Ordained by the Algorithm: Female (Religious) Influencers on TikTok

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ABSTRACT:

With the “decline” of organized religion, there is the question of where people now go to find meaning. While houses of worship previously served as sites of both community and spiritual reassurance, has another medium arisen that can perform these same services in a digital age? In this paper, I theorize a new type of religious authority that can be observed on the social media platform TikTok. Using three young women spanning three major faiths, I analyze the ways in which they have harnessed their femininity, cultural currency, and understanding of their respective communities to forge relationships with their followers and solidify their positions as influential figures. Focusing on two major themes, authority and modesty, this paper will give comparative insight into the ways in which “authentic” connection and, consequently, a sense of meaning is cultivated in an increasingly tech-driven society.

PROLOGUE:

My interest in this topic came about organically. As is the case for many people who entered graduate school these past few years, I imagine my interest was heavily influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. We were stuck inside; we watched an inordinate amount of TV; we kept up with the news; we refreshed Twitter and played Wordle and posted pictures of banana bread on Instagram. Media was everything. Our world, the world we had all known, had become inhabitable—so amid that turmoil, we found solace online.

Even before the pandemic, I was interested in the ways social media was affecting us psychologically. Although Psych 101 was the beginning and end of my science career, I could still connect my interest in social media to something deeper and more abstract: the pursuit of meaning. I wondered how my technological attachments were affecting me mentally. What parts of myself were being deprived by these habits, like a limb atrophying from disuse? Most importantly, what was I losing by never sitting in stillness? I use "stillness" here loosely; not just physical "stillness," but a stillness of the mind, a quiet that I have not been solely immersed in for longer than I can remember. My older sister, who has ADD, is constantly on her phone when we watch TV or movies together. It drives me crazy. When I occasionally scold her, her response is usually the same: "I don't want to be alone with my thoughts." Dark humor aside, my sister's practice and the reasoning behind it is not unique to her; the constant stimulation can be a tonic, a welcome distraction from the terror that is extended introspection.

We have replaced these moments of quiet contemplation with never-ending sources of entertainment and collective interaction. In many ways, these social media platforms have

become their own religion. They've created their own communities, feature their own "idols," and have an additive quality that demands its own form of ritual. More than once, typically in moments of anxiety, I've found myself frantically swiping through my phone like a good Catholic fingering her rosary beads. These are the moments that I was most interested in studying, along with the consequences of these moments. Where once people looked to their version of a higher power for clarity or emotional and mental relief, we now look to a screen. How is this new technological age affecting our beliefs? How has it changed our perception of "meaning" and the way these perceptions were traditionally formed?

My interest in TikTok specifically arose, ironically, from my own bout with COVID. While my interest in media was furthered by the pandemic in a broader sense, my first-hand experience (and the necessary self-quarantine) pushed me to download the app that had skyrocketed in popularity during these "unprecedented" years. TikTok is addicting, time-consuming, toxic, and inane…almost as much as it is hilarious, informative, joy-affirming, and brilliant. The hardest I've laughed these past twelve months has been while watching a TikTok video; at the same time, I've wasted innumerable minutes of my life staring slack-jawed at my phone. In either case, within my first few hours on TikTok, I was exposed to religious content. This was a side of the social media app that I hadn't been aware of before, and the structure of this content intrigued me. By far, the most viewed/"liked" TikToks I saw came from members of traditionally insular communities. Whether it be Orthodox Jews in religious garb or Amish youth on rumspringa, there is a clear fascination and appetite for this type of content. Even more intriguing, women from these groups were creating their own videos, a fact that seems shocking when considered alongside a surface-level understanding of what it means to be a female member of a traditionally conservative faith.

I chose to analyze these female creators further through a comparative look at the ways in which they engage with social media (with TikTok as my site of inquiry). While my interests at a macroscopic level will always revolve around the pursuit of "meaning" in a digital age, I wanted to focus my questions on the individual experiences of these women. How did becoming religious influencers affect their relationships with their faith, their communities, and themselves? What mechanisms did they use to create "authentic" connections with their followers, and what did these connections mean for their own autonomy? To center these questions on the experiences of these young women, I decided to focus my analysis on two themes that repeatedly appeared in their content: authority and modesty. My subjects were selected both organically and intentionally, whether by appearing naturally on my "For You Page" or through searches using various hashtags. These three young women span three faiths—Orthodox Judaism, Islam, and Mormonism. However, despite their differences, there are undeniable similarities in their content and the messaging they strive to achieve. As young American women, and further, members of "Gen Z," they share a cultural literacy that goes beyond their respective religious, ethnic, and geographic communities. They use this cultural literacy, including performances of vulnerability and personability, to both connect with their viewers and establish their own authority. What is an influencer if not an authority figure? And what is an influencer without a collection of loyal followers who value their opinion and advice as they would a friend's? Through these channels, my three subjects solidify a new understanding of religious authority that circumvents traditional, hierarchical structures. They speak as women for women—their right to do so ordained not by God, but by thousands of faceless peers.

INTRODUCTION:

My study involved an analysis of TikTok content created by three American women: Golda Daphna, a former ultra-Orthodox Jew, Yasmin Jalloh, a veiled Muslim, and Kenna McClellan, a practicing Mormon. My subjects' ages ranged from twenty-one to twenty-three years old. Each of these women, aside from representing a different faith, brought their own unique personality traits and interpersonal dynamics to their social media. Using the overarching themes of authority and modesty, I worked to identify the ways in which these women both navigate the world and establish their own places within it. How had TikTok become a site of affective connection and meaning for them and their followers? Golda frequently utilizes vulnerability; her content deals with sensitive issues related to her own sexual assault, and she frequently displays emotion in her videos. Aside from her trauma, her vulnerability is present in her willingness to publicly ask questions about her own faith. Despite having an extremely religious background, Golda opens herself up to the entire internet as she mulls over her own relationship with Judaism. Yasmin's analysis brings up the concept of intersectionality; as a black, veiled, Muslim woman in America, her racial and religious identities are always on display. Her content shows a young woman who understands deeply that each aspect of her identity is perpetually under attack; while undeniably vulnerable, Yasmin speaks with a startling clarity and thoughtfulness that is both intimidating and impactful. Kenna's platform harnesses personability; of all three women, she most embodies the power of branding—not just the companies she's paid to create content for, but the concept of someone cultivating an entire

online persona around a certain type of woman. She uses her understanding of pop culture to assimilate herself to her audience, making the more abnormal aspects of her lifestyle (i.e., her devoted Mormonism) feel familiar.

My research for this project was primarily ethnographic; I positioned myself in the role of audience member, viewing Golda, Yasmin, and Kenna's content through the eyes of any one of their many followers. For each of these subjects, I selected a range of TikToks from their profiles that displayed themes of modesty and/or authority. Outside of these two concepts, I also selected any TikToks that gave entry into the inner workings of their lives; although not directly related to religion or my selected themes, these videos were insightful in understanding the online persona each of these women had strived to create. Once my TikToks were selected, I performed a detailed analysis of every aspect of the video. This included not only their dialogue, actions, and displayed texts, but also more layered components like the subject's body language or the look on their face. These "performances" were picked apart and observed both as individual parts and as a whole. Aside from ethnography, textual analysis played a role in my research. Each TikTok caption was examined contextually, with certain keywords and phrases highlighted. An especially fruitful part of my research was the video comment section; for each sample, I looked through the accompanying comment section and identified any audience engagement that supported my hypothesis. Further, dialogue between my creators and their audience in the comment section was flagged as an example of online connection. My choice of an ethnographic study was inspired by the work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood—specifically her book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject.*[1] Her focus on Muslim femininity in the women's piety movement in Cairo has greatly influenced my own understanding of how to

[1] Mahmood, S., *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton UP, 2011).

approach questions of cultural difference. *Politics of Piety* shows that there are a multitude of meanings when it comes to the term "feminist," a mindset I tried to bring into my own research.

Through my study, I found that these three women further their online authority by co-opting digital trends; they take patterns that have been established by social media sites like TikTok and use these formats to not only publicize their lives and struggles, but to also communicate these experiences in a recognizable way for the audience. Virality is not the only goal for each of these influencers. While more views and "likes" equates to more success on social media, their motivations are beyond purely financial. They infuse their personalities into the content they produce, using moments of vulnerability to strengthen the bond between creator and viewer. Despite their differences, these women have artfully created a world in which they're agonizingly familiar; they face the same problems we face, they hurt the same way we hurt, and they get up and face these same issues day after day, just as we do. Through this emotional connection, they establish a form of authority that is not only deepened by its categorization as "authentic," but also grows stronger with each video. These women become ingrained in every aspect of their viewers' lives, their presence a reminder that even the seemingly "strange" can become a reassurance that we are not alone.

CHAPTER ONE: TikTok History

If you have been on some form of media in the past two years, chances are that you have heard of TikTok. Recognition of this app goes beyond age, ethnicity, nationality, or socio-economic background. Intimately tied to youth culture, TikTok is equally prevalent in political debate; as I write this, TikTok's CEO Shou Zi Chew has just been lambasted by Congress for more than five hours in a hearing.[2] Teenagers might be the ones who are actively on TikTok performing dance moves or learning how to apply eyeliner, but older, less "technologically-inclined" Americans are hearing about it on the news, reading about it in the paper, and voicing their opinions about it via its antiquated cousin Meta née Facebook. I know more than one person who has refused to download TikTok, only to have them tell me about a funny "reel" they saw on Instagram that was originally on TikTok three weeks ago. TikTok has become not just a part of American pop culture, but a *facilitator* of culture.

To understand the depth of this influence, there needs to be an understanding of TikTok's own history. Launched in 2016 by the Chinese company Bytedance, TikTok became one in a long lineage of short-form video platforms. In *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video,* Kaye, Zeng, and Wikström describe the hosting service as not only a platform but a product, tool, and business.[3] Like its predecessors, TikTok creates most of its profit from advertising; these ads are seen periodically as the user scrolls through their feed. The international version of Douyin, the name for TikTok's Chinese counterpart, the platform those of us in the US are most

[2] Kang, C., McCabe, D., Maheshwari, S. "Lawmakers Blast TikTok's C.E.O. for App's Ties to China, Escalating Tensions." (*New York Times,* 23 March 2021).
[3] Kaye, D.B.V., Zeng, J., Wikström, *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video* (Wiley, 2022), 24.

familiar with is the product of a merger between Bytedance and Musical.ly. On Musical.ly, users could create and share 15-second to 1-minute lip-synching music videos which fostered an environment in which ordinary people became "directors".[4]

This creative and entrepreneurial spirit is at the heart of TikTok as well, although with more innovative features. Users have more control of the videos they produce, going beyond the Musical.ly framework of purely music-related content. Features like "duetting," a structure in which users can create side-by-side videos and collaborate with others highlights the potential for community-building on the site. Creators can respond to others' questions, try out one another's dance moves, or comment on a previously produced scene. As described in *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video,* "social networking and community are at the heart of their [TikTok's] product".[5] "Stitching" is another collaborative aspect of the platform, functioning similarly to "duetting". Users incorporate up to 5 seconds of clips from other TikToks in their own videos. It's in these stitch compositions that a line of communication is most clearly seen between users. Often, the stitched clip includes some type of statement or situation that the person making the stitched video is responding to. These set-ups are fertile ground for comedy and often feature users reacting to outlandish scenarios or dialogue from the initial clip. These "stitches" and "duets" further contribute to the original video's virality; they act as free PR, drawing attention to the stitched video's content and furthering its digital reach. Virality is a vital component of short-form video services like TikTok and is a subject that will be further explored.

An essential element of these hosting services is the endless scroll feed. Platforms like TikTok and Musical.ly employ the endless scroll feature to keep users captivated. People who go

[4] Kaye, Zeng, Wikström, 53.
[5] Kaye, Zeng, Wikström, 51.

on TikTok describe the addictive nature of the app, often spending unanticipated amounts of time simply scrolling through various videos. This feature ties into an age-old human attraction to quantity; although the quality of the videos might fluctuate, their never-ending supply is enticing in and of itself. TikTok's algorithm functions in a way that makes popular videos appear more often on user's screens while scrolling; there is a direct line between the number of views and "likes" a TikTok has and the amount of people who then see it pop-up on their "endless scroll." However, this is not a steadfast rule. Often, one might see a relatively niche video appear on their page. This TikTok might only have a handful of "likes" and views and be the product of a less established TikToker. These videos feel out of place—as if these creators have somehow weaseled their way into the world of virality and influencer-hood by accident. Despite their being an exception, these videos and creators are still experiencing the benefits of a networking site that gives all creators a sense of autonomy. These self-made "directors" have the opportunity to reach the heights of TikTok fame through the chance their video might be seen and shared by the right number of viewers. Even with its intentional algorithm, a sense of randomness exists. TikTok fashions itself a meritocracy, where hard work and good content can lead to something much more.

The role of community in these social digital apps has been discussed by various scholars. One popular understanding takes root in the work of Ferdinand Tönnies. A German sociologist and philosopher, he co-founded the German Society for Sociology with Max Weber and Georg Simmel, among others.[6] Tönnies distinguished between two social groups using the concepts of *Gemeinschaf* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaf* referred to close, intimate, interpersonal communities, while *Gesellschaft* characterized formal, calculating, individualistic ones.[7] Tönnies

[6] Wirth, L. "The Sociology of Ferdinand Tonnies," *American Journal of Sociology* 32(3), 414.
[7] Kaye, Zeng, Wikström, 128.

suggested an inevitable shift towards *Gesellschaft* with urbanization, as tightly knit rural communities were replaced by scattered urban ones. Social groupings were vital elements of small-town life. Without access to expanded systems of support or communication, the people in one's geographic location automatically became part of a cohort working together to survive. Additionally, the diversity present in a large urban setting changed processes of relation; while previously living in the same place meant common physical and ideological attributes, there was no guarantee of continuity in a city. In *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video,* Tönnies's conception of social groupings is formatted for the digital stage. Short-form video is proposed as a link between the rural and urban, adding another dimension to the *Gemeinschaf* vs. *Gesellschaft* paradigm.[8] Social media sites like TikTok and Musical.ly (and, naturally, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) defy the limitations of geographic location. Users can transcend the boundaries of both setting and culture to create universal content. In my own experience, I've seen TikToks filmed in locations spanning rural Thailand to small-town Kentucky go viral. Along with this expanded access, the social nature of these sites allows for forged connections; things like "comments," "likes," and direct messaging permit a line of communication between creator and viewer. These platforms give individuals a creative outlet in which the lines between "intimate" and "formal" relationships are blurred.

Apps like TikTok have also elevated the power and influence of younger individuals. In October 2021, the top 50 TikTokers (the creators with the most followers) had a median birth year of 1998.[9] This number also includes TikTokers who already had social capital from their entertainment careers, such as Will Smith and Jason Derulo. While these two artists have a significant following on TikTok, this following is directly related to the influence they already

[8] Kaye, Zeng, Wikström, 132.
[9] Kaye, Zeng, Wikström, 138.

wielded. Meanwhile, scores of teens and young adults have forged their own following on the platform through virality and carefully crafted content. Gen Z, individuals born between the years of 1997 and 2012, has found footing on these social sites and fundamentally altered giant industries in the process. In particular, the music industry has seen significant modifications in the wake of the 2020 TikTok boom; now, TikTok dances and trends are what make or break industry attempts to manufacture a hit. If you were to turn on your radio and play the US top 40 today, most songs would be "featured sounds" on TikTok. In an interview, the singer Halsey described this phenomenon from the point of view of the artist; despite multiple Grammys, she was told by her label that to get a song made in 2021 she needed to also create a TikTok campaign to go along with it.[10] The sad nature of this fact aside, this is a prime example of the power held by these short-form video sites. Despite only being created in the past decade TikTok, and its numerous teenage users, have transformed the music industry and added a whole new dimension to its century-plus tenure.

These top 50 creators are emblematic of a rising interest in the "influencer." Social media influencing has become a legitimate, lucrative career for a number of people traditionally cut off from these types of economic opportunities. As described above, many of these influencers are teenagers or young adults. While these groups would previously be "just starting out" in their careers and thus limited to certain financial resources, online influencing has metaphorically opened doors for these sub-groups. In their article "Online influencer marketing," Leung, Gu, and Palmatier define online influencers as "individuals, groups of individuals, or even avatars who have built a network of followers on social media and are regarded as digital opinion leaders

[10] Chow, Andrew R. "Halsey Is the Latest Artist Complaining About the Music Industry's Reliance on TikTok." (*Time,* 23 May 2022).

with significant social influence on their network of followers."[11] Many of these influencers go on to make significant amounts of money through things like brand partnerships, sponsored content, and product "ambassadorships".[12] Two of the most prominent TikTokers, influencers who have received international recognition, are Charli D'Amelio and Addison Rae. These young women have amassed a following of 150.3 million and 88.8 million people on TikTok respectively, both before the age of 23.[13] [14] This level of influence on one social media platform almost automatically transfers to another; Addison Rae currently has 38.9 million followers on the app Instagram, while Charli D'Amelio boasts 48.1 million followers on the same.[15] [16] Through the help of various managers and agents, they have both leveraged their online stardom into business ventures including a reality show, Super Bowl commercial, Netflix movie, and fragrance line.[17] Having both achieved their initial TikTok fame as teenagers, D'Amelio and Rae exemplify the astounding level of success possible for young women on social media. The standard system of those already in positions of power having the largest sphere of influence is subverted here; while historically the amplification of one's voice in the public arena was tied to economic and social success (and race and gender, i.e., being a white male), the "democratizing" nature of the internet breaks down some of these barriers. It is not hard to imagine that these two young women would have much less power over public discourse without the platform offered by sites like TikTok or Instagram.

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[11] Leung, F.F., Gu, F.F., Palmatier, R.W. "Online influencer marketing," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 50, 226–251.
[12] Kaye, Zeng, Wikström, 73
[13] D'Amelio, Charli (@charlidamelio). 2023. TikTok, March 16, 2023.
[14] Rae, Addison (@addisonre). 2023. TikTok, March 16, 2023.
[15] Rae, Addison (@addisonraee). 2023. Instagram, March 16, 2023.
[16] D'Amelio, Charli (@charlidamelio). 2023. Instagram, March 16, 2023.
[17] Neibart, Sam. "Addison Rae Is Launching a Mood-Boosting Fragrance Line." (*Nylon,* 2 November 2021).

Addison Rae and Charli D'Amelio serve as examples of TikTok's reach; however, two vital elements of their success need to be acknowledged. Rae and D'Amelio are both conventionally attractive and white. Further, each came from a family that had the resources to capitalize on their burgeoning stardom by relocating to Los Angeles and pursuing professional representation. At the same time, they have both been accused of appropriation. The dances that helped both girls go viral, such as the "Renegade," were made by POC creators. Despite being the originators of these dances, many of these POC TikTokers do not receive even a fraction of the fame and success piled upon their white counterparts. On March 26th, 2021, Addison Rae appeared on the popular NBC talk show *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon;* the appearance revolved around her "teaching" Jimmy Fallon some viral TikTok dances including the "Up," "Corvette Corvette," and "Savage" choreography. It was only a week later that the actual creators of these dances, many of whom are people of color, were acknowledged with an apology from Fallon and an appearance on the show following public outcry.[18] While Mya Nicole Johnson, Chris Cotter, Dorien Scott, and Keara Wilson were eventually given credit, their initial erasure shows the centering of white voices that still takes place in our contemporary media landscape.

Part of this issue lies in the definition of what constitutes "mainstream," a definition and structure that has led to the creation of "subcultures" both online and IRL (in real life). In *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video,* these communities are described as making up "alt" TikTok.[19] Shorthand for "alternative," this designation has constituted various individuals who did not meet the expectations of the classic American mainstream including people of color and members of the queer community. In terms of "subcultures" or subgroups that have broken

[18] Carras, Christi. "After Addison Rae backlash, Jimmy Fallon hosts creators of viral TikTok dances." (*Los Angeles Times,* 6 April 2021).
[19] Kaye, Zeng, Wikström, 165.

off from the TikTok mainstage, a surprisingly popular one has been traditionally insular religious groups. For many, myself included, the popularity of these religious TikTokers has led to their appearing on mainstream "For You" Pages (i.e. one's homepage for scrolling). In my own experience, I had only just downloaded TikTok before I was met with multiple videos from Orthodox Jewish and Mormon creators. Although it can be assumed that as a religious studies student I spend more time on this "side" of TikTok, due to how recently I had downloaded the app and infrequent use it had yet to develop its algorithm around my own tastes. Part of the appeal of TikTok is that it caters the content it serves the user based on previous videos they have interacted with. This might include commenting on a video, "liking" a video, or even spending extra time looking at a video—all these metrics are recorded and used formulaically to anticipate a user's preferences.

However, alongside this algorithm is an element of randomness. Interviewees in *TikTok: Creativity and Culture in Short Video* described a "simultaneous randomness and specificity of the TikTok algorithmic recommender system [that] fueled their spontaneity".[20] Thus, while catering to the preferences of the user, TikTok's formula additionally exposes audiences to new content. When it comes to "alt" TikTok and the previously described "subcultures," this element of spontaneity provides ample opportunity for exposure and widening influence. In the fall of 2021, I had the opportunity to interview the TikTok duo @jewcrazy. Two Hasidic Jews living in New York, Tommer and Yossi created the account initially as a form of entertainment and had amassed over half a million followers and more than 9 million combined "likes" at the time of our interview. Much of their content featured the brothers-in-law dancing along to contemporary Rap and Hip-Hop hits in their Orthodox clothing including tzitzit and prayer shawls. The

[20] Kaye, Zeng, Wikström, 163.

contrast between their traditional garb and the extremely modern music creates a sense of disorientation for the viewer; their expectation of how a "proper" Orthodox Jew looks and behaves is subverted.

The surprise of seeing visually religious people participate in internet trends assumed to be "un-pious" and the startling juxtaposition this creates has proved to be popular entertainment. Many of these types of videos garner high numbers of likes and views, prompting significant growth in the number of religious TikTokers. These creators use the platform as a means of both familiarizing their religious practices to the "outside" world and engaging with current cultural trends. The "randomness" of TikTok additionally helped @jewcrazy build their following, a fact they acknowledged in our interview. Yossi explained, "It has a reach…TikTok's algorithm allows you to reach people without having that much of a following." I described how I had seen that phenomenon before, of seemingly "normal" people getting millions of followers from one successfully viral TikTok. Yossi smiled and shot back, "Right. We're not "normal," that's why we haven't hit a million yet." Although mainly a funny quip, his statement reveals an important aspect of this genre of content that has led to its proliferation online. Yossi is right—he and Tommer are not "normal" in our conception of the average, modern American. Their overt religiosity (particularly non-Christian religiosity) is an anomaly in a country that has embraced a private, individualized form of faith.

The Affective Public

Part of social media's appeal lies in its availability for "co-creation." As exemplified in the aspirations of scholars like Marshall McLuhan, the internet was a new landscape in which

participants could collaborate and innovate.[21] This "democratic" element of the online world would supersede its physical counterparts; while people IRL are defined by characteristics like culture, ethnicity, and social-economic status, the internet was presented as a neutral space. With growing interest in social media and, subsequently, an expanding audience hungry for content, users more frequently became creators. The ever-changing dynamic between these two groups, creators and consumers, has evolved further through the fluidity of digital media. In "The Story Logic of Social Media: Co-Construction and Emergent Narrative Authority," Paul Dawson and Maria Mäkelä explore the relationship between audiences and creators. They argue that audiences function as "co-tellers with a potentially significant narrative authority".[22] One of their sites of inquiry is Twitter. With its "tweeted" messages and connective structure, Twitter emphasizes storytelling; alongside original "tweets," users can post reply comments. This function allows for multiple layers of narrative construction. In "The Story Logic of Social Media," this storytelling is hypothesized as an "art of reframing." Dawson and Mäkelä additionally address the notion of social media as an egalitarian, individualistic space; instead, they propose social media as "connective" rather than collective. They cite the fact that individual narratives are what are typically shared across platforms, not a single, unified account. Instead of a "dialog icon feedback loop between participants contributing to a joint reconstruction of past events," users create their own narratives through these interactions.[23] On Twitter, the use of hashtags fuels this connective structure; utilized across social media, the hashtag (#) before a series of words or phrases ties together different posts on the same topic. For

[21] Thorton, S. H. "Let Them Eat IT: The Myth of the Global Village as an Interactive Utopia," *CTHEORY: Theory, Technology and Culture* 25, no. 1-2.
[22] Dawson, P., Mäkelä, M. "The Story Logic of Social Media: Co-Construction and Emergent Narrative Authority," *Style* 54(1), 1.
[23] Dawson, Mäkelä, 2.

example, a user can click on the hashtag "#fifa2022" and be shown various public posts related to the FIFA World Cup using the same hashtag.

The use of hashtags is popular among religious TikTokers; it gives these creators an opportunity to connect with one another and find content that coincides with their own religious and social views. The hashtag represents an "affective public" and creates a collective story through the aggregation of tweets from various creators.[24] However, the individual users in this collective are not working collaboratively, so much as they are "sites of affective contagion from which a different kind of mass behavior emerges".[25] Additionally, these users are not in control of the overarching narrative. Although they have the power to tell their story at the level of an individual tweet, the overarching sentiment is the polymorphous creation of multiple narrators speaking from different contexts.[26] Even as the hashtag frames the content of the tweet and "establishes [an] evaluative stance on the hashtagged topic," it does not control the narrative beyond these initial boundaries. Symbolically, this initial tweet acts like a drop of water in a crashing wave. It might be unique and represent an individual's take on a situation, but that one drop does not change the tide. Dawson and Mäkelä use the #MeToo movement as an example of "we-narration" on Twitter, with a focus on the role of "reply comments." Under the hashtag #MeToo countless tweets relay stories not about the same singular event, but individual users' experiences with sexual assault. Mäkelä and Dawson ask, in that case, "which subject utters the phrase, "Me too?".[27] The question of authority comes into play, as without a contextual frame these voices lose their individual effect. This "detachment of narrative authority from narrative

[24] Dawson, Mäkelä, 3.
[25] Dawson, Mäkelä, 4.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Dawson, Mäkelä, 6.

agency" can create various issues, notably "context collapse".[28] This new frontier of information sharing subverts traditional processes of co-narration, in which there was a reliance on "fixed, widely recognized authorities and systems of belief".[29] With these emergent narratives, "affect" becomes the vital ingredient in the recipe for internet virality (and its accompanying rewards). The fluidity of these systems and the supposedly democratic nature of social media means that anyone with an account can have a "voice." That fact is one of the more appealing characteristics of social media—anyone can have a platform. However, the centering of emotional investment in these digital communities means the centering of new values and mechanisms for expansive authority. An affected following is an engaged following, and an engaged following means more "likes," more shares, more connections, and consequently, a greater sense of authority for the initial user.

In "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience," Alice E. Marwick and danah boyd describe "context collapse" as the result of social media technologies meshing multiple audiences into single contexts.[30] They argue that users are unable to use the same techniques online that they do "to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation".[31] Another important aspect of this article is the "imagined audience," an element of social media that has only become more prominent with the development of influencer branding. As can be conceived from its name, the "imagined audience" refers to the "mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating".[32] This "audience" is not physically present and is essentially a mass of unknown figures; however, this mass holds

[28] Dawson, Mäkelä, 10.
[29] Dawson, Mäkelä, 11.
[30] Marwick, A. E., boyd, d. "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience". *New Media & Society* 13(1), 114.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Marwick, boyd, 115.

sway over our own behavior. Social media is often critiqued as fake, merely an inauthentic glimpse into a user's life that has been curated to a tee. The little flaws, mistakes, and general ugliness that make up most of our day-to-day lives are lost in the perfect world of Instagram and TikTok. While individuals initially had their friends and family in their imagined audiences (think Facebook and Instagram's heyday when your followers were only people you knew), the explosion of influencing and micro-celebrity has led to a new attitude towards social media use. While previously, the idea of letting strangers into one's inner world would be met with immediate disapproval, it has now become a legitimate career move. Instagram and TikTok stars have become their own genre of celebrity, and this celebrity has brought fame, fortune, and a new standard of what it means to be a public figure. With these "celebrities," we see into their bedrooms; we go along as they get coffee with friends; we watch them get ready in the morning, the sight of their makeup-less faces a vast contrast from the painted figures we're used to seeing in magazines and on TV screens. We feel that we know them, and that they know us. They begin their videos with a "hey guys" and usually include a point about how grateful they are for "us" and all the opportunities "we" have given them. There's a sense of fostered community through this acknowledgment of the invisible eyes viewing through our small screens, some numbering in the millions.

While this level of exposure and adulation was previously reserved for the Titans of (the entertainment) Industry—singers, actors, musicians—it has now become standard for even "normal" people to try and achieve micro-celebrity. In my own life, I know of multiple people from my college who have regular 9-5 jobs and are attempting to become influencers on the side; one has about 39.9k followers on TikTok and is just beginning to take part in "sponcon" (sponsored content). The lucrative side of internet stardom is beginning to take off for her, as she

and her fiancé are now receiving free merchandise from brands looking for PR opportunities via her account. In the same vein but on a much smaller scale, I have a fourteen-year-old cousin beginning to do GRWMs ("Get Ready With Me"s) on her Snapchat account. Every day at around 8 am, she props her phone up on her desk and applies her makeup while talking to the camera. She'll go through what she anticipates for her day and complain about tests or lacrosse practice, all while periodically displaying the makeup product she's using for the camera. She'll talk through the pros and cons of the product (how pigmented the blush is, how mattifying the primer is), her diction and mannerisms a direct copy of the influencers she's watched on TikTok. It goes beyond general slang or makeup terms that are used in the beauty community online; the way she pauses and rolls her eyes, the "silly" face she makes at the end, lips pursed or tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth, are behaviors she has seen before and is now mimicking. Her "GRWM" routine is a display of some of the many ills social media has to offer—obsession with appearance, emphasis on possession, a general endorsement for blind capitalism and a beauty industry that has historically fed on female insecurity. But, at the same time, she is being part of a community; she is reaching out to her Snapchat friends and allowing them into her life, into her bedroom, and making them a part of her day. I see my cousin once every three years at best. By being her Snapchat friend, and being a witness to these videos, I have learned more about her day-to-day life than I could have ever gleaned from our sporadic family visits. In many ways, it has made me feel closer to her. Even as it has made me fear for a homogenous future in which all teens act, talk, and look alike, there is an undeniable element to this type of openness that feels both welcoming and, at the very least, like an attempt at connection.

In terms of religious influencers, the question of context collapse and imagined audiences comes into play. Many are appealing to a primary base that does not make up the entirety of their

audience. Even with hashtags like #orthodoxjew or #judaism, TikTok's algorithm and the nature of public social sites means these videos can be viewed by anyone—not just those actively seeking religious content. These instances create ripe opportunity for antisemitism, Islamophobia, and general aggression. Even "mainstream" American religions like Christianity are often criticized and torn down on sites like TikTok; for many of these commenters, a public display of religiosity is taken as a personal affront. Comments might include how unbelievable these faiths are, the absurdity of their tenets and scriptural events alongside the usual racist and/or xenophobic rhetoric. As a secular society, the United States has embraced an attitude of unease when it comes to outward expressions of faith. Although religious freedom is a cornerstone of American democracy, this "freedom" only exists comfortably when it fulfills our expectations of what it means to be religious. In *Arguing Sainthood,* Katherine Pratt Ewing addresses this homogenization of religiosity through the lens of Westernization; she defines hegemony as a "particular set of premises about the nature of reality, often expressed through habitual practices that have come to appear natural to those who enact them".[33] Through this process, Western ideals are imposed as the one "truth," while the postcolonial subject becomes the lowly "other." In terms of religion, this means a private, individualized faith is the accepted norm and presented as the "natural" order of things.

[33] Ewing, Katherine Pratt. *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam* (Duke UP, 1997), 15.

CHAPTER TWO: Authority

Authority plays an important role in social media, particularly with the rise of the "influencer." The ability to connect with a massive number of people purely through the power of one's personality or charisma is an endlessly impressive feat. In this context, authority is a kind of trust; these followers are trusting that this figure, this influencer, is the person they think they are. They are trusting their opinion, their advice, and their recommendations because they feel that they recognize something in this figure that they can identify in themselves. Connection is vital for any sense of authority; for my three subjects, the pursuit of this connection comes in the form of self-performance. In their essay "Gender, Religion, and Authority in Digital Media," Professor Mia Lövheim and Dr. Evelina Lunkmark document the evolution of digital authority through analysis of widely known bloggers and YouTube vloggers, both in Sweden and the United States. They argue that in the case of these media personalities, self-performance is not just a byproduct of authority, but a particular form of authority in itself. They describe how this authority hinges on an individual's ability to "inhabit and/or perform certain values" and project their own personal qualities; in either of these cases, the individual's power is completely relational and co-effected, as it is "forged in constant connectivity with audiences".[34] These figures' authority hinges on a continual feedback between audience and creator, a never-ending dialogue in which their power and influence are dependent on their ability to personally connect with a mass group.

[34] Lövheim, M., Lundmark, E. "Gender, Religion and Authority in Digital Media." *Essachess: Journal for Communication Studies* 12, 23.

As described by Lövheim and Lunkmark, "authenticity" (or at least perceived authenticity) is vital in this formulation. In their understanding, authenticity marks a connection between "being true to your inner self and acknowledging your dependence on others".[35] This goes hand-and-hand with "vulnerability," a condition they say is elevated by social media but also has the potential to "challenge stigma" and "open up spaces of inclusivity and [enact] a different ideal of authority".[36] Personability, vulnerability, and sociability are the elements put forth by Lövheim and Lunkmark as key to the authority we see wielded by influencers online—all attributes traditionally categorized as feminine. Vulnerability, in particular, has historically been an acceptable condition for women and not men. Part of this acceptance stems from a deep-rooted misogyny that projects stereotypically "strong," stoic, capable women as threats; it's the age-old caricature of any non-emotional, ambitious woman being a "cold bitch". However, I use the term "stereotypical" when describing this common understanding of "strength" to avoid a one-dimensional definition. As seen in Lövheim and Lunkmark's work, there isn't a singular understanding of what it means to be "strong" or powerful. These women who are vulnerable online are not necessarily feeding into a misogynistic perception of docile, "weak" women being good; these aren't damsels in distress waiting for their white knights. Vulnerability in these cases is a form of connection, a way for the creator and her viewers to feel less alone. Here, shared experience and empathy are precious.

One of my subjects, Golda Daphna (@gold.a.star on TikTok), utilizes vulnerability in her videos regularly. However, this vulnerability is a means to an end—authentically voicing her opinions in a historically insular community. Like my other two subjects, Golda is a young woman; although seemingly inconsequential, her age contributes to her cultural literacy both in

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

her traditional faith and broader American public discourse. These women use this literacy, along with TikTok's platform, to conceptualize their places within these two intersecting societies. A recent Columbia University grad, Golda earned a degree in chemical engineering and is currently working at Columbia University Fertility Center as an Embryology Lab Assistant while preparing to apply to med school.[37] Some of her TikToks and Instagram posts deal with the struggles of studying and working at the same time, poking fun at the high-stress nature of the New York City workforce. However, the bulk of her content centers around her relationship with ultra-Orthodox Judaism. Golda grew up attending Bais Yaakov, a network of schools and Youth Movements for Orthodox Jewish girls. Originally started in Poland as a way to provide Jewish girls the religious education traditionally denied them, Bais Yaakov became "more conservative" after the Holocaust.[38] As explained by the Jewish Women's Archive, "the network of Bais Yaakov schools throughout the world have come to be associated with uncompromising standards of modest dress, passionate observance of Judaism, and intensive study of religious texts (with the Talmud, of course, excluded)".[39] The Talmud is a central text in Judaism focused on rabbinic law and traditionally only studied by men in Orthodox communities.[40] Golda's content revolves around both her religious experience and its social implications. Her TikTok bio reads:

If you're that concerned
Pray for me
Golda bas Yocheved Aviva
I cringe too[41]

[37] Daphna, Golda. LinkedIn, March 16 2023. https://www.linkedin.com/in/golda-daphna-42139718a/
[38] Weissman, D., Granite, L.B. "Bais Ya'akov Schools," Jewish Women's Archive. June 23, 2021.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Steinsaltz, Adin. *The Essential Talmud* (Basic Books, 2009).
[41] Daphna, Golda (@gold.a.star). 2023. TikTok, March 02, 2023.

Faith is a common theme in her videos. She is unflinching in her assessment of how Judaism has influenced her life thus far, particularly as a (formerly?) Orthodox woman. My own confusion here reflects Daphna's religious fluidity, a wavering relationship that she analyzes publicly on her TikTok account. With over 32k followers and 3.5 million combined "likes," Golda takes the concept of "private" inward reflection and makes it a collaborative, communal experience.[42] Her followers comment on her videos and she regularly responds to them, often taking questions or concerns voiced in her DMs (direct messages) and creating separate TikToks to address these comments. She and her viewers are in conversation, a true feedback loop. Although she has pulled back from Orthodoxy and ceased dressing exclusively "tzniut" (a Hebrew term for modesty), Golda is still intimately tied to her Jewish identity.[43] As she navigates the complexities of this relationship, she brings her followers on TikTok along both as spectators and pseudo-confidantes.

An important aspect of Daphna's online presence is her experience as a survivor of sexual assault. For some further background on Golda: she was raised in the "Five Towns" section of Long Island (although she doesn't specify which town, "Five Towns" colloquially refers to Lawrence, Cedarhurst, Woodmere, Hewlett, and Inwood).[44] One of three children born into an Orthodox family, she has an older brother and sister; her older brother, who is openly gay, is referenced only briefly in her TikToks. These videos mainly concern the ways in which she was emotionally punished by religious authorities in her community due to her brother's homosexuality, a point that I will revisit later. Several of her TikToks poke fun at her Bais

[42] Daphna, Golda (@gold.a.star). 2023. TikTok, March 16, 2023.
[43] "Tzniut ("modesty" in dress & behavior)". Chabad.org, March 16, 2023.
[44] Barron, James. "If You're Thinking of Living In: Five Towns." (*The New York Times,* 10 July 1983).

Yaakov education and experience, displaying her personal brand of dark humor. She exemplifies a type of feminism that I've seen across social media apps like TikTok; she highlights the power of her female voice and the right to project that female voice, while still conforming to more popular cultural trends. While historically, feminists were seen as "subverters" of societal norms and expectations, within the parameters of Golda's chosen platform (i.e., TikTok), she is not a disrupter. She uses popular lip-synching tracks, performs the day's most-watched TikTok dances, and bases most of her videos on trends that have gone viral on the app. However, in the context of her religious background, this act of "conforming" is its own type of disruption. Many of Golda's TikToks deal with the embracement of her sexuality; often, she is suggestively raising her eyebrow at the camera or wearing clothing that would be considered immoral in traditional Haredi circles. However, at the same time, she reaffirms her identity as a Jewish woman, separating her authority over her body from her faith. Although Golda has disowned the sect of Judaism in which she was brought up, she does not disown the religion as a whole. Frequently, she talks about her love of Judaism and the beauty she finds in its religious texts. At the same time, she laments the ways in which certain aspects of ultra-Orthodox Judaism have negatively affected women. This dichotomy, the tension between tradition and modern ethics, is at the heart of her account and its subsequent virality.

In her position as a Jewish feminist, Golda has harnessed the power of media to proliferate her beliefs about sexuality and how it has been unjustly manipulated in the Orthodox system. In July 2021, she wrote an article for *The Times of Israel* titled "Under the black hat's brim," a reference to the hat typically worn by Orthodox Jewish men.[45] Although only a college student at the time, Golda both submitted this opinion piece and used her social media following

[45] Daphna, Golda, "Under the black hat's brim." (*The Times of Israel,* 15 July 2021).

to publicize its release. In a companion TikTok, she sits in front of a greenscreen image of the article and says:

> If you grew up in the Haredi system…and it was great, and wonderful, I am so happy for you…but if you, like me, had an entire 8th-grade class of girls with anorexia and body dysmorphia because of the culture that promoted modesty and body awareness, and your rabbi said you'd never get married if your brother was gay, and there was child predators in your *shul* and everything was swept under the rug and people tripped over it and you love Judaism, so much, that you don't want it to be perverted and you don't want it to be devalued, and you want to bring *Masiach,* and you just want to spread love…then please read my article.[46]

She attributes her motivation to write this piece to her TikTok audience, describing how her followers "inspired [her] with their DMs". Golda also states that her decision to write this article was a response to an abundance of "slander" that had arisen in the aftermath of various television programs related to Orthodox Judaism during this period. She describes being "so sick of the Julia Haart slander, the Deborah Feldman slander." Her zeroing in on these two media figures is significant not only because they are both women, but because they're two women who left the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. Julia Haart, an American fashion designer, decided to leave her Haredi community in 2013 and went on to be the star of *My Unorthodox Life,* a reality show based on her experience.[47] Deborah Feldman, a German-American author, was raised as a member of the Hasidic Satmar group in Brooklyn before leaving the community in 2006. She went on to write her autobiography *Unorthodox: The Scandalous Rejection of my Hasidic Roots*,

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[46] Daphna, G. [@gold.a.star]. (2021, July 14). *Thanks to all the brave women who are changing the world. #jewishtiktok#juliahaart#unorthodox#frumtiktok* [Video]. TikTok.
[47] Pasarow, Anabel. "What have Julia and the Haarts Been Up to Since 'My Unorthodox Life' Season 1?" (Netflix.com, 23 November 2022).

which was later (loosely) adapted into a Netflix original miniseries in 2020.[48] In the context of these media events, Golda's TikTok and her article in *The Times of Israel* make sense; during this period, there was increased interest in Orthodox Judaism and its "unusual" traditions. Most of these depictions were unflattering, with emphasis on the more misogynistic and strict aspects of the faith. Alongside Haart and Feldman's television series, there was a Netflix documentary released in 2017 entitled *One of Us.* [49] Like the stories of the two aforementioned women, the pursuit of escape is at the heart of this doc. Domestic abuse, sexual abuse, and ostracism are mentioned throughout the film, and the Hasidic groups of Brooklyn are depicted as more similar to female prisons than communities.

While these themes were the main talking points in "mainstream" media, backlash towards the "whistleblowers" themselves arose in Orthodox communities. These women were condemned as liars and antisemitic, a stance that Golda combats in her written piece. She criticizes "putting down women to further a sect of Judaism" and urges for empathy, asking those who wish to further Judaism to do so by "seeing where they're coming from." Golda asks for this religion, a religion that she loves, to change. She describes her hope to one day build a Jewish family that "doesn't have trauma" and for the next generation to create an "ideal community" because the way she and her companions grew up "wasn't ideal." In the piece itself, she describes the precarity of being a young woman in her community; she recalls that the first time she was called a "slut" was when she was sixteen and still dressed modestly.[50] Although her skirt fell below her knees and she had never even kissed a boy, she feared being a "whore." Additionally, she laments her Orthodox Jewish schooling, particularly the fact that while she and

[48] "About". deborahfeldman.com, March 16, 2023.
[49] Ewing, H., Grady, R., directors. *One of Us.* Netflix, 2017.
[50] Daphna, Golda, "Under the black hat's brim." (*The Times of Israel,* 15 July 2021).

her female classmates were learning how to be proper wives in courses entitled "Jewish Family Life," students at their brother school were attending Model UN. Golda's author bio on the piece is telling and adequately summarizes both her article and the persona she has strived to achieve on apps like TikTok with her vocal activism. She states, "I write as a Jew who wishes to address problems the collective Jewish world should address."

The relationship between religious modesty, the physical body, and self-authority is explored in many of Golda's TikToks centered on her experiences with assault. In one of these videos, the caption reads "#greenscreen I changed the trend a bit" along with accompanying hashtags "#tsnius #survivior #jewishtiktok."[51] The "#greenscreen" refers to the video background, which features a variety of images and clips. The video begins with the text, "I was the girl whose body he stole" in front of a montage of images of Golda in modest clothing. In each picture the positioning of her body is demure, her arms crossed or stuck tightly at her side. She wears long sleeve t-shirts and shapeless skirts that fall below her knees. There isn't an overt, exaggerated display of unhappiness in this portrayal of that era of her life; in many of the pictures she is smiling, occasionally throwing a peace sign or making a silly face. The accompanying music is "Super Smash Bros (Shae O.T. Drill Remix)" by Japanese composer Nobuo Uematsu. It begins with a sample of classical opera music that accompanies Golda's walk down memory (modesty) lane, the singer's aria reaching its height halfway through the video. Suddenly, the beat drops. The music shifts into a hard, heavy sample of EDM along with the new caption, "So I became the woman who took hers back." In this new set of pictures, Golda's previous smile is now a wide grin, her head often thrown back. She's wearing an entirely new category of clothing—pants, sleeveless shirts, tank tops, cropped tees, and shorts. Again, Golda

[51] Daphna, G. [@gold.a.star]. (2021, June 11). *#greenscreen I changed the trend a bit. #tsnius#survivor#jewishtiktok* [Video]. TikTok.

equates agency over physical appearance to self-autonomy. After experiencing sexual assault while still dressing *tsnius,* there could be the misconception that she is rejecting that period of her life and almost blaming that form of religious adherence for her own tragedy. However, her account is not about refuting Orthodox Jewish practices or tarnishing the faith she still professes to hold dear; instead, it's urging for a sense of liberation and choice in a community that, for her, was often choiceless. She is sure to state that that lifestyle could be suitable for some, but in her own very personal case, it was suffocating and traumatic. Many of the 55 comments on this TikTok support her point of view, even with the customary trolling remark or two. One female commentator pinpoints Golda's message precisely, writing "the power we hold from reclaiming our bodies, whether towards modesty or away, is incredible." There isn't an equation of modest clothing = bad/vulnerable to assault while "regular" clothing = autonomy and freedom. Golda shows that the ultimate liberation is choice—whatever that choice may be.

CHAPTER THREE: Authority and Intersectionality

Yasmin Jalloh (@yasminjalloh) is a young Muslim woman who also uses TikTok to speak out about her experiences both in her religious community and the broader public. A 20-year-old graduate of Northern Virginia Community College and a first-generation college student, she is currently pursuing a master's degree in Psychology/Counseling from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. As part of her graduate program, she received a funded opportunity to travel abroad to Turkey; she described her motivation to travel as an opportunity "to show other Muslim girls that traveling for our education is possible, despite the stigma our community holds".[52] Her TikTok bio reads:

> keep God in ya life
> i <3 modest fashion
> dm for business inquires 💌 5 3

Half African American and half Sierra Leonean, Jalloh's identity goes beyond just being Muslim; as a black woman in America, the intersectionality of her everyday experiences is paramount in understanding both her life and the life she creates online. Intersectionality is a term that was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw more than twenty-eight years ago in her attempt to more accurately explain the oppression faced by African American women. Crenshaw describes the concept as "a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it

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[52] "Yasmin Jalloh," Fund for Education Abroad, March 16 2023.
[53] Jalloh, Y. [@yasminjalloh]. (2023). TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@yasminjalloh?lang=en

interlocks and intersects". [54] Intersectionality as a framework helps us understand the various factors that go into discrimination, including race, class, sexual orientation, and religion. These markers of identity dictate the way in which an individual is received by the world, and thus, the prejudice they may face.

Yasmin takes a more informative, social activist approach when it comes to her content on TikTok. While Golda engages more with short-form videos that showcase current TikTok trends, Yasmin uses the platform to discuss her thoughts on the state of her world ("her world" being Black and Muslim communities). Awareness surrounding intersectionality is at the forefront of her work on TikTok, particularly in the ways her religious community interacts with racism in the United States. In one video titled, "like yes but that's not the point," she subtly addresses this issue.[55] The hashtags "#muslim#blackmuslims" stand alongside the caption. The video features Jalloh facing one side of the screen mimicking a conversation, her mouth opening and closing in time with the text displayed that reads, "There's a lot of racism and stereotyping within the Muslim community". The next clip features her now facing the opposite direction, signifying a new character in this "conversation." She now mouths along to the text, "But we're brothers and sisters in Islam, we're one *ummah*" (*ummah* being the Arabic word for "community" or "nation").[56] The video ends with Yasmin now back in her original position, again playing herself. She has a dismissive look on her face and rolls her eyes in response to the words of the second character, the idea that "we're brothers and sisters" is an adequate reply to an accusation of racism. This TikTok has over 286 comments, revealing its more controversial nature and the accompanying "virality" of this kind of heated discourse.

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[54] "Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later." Columbia Law School, June 8 2017.
[55] Jalloh, Y. [@yasminjalloh]. (2022, May 5). *like yes but that's not the point.. #muslims#blackmuslims* [Video]. TikTok.
[56] "Egypt After the Pharaohs: Umma." Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology & the Ancient World, March 17 2023.

Many of the commenters simply state “what about Bilal,” a reference to Bilal ibn Rabah. One of the companions of the prophet, Bilal was a former Abyssinian slave who became the first *mu’azzin* (the person who calls for the daily prayer five times a day).[57] Those responding to Yasmin’s video invoke Bilal as a kind of racial placeholder, stating, “Islam can’t be racist if we had an important Black figure in Islamic history,” essentially the religious version of the “one of my best friends is black” defense. Yasmin references this cliché in another comment interaction, replying to a viewer’s comment, “here they come with bilal…” saying, “the token black Muslim card! It’s a distraction from the racism that exists TODAY”. This simple but effective statement carries an enormous amount of weight. It pinpoints an important issue in many communities, both religious and social. This white-knuckle grasp on past events as remedies for issues today is a fruitless stance that has been mistakenly taken up time and time again. One commenter wrote, “bilal exists” along with a thumbs-up emoji. Yasmin replied, “This is true. A lot of the times his existence is used to negate racism amongst Muslims. Bilal existed and so do racist Muslims.” Scrolling through the hundreds of comments, Yasmin has interacted with most of them, whether simply through “likes" or messages in response. She encourages dialogue through these interactions and uses the comment section to continue her own analysis. The comments themselves become an extension of the video, her original content, as she uses these questions and remarks to expand on her initial thinking. Yasmin writes in a series of comments:

> There are people who pray 5 times a day but would say their kid cannot marry a black Muslim! There’s something deeper going on wake uppp. And this has nothing to do with the idea that there is something wrong with Islam. All of the statements in my video are true. But use your intellect and realize that this is an actual issue that requires more than

[57] Curtis IV, Edward E. “The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora” (U of North Carolina Press, 2014), 2.

> JUST Islamic reasonings for why racism is wrong. We need to look at societal and cultural influences that fuel racist and stereotypical beliefs.

Yasmin takes a rational, holistic view in her analysis of racism in her religious community. She uses intersectionality and societal factors to dispel the idea that the root cause is Islam; like Golda, she loves her faith. She reiterates this dedication in her online interactions without losing sight of the issues at hand, not letting her devotion to God distract from earthly injustices. Through these constructive conversations, Yasmin educates without simply lecturing. There is a sense of mutual respect in these interactions, and the thoughtfulness of her answers when discussing sensitive topics like race, religion, and gender reflects the online community she has strived to create.

Even with the seriousness of her topics, Yasmin finds a way to infuse humor into her content. A common trend on TikTok is pointing out gender differences; something like comparing the way a man asks a question in a classroom vs. how a woman might ask, or "what the grocery list looks like when I send my husband to the store." The inspiration behind these videos is rooted in stereotypes that have been repeatedly portrayed on television, i.e., the oafish, incompetent man and the worn-out woman who keeps him together. Beyond these more superficial portrayals, there are sections of TikTok that have actively engaged with gender discrepancies in society. Yasmin grapples with this subject in many of her videos, using her dry, shrewd sense of humor to weave these narratives into the overarching pattern of TikTok trends while still making a point. Her presence is in many ways intimidating. She brings an intellect and clarity to her content that is startling and invokes a sense of awe, all while maintaining a "no bullshit" stance. In one of her TikToks, she infuses this trend of gender stereotyping with

observations regarding modesty.[58] The entire TikTok is a single take and only 8 seconds long; Yasmin stays in the same position throughout, with no transitions or camera shifts. She is facing the camera and wearing her usual uniform for creating content—a hijab, a shirt that covers her chest/shoulders, and artfully applied makeup. Her skin is flawless and a subtle flick of eyeliner curves out from the corner of her lids. The text across the screen reads, "Just told a grown man not to comment on how Muslim women are dressed." The background noise ("original sound" by Aaron) is just a drawn-out scream of frustration. Yasmin's face shifts slightly as the scream progresses, her eyes widening and brows rising in shocked judgment.

The scene that's being set is relatively self-explanatory; Yasmin is playing out a situation in which she has told a man not to comment on how Muslim women dress, and in response, he has thrown a tantrum like a toddler. Her reaction is subtly devastating, obliterating any credibility this fictional male may have had with her quiet disregard. The caption reads, "just women period" with the accompanying hashtag "#muslim." In this act, Yasmin has applied this more niche situation (i.e., a man commenting on a modestly dressed Muslim woman's appearance) to a universal female experience. Here again she disentangles the various aspects of her own intersectionality. Although black, Muslim, and a woman, she works to address each of these communities on her own terms while still maintaining her identity as a woman who encompasses all three. She doesn't raise one of these three categories above the other and doesn't allow a tribal allegiance to hold her back from commenting on what she believes is unjust. This particular TikTok has over 1600 "likes" and 26 comments; however, in terms of controversy or animosity, the comments are relatively tame. There are one or two along the lines of, "Why can't men comment? Just because they're men?" To those few, Yasmin replied, "yes because they're

[58] Jalloh, Y. [@yasminjalloh]. (2022, May 12). *just women period #muslim* [Video]. TikTok.

men…women have been under the patriarchal and shameful eye of men for centuries. They don't care they just comment to shame women. They should be lowering their gaze and if they see a video they think is inappropriate…they should scroll." Interestingly, most of the comments on this video concern Yasmin's appearance. Multiple people commented asking for a hijab or makeup tutorial, while another wrote, "off topic but sis you look sooooo beautiful *allahumma barik*" with heart-eye emojis. Even with her social activism, Yasmin is still considered an influencer. There will always be a group of followers who come to her page primarily for lifestyle and wellness advice, whether that be how to style a hijab or what color foundation to use. To achieve any kind of platform, these women must cultivate their own "brand." Consequently, they are seen as authority figures both in the causes they support and the products they advertise on their very bodies.

Yasmin's intersectionality comes into focus in another TikTok where she explicitly expresses her opinion on various subjects related to race, gender, and Islam.[59] This video follows a format that became popular on the platform as a way for creators to let their thoughts and feelings "spill out," almost like a venting session. The background audio used for this trend is called "original sound - emma" and features a soft, calming piano sequence. If you click on the sound label below Yasmin's video, you're taken to a feed of 50.3k videos that also use this audio. Each of these TikToks feature the same set-up as Yasmin's—a creator facing the screen as lines of text cover their face. Many of these texts include words like "trauma," particularly "sibling trauma," providing a space for TikTok users to expose their secrets, fears, and regrets. Yasmin's video follows the same formatting with slightly different textual content. She is facing

[59] Jalloh, Y. [@yasminjalloh]. (2022, May 19). *will I be ranting in the comments? absolutely #muslim#fyp#blackmuslims* [Video]. TikTok.

the screen in a purple abaya, a long, loose Islamic outer garment that covers most of the body.[60] Light purple eyeshadow highlights her lids as she blinks at the camera and occasionally shifts her eyes as the music plays for the video's 7-second duration. It's captioned, "will I be ranting in the comments? Absolutely" and has the hashtags "#muslim#fyp#blackmuslim." Across the screen, various blocks of text cover parts of Yasmin's face and neck. Block letters at the top read "Random Thoughts:".

The "Random Thoughts" laid out below the title are as follows: "Tribalism has prevented so many marriages from happening and it's sad." "People literally used to call me a wh*re (whore) for how I dressed and now all anyone can comment on is that one of my earrings is showing. Allah willed that change and I can never express enough gratitude for that." "I think any white person who says black women are their types are strange. What do all black women have in common? Answer quickly." "There is a hijabi beauty standard and I want to rant about it so badlyyy." "I think more people should stop talking. Like actually. Especially on the internet. Shh. (Not me tho :p)" (the :p represents the emoji of someone with their tongue sticking out). "There are some relationships we will never get to enjoy here for reasons Allah knows. It's painful but makes me even more excited to go to *jannah* (paradise) where we are flawless and happy."[61] "Allah can literally change the condition of a person in an instant. We should really hesitate to speak on anyone because we don't know the relationship they have with Allah". And finally, "Listening to someone with a victim complex tell their side of the story is so annoyingggg." This video has over 7k likes and 128 comments. Of all the topics Yasmin expresses her "random thoughts" on, her statement on hijabi beauty standards garnered the most

[60] Shimek, E.D. "The Abaya: Fashion, Religion, and Identity in a Globalized World" (2012). *Lawrence University Honors Projects.* 12.
[61] Rehmatullah, N. "Demystifying Al Jannah." Al-Islam.org, March 17 2023.

interaction from her audience. Many commenters wrote "so true" or pled for her to speak more on the topic. In one of her reply comments, Yasmin identifies the trend of "hijab baddies" as part of this standard. "Hijab baddies" refers to a trend on social media involving conventionally attractive women in hijabs.[62] They are often depicted wearing popular makeup styles including long mascaraed lashes, thick filled-in brows, and plump, expertly lined lips. Many also don an exaggerated eyeliner wing and dramatic eyeshadow that highlights the exposed parts of the face. However, there is an underlying bias in this beauty standard. As identified by Yasmin and one of her commenters, these "hijab baddies" are almost always thin and fairer-skinned. Even in something seemingly harmless and celebratory of Muslim femininity, there is unspoken racism at its root.

In one of her longer videos, Yasmin addresses racism in the Muslim community head-on.[63] Captioned, "how can we get mad at the US for Muslim issues when we do the same thing?", Yasmin begins by "stitching" another user's original video. The first 4 seconds feature this user, a young black Muslim man, speaking to the camera as he says, "no one on here, on my "For You Page", is talking about what's happening in America." The scene then transitions to Yasmin sitting in her car as she describes her need to "talk about this" after seeing @ihsan_j's initial TikTok. She talks directly to the camera as if in conversation, one hand holding the phone as the other gesticulates along with her words. Yasmin describes how "a lot of the time, the Muslim community only cares about when Muslims are being killed, when Muslims are being oppressed…if it has anything to do with Muslims, that's the only time Muslims care." She acknowledges that most people might not recognize the problem with that, but goes on to say,

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[62] *#hijabbaddies* [Video]. TikTok. Accessed March 17 2023.
[63] Jalloh, Y. [@yasminjalloh]. (2022, May 25). *#stich how can we get mad at the US for ignoring Muslim issues when we do the same thing?* [Video]. TikTok.

"where I see the fault in this is that Muslims are not just Muslim. That's our biggest title but at the end of the day there are Pakistani Muslims, Afghan Muslims, Black Muslims, Hispanic, Latinos, like…we have races and ethnicities as well." Without using the term specifically, she identifies a disregard for intersectionality as her issue with this mindset. She describes how ignoring the other facets of an individual's experience in the world, particularly race, is a disservice and misses the fact that they are "not only just Muslim". In her words, "it's frustrating when all we can talk about is "this Muslim was killed" when, you know, there was a shooting in Buffalo, New York, a racially motivated shooting. Black people were killed for being black. And as a Black Muslim, that frustrates me because why is it that we only care when Muslims are dying?" She connects this ignorance on the part of the Muslim community to the same ignorance they condemn in American news channels not talking about Palestine. "No one's talking about Palestine… but, like, we're not talking about anyone else either. We're only talking about ourselves…why aren't we talking about Roe v. Wade, things that are happening that don't necessarily involve religion and being Muslim. To me, it's ignorance." She goes on to talk about how she's actively used her platform to talk about black issues and her experience being a black Muslim and has received positive feedback from many of her followers who write supportive messages like, "we're with you sister". However, she notes, "When my people are being killed, y'all are silent. Why? Because they're not Muslim."

CHAPTER FOUR: Authority and Branding

My final subject, Kenna McCllelan (@kennarwood on TikTok), is a 22-year-old Mormon woman and an influencer. Compared to Golda and Yasmin, she is the most active on social media and the one who uses her platform mainly for financial income. Kenna currently has 104k followers on Instagram and 166.9k followers on TikTok, with more than 12.9 million combined total "likes" on the video-sharing platform.[64] [65] Of the three women, Kenna's religious identity was the hardest to find; although, as we'll see later, she does post content related to her Mormon faith, it is not at the forefront of her social media presence. While Yasmin and Golda's accounts could be described as dealing with questions of Islam and Orthodox Judaism respectively, Kenna's Mormonism seems to be secondary to her identity as a beauty influencer. Her Instagram bio reads: "📍 UT • fashion • hair," with the line "•freelance model- DM for inquiries" just below. Beneath her bio, she has a linktree (a "link in bio" tool that allows creators to link other sites to their social media page). Kenna's linktree includes a landing page directing users to products she's used, such as anti-wrinkle silicone patches, a feed of all her outfits with links to their product pages, and an Amazon Storefront. The Amazon Storefront is a common feature among influencers, a curated Amazon page of products the influencer recommends via the purchasing site. When a viewer purchases any of these products through one of these links, Kenna will earn a commission. Her TikTok caption is shorter, just "My life & things I love 🫶" along with the previously mentioned linktree.

[64] McClellan, Kenna (@ken_mcclellan_). 2023. Instagram, March 17, 2023.
[65] McClellan, Kenna (@kennarwood). 2023. TikTok, March 17, 2023.

Kenna's reliance on "relatability" is evident in her TikTok content and the video trends she uses as models. Her online humor is similar to Golda's, and she often hops on popular TikTok sounds and video formatting. An essential element of Kenna's humor is making fun of herself; she's self-aware of the stereotypes surrounding "basic blonde Mormon girls" and uses these stereotypes to her own advantage. In one TikTok captioned "Just a day in my life on Sunday please enjoy," she uses a slideshow format; multiple photos are edited into this slideshow and timed to transition periodically.[66] The background music is the song "Sunday Kind of Love" by singer Etta James. Across the first image in the slide, Kenna in bed wearing heatless curlers, the text reads, "Sunday in my life as a basic Utah Mormon girl." Accompanying hashtags in the caption include "#sundaybest#sundaygrwm#grwm#sundayroutine#dayinmylife#lds#utah." The acronym "grwm" stands for "get ready with me" and is a common term online, often used for videos of women applying their makeup or picking outfits. This video has just over 1300 likes and 21 comments. The next few images are selfies with the heatless curls taken out and Kenna in a long-sleeved blue maxi dress, followed by a selfie in the car with her husband with the text now reading, "Sam [Kenna's husband] always drives to church so we can maybe get there on time." Again, a little endearing, self-deprecating poke at herself without revealing any true character flaws.

As an attractive, blonde, white woman Kenna has her own obstacle to overcome in terms of personal image—an inherent unlikability that comes from someone portrayed to "have it all." Almost like a "Barbie effect," without some evidence of struggle or inadequacy, Kenna and her life might be annoyingly perfect. She might not seem "real" enough. The next slide features a shot of Sam's back with the text, "Nah bruh we still late 😅," with "bruh" being slang for "bro"

[66] McClellan, K. [@kennarwood]. (2023, January 8). *just a day in my life on Sunday please enjoy. #sundaybest#sundaygrwm#grwm#sundayroutine#dayinmylife#lds#utah* [Video]. TikTok.

or "brother." Next is a selfie of Kenna with a silly expression wearing a sweatsuit post-church, "Always change into comfy clothes after also what is my face LOL." The rest of the slideshow features images of Kenna with her husband, his niece, and his family, as well as pictures of various food items. Some notable content includes a picture of her Amazon slippers with the caption, "Amazon UGG doops [internet lingo for "dupes"]" along with various emojis, a picture of Milka chocolate with the text, "This is literally cr@ck ok European chocolate slaps," and an image of Kenna and Sam walking out of their house with the description, "Off to dinner at 3 cuz we fasted today." This selection of content is notable for multiple reasons, most glaringly, Kenna's use of slang and internet lingo. The terms she employs like "slaps" for something being good or "doops" as the phonetic spelling of "dupes" are practices that can be seen all over social media, often for a humorous effect. Kenna showcases her cultural currency in this instance, proving to her audience that despite being a Mormon she is "in touch" with popular trends.[67] The other notable piece of this selection is her off-handed acknowledgment that she and Sam fasted.

This mention of fasting is one of the few religious "easter eggs" within this post. Although Kenna includes Mormonism in the caption and her self-categorization as a "basic Mormon Utah girl," there isn't a religious undertone to this piece of content. She doesn't mention God or the "Heavenly Father", and despite a reference to going to church, there's no real sense that this has a large influence on her and her husband's life outside of a weekly event. It's only with the mention of fasting that there's a sort of "aha" moment for the viewer, the realization that Kenna and Sam aren't just the average American, Christian-ish couple who adhere to something vaguely resembling Protestantism. Fasting is an integral, although underpublicized, aspect of Mormonism. While this practice usually conjures images of Muslims

[67] Bourelly, Edward. "How Brands Can Use Cultural Currency To Connect With Consumers." (*Forbes,* 15 January 2019).

during Ramadan or Jews during Yom Kippur, the Mormon church "designates one Sunday each month, usually the first Sunday, as a day of fasting. Members are asked to go without food and drink for two consecutive meals, or approximately 24 hours".[68] Additionally, these fasting members are asked to take the money they would have spent on those meals and donate it to the church, which is then supposedly donated to the "poor and needy." Aside from this monetary aspect, fasting is seen as "drawing [one] closer to God and requesting His blessings."[69]

The requirement of skipping two meals is important in contextualizing Kenna's TikTok. She writes that she and Sam go to have dinner at 3pm on the day of their fast, technically fulfilling the two-meal requirement while debatably "cheating" by eating dinner unusually early. Is the two-meal designation really about the label of which meals you technically "skip" or is it about spending a certain amount of time fasting, praying, and looking inward? Is a 3pm "early" dinner really an early dinner or just a late second lunch, meaning Kenna and Sam have not actually fulfilled the fasting requirement? The answers to these questions are not as important as the subliminal messages being sent to Kenna's followers. There's an endearing quality to this potential moral failure; It's as if Kenna is saying, "yes I'm a Mormon, but I'm a COOL Mormon who bends the rules and lives on the edge." Her page is not just a tribute to modesty and piety, but a "relatable" look into someone who identifies as religious but prioritizes publicizing other aspects of her identity. Is this method for monetary gain? Does it pay more to be a beauty and style influencer who happens to be a Mormon than a Mormon influencer who also enjoys beauty and fashion? Or does Kenna personally want to keep her religious life private and have it not be the defining factor of her online identity, despite including snippets of Mormonism in her carefully cultivated image? Kenna responded to a number of the comments under this video such

[68] "Fasting." Churchofjesuschrist.org, 17 March 2023.
[69] Ibid.

as “milka bars are SO GOOD” and “I think I belong in Utah” with replies like “I know right” and “Yes girl”; notably, the lone comment of “can you talk more about your religion?” was ignored.

The relatable, “realistic” theme is continued in Kenna’s content focused on body size and depression. Body positivity is a popular trend on TikTok, and many TikTokers have gone viral for their content concerning their own size or experiences in the world concerning size in general. One of these trends includes essentially posting your weight, a number concealed by most women. Part of this impulse to privatize one’s weight is due to the automatic instinct to compare oneself to others. If I’m x weight and Jenny is y weight, do I look worse than her? Or vice versa. However, this TikTok trend is not simply about posting one’s weight; it also is to show the different ways in which weight “sits” on a certain body type. Numbers on a scale can be daunting, but they can lose their power when conceptualized on a body. Instead of the automatic “anything above x means you’re huge,” this trend helps users visualize the fact that a number is just a number and does not designate how someone will look or feel. Kenna’s video is a perfect example of this, captioned, “It will always look different on other people!”[70] Only six seconds long, there are no hashtags or fancy transitions between clips on this TikTok. The entire video is Kenna standing in front of the camera in a pair of leggings and a sport’s bra, beginning with just her in front of the screen. As she dances back to reveal her full body, the text, “Just a weekly reminder that this is what 155 lbs can look like…” spans across the screen. She is smiling throughout as the song “Just a Cloud Away” by Pharrell Williams plays in the background; a popular sound on TikTok, the particular section of the song repeatedly used, and used in Kenna’s video, is the line, “this rainy day is temporary”. At 5’9, Kenna is long and lithe,

[70] McClellan, K. [@kennarwood]. (2022, March 24). *It will always look different on other people!* [Video]. TikTok.

the camera shot of her full body revealing a gap between her slender legs. A "thigh gap" has been a marker of desired thinness in online media going back to the crazed days of Tumblr and its oft "reposted" models with their stick-like limbs.[71] Kenna is showing that despite her seemingly "heavier" weight, she is still thin and the metaphorical "weight" of her weight means nothing. Of the 8 comments on this video, two users ask, "how tall are you?" The motivation behind this question is clear; despite the intention behind the video, they want to know Kenna's height to conceptualize why she looks like that and they don't. Comparison is inescapable, but through this video, Kenna has curated her profile to include more body-positivity awareness and an overall "nice girl" persona. By "carefully managing [her] content, image, and endorsements," Kenna has successfully created a "distinct personal brand."[72] Each TikTok is an addition to this "distinct brand" and intentionally or not, a strategized building block in her creation of an online "self."

Along with body image, Kenna openly discusses mental health issues. This, superficially, might seem at odds with her religious identity and is something the audience might not expect from an influencer involved in a faith that relies on scriptural adherence. In one TikTok captioned, "Should I make a part two lol" with the hashtag "#nogatekeeping", Kenna has a slide show with the text "Slightly sad & seasonally depressed girlies don't gate keep" with a smaller line beneath it reading, "items I will be repurchasing in 2023."[73] The first item slide is a photo of Elta MD Clear UV Clear tinted sunscreen with the caption, "Makes me feel tan when I'm pale af," "af" being the acronym for "as fuck." The next slide is a stock photo of a woman sitting with her arms around herself while a man sits beside her with his hands on her shoulders in a caring

[71] Jones, Allie. "The Sexualization of the Thigh Gap." (*The Atlantic,* 22 November 2013).
[72] Leung, F.F., Gu, F.F., Palmatier, R.W. "Online influencer marketing," *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 50, 226–251.
[73] McClellan, K. [@kennarwood]. (2023, January 2). *Should I make a part two lol #nogatekeeping* [Video]. TikTok.

gesture; the text now reads, “Therapy is obvious.” The following slides include Maybelline brand mascara and the text, “Makes me feel pretty when I get ready,” Vitamin D3 supplements with, “Helps the sad ya know,” Redken hair products with, “Makes my hair happy,” followed by Dove chocolate, Tampax tampons, and tanning lotion. There’s a sense of vulnerability in this post. Sharing mental health issues is deeply personal, whether in person or online. Like Golda, vulnerability is now an aspect of Kenna’s online persona. Her sharing such a personal aspect of her life has endeared her followers to her, and again, made her more relatable. It’s more likely than not that many of her viewers—a majority young women—will have dealt with similar mental health issues. Her inclusion of Tampax tampons in her slideshow speaks to this; it’s a way to include some humor into her post with its caption of “I don’t need to explain,” while also sending the subliminal message of “see, I’m a woman just like you. I deal with the things you hate like periods and depression, and love the things you love like chocolate.” Here again is the performance of relatability, but in this case, used for an active good. For many struggling with depression, the feeling of being “not alone” can be remarkably soothing. Whether calculated or not, Kenna’s post will ideally help someone feel less hopeless in their own battles with mental health.

Kenna cements her status as an online influencer who shares her personal life with further TikToks concerning both her mental health and its connection to birth control. Again, this kind of content feels “out of left field.” Some would probably ask, are Mormons even allowed to be on birth control? Again, this isn’t a question I entirely know the answer to, and further, doesn’t really matter. The concern here isn’t the religious context in which Kenna has decided to use birth control, but the decision to put it on the internet. It’s another example of the “I am woman, hear me roar”-type rallying cry described above, although with a much less exaggerated

execution. Kenna's female experience, and the relatability of that experience, is important for reaching the widest possible audience. Throughout TikTok, you'll find videos made by women discussing their birth control; based on your algorithm, it might be women in the holistic wellness space discussing non-scientifically backed findings about birth control causing infertility or women popping their birth control along to a soundtrack of a baby crying in a comedic bit. Either way, discussions of contraception are readily found on the platform. There is a space for this content, and it has proven to be popular. Just as body positivity and mental health have been fertile ground for discussion and sharing throughout the site, Kenna's video on birth control is joining the ranks of an established, ready-made audience.

This TikTok has the caption, "Ok but seriously I hate birth control 😩 Did anyone else get these side effects? Luckily mine have mostly gone away but I still don't feel 100% like myself" along with the hashtags "#birthcontrol#birthcontrolproblems."[74] The 5 second video features Kenna standing in front of the camera in a sundress, with the accompanying sound titled "original sound - The Prophet." Kenna suddenly jerks her head to the side to the sound of a slap, a feature of "original sound - The Prophet." The text above her head reads, "After getting on birth control:" and, in time with the slap, another line of text appears saying, "Depression." Along with the slapping noise, the background sound features a voice saying, "I needed that." Suddenly, another slap and Kenna's head jerks in the other direction. Now another line of text reading, "Breakouts." "I needed that too" is heard. With one final slap, Kenna's head jerks back along with new text saying, "Hair loss" and the accompanying voice, now agitated, yelling, "You're pushing your luck Scoob!" (the "original sound" is a section of dialogue from the

[74] McClellan, K. [@kennarwood]. (2023, January 3). *Ok but seriously I hate birth control 😩 Did anyone else get these side effects? Luckily mine have mostly gone…*[Video]. TikTok.

Scooby-Doo movie).[75] The more than 50 comments on this video from women voicing their agreement, disagreement, or their own personal experiences on birth control displays the powerful effect of both vulnerability and relatability in the online space. Although aspects of Kenna's life could be alienating to a general audience, such as her position as a Mormon woman, these features of the female experience that she has chosen to elaborate on have found her an ever-available fanbase.

[75] Gosnell, R., director. *Scooby-Doo.* Warner Bros. Pictures, 2002.

CHAPTER FIVE: Modesty

Modesty and sexual assault go hand-in-hand in Golda's TikTok content. Ultra-Orthodox Jewish women are expected to dress conservatively and focus primarily on the home, their most sacred duties being the creation and rearing of the next generation of Jews. Golda frequently shares images and videos from her days at Baais Yakov where she's wearing a maxi skirt and long-sleeved top, her body as concealed as possible. Many of her former Baais Yakov classmates or other girls she knew from Jewish institutions cameo in her videos; often, these cameos are used as a juxtaposition of how much Golda (or the guest) has changed. One of her videos with the caption, "We met in kiruv camp," *kiruv* being a form of Jewish outreach aimed at bringing Jews closer to God and their faith, features one of these "throwback" set-ups.[76] [77] The video begins with a photo of Golda and her friend in a school gym with the caption, "spot the difference." She's wearing a long, multi-colored maxi skirt and neon sneakers with an elbow length, high-neck black top; her friend is dressed in a t-shirt and mid-length skirt. The video then cuts to a clip of Golda and the same friend today on a New York City street; Golda is in jean shorts and a tight, cropped shirt, while her friend wears a short linen dress. They're both laughing and holding each other, while the hashtags accompanying the video caption below read, "#chabadtiktok#jewishtiktok#purityculture#modestishottest#jewtok." Aside from the contrast in clothing, the contrast in both women's demeanor is notable as well; this is a video that has been carefully crafted using common social cues. Their smiles and easy-going, light bantering in the

[76] Wolowelsky, Joel B. *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 26, no. 3 (1992): 99–104.
[77] Daphna, G. [@gold.a.star]. (2021, July 25). *We met in kiruv camp #chabadtiktok#jewishtiktok#purityculture#modestishottest#jewtok* [Video]. TikTok.

final clip are a manipulated testament to the "freedom" they've achieved through individual choice. By dressing "immodestly," of their own volition, there is a sense of joy in this newfound autonomy.

Modesty and its impact on female dignity in the Orthodox community is a recurring topic on Golda's page. However, instead of equating the practice of modesty to increased female safety, she subverts this misconception. Often conceptualized in religious practice as a way to shelter a female subject from the violating male gaze, modesty is proposed as a solution without any action on the part of the violator. It becomes a woman's responsibility to dress a certain way, not a man's responsibility to act respectfully. This is a point that Golda refers to frequently—the burden put upon women to regard their bodies as self-destructive weapons waiting to be detonated. She goes beyond this idea by refuting the concept that modesty or immodesty bears any weight on a woman's safety. Her own experience with sexual assault, a traumatic event that occurred last year in the company of "friends", is a theme throughout her content. Besides this one event, Golda describes various experiences throughout her childhood and young adulthood where she felt threatened by male authority figures within her community, many of whom were highly regarded members of her synagogue. In a TikTok with the caption, "Modesty isn't protection," she addresses this idea directly; the hashtags "#survivior#purityculture#modestishottest#yousaytheoceansrising#jewishtiktok" accompany her title.[78] The "#yousaytheoceansrising" is a reference to the lyrics she is lip-syncing along to in the clip, a line from comedian Bo Burnham's song "All Eyes on Me" from his 2021 special "Bo Burnham: Inside".[79] The special itself explores Burnham's deteriorating mental health during the

[78] Daphna, G. [@gold.a.star]. (2021, June 28). *Modest isn't protection #survivor#purityculture#modestishottest#yousaytheoceansrising#jewishtiktok* [Video]. TikTok.
[79] Burnham, B., creator and director. *Bo Burnham: Inside.* Netflix, 2021.

COVID-19 pandemic and was self-recorded and produced; many of his songs from his special (which were later released as an album) then become viral TikTok "sounds," with a number of TikToks using clips of his audio.[80] Golda begins the video in a backward baseball cap while text across the screen reads, "If you dress like that guys won't think you're religious". The video transitions to Golda in the same position without a baseball cap, signifying that this scene is taking place as a dialogue between two people: Golda with the baseball cap and Golda without. This new character (Golda-sans-baseball cap) responds to the "guys won't think you're religious" comment by lip-synching along to the Burnham audio line, "like I give a shit." At the same time, she raises up a photo of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and the text across the screen now reads, "It's between me and G-d" (God). The baseball cap character returns and retorts, "But men will touch you without permission." This clip ends with Golda-sans-cap delivering a final response to her capped counterpart's concerns; smiling, she lip-syncs along to the line, "[they] already did."

Outside of her experiences with sexual assault, Golda uses the theme of dressing *tsnius* in a way that is both humorous and creative. She takes an idea that is extremely niche and adapts it to current social media trends, particularly popular TikTok dances, sounds, effects, and video formatting. Often, she enlists other friends from the Jewish community to participate; there's usually a theme of dichotomy between the two, whether it's centered on their differences in personality or on their respective relationships with Judaism. One of her earlier videos showcases this creative style and sets the tone of the content that will be found on her page later. It has no caption but multiple hashtags including,

[80] Bo Burnham, *Inside (The Songs).* Attic Bedroom, Imperial, Ingrooves, Mercury, 2021.

"#jew#jewishtiktok#tzniut#feminist#njg#frumjew#frumtiktok#chabad#rebbe#israel."[81] Her use of various, relatively popular hashtags shows her intent to garner a wider audience; although virality might not necessarily be her main motivation, using several hashtags increases the chance that this video will show up on more people's feeds. This video's background song is by the Russian musician, producer, and rapper kostromin; entitled "моя голова винтом (my head is spinning like a screw)", it went viral on TikTok along with an accompanying dance where two or more people hold hands in a circle and swing their arms across their chests as they skip around. Golda's TikTok begins with a clip of her walking towards the camera in a pair of beige pants with the text, "*Chabadnik* stops wearing skirts" across the screen ("*Chabadnik*" refers to a member of the Hasidic group known as Chabad).[82] The clip transitions to her friend doing the same movement, except she's wearing a long-sleeved shirt and knee length skirt. The text now reads, "*Baalat Teshuva* starts dressing *tsnius*" (*Baalat Teshuva* refers to a formerly secular Jew who adopts traditional religious observances).[83] In the next scene, they perform the popular TikTok movement described above with the caption, "Both disappoint our families." In this instance, Golda uses contemporary internet humor to describe a throughline between religious devotion and the relationship with one's family; the cliché of disappointing one's family, whether through one's religiosity or secularism, is a cliché for a reason. Of the 25 comments on this video, the majority express sentiments like "so true" or "I felt this." It's an experience that many can relate to and strikes a sense of recognition in the viewer, a type of understanding that this lighthearted display has touched on something much deeper.

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[81] Daphna, G. [@gold.a.star]. (2021, February 22). *#jew#jewishtiktok#tzniut#feminist#njg#frumjew#frumtiktok#chabad#rebbe#israel#style#ialreadyworethisshirtidolaundry#fyp#bettertogether* [Video]. TikTok.
[82] "About Chabad-Lubavitch." Chabad.org, March 17, 2023.
[83] Freeman, T., Posner, M. "What Is a Baal Teshuvah." Chabad.org, March 17, 2023.

Unlike Golda, Yasmin still dresses modestly and wears a head covering; due to this fact, her religious identity is overt. She wears it on her very body, making Islam not only an interior faith but the way in which she both navigates and is perceived in the world. Although she works to address social issues and uses her page as an informative resource for anti-racism and anti-Islamophobia, Yasmin's role as a beauty influencer cannot be ignored. As mentioned above, many followers look to her page specifically for beauty, fashion, and lifestyle advice. After observing her social media presence, I would imagine that this role would be secondary to her social activism in Yasmin's mind; however, there is an undeniable reality on platforms like TikTok—if an attractive, well-made-up woman is creating content, there will be interest in how she cultivates her physical appearance. No matter the video topic, there is always at least one comment directed at Yasmin's looks. Part of this has to do with the space that she inhabits in the world; as a black, veiled Muslim woman in America, Yasmin represents a minority in more ways than one. Her experiences are unique and powerful, and for many dealing with similar issues, a guiding light in an uncertain social world. To wear a veil in a Western country like the United States is to incite curiosity, both innocent and malicious. Sidelong glances and whispered comments become a part of one's reality. That level of scrutiny and discomfort can be difficult to bear, especially while navigating the hazardous road that is young womanhood.

Many of Yasmin's videos focus on this aspect of the female Muslim experience, offering advice and instructions on how to dress modestly without sacrificing individual style. One TikTok captioned, "to anyone interested in wearing abayas and jibabs to school :)" includes the hashtags "#muslim#modestfashion#tips" (abayas and jilbabs are two types of Islamic

coverings).[84] [85] The video features Yasmin in her usual positioning, speaking directly to the camera with her upper body visible. She's wearing a magenta and black abaya, but noticeably lacking her usual light application of makeup. The text, "Tips on wearing modest fashion to school:" is visible just above her head. She describes how for people interested in wearing more coverings to school, this can be a "really, really big step" and can cause "a lot of anxiety and fear…" Yasmin begins with the disclaimer that "you do not have to wear abayas and jilbabs to school. If you are not in a situation where you can freely do these things, it's ok. Allah knows your situation and he knows your heart, and if that intention is there, Allah knows best." The people she is referring to in this segment, those who are "unable" to wear a veil freely, most likely include those whose school or homelife forbids such action. This could even be applied more broadly to those living in stringently secular nations such as France, a country whose senate has gone as far as attempting to ban girls under the age of 18 from wearing the hijab in public.[86]

Yasmin is sure to include these individuals in her disclaimer to provide some solace to those who might be feeling moral guilt. Their inability to wear the modest style that they desire is not their fault, and in her words, "Allah knows best" and is understanding of their situation. For those who can don a veil, Yasmin does not mince words; she states plainly, "the first thing I'd want you to know is that you are going to be uncomfortable." She acknowledges that young adulthood, i.e., high school and college, is the time when we're most "self-conscious and self-aware." Additionally, she notes that many of her viewers could be going to PWIs and other less

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[84] Shimek, E.D. "The Abaya: Fashion, Religion, and Identity in a Globalized World" (2012). *Lawrence University Honors Projects*. 12.
[85] Jalloh, Y. [@yasminjalloh]. (2022, August 31). *to anyone interested in wearing abayas and jilbabs to school :) #muslim#modestfashion#tips* [Video]. TikTok.
[86] "'Law against Islam': French vote in favour of hijab ban condemned". (*Al Jazeera,* 9 April 2021).

diverse institutions. Here already, there's likely a status quo; students are white and Christian or secular. Either way, their religious identities are likely not as publicly recognizable as a veiled Muslim woman's.

Yasmin describes how "over time, being uncomfortable will be less uncomfortable, if that makes sense." Her terminology here is interesting. She intentionally does not tell her audience that the discomfort will go away; instead, the discomfort will become familiar. Although there is a tendency to sugar-coat things on social media sites like TikTok, a need to glamorize or diminish life's setbacks to create an uplifting atmosphere for the viewer, Yasmin does not want to lead them astray. She understands that it is difficult to be a veiled Muslim woman in Western society and that her followers should not be misled or unprepared for that reality. She describes how "navigating that anxiety and navigating looking different from everyone else" will take time. Next, she begins to give more technical advice. Some of her insights include "practicing" wearing abayas and jilbabs; she instructs her followers to try going to other places as they adjust to modest clothing in public. In her own experience, she found this method helpful and describes first donning abayas and jilbabs for errands at places like Walmart and Target before taking the plunge and wearing them to school. Again, part of this method includes "practicing being uncomfortable and practicing people looking at [you]." The vital result of this experience, in Yasmin's words, is building confidence—the confidence to look "different." Her third piece of advice is to know "that you [the viewers taking up the abaya] still have creative freedom." She reassures her audience that they can still have personal style even while dressing modestly, and points to her own focus on accessories like purses and rings as a creative element of her attire. Yasmin notes her own experience incorporating the things she liked about fashion in general into her "modest fashion," to help her feel "a little less foreign, if

that makes sense, and so I didn't feel like I was losing my identity in any way." She finishes with a final piece of advice, saying:

> You do not have to jump all the way in. You can start small…you don't have to see yourself as a "transformer," you can be wearing abaya one day and jeans the next day, it's ok. The goal is just to maximize being properly covered, and you can do that wearing absolutely anything that you want.

This TikTok has nearly 4500 "likes" and 60 comments. Many commenters express concern about their own experiences dressing modestly in Western nations like the United States. One viewer writes, "I'm moving to USA in december and im a little bit worried bout how people gon interact with me 😕(im a abaya/jilbeb/khimar girl)," with khimar being another type of Islamic veil.[87] Yasmin responds, "Inshallah! It might take time before you feel comfortable looking different but I pray you have really good interactions with others." Another merely comments her support, writing, "Thank you for this! I also am an abaya girl and go to college and it can get hard sometimes. Seeing you makes me feel less alone." The sense of community in this comment section is palpable; one user who is veiled in her display picture simply writes, "I don't know what to comment but have a blessed day everyone" along with a series of smile and heart emojis. Even though she had nothing concrete to say, she wanted to comment to express her support and leave a tangible mark of having done so; her words will remain as a source of levity in a difficult conversation, a simple wish that any viewer experiencing hardship surrounding their religious identity will be well. Yasmin's tone of acceptance and understanding in the original video comes up in the comment section as well. One viewer asks, "on windy days

[87] Ssenyonjo, M. "Moslem Women, Religion And The Hijab: A Human Rights Perspective." *East African Journal of Peace and Human Rights* 14,1.

how do u prevent urself from getting exposed from the fabric flying up or clinging on u?" Yasmin replies, "just making sure you have clothes under is important! I wear loose pants and a shirt under but these things are kinda out of our control. As long as you have clothes under you've kinda done all that you can for the most part!" Her flexible, laid-back response is a vital part of her online persona. She dresses modestly and does her best to be a good Muslim, but also acknowledges that there are aspects of the world outside of our control. Instead of preaching a stringent, choresome relationship with faith in which the practitioner feels they're constantly underachieving, she urges her followers to be kinder to themselves. The most important thing is doing "the most that you can" and letting everything else go.

Kenna's relationship with modesty is most apparent in her fashion influencing. While scrolling through her Amazon Storefront and other pages on her linktree, one begins to see some aspects of her Christian identity. While some of the product bundles on her Amazon Storefront are typical, such as "hair care" and "UGG dupes," after scrolling further down the page more niché categories appear.[88] Some of these bundles are titled "modest business casual" and "modest basics." At this point, there is still no clear identifier of Kenna's religious affiliation beyond dressing modestly. Her identity as a Mormon woman remains buried under pages of product recommendations and curated photos for sponcon. The feed with all her outfits reads the same, every so often featuring Kenna in a more covered ensemble with captions like "Modest Summer OOTD" (OOTD being outfit of the day) and "3 of my fav fuller coverage two-piece swimmies."[89] Here, finally, her religious affiliation becomes clear. One link entitled, "4 Modest ASOS Jumpsuits for Summer (garment friendly)" provides the first real hint. Garments are

[88] McClellan, Kenna, editor. "Kenna McClellan's Amazon Storefront." *Amazon.com*, www.amazon.com/shop/kennarwood. Accessed 20 Mar. 2023.
[89] McClellan, Kenna, editor. "Kenna McClellan." LTK, https://www.shopltk.com/explore/kenmcclellan.

ceremonial clothing adult Mormons are given after receiving "the endowment." A religious ceremony administered in a temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the endowment provides "instruction, covenants, and promised blessings that offer power, purpose, and protection in daily life".[90] Members who receive the endowment promise to follow "His [God's] standards of morality, integrity, and service to others" and "to keep the law of obedience, the law of sacrifice, the law of the gospel, the law of chastity, and the law of consecration".

Part of the appeal of the endowment is that those who receive it are guaranteed "eternal exaltation" and a return to the presence of "the Father" in the afterlife. The endowment is required before adult Mormons head off to their missions or enter a "celestial marriage" in a temple. As part of the ceremony, members receive a simple undergarment aka a "temple garment." This garment is worn underneath members' normal clothing for the remainder of their lives as a daily reminder of their covenant with God. The garment "encourages modesty" and is worn as an "outward expression of an inward commitment to follow the Savior".[91] Today, Mormon garments are typically a two-piece set for both men and women; the female set features a shirt with cap sleeves and longer pants somewhere between shorts and knee-length. Several of Kenna's posts feature a reference to garments, along with outfits curated around this clothing item. She uses popular influencer slang and terms of endearment in her captions, combining a sense of the deeply traditional with current cultural trends. Some outfit ideas include "perfect pink pants for summer for girlies with garments," "prettiest flowy pants for summer for girlies with garments," and "garment friendly post church nap fit" ("fit" being slang for outfit).[92] As can

[90] "Endowment." Churchofjesuschrist.org, 17 March 2023.
[91] Ibid.
[92] McClellan, Kenna (@kennarwood). 2023. TikTok.

be observed, “girlies with garments” is one of her endearing terms of choice. Aside from keeping in line with the cutesy, feminine aesthetic of her page, Kenna’s use of the term attempts to normalize a more foreign concept. While wearing religious garments is a niche experience, the term “girlie” instills a sense of familiarity in the subject as it’s an extremely popular term of address in our cultural landscape; in many ways, she is making the “strange” familiar and more accessible to a “regular” audience.

Modesty plays an important role in Kenna’s TikTok account, specifically modest fashion. As discussed earlier, she often styles clothing with Mormon garments in mind. Beyond garments, she also dresses modestly and creates content concerning modest fashion for young women. Kenna’s definition of modest clothing differs from Yasmin’s in terms of veiling; while both women wear clothing with more coverage, Kenna does not cover her hair. Additionally, while she wears items of clothing that might be more modest than typical American attire, she is not entirely covered. She still reveals her legs and arms at times, although things like cleavage and anything too tight seem to be where the line is drawn. Essentially, her definition of “modest dress” could be inferred as more moderate than Yasmin’s or even Golda’s as a former ultra-Orthodox Jew. Kenna’s propensity for internet lingo and her use of cultural currency is evident throughout her TikToks on modest clothing. At its core, her account is about beauty and style; her most popular videos include hair braiding tutorials and Amazon clothing hauls. Modest clothing doesn’t necessarily fit within this brand at first glance, but Kenna seamlessly weaves her modest content among this more “regular” content.

In one TikTok captioned, “don’t mind my wrinkled shirt lol. But follow along for more modest fashion inspo,” she introduces herself as a modest fashion influencer in a humorous,

winky way.[93] The hashtags on this video include "#modestfashion#garmentfriendly#modestinspo#mormon#lds#utah#amazon fashion." The 11-second video begins with Kenna pretending to be involved in a conversation; one hand holds her phone while the other gestures along with her lip-synched script. The text across the screen reads, "I show girls how they can dress modestly and still look cute." The clip transitions to Kenna now facing the opposite direction and acting as the second character in the conversation. She has a blank look on her face and a large "?" sits above her head. This second character is seemingly confused by Kenna's definition of "modesty". The camera shifts back to Kenna in her original position as she mouths along to the text "Oh sorry." However, there is a disconnect between the next line of text and the words Kenna continues to mouth. Below the "Oh sorry," the caption on the screen depicts the emojis "🍒<< & 🍑<<". Both emojis have dual meanings on the internet and are often used as references to breasts (the cherries) and backsides (the peach). While she uses the emojis in her accompanying text, Kenna's mouthed words are clear: "Oh sorry, less boobs and less butt." The secondary character is now back on the screen, nodding and smiling in understanding. Here again, Kenna packages modest clothing as a lifestyle choice that can still be current and in touch with cultural trends. She is essentially clarifying that she may dress modestly, but she still uses internet lingo and knows what the 🍑emoji means.

Aside from her styling videos, Kenna posts content of herself in modest clothing in the "real world." This is an important aspect of her role as an influencer; there must be an added layer of "authenticity," or at the very least, the guise of authenticity. If she were to just post her different modest fashion inspiration boards and clothing suggestions without proving to the

[93] McClellan, K. [@kennarwood]. (2022, July 17). *don't mind my wrinkled shirt lol. But follow along for more modest fashion inspo #modestfashion#garmentfriendly#modestfit#modestinspo#mormon#lds…* [Video]. TikTok.

viewer she follows these guidelines in her day-to-day life, there would be less opportunity for connection and emulation. Seeing Kenna boldly wear modest clothing makes her not only an influencer, but a "role model" for her followers. As described by Yasmin, the choice to dress modestly can be uncomfortable; unwanted stares and whispered remarks become an individual's new reality. However, seeing someone like Kenna—a conventionally attractive, pop culture-savvy, young adult—embrace modesty can make the experience appear less daunting. In one TikTok captioned ,"Like normally I don't lol but THIS ONE?! I'm obsessed".[94] The accompanying hashtags include "#modestfashion#modestswimwear#swimwear#modestoutfits," along with a tag for a modest clothing brand called DM Fashion (@shop.dmfashion). Kenna is at the beach with a frosty drink in hand and the text, "I could never wear a full coverage swimsuit like that" across the screen. The background audio, an original sound called "follow me on ig the__jaderoom" by jade includes spoken lines that Kenna mouths along to: "Ok well that's you. But on the other hand, me? I'm finna turn up." Here the written text represents one character and side of dialogue while Kenna/her chosen audio represent the other. Again, her choice of sound exhibits someone in touch with internet trends. This particular audio went viral and is repeatedly used on TikTok, while slang like "finna turn up" further represent an understanding of youth vernacular (in this case, black vernacular that has been co-opted by the "internet" i.e., white creators—unfortunately a common practice on social media platforms). This video is one of Kenna's more popular TikToks with over 79k "likes" and 550 comments. Most comments are highly supportive, including "modesty is beautiful 🥰" and "a little modesty never hurt anybody".

[94] McClellan, K. [@kennarwood]. (2023, January 26). *Like normally I don't lol but THIS ONE?! I'm obsessed #modestfashon#modestswimwear#swimwear#modestoutfits* [Video]. TikTok.

CONCLUSION

In terms of future research, it would be beneficial for this project to be further focused on audience reception. To accomplish this in an ethnographic setting, Yasmin, Golda, and Kenna's followers could be analyzed directly. This might involve interviews or examination of their social media accounts, as well as a more detailed understanding of the ways in which they have been personally influenced by these authoritative figures. The underlying question of my research was how people pursue meaning in a digital age; however, a fundamental aspect of "meaning" is its individualized nature. My understanding of what brings life "meaning" could be vastly different from another's. Due to this fluidity, there can't really be a concrete answer to my initial question. With the ambiguity and unknowability of both the black void of the internet and, on a broader scale, life itself, the consequences of our missing interiority can't now be known. My questions arose from fear of something I saw within myself; a lack of introspection and "stillness" that I worried was atrophying the parts of myself I had yet to discover, whether mental, emotional, or even spiritual. In the end, these are questions that can only be asked of ourselves—resounding echoes tossed out into the void.

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