Shazia Mirza wearing a hijab while she performed her standup routine. I would then ask my respondents if they agreed with what Shazia Mirza said about the relationships between Muslim men and Muslim women (e.g. her parents' relationship, her getting married, etc.). I chose to show Mirza because she was the only comedian who wore a hijab and joked about Muslims and Islam. In addition, she joked about the gender relationships between Muslim women and men. I wondered what my respondents thought about her wearing a hijab while she told her jokes. I wondered if they thought it was fine for her to wear the hijab while she made jokes. I also wondered if my respondents agreed with her jokes about the relationships between Muslim women and men.

The fourth standup comedian I showed was Muslim Palestinian-American woman Maysoon Zayid. She described herself as a "Palestinian, Muslim, virgin, with cerebral palsy from New Jersey, with no health insurance." In her clip she discussed the difficulties of being engaged to a Palestinian Muslim man. She told her jokes in the fourth annual gala for the American Task Force on Palestine. After playing Zayid's clip I asked my respondents if Maysoon Zayid's interpretation of marriage was accurate for Arab or Muslim women. Respondents provided me with tremendous insights on the

gender inequality with marriage. Similar to relationships between Muslim women and men, I chose Zayid's clip because I wanted to know what my respondents thought about her interpretation of marriage. She joked about being engaged and I wondered what my respondents had to say about marriage in the Muslim community.

The fifth standup comedian I showed was Muslim Indian-American man Azhar Usman. He discussed Muslim relationships with various ethnicities in the U.S. He poked fun of different Muslim-American ethnic groups in his act by doing his best rendition of their accents. I asked my respondents if Usman's appearance (e.g. brown skin color, long thick beard, long black hair) helps or hurts other Muslim-Americans and if his appearance should be changed so he would look different. I also asked if it was acceptable for him to joke about Indians, Arabs, African Americans, and Whites by impersonating their ethnic accents. I chose Usman's clip because Usman's appearance of having brown skin, a long thick beard while he wore a kufi (brimless, short, and rounded cap worn by men in Africa and Asia) made me wonder if my respondents thought if he should change his appearance to look different. Plus, he made jokes about the racial and ethnic diversity within the Muslim community. The multi-diversity that Usman jokes about made me wonder what my respondents would say about Usman impersonating various accents so he can make the audience laugh. I wondered if they considered the jokes to be racist or reflective of their own lives.

The final standup comedian I showed was Muslim African American man Preacher Moss. He discussed the improvements that need to be made in the Muslim community. He implies that Muslims need to try different things. Also, Moss joked about

Muslims being labeled as terrorists. Moss made jokes about Muslims and non-Muslims. I chose this clip because I wanted to know what my respondents thought about him being critical of the Muslim community. Plus, I wanted to know what my respondents thought about Moss being critical of the stereotypes non-Muslims have.

I chose these clips from these comedians because they touched on different aspects that are covered in sociology. The different areas of sociology I noticed with the clips involved gender, race, culture, religion. For instance, Dean Obeidallah joked about racial profiling and stereotypes. I asked my respondents questions about racial profiling and how Obeidallah is joking about it. Or when Shazia Mirza spoke about gender. I asked my respondents questions about her jokes about gender in the Muslim community.

The data for this study come from 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Muslim-American college and university students. I sampled these Muslim-American college and university students from three different colleges and universities (Eastland University, Northland University, and Westland College) – one private university in a Midwestern city, one public university in a Midwestern suburb, and one community college in a different Midwestern suburb. All respondents were current students of their colleges or universities.

I sampled Muslim-American college and university students because they were in settings that brought together significant networks of Muslim Americans, many of whom are familiar with popular culture. For all of my respondents, I traveled to their schools to conduct face-to-face interviews. The interviews were held on campus at a location where respondents felt comfortable speaking openly. All but two of the interviews were held in

a study room in a college or university library. All of the conducted interviews were audio recorded with permission from the respondent and were later transcribed.

I played six 1-4 minute clips of Muslim standup comedy from YouTube.com and the DVDs for *Allah Made Me Funny* and the *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*. I used YouTube video footage of Muslim standup comedians who were women because both DVDs (*Allah Made Me Funny* and *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*) did not have appearances by Muslim women. These same clips were used throughout each interview that I conducted in order to keep consistency with each respondent. However, I skipped both of the Dean Obeidallah and Preacher Moss clips because of time constraints with four respondents. For one of my respondents I only skipped the Preacher Moss clip. All of the respondents saw clips of Ahmed Ahmed, Shazia Mirza, Maysoon Zayid, and Azhar Usman.

Recruitment Process

I emailed Muslim student organizations at nine colleges and universities, and heard back from three of them. They included two universities Eastland University and Northland University, and a community college called Westland College. I went to different schools because I wanted to attain socioeconomic and ethnic diversity with my sample. However, I received 16 responses from students of Eastland University, two from Westland University, and one from Northland University.

Respondents were recruited through snowball sampling for this research since the respondents were expected to be interconnected in the same social groups. I worked to build diversity in the sample by recruiting Muslim-American men and women that live in Chicago and outside of Chicago.

After I contacted the Muslim student organizations, I e-mailed them to set up a date and time to speak with a representative of the Muslim student organization. I met with a representative of the entire Muslim student organization in their school and spoke to them. I informed them that I want to study the perceptions of Muslim standup comedy by Muslims of that college or university. I told them that I wanted to recruit members of the Muslim population of that school by e-mailing information about my study to them. I also answered any questions or concerns that members of the Muslim student organization had of my research.

Overall, representatives from Muslim student organizations in all three schools told me that they wanted to help me out with my project in any way that they could. I chose to sample college and university students because they were in settings that brought together significant networks of Muslim Americans, many of whom are familiar with popular culture.

Description of Study Respondents

My sample consists of 19 Muslim-American college and university students from three different colleges and universities throughout the Chicagoland area. I interviewed 11 men and 8 women. The youngest respondent was 18 and the oldest respondent was 22. One of the respondents was Palestinian American, one respondent was Algerian American, two of the respondents were Albanian American, and the rest of my respondents were South Asian American (i.e., Indian American or Pakistani American).

All of my respondents had at least one parent who was college educated. For the majority of the sample, the father was college educated, but the mother was not. All of

my respondents had at least one parent who was born and raised outside of the U.S. Sixteen of my respondents were born and raised in the U.S. and three respondents were not.

All of my respondents described themselves as being Muslim their whole lives, and all of them had Muslim parents. All of my respondents described themselves as Sunni Muslims, and they stated that their belief in Islam is important to their identities.

All of my respondents were members of either the Muslim Student Association (MSA) or another Muslim student organization in their university or campus. Some even took administrative roles with the MSA that required them to have more responsibilities than regular members.

When it came to Muslim standup comedy, all but one of the respondents had heard of Muslim standup comedy before. The most famous Muslim standup comedian I kept hearing about before I played the clips was Azhar Usman. During the interview I asked all of my respondents if they saw Muslim standup comedy before. Some of my respondents told me that they never heard about it until I tried recruiting respondents, and some stated they had watched video clips of Azhar Usman when they were in high school on YouTube or Facebook.

Insider and Outsider Status

I became interested in conducting this study because I have always enjoyed the hilarity of watching performances by Muslim standup comedians. As I laughed at the performances, I wondered if other Muslim-Americans feel as if Muslim standup comedians were speaking for them or coming to their defense. I noticed that the Muslim

standup comics would make fun of their Muslim upbringing, their culture, stereotypes of Muslims, and many other topics. Aside from the humorous array of topics that are discussed by standup comedians, I noticed that I was an insider and outsider to my respondents.

I am a second generation American that was born into a Pakistani Muslim family. When I was a child I attended an Islamic school for 4 years. Also, I went to the weekly Friday (*jummah*) prayers for majority of my childhood and adolescence. Attending a mosque was an integral part of my socialization but my parents stopped forcing me to go to the mosque after I was 18.

I was born in Chicago, IL and lived there until I was one year old. After living in Chicago, IL my family and I moved to a western suburb outside of Chicago, IL. My knowledge of the Chicagoland area was beneficial in making me an insider because 17 of the 19 respondents were from the Chicagoland area. Inside and outside the home I spoke Urdu with my mother but I spoke English with my father. By speaking Urdu I became a member of the Pakistani culture. By attending Islamic school and attending a mosque, I became aware of Muslim tradition. My experience growing up in a Pakistani Muslim family made me an insider since I knew the language and the culture and traditions that came with being a Pakistani Muslim-American.

In addition to my upbringing, my full name is Bilal Hussain and this led me to be an insider with my respondents. My first name is a common name with Muslim males, and this probably made my respondents know that this study was conducted by a Muslim. For instance, without telling anyone I was Muslim I was labeled as a “brother” by my

male respondents. One of my respondents, Sufyan, mentioned the reason why he participated in my research is because he wanted to help out another Muslim. After our interview, Sufyan, wrote an e-mail to other members of the Muslim Students Association of Eastland University that stated,

Salaam, So there's this brother, Bilal Hussain, is studying for his PhD in Sociology and needs Muslim participants. It won't take too long and iA [*inshallah*] you can be rewarded for your efforts. As a brother once told me, 'If we're not gonna look out for ourselves, then who will?' If you want to email him and set up an appoint, here's his email: bhussain1@luc.edu
Jazaks guys

My role as an insider gave me access to the Muslim community for the three different colleges and universities. While I was considered an insider in certain respects, I was also an outsider because I was not a member of their social circle. I assumed my role as a researcher made respondents skeptical about voluntarily participating in an interview. Some Muslim-Americans I walked up to asked me questions about my research but then they told me that they were not interested in my research. Some Muslim-Americans saw me arrive time and time again at Muslim student organization meetings and making announcements in the three colleges and universities they finally were willing to schedule a time for an interview. However this did not stop some of them from treating me like an outsider.

I am not an undergraduate student and I did not have any relationships with the undergraduate population of any of these higher education institutions. They saw me as an outsider who was trying to obtain information from them. In fact I received a total of 45 people that signed up for an interview. However, only 19 of them were willing to be

interviewed. I e-mailed them to schedule some time for an interview, but I never heard back from 26 of them.

Yet, my last interview with Muhammad ended on a positive note. Muhammad was an 18 year old Indian American from Eastland University. After the interview was over I thanked him for participating as I did with all of my respondents. I then asked him why he helped me out. He said to me, “I know you’re a good person. So I knew I had to help you out.” I then asked, “How do you know if I am a good person? Not saying that I’m not. But, how do you know?” Muhammad then said, “Man, you’re Muslim. And plus, I can just tell. You’re a Muslim and a good person. I met with you in one of the *jummah* [Friday] prayers and you made the announcement about your research and that’s when I signed up. I can just tell with your personality that you’re a good person. And you’re also a Muslim. That makes me trust you even more.”

I never told my respondents that I was Muslim. Yet, they all took it upon themselves to call me a Muslim or call me a “brother.” I was able to build rapport with my respondents because I was a graduate student seeking to interview them. While some of them were hesitant, skeptical, and unresponsive towards me, students such as Muhammad gave me the benefit of the doubt. My insider role helped me tremendously in my study. It helped frame my research questions, grant access to the community, and it helped me find multiple themes. I discuss these themes in the next section.

CHAPTER TWO

ANOTHER COAT OF PAINT

One of my research questions was to discover if college age Muslim-Americans think that Muslim standup comedy is painting a new image of Islam and Muslims in the U.S. My respondents all agreed with this idea. Essentially, my respondents suggest that Muslim standup comedy makes non-Muslims feel that Islam and Muslim-Americans are normal and “just like everyone else.” All of my respondents told me that they think Muslim standup comedy should exist. They stated that non-Muslims should hear it because it destroys stereotypes of Islam and Muslims.

The image of Islam and Muslims has been painted very negatively. Not only have the events of September 11, 2001 painted a negative image of Islam and Muslims, but those events were built on pre-existing stereotypes and suspicions. As Cainkar (2011) notes, September 11, 2001 was not the singular event that changed everything, but instead it was the event that was the tipping point for Muslim-Americans. In essence, September 11, 2001 was a turning point in the Muslim-American experience (Peek 2011). Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 there have been many books written about Islamophobia. The scholarship has pointed towards the negative image that has been painted towards Islam and Muslims (Driel 2004; Welch 2006; Bayoumi 2008; Cainkar 2009; Fekete 2009; Sayyid and Vakil 2010; Peek 2011; Bilici 2012; Kumar 2012; Nussbaum 2012; Ernst 2013; Williams 2013; Kundnani 2014; Zempi and

Chakraborti 2014). Peek (2011) defines Islamophobia as the “hatred of Islam and the resultant fear or dislike of Muslims” (36). Likewise, my respondents said many people had a fear of and animosity towards Islam and Muslims. The fear and animosity all paint the image of Muslims and Islam with a negative brush stroke. This negative brush stroke would especially come up in the interviews when I would ask if non-Muslims should watch Muslim standup comedy.

My respondents stated that non-Muslims should watch Muslim standup comedy. For example, Fahad mentioned that it is not only okay for non-Muslims to hear and watch Muslim standup comedy but it is also necessary. He states:

Not only is it okay but I think it’s really necessary. If we’re going to have – if you’re going to be a Muslim comedian you have to make sure non-Muslims hear your standup. (Why’s that?) Because isn’t that kind of the point of your standup routine? You can say it so people can relate to you - but you also say it so you can bring about change in a way. That’s what I mean by social commentary. You want to bring about change in some way. You kind of have to hit it at the people that need to change their views.

Fahad did not take offense to the jokes and instead he thought it should be a way to build a bridge with non-Muslims. Likewise, Waqar a 22 year old Albanian man takes no offense if non-Muslims heard Muslim standup comedy and laughed at the jokes. He states:

By all means. I take no offense if they watch this and laugh at it. Because this just brings attention to general issues as well as funny things with being a Muslim comedian. So if they can relate to it and laugh at it, then that’s definitely one step forward. It’s a positive outreach for them in my opinion.

Habib a 20 year old Indian man said that Muslim standup comedy should be heard by non-Muslims. Also, he wants non-Muslims to know that there are “serious points” to the comedy. Habib states:

I think it’s okay if you get the point of what they’re trying to bring out. You know – that’s what our community needs to learn. You know – the actual point that these guys – they’re not, they’re there to make jokes but there’s also a point behind what they’re trying to say. You know, they’re trying to get a point across. You know – certain things and assumptions – that are made against us you know? It goes to a funny point, but then there’s a serious point at the end, if you watch it to the end. I mean, I’m telling you based off of the clips that I saw. There’s serious points you should take out of it. You know? They’re kind of like ‘lessons learned’. Like – you know – things you should know what Islam is really about. You know, they’re trying to spread Islam in a way where we get a good name towards ourselves. I mean yeah – they’re funny, they’re really good but there’s the serious point of what Islam is really about.

My respondents spoke about how they at least hoped Muslim standup comedy can change views that people have of Islam and Muslims. They encourage non-Muslims to watch Muslim standup comedy solely to disprove stereotypes of Islam and Muslims.

At the same time, when I asked my respondents questions about the clips, many of them discussed the practice of standup comedy as a whole. Their thoughts on the new image that is being painted of Islam and Muslims is that Muslim standup comedy breaks the barrier between Muslims and non-Muslims. They said that comedy has the power to shatter stereotypes since it is a tool to make non-Muslims understand that Islam and Muslims are painted positively. Similar to Habib’s point about the comedy having “serious points”, Basheer states:

Comedy needs to be a way to educate. Not just to laugh about worthless things. So it’s cool to learn about something, while you’re laughing at it. See that it’s funny, and then you reflect later and you say, ‘why was that

funny?’ It was funny for a reason, and you know sometimes it was funny for a funnier reason. But sometimes it was funny for a sad reason.

Educating the audience through standup comedy was a consistent theme in some of my interviews. For my respondents, standup comedy served a vehicle to not only educate audience members, but a way to give “social commentary” about the Muslim perspective to non-Muslims. Fahad states:

Standup comedy is a really great way to get social commentary. And when you have issues that involve the Muslim community, like that’s uh - you need to give social commentary away that’s presentable to average people. And um, they kind of look like majority of people in the audience who were like Muslim. So, they were more able to relate not to learn. But uh - it’s a good avenue to get people to learn... Humor really gets people to connect and relate.

In this sense, standup comedy is seen as a tool to shatter stereotypes by painting a new image of Islam and Muslims by Muslim standup comedy. Basheer spoke about comedy being a tool to educate people so they can learn something once they walk away. Fahad spoke about Muslims watching Muslim standup comedy in order to find a relationship that non-Muslims can learn from Muslim standup comedy. They both talked about how comedy can be a way to paint a new image of Islam and Muslims by getting non-Muslims to understand Islam and Muslims better. Similarly, some Muslim standup comedians also want non-Muslims to understand Islam and Muslims better.

Muslim standup comics’ themselves argue that the comedy helps paint a new image of Islam and Muslims. The two comedians who spoke about Muslim standup comedy were Dean Obeidallah and Ahmed Ahmed. I showed clips from Obeidallah and Ahmed to my respondents. In an interview Obeidallah states, “For all the comics I know that are of Middle Eastern heritage, the idea of using their craft as a way of activism is a

thread that unites all of us” (Amarasingam 2010: 467). In another interview, Ahmed spoke about Muslim comics painting a new image for Islam and Muslims. He states, “We can’t define who we are on a serious note, because nobody will listen. So the only way to do it is to be funny about it” (2010:474). Obeidallah and Ahmed believe, Muslim standup comedians have a collective consciousness towards their comedy, a shared understanding or awareness about the Muslim experience and they mobilize by performing comedy to challenge inequality. In fact, Amarasingam states that not only are Muslims “overwhelmingly supportive” of Muslim standup comics, “but also grateful to them for painting a new image of their faith” (2010:474).

Nussbaum (2012) argues that there is a fear permeating the U.S. and Europe. Specifically, there is a religious fear in the U.S. against Muslims. Initially it was difficult for Jews to win acceptance because they were seen as different. Nussbaum states that Jews in Europe assimilated to European ways by intermarrying, speaking another European language (e.g., German) instead of Yiddish, as well as countless other things. Whether the difference came from the language they spoke, the food they ate or the way they worshipped, their differences led many Jews to change in order to find acceptance with other Europeans. Essentially, subscribing oneself to the dominant paradigm is key to not being different because difference is believed to be foreignness (2012: 14-15). Muslim standup comedians are trying to win acceptance with non-Muslims. They want non-Muslims to look at Islam and Muslims in a favorable way.

Winning acceptance from the American population is something that Muslim standup comics set out to do. Amarasingman states, “Muslim standup comedians are

playing in breaking down cultural barriers, promoting inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue, as well as tackling the misperceptions about Muslim and Arab Americans in the United States” (2010: 463). In the same way, Muslim standup comics are also trying to win acceptance from non-Muslims by using the American practice of standup comedy for their advantage. According to Muslim standup comedian Azhar Usman, standup comedy becomes a rite of passage in order to win acceptance from the larger society. For example, Usman states:

When you study the history of standup, you see how often it gets used as a tool, an art form for the underdog. Black American comedians, Jewish-American comedians, Latino comedians, women comedians, gay comedians, blue-collar Americans, Jeff Foxworthy and that whole hillbilly comedy tour... time and time again, you find that groups that are written off by mainstream America use comedy as a weapon. This is a way for them to speak truth to power – that quintessentially American thing to do. And that’s what we’re doing as well (2010: 470).

To Usman, comedy is a rite of passage for people who are “written off” by mainstream America. My respondents often talked about Muslims getting written off by mainstream America. There were two functions that my respondents found appealing in Muslim standup comedy; battling stereotypes and identifying with the comedy. The topics my respondents talked about were living in a Muslim bubble, “sinning” but not eating pork, dating, marriage and ethnic accents. My respondents said they liked the fact that Muslim standup comedy exists. They said that Muslim standup comedy provided them with something personal. They liked the existence of the comedy because they said they were able to identify and relate to the jokes. Many of the respondents said they were able to see part of their own lives within the jokes they heard. In fact, some of the respondents even said that they enjoyed Muslim standup comedy because they were able

to relate to the comedians themselves. One of the women who wore a hijab during the interview told me that one of her favorite comedians was Shazia Mirza. She said that by Mirza wearing a hijab as she performed made her feel like she was able to relate to Mirza. On top of that, the women I spoke with mentioned that out of the two standup comics who were women, they enjoyed watching Mirza the most.

All of my respondents enjoyed the comedy. They were able to relate and identify with the comedy. For example, Nour explained why she loved the fact that Muslim standup comedy exists:

Muslims – they live here in the United States... There is a form of comedy [about] being Muslim living – especially in America. So, it's like a whole new area that people can explore and... get that audience. And reach to the audience, and it's also important because comedy is a great way to learn and explore topics – and it really makes you think afterwards. You know it's funny – it makes you laugh and then it really does make you think about things. So it's important to have this genre... Muslim people not even Muslim but everyone – can hear that kind of perspective and get a chance to laugh about it in not so much of a serious setting cuz people don't like talking about serious things as much... Having comedy as knowledge for people to experience and... open their eyes and Muslims to thinking a different way. I think is a good thing to have.

Essentially, Muslim standup comics joked about serious issues in a funny way. They put these serious issues under a funny light that my respondents related to and identified with. These serious issues allowed Muslim standup comics to include various issues that not only affect non-Muslims, but Muslims particularly. For instance, Dean Obeidallah joked about how people who look Arab or people who look Muslim are harassed in the airport. He took the issue of racial profiling and turned it into a joke. Shazia Mirza joked about the stereotypes of Muslim women and dealing with the backlash towards Islam and Muslims. She made jokes about Muslim women not having

any rights, stereotypes people have of Muslims and Islam, and being unable to get married to Muslim men because she speaks. Jokes like these were effective for my respondents because it built a connection between the comedy and their lives. They were able to relate to the comedy and build a connection because the comedy would discuss things they were familiar with or have experienced. The comedy was effective for my respondents because they identified with the comedy as well as the comedians. The standup comedians joked about their lives in exaggerated ways. These exaggerated ways gave glimpses to my respondents that it helped them build a connection with the comedy and the comedians.

Respondents launched into stories about Muslims they knew who experienced some of the things these comics joked about. Whether it was about other Muslim-Americans getting harassed in an airport, committing multiple sins except for eating pork, getting married at a relatively young age or not stepping outside of their “Muslim bubble”, these issues resonated with my respondents. The jokes reflected reality for them or for other Muslim-Americans. After watching Dean Obeidallah’s clip I asked respondents why they thought his clip was funny.

After I saw Fahad laugh at Obeidallah’s jokes Fahad stated that he was able to find a connection with the jokes told by Obeidallah. Obeidallah joked about stereotypes that people had of Islam and Muslims. Plus, Obeidallah joked about the backlash Muslims experience. More importantly, the topic of 9/11 was also brought up. For example Fahad states:

He was pretty funny... Even though I’m not Arab, I was able to relate a lot of situations. Even though I was younger when all that stuff was going on,

I heard about it a lot of times – people acting that way – and not even realizing they’re offensive. And I guess sometimes I’m at the point where I can laugh at that. And he can laugh at that. So - (When you say all that stuff was going on, do you mean 9/11?) Yeah, 9/11. (And the backlash that Muslims received?) Exactly, yeah. Cuz I was maybe 8 when it happened... second, third grade so I mean I was like - I was only 10 years old when the worst was going on. I’m sure people made stupid comments, but I don’t even remember anything to be honest. (But you were able to relate to the jokes he said?) Yeah, I definitely think so. Cuz people... Well, the Indian food one was pretty funny to me. People don’t even realize it - you tell them something and they make a comment you don’t even realize might be offensive. Like the guy - I can understand where those someone was saying were ‘oh you’re Arab’ ‘oh’ it’s funny and I also understand maybe the other individual is talking about doesn’t want to be offensive, but in not being offensive, he was kind of offensive (Chuckles). Cuz you couldn’t react normally... I was fortunate to not experience too much of the discrimination or anything like that but I’ve heard many stories from a lot of my friends and through elders that I know, people that I know especially the ones with beards and the ones who decide to wear “Islamic clothing” like thobes.²

Muslim standup comics took issues that had to do with discrimination, hypocrisy, sexism, and racism, and my respondents laughed out loud as they watched. At the same time, as I heard my respondents talk about the seriousness of the jokes, they began talking to me about their “second generation stories.” During the interviews I heard a lot of second generation stories when I expected to get responses strictly about the comedy. I would ask my respondents about the comedy and they would go on lengthy stories of what it is like to be a second generation Muslim-American and belonging to a faith and community that gets scrutinized. They would not only speak to me about the comedy, but they would talk about their experiences of being a Muslim-American. In many of my interviews, respondents wandered away from talking about comedy to talking about their own life experiences. These life experiences show how their responses to Muslim

² Thobes look similar to robes. They are considered to be ankle length and long sleeve Arab garments.

standup are helping them paint a new image of Islam and Muslims. As a result, the comedy was a 'launching pad' for other issues.

In the chapter "The Media Portrait" I examine my respondents' discussions about stereotypes. Specifically I focus on comedian Shazia Mirza wearing a hijab in her performance. My respondents said they liked the fact that she wore the hijab because she is dispelling stereotypes of Muslim women. Also, I focus on my respondents telling me that they like the fact that Muslim standup comedy exists because it dispels stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. Moreover, I touch on identity, race and gender in the chapter "Painting with Colors". My respondents said they were able to relate their identities with Ahmed Ahmed's joke about Muslims "sinning" but not eating pork. I discuss the connection they received and explanations of why they enjoyed themselves. Additionally, the comedy clips played on issues about race and gender and my respondents often spoke expansively about these issues. There I focus on comedians Azhar Usman and Maysoon Zayid. Zayid joked about being a single Muslim woman who recently got engaged and Usman joked about the diversity of the Muslim community. I then end the thesis with the discussion and concluding chapter "Repainting the Image." There I discuss the positive and negative sides to the comedy, research limitations, future research, and the conclusions for this research.

CHAPTER THREE

THE MEDIA PORTRAIT

I created the metaphor “spray painting the portrait” to represent Muslim standup comedy shattering stereotypes of Islam and Muslims. These stereotypes are popularized in the media and this section details the meaning of the metaphor.

My respondents found their religious beliefs and their identities as Muslims to be significant. They all stated that Islam was important to their lives. Some of them mentioned that their belief in Islam is important to them because Islam brought a sense of principles and ethics. As Waqar, a 22 year old Albanian man states:

To me, I view Islam as more of a complete way of life. Not just something that I keep in the backburner. It does influence every decision I make. The way I think, the way I act, the way I carry myself, all of that. That is influenced directly from Islam.

Muslim-Americans acknowledged a “portrait” that stood between Muslims and non-Muslims. Yet, Muslim-Americans did not let this portrait separate them from non-Muslims. Instead, I argue that they “spray painted the portrait” by acknowledging their own identities as Muslim-Americans. By spray painting the portrait, my respondents are expressing their religious and ethnic identities to mainstream America. Muslim standup comedy helps my respondents accept their religious and ethnic identities as the comedy has jokes that my respondents identified with.

Spray paint is packaged paint in an aerosol container that can spray directly onto a surface. Graffiti is the writing or drawing on public surfaces, usually done with spray

paint. Spray painting or graffiti art has been used in protests and for addressing social issues. For instance, Gröndahl (2013) described how graffiti was used as a tool to express the political and social climate of the Egyptian Revolution that started on January 25, 2011. Similarly, Peteet (1996) argues that graffiti is used by Palestinians against Israelis in the relationship of power. He states, "Graffiti did not merely send messages or signify defiance; their mere appearance gave rise to arenas of contest in which they were a vehicle or agent of power" (1996:140). The spray paint is the new image that Muslim standup comedy is helping to paint; it is a form of inclusion for my respondents. My respondents are spray painting the portrait, using a new image to replace the perceptions they argue some non-Muslims have of Islam and Muslims. This new image of Islam and Muslims is shooting out of the can and onto the portrait of mainstream America. Muslim standup comedy uses the space of standup comedy to talk about issues that resonate with my respondents.

The "portrait" symbolizes the barrier between Muslim-Americans and mainstream America. My respondents are attempting to "spray paint" the portrait by recreating what Americans think about Islam and Muslims. Once the image becomes repainted, it becomes plastered on the portrait for mainstream America to witness. The "portrait" is a canvas on which my respondents were able to spray paint a new image of Islam and Muslims. Spray painting the portrait is about being included in a society that stereotypes them. "Spray painting the portrait" means using the boundary that was placed before them, and to acknowledge and accept the boundary for what it is. Plus, it means to

simultaneously interact with the boundary, socialize with the boundary, criticize the boundary, and to “spray paint” the boundary.

My respondents then are spray painting a portrait that has been placed. They are repainting it with the assistance of Muslim standup comedy. Ultimately, Muslim standup comedy dramatizes the idea that Muslims are funny people. They can poke fun at their own culture and other Muslims as well. They personally receive a sense of relatability and they identified with the comedy. Since all of the comedians made jokes in English about their Muslim heritage, my respondents found Muslim standup comedy to be resonant with their own experiences. They feel that Muslim standup comedy is resonant to them, of their experiences and their lives.

The comedian who brought out discussions of dispelling stereotypes was Shazia Mirza. When Mirza was about to perform, she walked out on stage wearing a black hijab, pink sweater with horizontal red stripes, and black baggy pants. I would ask my respondents of what they thought about Mirza wearing a hijab while she performed her comedy. The majority of them did not have an issue with it. If anything, my respondents said it was good that she was wearing it because it showed non-Muslims that Muslim women who wear hijabs can also be funny. Essentially, Mirza’s use of the hijab made my respondents feel like that it was “normalized.”

The Hijab Symbol

The hijab is defined as “the headscarf that covers a woman’s head, hair, neck, and ears – leaving only the face showing” (Williams and Vashi 2007: 270). Gender and the hijab have been at the center of attention when discussing Islamic critiques of modern day American society (Williams and Vashi 2007: 276). Williams and Vashi (2007)

argued that the decision to wear a hijab works in establishing equality, independence, and an autonomous personal identity for many second-generation Muslim-American women. The religious symbol of the hijab is used by Muslim-American women to achieve autonomy for themselves, and simultaneously it emphasizes their Muslim identity. Wearing the hijab serves as a tool to live in American society, but at the same time live as young women who are members of a minority faith. Moreover, Williams and Vashi argue Muslim-American women “are able to carve out some autonomous cultural space with a public symbol that visibly repudiates the overly individualized culture of dominant American society and that gives them some room to feel at home and to prosper in both worlds” (Williams and Vashi 2007: 285).

In Season 1, Episode 6 of *Stockholm Live*, standup comedian Shazia Mirza walked in front of an audience in what looked like a sold out auditorium. Mirza wore a pink and red striped sweater, dark colored cargo pants, and a black colored hijab that did not cover her ears as many Muslim women wear it. Some of her jokes included making fun of the hate mail she received from Muslim men telling her not to perform comedy, her mother walking five steps behind her father, oppression of Muslim women, the burqa, taking ecstasy because according to her the Qur’an does not forbid ecstasy, people having stereotypes of Muslims and Islam, her marriage opportunities, and experiencing prejudice in an airplane. Throughout her performance Mirza used the word “fuck” when describing an altercation with a woman who said she looked like “Dobby” from the movie *Harry Potter*. Mirza asked the question, “who the fuck’s Dobby?” The audience in the footage laughed after she asked this question.

When asked, “What do you think of Shazia Mirza wearing a hijab while she performs her standup comedy?” my respondents said there was a feeling of normalcy with her wearing a hijab. They did not find anything wrong with her wearing a hijab while she performed. The men and the women argued the hijab served as a way for Mirza to showcase to people that the hijab was a normal part of her wardrobe. In fact, they argued that the hijab was a way for her to challenge stereotypes and normalize the hijab for non-Muslims.

When I asked Nour about what she thought about Mirza wearing a hijab while she performed her comedy she replied with a confused look on her face and said, “Am I supposed to have an opinion on that?” I then was about to tell her that if she did not feel comfortable answering the question I could skip the question. She then interrupted me and said:

It’s just like if someone was wearing a suit like – I guess it’s nice to see that cuz it kind of gives a different portrayal like it breaks stereotypes of you know the hijabi Muslim, she doesn’t talk she doesn’t do like anything. She just does – like she’s the oppressed but she’s doing – she’s acting like a normal person you know? (Chuckles) So I guess– it, it helps in the image of Muslim women.

Generally, my respondents did not have a problem with Mirza wearing a hijab. They saw Mirza’s use of the hijab in her comedy as a way to challenge the stereotype of Muslim women that wear hijabs as being docile and subservient. I asked Nour about this since she said wearing the hijab helps the image of Muslim women. Nour states:

(How does it help?) Well because it shows that – people, I feel like people alienate like the Muslim women who wear hijab like okay, ‘she’s a foreigner, she’s oppressed, or she doesn’t know what she wants. She’s being told what to do kind of thing.’ And here she is, she’s wearing it she’s a comedian with it first of all non-traditional role someone that –

‘wow she’s a comedian, wow she’s a Muslim’ and therefore she’s showing her face... So I think it helps break that image of that mindset people have of Muslim women, especially those wearing the hijab.

When I asked Aisha, a 19 year old Indian woman who wore a hijab during the interview, she suggested that the hijab made Mirza look normal.

For me, when I think of someone wearing a hijab it’s just like someone who is super modest I guess. And not to say what she was doing was immodest or whatever but... It’s not like I live up to that standard like all the time either, but it’s just kind of like in the back of my mind I guess. Like when I think of hijab and someone wearing a hijab. But, I mean I think it was fine with what she was doing. It’s not like she... I guess she kind of made it normalized hijab I guess... Normalized is not the right word probably. But... I don’t know I guess it made people realize that she’s normal too you know? She has like these weird experiences that other people probably have too. Of like ignorant people and whatnot... I feel like it was fine.

The sense of normalcy was mentioned by many respondents including the men.

The fact that Mirza wore a hijab while she performed her standup routine made all of my respondents say that she was challenging stereotypes that people have of Islam, Muslims, and Muslim women.

Basheer stated the following:

It’s not an issue. Just like it’s not an issue for a woman to wear a hijab and do any other profession... I think very plain and simple it’s just not an issue for anything. might as well you know she’s talking about Muslim things, so I think – maybe it helps kind of– it actually helps break stereotypes in my opinion you know. To people who see Muslims as very uptight people you know and they don’t really see Muslims right? They just see like they don’t see Muslims but they see Muslims right? So it’s kind of like they see us from the outside they see you know the exterior they don’t really interact with them. So it gives her a chance to come out and be like – like – you know ‘I’m a person – like I’m a Muslim but at the same time you know – I’m kind of brash about some things.’ So I guess there is kind of– just a little– it shows the true face of Muslims. Whether you know – whether... people were comfortable with it or not. So I’m not saying that to attribute to feeling comfortable to what she’s saying – but it

shows the diversity of Muslims you know? It shows here's the Islam but Islam doesn't mean a bunch of very strict people... Some people are not so strict, some people are very strict. And she feels comfortable doing what she's doing. Others might not – you know I'm not comfortable with her. Being – kind of brash in the name of religion and in the name of comedy. So, it's just I mean you know she's going to do what she does I'm not going to sit here and berate her you know 'you're a... you're a whatever (chuckles). Like stop it you're going to hell'. No, that's no one's place for sure.

He stated that wearing a hijab was not an issue. The same way it was not an issue for any Muslim woman that wears a hijab to have any profession. My respondents thought it was a good way for a Muslim standup comedian to challenge stereotypes that people might have of Islam and Muslims. Therefore, they did not find anything wrong with her attire. The hijab was seen as an empowering tool by my respondents. Mirza was seen as someone who was not only empowered but also someone who was comfortable enough to wear a hijab in front of non-Muslims. Sarah states:

I think it's bold and awesome. Because she is portraying who she is. But it's also the way she's acting her comedy. She said the 'f word'. Which is fine, I don't care. She's I mean... If you want to go super religious, that's a really bad word to say and you shouldn't say that. But she's portraying herself as a Muslim and she's... portraying herself because she's put on the hijab as an image, she's portraying herself and she's commenting on why some westerners bash on us.

However, the responsibility that comes with wearing the hijab played a role for a minority of my respondents. When I asked Sufyan if it was fine with Mirza wearing the hijab while she performed her comedy he said it was as long as she knew she was representing the Muslim community. The hijab served as a symbol of responsibility for Muslims and non-Muslims.

Sufyan states:

I mean yeah but like – I mean again, it’s like it goes both ways like – if she is going to be like representing herself as a Muslim then she should like also be aware of like she carries a heavier role in what people will think of Islam. (Because of the hijab?) Yeah, so like people notice that she’s a Muslim and they’ll be like extra sensitive to the things she says. Like – if she goes up and something like – derogatory or racist or something against a group of people or something and calls them out in a bad manner – As opposed to like someone – a random person wearing a hijab it would be a big deal since more people know her so like –she has like more influence I guess. So – (because of the hijab right? The symbol -) um – not necessarily – I mean it’s like both. Like the fact that she’s a comedian you know – she’s more well known. But like also like – like there’s always going to be people looking for like something to like a like pick on kind of. So like – like she is doing something good but she should for her own sake for others as well, be careful I guess.

Haddad (2007) argues that the hijab has become a symbol of an American Islamic identity. Haddad argued, “the process of re-Islamization has been accelerated in the aftermath of 9/11, as an increasing number of adolescents and young adults (daughters of immigrant Muslims) are assuming a public Islamic identity by wearing the hijab (headscarf)” (Haddad: 2007: 253).

For my respondents, the hijab serves as a signifier for Muslim women. They also stated that the hijab carries weight for Muslim-American women to live their lives in the U.S. Muslim standup comedy makes my respondents think there is a sense of reaffirmation of their faith and their religious and cultural beliefs for the hijab. They feel there is nothing wrong with Mirza wearing the hijab. And in fact, Mirza wearing the hijab is breaking stereotypes people have of Islam, Muslims, and Muslim women.

Comedian Maysoon Zayid, did not wear a hijab as she performed. My respondent Farah, a 22 year old Pakistani woman saw me play Zayid’s clip. She was the only respondent who directly spoke about Zayid not wearing a hijab. She states:

I see what you did there. I can see why you picked her. I know what you're going to [ask]... (So you said in the middle of the clip, 'I see what you did there or I know what you did there, something like that. What did you mean?') Cuz they're two totally opposite women. (You know I didn't even – okay – what did you mean by that?) The way they appear. The way they're dressed, & the way they talk. It was a complete contrast. (You're talking about Shazia Mirza wearing a hijab?) Yeah! (And then Maysoun Zayid not wearing a hijab?) Yeah! (Can I tell you something crazy?) What? (I didn't even notice that until you just said it right now) Oh and not just hijab (I didn't even do it purposely) Oh you didn't – I thought you did. I thought you were going to ask me if my perception changed based on the fact she's dressed in – you know – not very Muslim like. As opposed to Shazia Mirza. And I thought that you would ask me what's my opinion on the fact that do you consider her a Mus – you know – that's just a description of what I thought – sorry (No that's good. I didn't even have that in my mind) I don't know. That's the first thing that really stood out to me. She's so different. But, she identified herself as a Muslim right away. If she didn't – I wouldn't know that she's Muslim. (By or with her saying that she was Muslim?) Yeah! (Like when she said, 'I'm a Muslim, Palestinian...') If she didn't say that I wouldn't haven't imagined her of being a Muslim. (Why? Because of the way she's dressed?) Yeah! Or because - that's the perception. You think there's a certain way you imagine things to be and ... but again I have what I know, some people can't tell that I'm Muslim either. I don't wear a hijab but, so it's something that gives away your identity right away... It just happens to be a very interesting contrast too.

While Farah was one of the two respondents that mentioned Zayid's appearance it begs the question if Zayid's appearance contributed to all of my respondents not enjoying her comedy. Zayid was the least favorite out of all of the comedians I showed. It could have been other reasons why they did not like her clip. Nonetheless, Zayid's appearance was a talking point with Farrah as well as with Ibrahim.

Ibrahim, was my only respondent that did not look at the screen when Zayid performed because of her appearance. Ibrahim was a 22 year old Indian man from Westland Community College. I noticed that Zayid's clip was the only clip that he did

not watch, but instead chose to hear her performance. I asked him about his choice of not watching Zayid's performance he states:

Generally in Islamic ethic, you lower the gaze for women. Even with the other lady (Shazia Mirza) I was doing it. Partially because her cleavage was also showing. Like – keep it on the DL. (It didn't make you uncomfortable or did it?) No! I'm in [Westland Community College] everyday so – I'm happy winter is here. No more miniskirts anymore!

Overall, my respondents argue that Mirza's use of the hijab in her comedy routine was painting a new image of Islam and Muslims. For my respondents, Mirza's use of the hijab was significant for fighting stereotypes that non-Muslims have of Islam, Muslims, and Muslim women. My respondents talked about how it was normal for her to wear a hijab while also fighting stereotypes. Yet, when it came to Maysoon Zayid, two out of nineteen respondents mentioned that her appearance played a role with her comedy. One respondent thought I was trying to show diversity, and the other respondent thought he showed "lower his gaze" because she was wearing a black dress.

CHAPTER FOUR

PAINTING WITH COLORS

In “Painting with Colors”, I detail the aspects of ‘identity’ and topics regarding ‘gender’ and ‘race.’ Identity was a function that my respondents found appealing in Muslim standup comedy. Gender and race were topics that my respondents must negotiate. I did not ask them about these topics directly, but the comedy clips played on about ‘identity’, ‘gender’ and ‘race’ and my respondents often spoke expansively about these issues.

All respondents said that Islam and their Muslim identity was important to them, and yet they lived in and attended school in settings where they are not in the majority. Thus, they consistently faced issues with figuring out how to relate to non-Muslims and how to connect to (or not) an “American” identity. I asked direct questions about the extent to which they had non-Muslims friends, thinking that their relative “social closure” might influence how they reacted to the comedy clips. I did not find a direct correlation there; instead, I found that respondents with non-Muslim friends and those without them found the comedy equally funny. I found that the question, and some of the comedy clips, provided occasions for respondents to muse about whether they did (or should) have non-Muslim friends and how Muslim identity gets expressed. A connection to their identities is exemplified by them speaking to me about stories of other Muslims they know participating in multiple practices that are forbidden in Islam. I would ask my respondents questions about the comedy, and my respondents would launch into various

stories regarding Ahmed Ahmed's joke, and that he makes a good point with his joke about pork.

One of the main ways my respondents identified with the comedy is through Ahmed Ahmed's joke about Muslims committing multiple sins except for eating pork. The chapter details Ahmed's joke and how his joke relates to my respondents' Islamic and Muslim identities. Their thoughts on Ahmed's joke went into stories about different Muslim-Americans. In which case, my respondents would tell stories about how they know certain Muslim-Americans who drink alcohol and have premarital sex, but they refuse to consume pork. His joke about pork made respondents relate to the issue of having a Muslim diet, but not adopting "Muslim-like" practices when it came to drinking alcohol and other activities.

Muslim standup comedy is also painting a new image of Islam and Muslims regarding the topic of race and diversity. These comedians showcase the racial and ethnic diversity of Muslim-Americans and the interpretations my respondents have of race in Muslim standup and the Muslim community. My respondents spoke a lot about acceptance and this was the key underlining theme both Shazia Mirza and Azhar Usman reflected for my respondents. For instance, while Mirza wore a hijab in her performance, the next comedian Maysoon Zayid, who was also a Muslim-American woman, did not wear a hijab. Instead, she wore a black dress as she sat down and performed her comedy. The topic of gender and marriage was brought up for Zayid's clip. Zayid joked about her age in her clip. She would say that even though she was in her 30s, she was able to still be engaged. I then asked my respondents if Zayid's interpretation of marriage was

accurate for Muslim women. For instance, how she said that she was 33 years old and in Arab years that was the same as being 67 years old. My respondents spoke about the institution of marriage and gender roles in the Muslim community. They would talk about their loved ones getting married or about pressures they feel regarding getting married.

Azhar Usman was a comedian who discussed the diversity of the Muslim community. To prove that there was diversity with the Muslim community, he began saying “Salaam” in different accents. In his clip Usman states, “Because truthfully, I believe you can tell how diverse the American Muslim community is just by listening to the way people say Salaam... That’s right I’m serious. Try it out sometime!” He said the word, “Salaam” in accents that impersonated Muslim-American men who were African American, Arab, Latino, White “new Caucasian Convert”, and Indian. Usman also impersonated an accent of older Pakistani “aunties” saying “As-salaamu alaykum.”

My respondents mentioned to me that certain comedians were their favorites because they can relate and identify with their jokes. This connection with my respondents was not out of the ordinary. I assumed that my respondents would find some type of racial or gender connection when they watched clips of Muslim standup comedians.

The Muslim Bubble

In the beginning stages before I showed the clips, I would ask my respondents demographic questions. One of the questions I asked them involved their friendships with non-Muslims. Specifically, I asked if they had friendships or interactions with non-Muslims inside or outside their colleges or universities. Seven of my respondents

reported that they do not have close friendships with non-Muslims. Fahad, a 21 year old Pakistani college student told me that he stays in a “Muslim bubble” where he does not socialize with non-Muslims and he only socializes with Muslims. Fahad states:

Yeah, unfortunately I don’t. I need to branch out (chuckles). But, it’s a bigger sense that the company I find in the MSA is enjoyable to me so you know I’m not acting or looking for new friends because I need new friends. But you know – I do realize I need to diversify my perspective. And in order to do that is by getting out of that ‘Muslim bubble.’

Some of my respondents argued that keeping distance from non-Muslims was necessary because non-Muslims had “non-Islamic” behaviors. Adil a 22 year old Indian man states:

Our lifestyles are completely different... My interpretation of the Islamic lifestyle is really – like – I have my own rules of what I don’t want to do, and what I think of fun. And it doesn’t correlate well with many non-Muslims I’ve met.

Fahad admitted that he “needs new friends” and he wants to “diversify” his “perspective.” Yet, he stayed in a Muslim bubble where he only associated himself with other Muslims in his university’s MSA. Adil admitted he stays clear from making friends with non-Muslims because his idea of fun and non-Muslims’ idea of fun does not correlate. Similar to Adil and Fahad, Muhammad, an 18 year old Indian man also said that he does not socialize with non-Muslims. He associated his Muslim friends as being “brown” and non-Muslims as being “white.” He did not explicitly say he was in a “Muslim bubble”, but he talks about why he chooses to not be friends with non-Muslims. Some of his reasons are non-Muslims eating food that is “haram” (forbidden by Islamic jurisprudence), him being lazy, and not having time to make non-Muslim friends. He

talks about his decision when discussing the importance of Islam, being a Muslim, and joining the MSA of his university. Muhammad states:

Honestly, I have maybe like one or two white friends. Everyone else is brown or Muslim or something. It's not that I'm not – it is because I'm not trying. I'm just lazy right now. Like I really don't care of making friends outside of my group or Muslims. Maybe next year, we'll see. But yeah – like majority of my friends are Muslim so... If you look at it in terms of number – it would only be like one or two or three white friends, non-brown Muslim friends. Majority of them [my friends] are brown or Muslim just because like MSA, we have activities – everyone has their dates... with classes you get homework and stuff you don't really get as much time. Non-Muslims eat like haram like every day, you know – you can't even participate with them. I guess it's like a turn off. Um – and – it's not that I don't talk to them at all. I have classmates who are white. But they're classmates. They're not really friends. I don't talk to them outside of class though... Like I really don't care that [all of these] Muslims are white, one gender – I mean uh – one race or whatever. As long as I feel comfortable and happy. I don't care about the number brown – I mean Muslim – my friends just being Muslim or 90%. I don't care. That's not, that's not something I consider myself with. As long as my friends are happy, I'm happy. I mean, I welcome new friends. I'm not like 'Team Drake³: No New Friends.' It's not like I'm not trying to make new friends. If I make new friends, I make new friends.

On the other hand, some of my respondents said they would like to branch out and pop the “Muslim bubble” they live in. Yet, for the time being, they stuck with Muslim friends because as members of the MSA, they are mostly around other Muslims when they are not in their classes. Being friends with other Muslim-Americans reinforced their beliefs in Islam and the code of ethics Islam provides for them. Even if they spoke about some of their Muslim-American friends who participated in certain sins, they were still friends with these Muslim-Americans. Plus, if they did have relationships with non-

³ Drake is a Hip-Hop and R&B recording artist. “No New Friends” is a song that he is featured in.

Muslims it was not a deep relationship. The close relationships were saved for their Muslim friends and the not-so-close relationships were saved for non-Muslims.

Twelve of the nineteen respondents said they had friendships with non-Muslims inside and outside of their colleges and universities. Their sense of being enveloped in their faith and identity did not stand in the way for them interacting with non-Muslims. They found a way to find some type of common ground with non-Muslims. Whether their friends were from their respective colleges, universities, or hometowns they did not disassociate themselves from non-Muslims.

Rather than putting up boundaries with non-Muslims, they welcomed non-Muslims into their lives. Maha, a 21 year old Algerian woman spoke about her decision to socially include non-Muslims into her life.

I don't think you cannot be friends with someone who is non-Muslim. Because they're still people. And as long as you are alive in this earth – you don't know what's in their hearts... I think it's very naïve and narrow minded to say 'only Muslim people are good people'... And I think you find good people in both groups.

Twelve of my respondents were like Maha and crossed the dividing line between Muslim and non-Muslim. They accepted non-Muslims for their cultural and religious differences. In essence, acceptance was omnipresent in their social interactions with non-Muslims. Even if non-Muslims had different sets of beliefs, rituals, cultures, and religions it did not stand in the way of Muslim-Americans socializing with them.

Sarah, a 22 year old Pakistani woman from Eastland University, mentioned that her relationship with non-Muslims outside of Eastland University was “very open.” She stated that she was not raised around a lot of Muslims in the predominantly white

suburban towns in the Midwest. In addition, she stated feeling uncomfortable around other Muslims.

It's actually weird. I'm actually kind of uncomfortable... With other Muslims. Like not meaning you, but in a huge crowd of Muslims, I feel uncomfortable. Maybe because I've been so diversified. And seeing a lot of color, like a mixture of everyone... I don't want to say I'm different than other Muslims out there. But in some aspects I am. Especially some of the really strict Muslims who... only seclude themselves to be a certain way and interact with only certain people cuz... they have certain moral and lifestyle choices. But I feel uncomfortable because yeah, it is my identity because you know, eventually I'll be with a family of my own and it will integrate the Muslim aspects. So I don't know, being with other Muslims just make me uncomfortable because it's my self-identity and I'm at that stage where you know... what's it called... Exploring who I am... My upbringing was kind of different than what it should be. Should I be totally Muslim? Should I be 50% Muslim? It's conflicting with my self-identity at the same time.

Sarah's story of being "very open" with non-Muslims but simultaneously feeling uncomfortable around Muslims was strikingly different from other respondents. Her uncomfortableness even traveled to her interactions with the MSA on her campus. She stated that an ideal MSA should not be about exclusivity, but more about including non-Muslims with MSA activities.

Why aren't we in the newsletters, why aren't we in the [student newspaper], why aren't we in the [student magazine]? Why isn't the president talking about us? Why aren't we integrated more? We're just in this isolated place and I think it's cool cuz [Eastland University] is a [religious] school and we're so religious why can't that religion integrate us?

Sarah went on to state that Eastland University's MSA chapter says that MSA members want racial, ethnic, and religious diversity. Yet, they cater to only Muslim-Americans and they exclude religious diversity. She goes on to state of the lack of

“togetherness” within the MSA of Eastland University and the broader range of non-Muslim and non-MSA members that exist on the campus.

She also went on to state that some Muslim-Americans who are members of the MSA are hypocritical once they are outside of an MSA meeting.

Some people in the meeting, they say certain things but outside those meetings they don't implement it. So they're more like hypocrites. And I'm like, 'why are you doing that?' Cuz I'm a person of morals. Like whatever I say, I do. Or at least I try my best. But it's like 'no you can't do that!' We say we want more white people but really out there, we're not wanting them. But not just white, there's other races out there, not just white... It's like there's a lot of talking and less action in terms of integrating, leadership, implementing our religion, knowledge, information, everything is just secluded, and it's just talk, talk, talk.

Overall, being a Muslim was imperative for my respondents, twelve respondents still found a way to have friendships with non-Muslims. Nonetheless, respondents still had close relationships with Muslims since Muslims helped reinforce their faith. The Muslim bubble is a topic that my respondents emphasized as they answered demographic questions. They had a lot to say about other Muslim-Americans in their school's MSA. But many of them said they wanted to pop this Muslim bubble because they argued that having friendships with non-Muslims is of necessary importance to their “perspective.”

No Pork on My Fork

“You know you're a Muslim when you drink, gamble, have sex, but you won't eat pork. That's the weirdest thing... You won't – eat – pork.” – Ahmed Ahmed

After showing the video clip of Ahmed Ahmed's performance in the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour, I watched many respondents laugh out loud. They turned their heads as they kept their eyes glued to the screen, with their elbows and hands on the table as they sat in their seats watching Ahmed poke fun at Arab accents, Dubai, and Jews. My

respondents laughed or smiled while they watched the videotaped audience erupt in laughter for Ahmed's jokes. Ahmed joked about something that many of the respondents agreed on – the hypocrisy within the Muslim community.

Respondents watched the video clip and they all laughed when Ahmed accused Muslims of being hypocrites. Ahmed called them hypocrites because in the joke he was told by another Muslim that it is sinful when Ahmed jokes about Muslims and God. A while later, that same Muslim asked for a beer. The punchline is that Muslims are not allowed to drink alcohol and the Muslim who told Ahmed that he was being sinful was actually being sinful himself. Therefore, Ahmed made a point of joking about the hypocrisy of the Muslim community.

When I asked my respondents if it was true when Ahmed said "You know you're a Muslim when you drink, gamble, have sex, but you won't eat pork?" they said Ahmed probably meant some Muslims do not practice Islam in the way they are meant to practice Islam. They mentioned that many Muslims they knew or heard of were non-practicing and they were "Muslim-by-name". Although very few respondents admitted that they knew a lot of Muslim friends who participated in these activities, they offered some information about what they thought of Muslims picking and choosing their sins. They said drinking, having premarital sex, and committing other "sins" were not looked down upon because mainstream America does not punish people for eating pork. Respondents said these practices are socially acceptable in mainstream America. Additionally, respondents said there is no pressure for eating pork. Yet, there is peer pressure for drinking, gambling, and having sex. Social pressure was the explanation for

why some Muslim-Americans committed certain “sins” except for eating pork. To further highlight this point Heba states:

There’s no peer pressure for pork.... there’s this huge cultural like thing about like drinking and you know trying to be cool... eating pork doesn’t make you cool... there’s no stigma attached to [it]... At least in my opinion, I never had anyone be like, ‘you should eat pork.’

Heba’s explanation of peer pressure and not eating pork is arguing that peer pressure plays an important role in the social behavior of some Muslim-Americans. Since there is no punishment for eating or not eating pork in the U.S., Muslim-Americans do not eat pork. But, some Muslim-Americans participate in drinking, gambling, and having sex because these things are glamourized. Plus, there is a stigma for eating pork among Muslims. Pork is the dividing line that some Muslim-Americans do not cross. Also, it is the identity marker for Muslims. My respondents said that it is known for Muslims to drink, gamble, have sex but not consume pork.

Respondents said that there is something to gain from drinking, gambling, and having sex. But, there is nothing to gain from eating pork. This “gain” is acceptance from non-Muslims and Muslims who participate in these same activities. Participating in these activities gives the reward of acceptance. Respondents claimed that these activities were practiced by non-Muslims so some Muslim-Americans felt they had been pressured to feel accepted.

Also, Habib talked about peer pressure playing a role with Muslims participating in certain activities, but not participating in eating pork. He talked about his parent’s generation and how they did not feel peer pressure when they grew up in India. He states:

The thing is, our parents they obviously have not grown up as kids in our society, where there's peer pressure. Back then, everyone followed Islam the way it should be followed. So – Our parents obviously – they enforce it on us, but the kids don't listen. Cuz they're peer pressured to do what others think is right, and not what your parents think is right, or what Islam says is right. You know – we don't differentiate the difference between right and wrong is what I'm basically trying to say... Because of peer pressure. Peer pressure is huge. You know – for anything! Like I'm not just saying: sex, gambling, or drinking – for anything. Regardless of what it is. Peer pressure is huge in this society. And I don't think it was as much back then. I mean, it's just an assumption. (Back then – you mean your parent's time?) Yeah my parent's time! I feel like peer pressure – no one really forced anyone to do anything. You know – back in my parent's time. But now it's becoming big – it's spreading because it's becoming more available to us.

Basheer, a 21 year old Palestinian man, stated that he knew some Muslims who were “sinning” in other ways but not eating pork. Pork was the one “sin” Muslims refused to commit. When I asked him why he offered this explanation:

Maybe it's something psychological maybe a [psychologist] can tell us more about it. But I think – there's something psychological about – not really deriving any benefit from pork it's just a minor inconvenience... you don't see like popular media – like rappers singing about eating pork. They're singing about – you know – drugs, money, weed, sex. These are the things they're singing about. So they're things people are always thinking about... there is something to gain from drinking – there is something to gain from sex and weed and all these different things. But there's nothing really to be gained from pork ... It's not glamorized. There's no glamour for pork.

Basheer associated pork not being glamorized in mainstream America as a reason for Muslims' easy resistance to it. His explanation was that consuming pork does not give someone a social status. My other respondents were associating the behaviors Ahmed joked about (drinking, gambling, and having sex) with increasing social status. However, pork was not seen as increasing social status of my respondents. In which case,

they gave the explanation of pork consumption being unassociated with glamour and therefore easy to resist.

My respondents told me stories about Muslim-Americans they knew. One story that stands out is Waqar's story. In his university's MSA chapter, he said people think MSA members are religious, but they are mistaken – not everyone in the MSA follows the tenants of Islam. Waqar stated that outsiders or non-Muslims have this “stereotypical view of the MSA that these are all angels and so on and so forth.” Waqar was one of the few respondents that admitted he knew members within the MSA of Eastland University that had certain “deficiencies”. He told me a story of some of his Muslim friends that prompted him to notice the contradiction of their actions.

Look, the problem is people have that stereotypical view of the MSA that these are all angels and so on and so forth. And that's not the case. Everyone has their deficiencies. The funniest bit though is um... My favorite line that he said. While everyone has their deficiencies, surprisingly no one will eat pork. It's very entertaining. I've had a couple of Muslim friends, they would go out, party, get drunk but they would have pepperoni pizza they would be looking at the pizza. It was very entertaining to watch (laugh). I'd say, 'what are you guys even doing?' I would go pick them up and they would ask, 'can we go get food?' I'd say 'why, didn't you have pizza?' They would say, 'but it's pork?' I'd say, 'but you're drunk!'... Even when they're drunk they know not to eat the pepperoni pizza. I'm like, 'man, this is impressive'.

When I asked Waqar of what he thought Ahmed meant by this clip he said:

I think it's just the irony of the situation. Like we'll indulge in these huge issues but we [will abstain] from very minor things. I believe in the Qur'an it only mentions pork once... Only once. Everything else is mentioned multiple times. But eating pork is only one iyaat in the Qur'an it mentions don't eat pork.... Just entertaining to see that we're not very good listeners (chuckles).

The issue of pork was important to my respondents. They had a lot to say about this topic; they argued that Muslims participating in a multitude of “sins”, but not eating pork is not openly discussed in the Muslim community. Some of them like Waqar told me that they knew some Muslims who participated in activities that are deemed to be non-Islamic or sinful, but many of them did not mention that they personally knew of any Muslims that participated in these activities. Yet, when I asked them if they would still consider those Muslims to be Muslims, all of them stated they would still consider those Muslims to be Muslims even though they were “sinning” but not eating pork. Essentially, “those Muslims” were regarded as being non-practicing Muslims, but they were still members of Islam. My respondents argued they were unable to label who was a Muslim and non-Muslim. As long as non-practicing Muslims stated they were members of Islam, respondents felt they had no place in telling someone else if they were a Muslim or not.

The ban on pork was an identity marker as Muslim. My respondents’ stories and experiences showed that they remained friends with Muslim-Americans if they participated in multiple “sins” except for eating pork. Yet, they did not associate themselves with non-Muslims because they argued non-Muslims participated in “haram” or “sinful” practices. Therefore, they remained friends with Muslim-Americans who participated in multiple “sins” that did not include consuming pork. This shows that there are dimensions to the Muslim community beyond just behavioral guidelines.

Ahmed’s joke reminded my respondents of the hypocrisy that exists within the Muslim-American community. His joke served as a reminder that many Muslims try to correct other Muslims with their behavior, but the ones who are correcting should look in

the mirror and correct their own actions. This form of Muslim standup comedy was repainting something that Muslim-Americans already knew. They already knew some Muslims drink, gamble, have sex, but won't eat pork. The fact that Ahmed joked about the hypocrisy of Muslim-Americans made Muslim-Americans bring up stories and perspectives on peer pressure other Muslim-Americans have succumbed to. The issue of Muslim-Americans participating in multiple sins forbidden by Islam except for eating pork showcased that Muslim-Americans already knew that this was an issue within the Muslim community. But this issue is not going away any time soon.

Marriage Material

“My parents you know – they really want me to get married. But, the thing is Muslim men do not want to marry me... Because I speak.” – Shazia Mirza

“I’m 33 years old, which in Arab years is 67. And I figured to myself you know, Maysoon, ‘where is the best place in the world to catch a husband?’ And I thought, ‘Gaza, cuz they have no place to run!’” – Maysoon Zayid

I did not expect to get into a long conversation about marriage with my respondents. But apparently, my respondents had a lot to say regarding marriage. Palestinian Muslim comic Maysoon Zayid said her age of being 33 was actually the same as being 67 in “Arab years”. Which is why she went to Gaza “catch a husband”. Dressed in a black dress with her hair tied to the back. She was sitting down as she performed her comedy in the American Task Force on Palestine (ATFP) fourth annual gala. Her jokes revolved around being an older woman trying to get married, and she described her fiancé as a “Palestinian unicorn” because he was “Palestinian, Muslim, 30 years old, not divorced, no kids and has no disease.”

My respondents thought Zayid's interpretation of marriage was accurate for Arab or Muslim women. The women and men both agreed that for Muslim women it is difficult for them to get married to someone once they reach their mid-20s. Plus, once they reach 30 years of age it becomes even more difficult to find a potential marriage partner. The women and the men both related their own stories of Muslim women having difficulty in finding a marriage partner because they were considered older than expected.

The majority of my respondents stated they agreed with Shazia Mirza's or Maysoon Zayid's interpretation of gender and marriage in the Muslim community. For instance, Mirza joked about her mother walking behind her father and how Muslim men are not attracted to her because she speaks. Hadeel, a 21 year old Albanian said she agrees when Shazia Mirza joked about the relationships between Muslim men and Muslim women, specifically on the topic of Muslim men not liking a Muslim woman that speaks in a relationship. She went on to state:

Yes, I agree with her. (Why?) Because there are a lot of guys who don't really, they're not really interested in the girls that like - kind of speak their minds - I don't know - I mean even growing up my mom would be like 'oh you can't do this cuz you're not a boy.' So like a lot of guys don't like when girls like go outside of the box and do things guys would do, so it's kind of the same thing... because it's basically like, she does what she wants and doesn't care about other peoples' opinions. And there are people that look at it negatively.

Some of my respondents found her jokes to be a little exaggerated but they thought there was some truth to them. This shows that Muslim standup comedy brought some type of reminder for my respondents of a reality that they know exists. But a comedian brought it to light. When I asked Waqar if he agrees with what Mirza said about the relationships between Muslim men and Muslim women he said:

I believe that it depends more on the culture... Cuz for Muslims there's like... From my experience, like when I said I went to an Islamic school for 14 years of my life. Like I see the whole spectrum of Indo/Pak families, Arab families, and me pretty much a white family (rolls his eyes) I got to see the differences between the mother and father. While there is a huge emphasis on all the education, there's not as much as a push of what I realize with the older generations for from the Indo/Paks however that is changing with their children. And because of that there has been a discrepancy between the husband and the wife. Not so much so one is better or worth more than the other. That's definitely the wrong way of looking at it. But when you've got one who is the bread winner with the degrees and the other doesn't really have much there will always be that sense of inferiority. And so that is where issues will arise.

Fahad said that Mirza exaggerated a lot with the jokes she made. He states:

I think she's kind of like taking exaggerations and the extremists' views and you know basically making fun of them and uh - like I personally wouldn't believe that was actually how her parents behaved. And - you know - I don't know how many Muslim guys she actually interacted with that said 'I don't want to marry you because you speak.' 'Cuz she was - I mean - she's not in one of those countries - India and stuff - that kind of stuff does happen. People get arranged marriages and stuff. And um - you don't see each other until it is wedding day. That was very common especially with my parents' generation- but now, it's definitely not. Arranged marriages, they're arranged so obviously, like not much stuff can happen beforehand. Like definitely not the way she's describing it, and I'm sure she knows it. But, you know - she's just playing off of extreme type of scenarios.

After I showed Mirza's clip, the next clip was of Zayid. Mirza's clip focused on 'stereotypes' and 'gender' but Zayid's clip focused on 'gender' and 'marriage'. I asked Salmaan if Zayid's interpretation of marriage was accurate for Arab or Muslim women. He did not focus on the gender aspect, instead he said that Zayid's interpretation is accurate when it comes to age and ethnicity in the Muslim community. Specifically he talks about Desi (South Asian) and Arabs. He states:

Okay that for sure I don't think that's just an Arab thing that's like a Desi thing too. You're expired after 30, so I think that is something I can relate

to. Yeah. I can relate to what she was saying, to that point specifically... Yeah, I would definitely say uh, um, so I mean this is in the cultures we belong to. Especially like in Desi or Arab especially. That age thing plays a big part, it can derail someone's life entirely. Like someone pursuing an education, then you have kids, then you're getting up to go to night school. So I agree like with that she made that about age specifically.

My respondent Basheer says Zayid's interpretation of marriage is accurate for his Desi friends than it is with his Arab friends. Basheer is Palestinian and he told me that he had a lot of Desi Muslim-American friends in his university. Basheer states:

Now that I think about it that yeah the one stereotype is definitely true like – like 33 means 67. Cuz like you know - you're expected as a Muslim or as an Arab culture to get married very young. Although that's changed in recent years. Um – so you know you get past 30 it's like you know – an old woman now like – you know society doesn't want you, you better like (chuckles) – you find the first husband you get (chuckles)... I definitely agree with that uh – stigma in like Muslim society in Arab society. So – maybe more like in Muslim – less in Arab now I would think. Especially maybe among people that I know more immediately within my community so... I talk a lot to my Desi friends and they'll say the same exact thing like you know – their always trying to marry the girls very young. Uh – so avoid reaching a point where no one is left for them.

When I asked Basheer to talk about Muslim men getting married he states:

I was talking to a brother like a – you know – I was just playing with him like 'man, when are you getting married?' like very seriously he's like, 'Dude, my sister like – I know she's younger than me but you know – they're always going to marry the girls in the family first. So I'm gonna' you know – when my time comes – you know – after like the girls that are of age to be married – regardless if they're younger than me you know – after they get married'... So there's a definitely a push to get them married very young...

Arguing that Muslim men have little to no pressure when it comes to getting married was true for the other men I interviewed. They also argued that Muslim women have more pressure to get married when compared with Muslim men. Salmaan was

saying that it is true more for both Arabs and Desis. On the other hand, Basheer argued that Zayid's interpretation of marriage was true for only Desi men and women.

Waqar, a 22 year old Albanian man said that he also agreed with Zayid's interpretation of marriage. He argued that it was accurate, and the Muslim community angers him when it comes to marriage. He states:

I would say that is probably true in Arab culture and definitely true in Albanian culture. Especially for women. Actually the women they... once you get over 30 it is uh.... Significantly more difficult. Which is not, not really fair. I feel bad for that but um... what are you going to do about that? – She was talking about issues of marriage. Which I always (feel for) because I am not married, or engaged, or have a girlfriend. Well that's something that angers me a bit, how closed minded our view of marriage is.

Fahad, a 22 year old Pakistani man spoke about his sister being of a certain age. Even though Fahad is one year younger than his sister, he noticed the pressure for her to get married instead of him. He states:

I think the point she was making, by saying that, by saying you know - 33 is too old, that statement she's making, it is pretty true when it comes to Muslim women. For Muslim men, it's not as true. But as you get old, I mean... In terms of the general culture - Muslim culture - the older you get – you know - the quicker you need to get married you know - people say to get married soon because you're getting old. And uh, I don't think non-Muslims have that issue too much. Just the way with marriage, they date and all that - some people get married when they're 40. And nothing is... They don't think twice about it and no one says anything about it cuz that's how the life is. [For those people] get married a little bit later. [If you are in your] 30s, you better be doing a residency that's why you're not married you know, and stuff like that (chuckles). Um - you know - you better be finishing up a Ph.D. that's why you're 32, not married and stuff like that. So otherwise, get married in your 20s. (You see that a lot with Indian Americans or Indians) Indian Americans yeah. The way she's talking I guess it carries over to Middle Eastern and Arabs as well. But I do see it... I mean - I see it. I have an older sister who will be turning 22 this year. So when I explain it, she's like the same age as me. She's 22. When she was 21 my mom was like trying to get her set already. She's

kind of worried and worried, cuz it's getting late. 21 is 21 you know? But you know, my mom wants it to happen, as soon as possible at this point - 21 at that stage is possible, 33 is like 'Whoa! How could you wait so long?'... I definitely don't get the same pressure.

All of my respondents who were men argued that Muslim women who are of a certain age become stigmatized in the Muslim community for being non-marriage material. However, the men argued that Muslim men have male privilege that Muslim women do not have. Many men talked about Muslim women they knew who felt pressure to get married.

All but two of my respondents who were women argued that Muslim women become stigmatized if they do not get married by a certain age as well. I heard stories about single Muslim women who were their friends or relatives facing the pressure of getting married.

Nour, a 22 year old Pakistani woman says that Zayid's interpretation of marriage is inaccurate when it comes to "catching a husband". When I asked her if Zayid's interpretation of marriage was accurate she states:

You know what, actually it isn't. Women are not supposed to go and find their husband. Like culturally speaking you know – they'll get suitors or you know – kind of thing – they're supposed to wait and sit and parents find them kind of thing. So it's kind of – it's non-traditional what she's saying. As far as my knowledge or my experiences.

But Nour agreed with Zayid when Zayid said, "I'm 33 years old, which in Arab years is 67." Nour states:

Once you hit like 20 everyone is like 'oh – okay like – come one what's going on now you know?' – 'What's the wait? Even people at the Masjid, people are like, 'oh okay your 24 now? Come one you guys gotta' like – you gotta' get on that'. It's like what about the guys who are like 33 what – what are they doing you know? Cuz my friend – my brown friends –

they're all married (Like your Muslim friends) Yeah. (Your Desi friends?) Yeah. My Desi Muslim friends, they're all married. And I just find it like – I don't feel comfortable (Laughs) Cuz like - their like – they're my age, but they got married like 18 or you know they had their engagement when I was in high school. It's kind of on the hush, hush kind of thing. Because obviously it would be like – [A big deal] cuz like their so young but their already doing this. But everyone knew that what was going on you know? But, I just feel weird because – like – their so young and you know beautiful and the guys are like – it's not a great match you know? The guys don't look good at all. And their like old – Their like fat, or the girls are all skinny and beautiful and I'm all like 'what are you guys doing?' (Chuckles) I mean obviously I mean, both people don't have to look attractive but its like – I feel though they want the girl to look pretty and young and get married, and the guys can look however the Hell he wants as long as he has money or he has like a degree or something you know?

Nour went on to talk more about her personal life when it came to marriage. She drifted away from talking about Zayid and her comedy, and focused more on her perspectives of Muslim women getting married before Muslim men.

For Muslim women, like they start like really early like... Parents like talk about it and like – it's just ridiculous I'm like, 'why are you telling me about this like what about me?' My parents are not like that, they want us to finish our education, they want us to be like independent before we do anything you know? Cuz you should they believe that you should be able to take care of yourself. And you shouldn't be like dependent on your husband or somebody else but that's the - their primary thing is okay, 'get these girls married and... they'll be done'.

Farah, a 22 year old Pakistani woman spoke about her Desi friend when explaining how accurate Zayid's interpretation of marriage. Farah states:

I remember talking to my friend a few days ago and um – she's a senior too. And she was like, 'I need to get married! I need to get married!' I said, 'calm down. You're only 22.' She's like, 'No! In Desi years I'm expired!' I'm like, 'what the heck are you talking about?' I think girls have a bigger pressure. Like more... More intense for girls than guys I guess... Like I'm graduating this May, and my mom thinks that I should be getting married soon... Because they think [otherwise] it will be too late. And now is the time... I know it happens. It's true...

Maha, a 20 year old Algerian woman spoke about her parents lacking seriousness with her education. She described how her parents thought she would be attending her university to try to find marriage material instead of trying to get an education.

I think when you first come to college – it's on everyone's mind. Like, 'you're going to get married now.' And I don't think it's something I'm ready to do... People generally in Arab culture will go to college and be out looking for their soulmate in the process. I'm like, 'Really? There's 101 things you have to be doing and this is the first thing you're jumping to?'... (How does that make you feel? Being a Muslim, a sophomore in your university? Do you feel pressure to get married?) I don't think like – me directly – I'm not focused on that right now. It's kind of annoying having that – like when I first came to college my parents were afraid like, 'oh that's what you're going to college for?' I'm like, 'No!' I had to prove to them that I'm serious about going to school. I want to go to school for myself. And you know, I want to like... For any other reason someone would go to school you know... And it's kind of annoying sometimes like if you're talking to a guy who's Muslim or something, then they'll have that 'oh, she wants to get married. She liked me on Facebook... We're getting married.' I'm like, 'No! We're having like an interaction that's not related to anything like that. We're classmates!'

My respondents who were women argued that Muslim women have a lot of pressure to get married. Muslim men argued that Zayid's statement of being of a certain age is true, but only for Muslim women, not for Muslim men. However, the last women I interviewed said that Muslim men have more pressure to get married than Muslim women. I interviewed Heba and Aisha at once since they were both close friends and they preferred to do the interview together. I asked them if they felt any pressure to get married. Heba states:

No, there's just like no immediacy... girls have this tendency of saying guys aren't mature blah blah blah you know always bashing on them. I'm like, 'actually to be honest you know we have nothing riding on our future. We could like drop out of school and our parents will be like, 'oh that's fine as long as you get married'. You know?'

Aisha states:

Yeah exactly there's no like immediate pressure like she said. I mean obviously there's pressure cuz like yourself get a life, get it started I feel like you know what I mean like. Like you don't want to sit there and be like 40 and still not be married. At least with me, I don't know about anyone else but um... so like I don't know. And I mean... yeah I guess I don't feel like any pressure. I feel like if I was a guy I would feel a lot more pressure (Heba says 'yes') to like you know what I mean? Cuz you have to like support I guess kind of you know? And so I guess it would probably be more pressure... There's like that joke that came around finals and I was like, 'it doesn't matter how you do on your finals as long as your future husband is acing his' (Heba says, 'yeah, exactly'). But it's like so true. Especially if you're a Muslim. You get the religious pressure and the societal pressure and then you get the pressure from all the aunts and uncles and stuff like 'beta, why aren't you married yet?' It's like, 'Let me live my life!'

Heba states:

And for guys it's a step wise thing. They have to do this, they have to do this, they have to do this, and then they can do this. So it's like if they slip up anywhere in the middle then like a lot of it is riding on it. If I don't do well, let's say I don't get into grad school right after graduation everyone will be happy. They'll say, 'oh you have a year to get married now.' Whereas if my brother didn't get into grad school right after like he took a year off and like um, I'm taking a year off now too. But it was a lot harder for him to try to convince my parents that was something that's like normal and that he's not like losing – like missing out on anything for taking a year off. Because their just like, 'oh you're just slacking off you know. You're just lazy'. And it's like, 'no he's still doing stuff.' But, it's just the fact that there is a more of an immediacy in order for a guy to get married, he has to have a job (begins slamming her fist in her hand) (Aisha says, 'yeah'), in order to get a job you have to be good in school, in order to be good in school you have to be focused. So it's like from early on you know that pressure is always on them to do better. And then the fact that like that probably plays a huge – at least in my family it plays a huge role in like how my brother actually does because like pressure is you know... confining you know when you have so much pressure. It – Sometimes you slip up. So I know personally like part of the reason why I do okay in school is because I don't have that fear hanging over me all the time (Aisha says 'that's true') if I mess up I'll do bad... You know?

Aisha states:

It's like guys have no choice BUT to be successful. It's like if we, like – like what she said if we slip up or something then it's – Totally like okay. You know what I mean? It will be looked over a lot. Yeah! Honestly we could've just stopped after like high school (Heba says, '55% of the population will be fine if we don't go to school') honestly, that's like totally true. It'll be – but like when a girl slips up or something it will be looked over a lot – easier than it would be like for a guy. And then there's like all the gossip that would start like if a guy like you know what I mean. Like god forbid something bad happened and he slipped up or something like that you know then it just then – then that like the gossip also makes it so much harder for a guy to get married like when that happens....

I was not expecting any of my respondents to tell me that they believe Muslim men have more difficulty with getting married than Muslim women. I was getting used to my respondents telling me that Muslim women have more pressure, and Muslim men are privileged because they have little to no pressure with getting married. Yet, when I heard Heba and Aisha tell me that Muslim men have more difficulty because they get taken more seriously of being the providers for their relationships, it offered a new perspective. This new perspective shows that in the Muslim community, Muslim men might have more requirement to fulfill before getting married. Therefore, Aisha and Heba said Muslim men have more pressure to get married since Muslim women do not have to fulfill the same level of requirements. Seventeen of my respondents argued that age plays a role more for Muslim women. However, Aisha and Heba explained that Muslim men have requirements to fulfill that are beyond being of a certain age. Their requirements may not involve getting married at a relatively early age, but they have pressure to be considered marriage material.

Accentuated Accents

Azhar Usman imitated six different accents in his act. He said the words “A – Salamu – Alaykum”, with impersonations of an African American, Arab, Latino, White “new Caucasian Convert”, and Indian. He finished his set by impersonating a “nasal eyes Pakistani auntie”. As he did his impersonations, he was dressed in a blue button-down shirt, dark grey dress pants, and he wore a topee or kufi (a lightweight hat that is typically worn by Muslim men while they are praying) on his head. Usman also had the biggest beard than any of the comedians with facial hair.

He was the most popular comedian out of all of the comedians because when I asked my respondents if they ever saw Muslim standup comedy before, some of them would say the first Muslim standup comedian they saw was Azhar Usman. Some of my respondents told me that they heard of him years ago in the DVD “Allah Made me Funny” or on YouTube when they were younger.

I asked my respondents if Usman’s appearance (e.g. brown skin color, long thick beard, long black hair) helps or hurts other Muslim-Americans. What I meant by this question was that I wanted to know if my respondents thought his appearance should be different. I wondered if my respondents wanted him to not have a beard or topee.

Gamali, a 21 year old Indian man who has a long beard said:

It’s more inviting to me. It might not be a good thing to feel but I can relate to him because he looks like me. (Why is that not a good thing to feel?) Cuz it might be judgmental. If he didn’t look like me I would have different views... It’s a natural feeling of inclusion... He’s doesn’t feel ashamed at all. His beard is awesome, I want that beard (laughs). Because if he’s comfortable he’s successful that helps... He’s successful and out there like that, it makes me feel I can be out there too. And he got there, I

look at that like ‘I can get there too’. I don’t have to shave my beard to impress anyone.

Gamali went on to state the importance of Muslim men growing a beard. He told me a story of how his friend was offered his dream job but was told to shave his beard. His friend refused because he said his beard was important to him.

Over [winter break] my friend was like, ‘I got the job, got the interview but these guys told me I have to shave my beard.’ He said that ‘I’m not taking the job.’ And it was something he really wanted... [The beard] is what some Muslims use for their identification. I’m Muslim I’m representing. But I know people who don’t have beards and they’re more pious than I’ll ever be (chuckles)... You know how the sisters have the hijab? (Yeah) Brothers have the beards... It’s reassuring [seeing Usman with his beard] Like – Yo, you can still have a beard and be proud of yourself. You don’t have to live up to other peoples’ standards, of like not looking like a Muslim. Looking more American. (That would mean what?) Clean shaven and no topee.

Gamali found Usman to be someone who legitimated his use of the big beard and this brought a sense of comfort for Gamali. The importance of the beard for Muslim men was key for Gamali associating having a long beard with religious and racial freedom. None of my respondents said that Usman having a beard or topee was an issue. They mentioned that he should not change his appearance to suit others. When I asked Salmaan if Usman should change his appearance. Salmaan states:

Absolutely not, no. (Why is that?) Well I think I mean just by - country, you should be able to dress how you want. Um, but, I think that a part of uh, what also influences my answer to this question is that he’s still breaking a barrier, by being the way he is. And being dressed that way um. So um. [He’s disproving] stereotype, so it’s a good thing. And he should stick with that.

When I asked Sufyan if Usman’s appearance helps or hurts other Muslim-Americans he said:

I think it would help. (How so?) Cuz um – you have the stereotypical Muslim guy you know? The big beard, big guy – um – in the one clip he had long hair too you know – the other clip he’s wearing a topee so it’s like he’s probably looks like a stereotypical Muslim so he probably is a stereotypical Muslim. He’s probably a stereotypical terrorist or whatever. He seems like a very friendly guy you know? He seems like – a really nice guy you know – it’s kind of cool to see like him breaking those stereotypes I guess.

Heba and Aisha spoke about nothing being wrong with his appearance. But Heba was frightened when first watching Usman’s clip. Heba states:

I mean the first time I saw him he looked a little frightening just cuz like – I don’t know like – he just looked frightening I don’t know not in a weird sense but in a – he’s just a big guy (A: and intimidating) Yeah, yeah, yeah there you go. Yeah but like his demeanor and the way he tells his jokes kind of like appeases that side (A: Opposite)

Aisha states:

I mean I think it’s fine he has like a beard. I mean people can think what they want I guess. I don’t think you should change like your religious thing. Like what he’s doing with the topee and the um – the beard or like other people...

Heba states:

That’s like the reason why he does it, then there’s nothing wrong. There’s no correlation with that and comedy.

No one said that Usman’s impressions of accents were racist. They found it to be funny because they argued the impersonations were accurate because they argued some Muslims they encountered have the same accents that Usman used. Therefore, diversity was brought up when I asked about Usman using accents in his act. Instead of his jokes not being racist, his jokes were seen as talking about the diversity in the Muslim-American community. Usman’s appearance showed that diversity was central to Usman’s accents. They spoke about the diversity of the Muslim community and how Usman was

breaking barriers by using accents. I asked my respondents if it was acceptable for

Usman to joke about the different racial and ethnic communities by impersonating their accents. Salmaan states:

I wouldn't think it is insulting, it shouldn't be insulting to people. Why would you take it as an insult? Like it's how you pronounce things, how you say things, um... and like the jokes were all like in the name of diversity. Like Islam is a diverse religion we have all these kinds of people and like yeah of course we're going to laugh about it like that's fine. But I don't think like he was saying, 'they say it like this, they sound so stupid.' Like you know – that would be going too far. But this one was fine. I guess the extent to which he took it was like all in the name of diversity and goodwill. Good comedy so yeah... I think it's funny especially when I can relate to it culturally. So I said, I find the Indo/Pak one the funniest. And I met Arabs that's how they talk and stuff like that. I think the close it is to reality, the funnier it is. On top of being able to relate to it.

Sufyan states:

I guess like in a way it is because like – it's stemming from them being Muslim right? And them speaking like Arabic. And um – that varies you know – you have Muslims from everywhere and also um – (pauses) like he didn't dis-include, disclude – sorry – he didn't disclude Desis in the back or whatever. So – I guess in a way he might have been doing something bad by picking on a race that's not his own. Like at the same time – I guess he was showing the unity of like all the races in Islam – so it was also kind of cool.

Gamali states:

I think it's cool. Some people might think it's racist, but he's doing it to every race. He's not being racist. He did it to his own race you know? It's funny. And then he might use a stereotype here and there but – I mean I find it funny... As long as he's equal with the hate. Not the hate. But with the jokes. I think it's funny. It's true how people say 'A – Salamu – Alaykum.'

My respondents do not want to see Usman change his appearance. If anything, his beard and topee were seen as forms of empowerment that showed he was comfortable in his own skin. Respondents like Gamali felt empowered by Usman looking the way he

looked. Gamali as well as other respondents talked about how Usman was breaking barriers by not only his appearance, but by making the audience laugh and disproving the racial stereotype that people may have of him.

Respondents talked about how Usman was showing the diversity of Muslim-Americans in his comedy by impersonating accents. Therefore he should not be seen as he was being racist towards the various communities he impersonated. They argued that some Muslim-Americans do sound similar to those that Usman impersonated. My respondents related a lot to Usman and his clip was one of the main clips that they said they enjoyed a lot.

In the final analysis, “Painting with Colors” is about identity, gender, and race. The ‘Muslim Bubble’ showcases that even though seven respondents are not friends with non-Muslims, they still associate themselves with other Muslims for the same reasons they don’t associate with non-Muslims. They related to the comedy, with Ahmed joking about pork, Zayid joking about gender and marriage, and Usman’s appearance while he’s impersonating different accents. Muslim standup comedy serves as a way for my respondents to relate to the comedy by telling stories of the relationship between identity, gender, and race. In essence, the comedy paints a new image of Islam and Muslims and my respondents personally received a form of relation from Ahmed’s joke, Zayid’s thoughts on marriage, and Usman’s joke about Muslim-American diversity.

CHAPTER FIVE

REPAINTING THE IMAGE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I am using respondents' reactions of standup comedy to understand how it neutralizes negative stereotypes and makes Muslims appear normal to mainstream American society. I focused on the perspectives on Muslim standup comedy from college-age Muslim-Americans. Muslim standup comedy creates a safe space to negotiate and explore topics of stereotypes, identity, gender, and race.

There were variables that I thought would influence reactions to the comedy such as the university respondents attended, ethnicity and gender of respondents but they did not influence the respondents' reception. All of my respondents enjoyed the comedy and before I conducted interviews, I assumed I would have more variation of their receptions.

Instead, the clips and questions gave respondents opportunities to discuss their lives and issues important to them. My research inadvertently produced data that included stereotypes, normalizing the hijab, whether to have non-Muslim friends, what is proper Muslim behavior, and handling marriage pressures. Respondents discussed these topics at length, and this is why respondents identified with and related to the comedy.

There were certain improvements I could have made with my research. These improvements include having more of an ethnically diverse group of respondents, having more respondents, and having respondents that have more class differences. The vast majority of my respondents were South Asian. I did not have a racially or ethnically

diverse sample. Having majority South Asian respondents meant that ethnically diverse perspectives were not found. Specifically, I was looking for perspectives from African American Muslims since there are many African Americans in the Muslim community. If I had ethnically diverse respondents I would have more voices (e.g., African American Muslims) because their voices were not included. Instead I mainly had South Asian Muslims, and a few Arab Muslims speaking about the comedy and their lives. Without ethnic diversity I was unable to include different perspectives. Since non-South Asian and non-Arabs are part of the Muslim-American community, they would have a unique set of insights. They may have different life experiences because of their race and ethnicity that many Arab and South Asian respondents do not have. For instance, the topic of marriage is equally important to African American Muslims, but they have a different experience because they are African American, Muslim-American, and in a city where many Muslim-Americans who are South Asian or Arab marry within their ethnic communities.

On top of that, as I traveled to three different schools I was expecting to receive more respondents. However, I had one respondent from Northland University, two respondents from Westland University, and 16 from Eastland University. The improvement I would make is have more respondents from different colleges and universities in my sample. Nineteen respondents sufficed the research for now, but having twenty five or thirty respondents from different colleges and universities as I projected will allow different perspectives. The students who attend Eastland University come from college educated families, and they are almost all planning on attending

medical school. However, getting more perspectives from students of Westland University would have allowed me the opportunity to speak with more students who do not attend a private university. They may not have parents who are college educated and this means that since they are coming from a different class, they may view Muslim standup comedy differently than many of my respondents.

Additionally, there was not much of a class difference. Many if not all of my respondents had a parent that was college educated. I was hoping to get respondents who did not have parents who were college educated because possibly it would mean that there would be a class difference. A class difference would possibly mean that there would be a different perspective of Muslim standup comedy. In the comments section of YouTube.com, some users comment about a Muslim standup comic and argue that Muslim standup comedy is not the “real Islam”, and that this form of comedy is “sinful” or “haram.” There is no telling what these users’ class is, but finding out their class may bring some type of disagreement with Muslim standup comedy, since all of my respondents agree with it existing.

What I would like to learn more about is what my respondents have to say about where Muslim standup comedy stands today, conducting ethnography of standup comedy performances, what non-Muslims say about the comedy, and what older Muslim-Americans say about the comedy. Learning more about Muslim standup comedy can push the barrier of only studying a Muslim-American audience in their respective colleges and universities.

When it comes to where the comedy currently stands, I want to know where Muslim-Americans think Muslim standup comedy stands today. Some of my respondents mentioned to me that certain comics are using jokes that they have heard before. Specifically they said to me after watching Obeidallah that many of the jokes are outdated and that there is no place for them in today's world. They mentioned that they used to joke with their friends about terrorism, being racially profiled in airports, and being spied on by the FBI or CIA as jokes in the past. But, discovering where Muslim standup comedy stands today will allow me to understand if it is still painting a new image of Islam and Muslims. In the year 2008, Muslim standup comedy was on the rise, but now there is little news about it. I would like to learn if Muslim standup comedy is still trying to shatter stereotypes of Islam and Muslims or if it transformed to accomplish a different goal. Because if it is trying to accomplish a different goal, that would probably mean that Muslim standup comedy does not have the same function of identity I discovered in this research.

I would also like to conduct ethnographic study of observing standup performances by these standup comedians. I was unable to do this for this research but conducting an ethnographic study of observing these Muslim standup comics will enhance the observation of audience members. If I get a sense of audience responses as the ability to interview people before and after the show, it might yield different information than the controlled experience of viewing a video individually. I might also discover if there is a difference between having other audience members around while watching the comedy. Watching a live comedy performance might yield a different

experience of the comedy because everyone else in attendance will be laughing to the jokes as opposed to solely watching the comedy through a computer screen. An ethnographic study of Muslim standup comedy performances might answer the question of how the comedians are able to make the audience laugh at certain jokes. In fact, it might even explain why the audience finds certain topics to be funny and why some other topics are not funny. In my research I tried discovering why certain jokes were funny, but by doing ethnography I would be able to discover which jokes are funny as well as if the environment plays a role with making jokes funny for the audience.

I would like to discover what the non-Muslim audience has to say about Muslim standup comedy. I already have the perspectives from Muslim-Americans, and before I conduct more research of Muslim-Americans' perceptions, I need to discover non-Muslims' perceptions about the comedy. Discovering what non-Muslims have to say about the comedy is important because as Obeidallah and Usman argued, Muslim standup comedy attempts to disprove stereotypes non-Muslims possess about Islam and Muslims. These are stereotypes held by non-Muslims and if there is no research on what non-Muslims have to say, then we cannot draw a conclusion if Muslim standup comedy is in fact successful in battling stereotypes.

The final piece that I would like to learn more about is I would like to broaden my pool of respondents to adults who remembered 9/11. My respondents were 4 – 9 years old on September 11, 2001, therefore they may not have much recollection of this day. By interviewing Muslim-Americans who have vivid memories of this day and what the events that came after meant to them might give me different perspectives because they

“lived through” September 11, 2001. They presumably experienced racism, discrimination, prejudice, and hate crimes that none of my respondents said they experienced because they were so young. Possibly older Muslim-Americans can share their stories of “Islamophobia” they endured during September 11 and now.

In the final analysis, this research showed that Muslim standup comedy is perceived by many college-aged Muslim-Americans as painting a new image of Islam and Muslims. It does this by having respondents identify and relate to the comedy. No matter the class and ethnic background of my respondents, they all enjoyed the comedy for many of the same reasons. Respondents loved the comedy because it helped them feel less isolated and more normal. It let them understand that the challenges of being a young college age Muslim-American are shared and can be successfully overcome.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions for Muslim-Americans

Before playing any clips...

- 1) What is your age?
- 2) What is your major?
- 3) How would you define your race?
- 4) How would you define your ethnicity?
- 5) What is the highest education your father has achieved?
 - a. Probe: What occupation does your father have?
- 6) What is the highest education your mother has achieved?
 - a. Probe: What occupation does your mother have?
- 7) What is your father's profession?
 - a. Probe: What does your father do for a living?
- 8) What is your mother's profession?
 - a. Probe: What does your mother do for a living?
- 9) In what country were your parents born?
- 10) In what country were your parents raised?
 - a. Probe: Are your parents immigrants to the U.S.?
- 11) In what country were you born in?
- 12) In what country were you raised in?
 - a. Probe: Are you a second generation American? For instance, you were born and raised in the U.S. but your parents were not.
- 13) How long have you been a Muslim?
 - a. Probe: Are you Sunni Muslim?
 - b. Probe: Are you Shia Muslim?
- 14) Is your belief in Islam important to you?
 - a. Probe: In what ways is Islam important to you?
 - b. Probe: In what ways is being a Muslim important to you?
- 15) Do you pray on Fridays?
 - a. Probe: Where do you normally pray on Fridays?
- 16) How long have you been attending this college/university?
 - a. Probe: What made you want to attend this university?
 - b. Probe: Do you enjoy attending this university?
 - i. If so, why or why not?
- 17) Are you a member of a Muslim student organization (e.g. MSA) in this college/university?
 - a. Probe: Why or why not?
- 18) What are your interactions with non-Muslims outside of this college/university?

- 19) Have you heard of any Muslim American stand-up comedians before?
- Probe: If so, who have you heard of?
 - Probe: How did you hear of them?
- 20) Have you ever seen or attended any Muslim American stand-up comedy shows?
- Probe: If so, where, when, and why?
 - Probe: Do you consider yourself to be a fan?

After watching the clip of Dean Obeidallah

- 21) Why or why not are Dean Obeidallah's jokes about Muslims and Arabs being stereotyped as terrorists funny?
- Probe: Does Dean Obeidallah make a good point with his remarks? Why or why not?

After watching the clip of Ahmed Ahmed

- 22) Is it true when Ahmed Ahmed says, "You know you're a Muslims when you drink, gamble, have sex, but you won't eat pork?"
- Probe: If so or if not, why?
 - Probe: What do you think Ahmed Ahmed means by this statement?

After watching the clip of Shazia Mirza

- 23) What do you think about Shazia Mirza wearing a hijab while she performs her stand-up routine?
- Probe: Do you think it is fine with her wearing the hijab while she performs? Why and why not?
 - Probe: Do you not think it is fine with her wearing the hijab while she performs? Why and why not?
- 24) Do you agree with what Shazia Mirza said about the relationships of Muslim men and Muslim women? (e.g. her parents relationship, her getting married, etc.)
- Probe: If so, why or why not?
 - Probe: Is it okay if Muslim women perform comedy?

After watching the clip of Maysoon Zayid

- 25) Was Maysoon Zayid's interpretation of marriage accurate for Arab or Muslim women?
- Probe: If so, why or why not?
 - Probe: She said she was "33 years old, and in Arab years that is 67 (years old)." Is this true for Muslim or Arab women?

After watching the clip of Azhar Usman

- 26) Does Azhar Usman's appearance (e.g. brown skin color, long thick beard, long black hair) help or hurt other Muslim-Americans?
- a. Probe: Should he change his appearance and try to look differently?
 - i. Probe: If so, how?
- 27) Is it acceptable for Azhar Usman to joke about Indians, Arabs, African Americans, Jews and Whites in his comedy?
- a. Probe: Why are the ethnic accents that he uses funny? Or not funny?

After watching the clip of Preacher Moss

- 28) Do you or do you not agree when Preacher Moss said, "Muslims need to try different things?"
- a. Probe: Why and why not? For instance, when he said Muslims don't advertise or have a theme song?
 - b. Probe: Would his statement still hold the same value if he was not an African-American Muslim?
- 29) What do you think of when Preacher Moss said, "Why do they hate our freedom?" and "why do they call us terrorists?"
- a. Probe: Do you think Muslims are not seen in same light as other people in the U.S.?
 - i. Probe: Who are these other people in the U.S.?

After watching all of the selected clips

- 30) Did any of the clips make you feel uncomfortable at all?
- a. Probe: Which clips made you feel uncomfortable?
 - b. Probe: Why did it or did not make you feel uncomfortable?
- 31) Which clips did you most enjoy watching?
- a. Probe: Why did you enjoy these clips from the others?
- 32) Do you like the fact that Muslim stand-up comedy exists?
- a. Probe: Why or why not?
- 33) Are you able to relate to any of the jokes that were being told?
- a. Probe: If so, how do you relate to the jokes?
 - b. Probe: Which specific jokes were you able to relate to?
- 34) Is it okay if non-Muslim stand-up comedians were telling the same type of jokes as Muslim stand-up comedians?
- a. Probe: For instance, how Muslim American stand-up comedians joke about ethnicity, culture, heritage, religion, stereotypes, etc.
 - b. Probe: Would it make you feel uncomfortable or does it not matter if they tell the same jokes?

- 35) Is it okay if non-Muslims heard Muslim stand-up comedy?
- a. Probe: After hearing the stand-up is it okay if they laughed at the jokes?
 - b. Probe: Is it okay if non-Muslims heard Muslims making fun of their own ethnicity, culture, religion, etc.?
 - c. Probe: Why and why not?
- 36) Are there certain things that Muslim stand-up comedy should not joke about?
- a. Probe: What are these specific things?
 - b. Probe: Why should they not joke about these things?
- 37) Is the religion of Islam something to laugh about?
- a. Probe: Why or why not?
- 38) Do Muslims have to learn to laugh at themselves?
- a. Probe: Do Muslims have to not take jokes from Muslim stand-up comedy seriously?
 - b. Probe: Do Muslims have to not take jokes from non-Muslim stand-up comedy seriously?
- 39) Any final thoughts?

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VITA

Bilal Hussain, was born in Chicago, IL and grew up in a western suburb outside of Chicago, IL. Before becoming a doctoral student in sociology at Loyola University Chicago, he attended Northeastern Illinois University. This is where he graduated with honors in 2012 after majoring in sociology with a minor in economics.

Currently, his research interests include the study of race and ethnic relations along with the sociology of religion. His M.A. Thesis is with Dr. Rhys H. Williams and Dr. Talmadge Wright. Hussain's thesis is about the perspectives that college aged Muslim-Americans have of the comedic performances of Muslim standup comedy.

In the future, Hussain wants to continue his work on Muslim-Americans. He wants to apply literature concerning race and ethnic relations as well as the sociology of religion to his upcoming research.

