

# Veiling as Agency: Empowerment through Modest Fashion on TikTok

## Introduction

In the Global North, prevailing public discourse frames the veil as a symbol of subordination, frequently associating it with religious or patriarchal pressures imposed on Muslim women. These perspectives reject the possibility of veiling as an autonomous, self-determined practice grounded in personal and religious belief. They associate veiling with oppressive regimes that negate women's agency. Contrary to this narrative, my research adopts the position that veiling can be an act of agency. To examine how agency is articulated through modest fashion, I conducted a small scale digital ethnographic study on TikTok, focusing on the Dutch modest fashion brand MERRACHI. The research is guided by the question: **How does Merrachi's TikTok content frame modest fashion as empowerment rather than a symbol of restriction?**

## Hypothesis

I expect that MERRACHI's TikTok content will frame modest fashion as a vehicle of women's agency and self-expression rather than a symbol of oppression. Thereby this brand would counter the dominant narrative in the Global North that frames veiling as oppressive.



Have a look at Merrachi's TikTok page

## What is MERRACHI?

MERRACHI is a Dutch modest fashion brand founded in 2020 by Dutch-Moroccan designer Nada Merrachi. Following her decision to cover her hair, she struggled to find clothing that aligned simultaneously with her aesthetic, core beliefs and values. This gap encouraged her to design clothing and scarves for women with similar experiences. Embodied in the slogan "Modesty at its finest in the most fashionable way," the brand provides an inclusive and empowering community and positions itself within contemporary modest fashion (Merrachi 2025).

MERRACHI



Nada Merrachi, owner of the namesake brand (Merrachi 2025).

## State of the Art

Since colonial expansion into Muslim regions, Western discourse has instrumentalized Muslim women and veiling to construct cultural "otherness" to justify domination. Colonial powers appropriated feminist language to legitimize intervention in the name of liberating women for their agenda to assimilate the local culture, while simultaneously resisting feminist calls for reform at home. This established the fusion between the issues of women and culture. It produced enduring assumptions that veiling signifies oppression and that abandoning it is a precondition for emancipation. European unveiling campaigns lead to the internalization of this narrative. Consequently, debates on the veil are repeatedly framed – until today – as one between feminists and antifeminist. Yet paradoxically, colonial attacks on the veil helped transform it into a symbol of resistance. The veil remains embedded in these historical power relations, carrying multiple and contested meanings (Ahmed 1992, 150-154; 164-168 and El Guindi 1999, 181-182). Muslim women denounce how such assumptions overlook women's own interpretations. Some veil to assert minority presence and demand justice, others reject stereotypes and affirm pride in their Muslim identity (Ahmed 2011, 41-42).

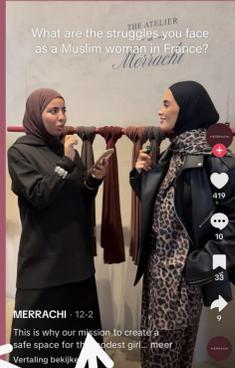
Within this debate, feminist hermeneutics have drawn attention to women's agency and the need to examine lived religious practices. Yet, scholarly disagreement persists over whether veiling can constitute agency because these debates often rely on liberal definitions of agency, which overlook how agency is articulated within religious spaces.

## Observations

The present research focusses on the TikTok-page of MERRACHI, a modest fashion brand with a chic and fashionable outlook. The page represents a range of interpretations of modest dress, including how women wear headscarves or dress modestly. Neutral, warm and earthy tones contribute to the modest and chic feel of the brand. The focus is entirely on women, no men are featured on the page. MERRACHI promotes a welcoming "community" for girls and women seeking modest fashion. The brand creates an inclusive space, extending beyond Muslim women to anyone interested in modest clothing.



Most of the comments under the TikTok that shows the line outside during the launch of the Antwerp store is negative, however some people reacted with praising words and positivity.



The TikToks include customer interviews, hijab styling tutorials, behind-the-scenes content and updates on new store openings. In interviews, women share advice on staying true to one's style while dressing modestly. Some mention the importance of trusting in Allah, because the judgements of others do not matter. The interviews give a non-judgemental and welcoming image of the brand.

Another recurring interview topic is the challenges Muslim women face in Europe. Many women relate about the struggle to find acceptance and safe spaces where they are respected for their dressing choices. They often face misconceptions that they are forced to wear the hijab, while in reality, they choose to do so as part of their identity. MERRACHI's community then offers them a safe space away from misunderstandings and judgements.



When MERRACHI opened a pop-up shop in Paris, the event was well received. However, the next day, the pavement before the shop was vandalised with graffiti paint saying: "Stop the hijab, stop the oppression of women". The owner of the brand made a TikTok response, relating about the irony of the quote. She explained that the pop-up was the complete opposite of oppression. Women gathered to shop at the store and find confidence in their identity and self-expression. Further, she said that she is aware that reshaping perceptions would take time, therefore she will continue to create safe spaces for her community and push to claim a space for them in the fashion industry.



## Saba Mahmood: Piety as Agency

Saba Mahmood theorizes piety as a form of ethical self-formation. She counters liberal feminist frameworks that assume that agency is always connected to resistance and emancipation. She argues that such an understanding excludes agency of Muslim women (Mahmood 2005, 154-155). In Mahmood's theory, agency can exist in piety itself. According to her, Muslim women can express agency through religious practice and norms without necessarily having to oppose them. Practices such as veiling become techniques through which women express their piety, illustrating that agency can be exercised within religious tradition (Mahmood 2005, 157-174). Important note on Mahmood's theory: This understanding of piety as agency sees Muslim women as operating within a patriarchal structure constraining women's choices and possibilities and that women intentionally participate in them (Mahmood 2005, 167). My critique is that this assumption risks overgeneralizing Muslim women's social realities. It positions Islamic communities as patriarchal by default and overlooks contexts in which women's religious practices are not experienced as constraint, but as sources of authority and self-definition.

## Conclusion

MERRACHI's TikTok content demonstrates how agency can be exercised through practices of piety, grounded in Mahmood's redefinition of agency. The brand's interviews, tutorials and community messaging, frame veiling and modest dress as intentional ethical choices motivated by personal belief and self-expression. This aligns with Mahmood's argument that agency can be exercised through piety. Women featured on the TikTok page describe staying true to their values and finding confidence in modest dress despite the public gaze. This reinforces Mahmood's theory that claims piety as a form of agency. By offering a welcoming and safe environment, as well as responding to anti-hijab vandalism, the brand further illustrates this agency, as women claim visibility and counter the narrative that misreads veiling as oppression.

By interpreting these observations through Mahmood's framework, this study challenges dominant narratives in the Global North that see veiling as inherently oppressive. MERRACHI's TikTok page serves as a space where piety and fashion connect and enables women to express empowerment within their religious commitments. This analysis shows that modest fashion on social media can contest dominant assumptions about autonomy by presenting modesty as a means of ethical self-formation.

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