MAS | Muslim American Society

THINKING CRITICALLY

ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA & INFLUENCERS

REVIVE PACK

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Have you ever wondered, why is social media free?

After all, social media is a service that lets you conveniently find people you know, wherever they might be in the world, and stay connected with them by being able to share images and videos, which you can also edit to present in the best way possible. Not only people you know, but you also have access to the biggest names in politics, sports, entertainment, academia, and more. Why would such an amazing, all-comprehensive service be presented to you to use for free of charge? What are these social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, X (a.k.a. Twitter) and more selling?

The answer is "you." Access to you is what social media sites are selling to the companies that are displaying ads on your feed. Social media algorithms analyze what content you engage with and what your likes and dislikes are, and yes, sometimes these platforms even **listen in on your conversations** so they learn more about you. They want to know as much as possible about you to better target you with products and services you will buy.

So, while social media undoubtedly plays a huge role in connecting people worldwide and teaching us new things, one of its primary goals is also to influence us. And that can be an awfully powerful tool.

The Power of Influence

in·flu·ence
/ˈinflooəns/

noun
the capacity to have an effect on the character, development, or behavior of someone or something

Having the ability to influence others is a potent thing. If one has the power to affect the way someone looks, acts, and thinks, then they essentially have a level of control over the other. Power has both positive and negative aspects to it. Let's look at some recent examples to show how intensely social media can affect us.

The Good: #FreePalestine

Recently, we've seen a phenomenal change in the narrative regarding the occupation of Palestine and particularly the genocide in Gaza, thanks to the power of social media.

- Journalists and everyday residents in Gaza were able to stream to the world the death and destruction they faced directly without having to go through the filters and censors of traditional mass media (i.e., network TV channels).
- This reporting prompted ordinary citizens from around the world to do independent research on the conflict in the region, and they reported being astonished that they never knew the truth of the injustices Palestinians have been facing for decades. They used social media to share their discoveries.

- The call to boycott companies and brands supporting Israel also spread like wildfire as a result.
- There is a remarkable uptick in the number of people who are interested in Islam and those who converted because they were inspired by the bravery, resilience, and generosity of the Palestinian people under siege.

And The Very Bad: A Plethora of Health and Wellness Issues

While social media can help perpetuate a lot of good in the world, it has an even greater ability to cause significant harm. Social media can influence us in devastating ways, leading to:

- Depression and loss of self-esteem from comparing yourself to the curated lifestyle of others.
- **Eating disorders** in girls and young women who use Instagram
- Short attention spans and the **development of tics** from scrolling through endlessly new videos on TikTok
- Cyberbullying – abusive or harassing behavior online has been reported by 59% of US teens, according to **research**.
- Sleep issues which are caused by overstimulation when using social media before bedtime.

Human beings have always had people they look up to. Whether a religious figure, a mighty warrior, a beautiful musician, or even people we know personally like a teacher or parent. These individuals could influence what we study, what jobs we pursue, how we dress, and other aspects of life and personality. They would be known as "role models" for the distinction they had achieved in their industries or the good examples they set.

With the rise of social media, we see a whole class of people who have self-identified themselves as influencers, and this word has come to denote a full-time job in and of itself. So much so that anyone who can bake their own bread, for instance, record themselves lifting weights or wearing pretty clothes while having a picnic every other week deems themselves worthy of being people we should look up to and copy.

Once they have gained a significant following for their "aesthetic" or "vibe," many influencers quit their day jobs to convince their followers to live as they do full-time. They make money collaborating with brands to advertise their products and services by persuading followers that they, too, can live a picture-perfect life as they do.

But herein lies the problem: this picture of perfection can often be a facade or a well-curated lie. Influencers can put out very damaging ideas that can warp the minds of impressionable young people.

Let's take a look at a couple of cases affecting young Muslims.

Case One

The Case of the 2010s Hijabi Influencers

A decade or so ago, a few Muslim women gained significant followings on social media for sharing hijab tutorials and modest fashion tips. Eventually, these personalities became so big that some even started their own modest clothing lines. Their social media presence attracted the attention of mainstream fashion brands, further elevating them on social media. Muslim women are finally being recognized, many thought. But then suddenly, some of these influencers bizarrely started taking off their hijabs, seemingly one influencing the other, citing reasons like self-discovery, personal choice, etc. When followers expressed hurt or condemnation, some of these influencers blocked and lashed out against them, effectively turning their back on the very cause of their success.
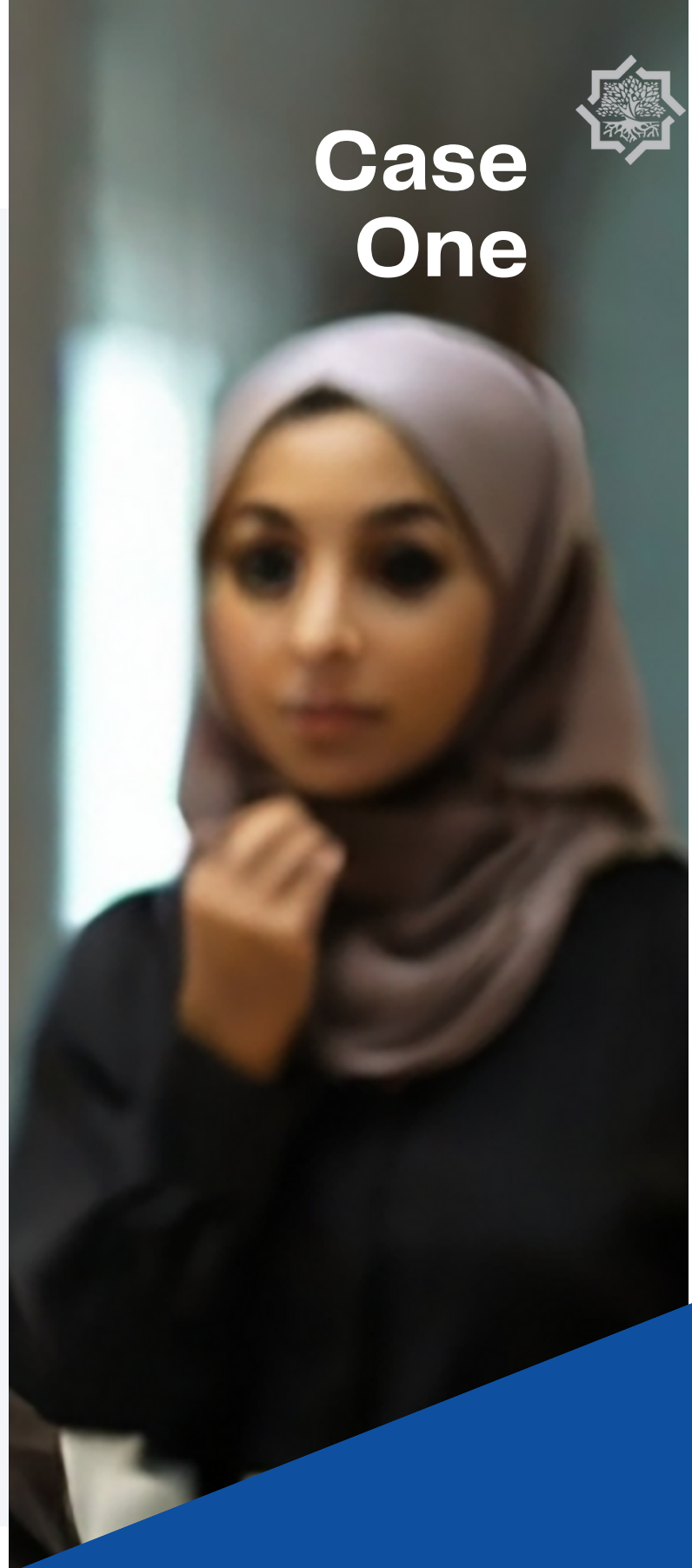
Case Two

Toxic Masculinity Maestros

Young men, on the other extreme, are faced with advice from a barrage of male talking heads who demean women and blame them for almost all evils in society. They call women greedy and disloyal. Unfortunately, their toxic ideas have also influenced Muslim young men, some of whom took to Muslim spaces on social media to share absurd views. For example, cautioning men from marrying divorced women, which is actually a sunnah. Then there are examples of excessive scrutiny on the behaviors of Muslim women with some Muslim men calling out women for engaging in tabarruj, (extravagantly displaying themselves) for simply wearing coats over their abayas. Others have advised sisters to not have photos of themselves on their own phones because there is a chance that their phones can be hacked.

So many influencers are vying for your attention on social media. Are you thinking critically about who you're letting into your life? With social media showing us all kinds of curated lifestyles, it's easy to start feeling depressed or insecure about looks, money, and any lack of opportunities in your life.
Here are some pointers to keep you in the driver's seat and ensure you're not taken for a ride.

- Remember, you have the power to control who influences you. Your attention is precious; don't give it away freely — especially to people who will pull on your heartstrings just so they can install a jacuzzi in their second bathroom. Unfollow anyone who makes you feel insecure or ungrateful for what you have.

- Is who you're following bringing you closer to Allah or further away from Him? Anyone who makes you forget and neglect the Lord of the Universe is not someone who is bringing you any benefit, despite how much you enjoy their content.

"And whoever turns away from My remembrance – indeed, he will have a depressed life, and We will gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind."
[Quran 20:124]

- Do not let yourself become desensitized to Haram. Think about if the accounts you follow online align with your Islamic values. Is there too much profanity or vulgarity? Do they share views that go against traditional Islamic teachings? Do they make you feel uncomfortable or guilty? Listen to your fitrah and stay away. Repeated exposure to ideas can normalize them in your head.

"Say, 'O Prophet,' "Good and evil are not equal, though you may be dazzled by the abundance of evil. So be mindful of Allah, O people of reason, so you may be successful." [Quran 5:100]

- Competition kills contentment. Don't compare yourself to people you have never met or will never truly know. You don't know what their life is like behind closed doors. Be thankful for what you have.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "Look at those who are lower than you and do not look at those who are higher than you, lest you belittle the favors Allah conferred upon you."

- Never hold up an individual on a pedestal. Learn to accept that all humans make mistakes and have shortcomings. Only the Prophets are worthy of such a status because of their unmatched humility before Allah and noble character. Be gracious when you know a knowledgeable person has made a mistake, but also know when to unfollow if someone consistently makes claims without evidence.

- Don't spend time keeping up with people online so much that you miss one-on-one time with Allah and your loved ones.

Sh. Ibn Al-Qayyim said, "Wasting time cuts you off from Allah and the hereafter, whereas death cuts you off from worldly life and its people."

The Prophet ﷺ said, "The two feet of a slave will not move on the Day of Resurrection until he is asked about his lifetime – where did he spend it? His knowledge – what did he do with it? His wealth – from where did he earn it, and on what did he spend it? And his body – how did he wear it out?" (At-Tirmidhi)

The Responsibility of Influencers

According to a new survey, 41% of adults and 57% of Gen Zers reported they would like to become influencers if given the chance. It's understandable why – many see it as a fun, flexible, and money-making career choice. If you or someone you know is an influencer or wants to become one, here are some questions to ask yourself.

- What is your intention behind being an influencer?
- How do you see it benefitting your life and hereafter?
- Are you ready to open yourself up to judgment for sharing your life with the public?
- How will/do you balance being an influencer with your relationship with Allah and your loved ones?
- What do you think your responsibilities are toward your followers?

THOUGHT EXERCISE

Imagine a friend comes to you and says social media is making them bad about themselves or exposing them to content that is inappropriate but they find themselves enjoying it. What advice would you give them to overcome these issues?

Write this advice down and try applying it in your own life if you go through something similar.

Discussions & Activities

There is good and bad in everything - reflecting on how and why we utilize social media as both a consumer and a poster is important. Social media is a tool of this day in age, and our scholars acknowledge we have a responsibility to utilize the tools of our time for beneficial knowledge and outcomes.

Do you think social media is more beneficial or detrimental to our mental health - why? What is our responsibility for our engagement?

First, let's look at how we consume social media by doing a social media audit.

ACTIVITY: Social Media Audit

1

1ST PHASE - Reflection and Categorization:

First, take ten minutes to look through your feed and notice the accounts that come up in your feed on the social media platform you use most often (this goes back to the algorithm - you're shown these videos or posts in your feed due to your engagement with the platform).
While you look through the posts and accounts, create a list categorizing the types of posts you see most often in your feed or intentionally check each week (for example: funny videos, art, Islamic reminders, politics, friends, etc.). After doing this, we will discuss what we consider to be beneficial, unbeneficial, and neutral.

Open or small group discussions with share-out: What did you notice in the first part of your social media audit?

Facilitator Notes: Initiate open conversation or small group discussions on beneficial, unbeneficial, and neutral types of posts and accounts. This will most likely have varying opinions and will be a fruitful discussion as to the impact of what we each consume. If done in small groups, share and bring together for the next phase of the social media audit.

2ND PHASE - Impact and Curation:

Now that we've reflected on the beneficial, unbeneficial, and neutral content we consume, let's reflect on the impact our consumption has on our well-being.

Reflection Questions:

- Just as they say, you are a culmination of the five people you spend the most time around - what would that mean when it extends to your virtual life?
- How many hours per week do you spend with certain people by way of their content online?
- What types of content motivate you?
- What types of content demotivate you?

With that understanding, let's be intentional with the algorithm that pops up in our feed - take time to curate a list of either general types of accounts or specific accounts you'd like to add/delete follow/unfollow moving forward.

Facilitator Notes: Give each individual or small group ten minutes to curate a list of examples of accounts that motivate and demotivate them, leading into a share-out wherein each individual or group explains what they've reflected on.

3RD PHASE - Our Representation and Influence

So far, we have reflected on our social media usage as consumers - but what about the responsibility we have to utilize social media in a positive way as content creators ourselves?

Facilitator Notes: Open a discussion on what we create and post, prompting the group to think of why they post certain content reminding the group of the psychological impact that social media has been designed to have on its users as it has evolved.

For example, people may post certain content because it is a trend and they want to remain relevant, they need to feel a sense of community during a difficult time, they want to raise awareness reaching more people online, and they want to have a creative outlet, they need a dopamine boost to feel more confident, etc.

All of these reasons are understandable - the key, however, is in identifying the root why in the first place and reflecting on the short and long-term results. Remember, Facebook was originally designed to be an online platform that helped facilitate in-person connections and collaborations - then it morphed into a virtual community that replaced in-person connections.

Some of this is good in that we have worldwide connections and reach; however, some of it is bad in that it has diluted our communications and relationships (how many times have we liked posts from certain people, counting that as engagement, but failed to call or chat with them to have a real connection.

Reflection Questions:

- What are we seeking in certain types of engagement?
- Is there a bigger why we are working toward this?
- Are we utilizing social media in a way that has a long-term positive effect on us or are we simply training our brain for quick bursts of dopamine that is an endless pursuit?
- Is there a way to find what we are seeking online or extend our online influence in-person or in the community using social media as a supplemental, not primary, tool?
- Utilizing the same category lists as before, take time to tally up the types of content you have produced in the past few months. Put tally marks under beneficial, unbeneficial, or neutral.

ACTIVITY: Beneficial, Unbeneficial, Neutral Buckets

2

Materials needed:

- Three clear containers (buckets/vases/bowls) labeled "Beneficial," "Unbeneficial," and "Neutral."
- Collection of rocks or any item that you can obtain in bulk easily that has a visible impact in the containers

Instructions:

Utilizing the tally lists from the social media audit, have each individual drop rocks (or chosen item) into the containers for the number of beneficial, unbeneficial, and neutral posts they see as consumers within ten minutes of scrolling through their feed and for the number of beneficial, unbeneficial, and neutral posts or stories they themselves have shared over the past three months.

Notes: This can be done as an integrated part of the social media audit, completed after the 1st and 3rd phases of the social media audit, or it can be done afterward as an extension.

This activity can be done with water, filling each container halfway with water before the participants drop the rocks (or chosen item) in, or it can be done as a dry activity. If done with water, you will see how the water is displaced. If wanting to do it without water, ensure the containers are clear so the group can visualize what they are spending most of their time on vis-a-vis social media.

ACTIVITY: Social Media Campaign Small Group Challenge

3

As an extension of the social media audit 3rd phase, have the group brainstorm ways in which they can achieve their bigger why in terms of content creation on social media through organized social media challenges.

Example:

if the trends in the group behind why they post what they do on social media was to (a) raise awareness, (b) boost self-confidence, and (c) creative expression, divide the groups into small "think tanks" for each reason and challenge them to create a way to achieve the why in an organized social media campaign that contributes to the larger good.

The group on raising awareness can identify an issue that needs to be addressed and come up with a plan to raise awareness collectively and individually vis a vis social media for the upcoming month. The group addressing boosting self-confidence can identify ways in which they can grow in God-confidence and understand their worth by being part of something bigger of which they are proud. The group addressing creative expression can identify ways to utilize their unique talents for a bigger why.

The Impact of Influence

4

Start by defining "influence." Reflect on the biggest 'influencers' in your daily, physical life. (reminder on who we surround ourselves with - in this day and age, that extends to what we consume daily on our phones, not just our physical circles).

Now, extend that to your virtual life - who/what are your biggest influencers online? That brings us to the term "influencers."

Discuss the impact of influencers: What does influencer mean? Brainstorm the type of influencers and how this term has changed over the years (capitalist influence, "buy this product", creative influencers, awareness influencers, etc.)

Reflection Questions:
- In light of recent events, have you thought of redefining and reclaiming this term?
- Who/What do you think is worthy of being called 'influencer'? The power we have as content consumers and content creators is to reclaim what this means through our engagement.

Visualizing Beneficial Influence:

Materials needed:
- transparent water container
- a few drops of food coloring
- liquid bleach water

Process:
1. Fill half the transparent container with water - the water represents us.
2. Add a few drops of food coloring to the water - the food coloring represents the unbeneficial and neutral content we consume and post (can be done with one color or two colors, be careful not to add too much food coloring otherwise the bleach will not have an effect.)
3. Slowly pour liquid bleach into the water and watch the colors dilute and eventually disappear - this represents the impact of beneficial consumption and usage on our hearts and psyche.
4. Open discussion on how what we consume, in all forms, impacts our heart and psyche. Tie-in to preparation for Ramadan and how we are reminded during Ramadan that consumption in all forms, not just what we eat and drink, is important to cleansing and maintaining a healthy heart and way of being.

Resources

- https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-safety-blog/2023-05-16-the-influence-of-influencers/#

- https://www.bebafoundation.org/post/role-models-vs-influencers

- https://thriveworks.com/blog/mental-health-impact-of-instagram-and-tiktok-on-young-adults/#:~:text=Long%2Dterm%20use%20of%20Instagram,disorder%2C%20as%20well%20as%20depression.

- https://www.teensundayschool.com/lessons/life-applications/truth-or-dare-part-2/the-truth-about-media

- https://madinahcollege.uk/8-islamic-guidelines-for-using-social-media/

- https://muslimhands.org.uk/latest/2020/08/to-post-or-not-to-post-the-muslim-hands-guide-to-using-social-media

- https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/why-is-everyones-life-better-than-mine

- https://www.amazon.com/Fiqh-Social-Media-Principles-Navigating-ebook/dp/B08QHMZ8ZW

- https://www.thesocialdilemma.com/

- https://pa.cair.com/blog/faith-social-media/

- https://thefyi.org/?s=social+media