

# THE #NIQABSQUAD MOVEMENT AS NIQABIS ACTIVISM FOR OPENNESS THROUGH VISUAL CYBERSPACE

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**Abstract.** . By exploring the experiences of Muslim women who wear the niqab (veil) in Indonesia, this article explores the various aspects of their presence on social media, especially Instagram. Through the hashtag #niqabsquad, cadaris engage in digital activism, challenging societal perceptions and showing various sides of their lives. This paper explains how cadaris use Instagram as a platform for self-expression, community involvement, and even romantic relationships, challenging stereotypes and asserting their agency. The hashtag becomes a channel of solidarity and empowerment, allowing cadaris to explore virtual and physical realms while challenging prevailing ideologies. This research provides insight into the transformative potential of digital spaces for marginalized groups, providing a nuanced understanding of the nexus between identity, religiosity, and social media in contemporary contexts.

**Keywords:** Digital Activism, Cadaris, Hashtag #niqabsquad.

## INTRODUCTION

The use of headscarves to full-face veils by Muslim women has sparked various controversies in several countries. The wearing of niqab generates opposing narratives due to the concept of face covering as a primary presentation of individual identity. Women who wear headscarves or veils demonstrate their bodies with the choice to be covered as an empowering practice. This contrasts with the perception that the choice to cover with headscarves and veils reflects patriarchal oppression of Muslim women (Droogsma, 2007). The media often portrays Muslim women as oppressed victims who wear headscarves and veils (Bullock & Jafri, 2000). As a result, the audience tends to form perceptions associating clothing concealment with oppression and prohibition. However, the Simone de Beauvoir Institute in 2010 expressed support for bodily autonomy and personal freedom for all women. Women are deemed capable of interpreting and articulating their experiences of oppression in their own ways (O'Neil, 2015).

Amidst the controversy over niqab, mainstream media coverage is beginning to provide space for veiled women to comment. In some cases, this is framed by media power to direct criticism and neglect towards veiled women (Piela, 2014). This condition extends negative tendencies and rejection through opposing narratives. Media plays a crucial role in depicting group identities and deciding who will remain in internal or external positions (Bullock & Jafri, 2020). External parties or those positioned as 'others' tend to face the risk of stereotypes and slander (Morey & Yaqin, 2011). Veiled women have the ability to use technology to create opportunities and benefits for themselves, showing that veiled individuals can be accepted as ordinary people not in conflict with their religious beliefs (Nisa, 2013). Media now acts as a personal diary for veiled individuals, creating a process of identity construction related to fashion and technology that supports self-image.

New media provides a new space for intimate communication by veiled women who may not be able to unite due to geographical or cultural aspects (Tarlo, 2010). Media representation of veiled women has transformed from being victims to becoming threats (Khiabany & Williamson, 2008). Often, the home, as part of the domestic space, becomes a stage for veiled women to gain power and visualize themselves (Goffman, 1959). The self-publication of veiled women is an effort in self-identification and creating a safe space for appreciation, sparking positive discussions about veils (Piela, 2017). Thus, veiled individuals can counter the dominant narrative related to veils and shape an ideal expression of their religious practices. Through new media, the hegemonic discourse that

previously surrounded veils is continually debated through alternative discourses on the virtual self-actualization of veiled individuals.

The presence of public spaces becomes a place to consider and criticize public authorities or demand accountability from society (Habermas, 1991). Public spaces are related to an ideal and unlimited process of rational discussion about societal issues (Fraser, 1990). The plurality of public spaces opposes critical efforts to resist bourgeois domination emphasizing differences in race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (Felksi, 1989). According to Breindl & Houghton (2010), the presence of internet technology infrastructure plays a role as a space for processes occurring between hierarchical power and the developing counter realm. In the midst of public uproar, the creation of communities in marginalized areas has a significant impact on generating harmonious energy (Palczewski, 2001). In a stratified society that tends to favor dominant groups, subordinated social groups emerge as subaltern public counter-parts.

Accessibility to media brings various activism with ideologies created by Muslim women. According to (Pruzan-Jorgensen, 2012), the Muslim women's activism movement can strengthen women's positions in private and public realms through a) participation in social activities, b) providing new avenues for women to obtain legitimate authority positions, and c) interpreting Islam with broad potential for new arguments. On the other hand, Muslim women's activism has the potential to complement liberal approaches to support empowerment, participation, agency, and authority of women. Digital activism is evidence of Muslim women's efforts to reject and resist oppression as objects of pressure, threats, and targets (Hijri, 2021). Muslim women who are marginalized in physical religious spaces can voice sentiments of defiance against the ideology of power. Muslim women intertwine to form a movement for support and resilience in bringing about emancipation. Furthermore, this paper will examine digital activism brought by Muslim women, especially veiled women in Indonesia, who are actively present on social media platforms like Instagram through the hashtag #niqabsquad.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a critical paradigm with a qualitative approach. Furthermore, the object of this research is the content in #niqabsquad hashtag uploads from January 2022 to September 2023 which has been identified using research criteria. Primary data in this research was obtained by online observation via social media Instagram and secondary data came from relevant articles and books. In this research, qualitative content analysis was used to view and study the digital activism movement presented through the hashtag #niqabsquad. In order to find out the truth of the information in the research, the theoretical triangulation technique was used.

## RESULT AND ANALYSIS

### 1.1 Facts Found



Fig 1. Hashtag #niqabsquad



Fig 2. Content with the hashtag #niqabsquad

The use of the hashtag #niqabsquad is a digital activism phenomenon carried out by Muslim women who wear the niqab on the social media platform Instagram. The terms "niqab" and "squad" refer to the formation of a group or community in the virtual world among fellow niqab-wearing Muslim women on Instagram. The digital features provided by Instagram serve as the foundation for niqab-wearing women to showcase content with the hashtag #niqabsquad. This hashtag emerges and grows in its existence to shape a part of their identity and become something that can be consistently followed by the audience on the platform. The virtual activities carried out through the #niqabsquad hashtag are extensive, evident by the fact that as of October 10, 2023, there are 158,262 posts that exist and can be consumed by the public. In contemporary times, social media has become a significant space for movements to popularize the niqab, both on an individual level and within community-based initiatives. The construction of the use of the niqab is also created through self-presentation practices via online promotions. The existence of niqab-wearing women on social media provides a new atmosphere for their peers to undergo transformation, breaking free from conservative values and patriarchal societal norms that may have previously constrained them.

Via #niqabsquad, the use of hashtags can be a capacity for creating stories through social media as a collective effort and recognized by the public so that it has an impact on aspects culture. Borrowing the thoughts of Bruns & Burgess (in Dobrin, 2020), use hashtags in digital movements through a media studies perspective shows how culture works imagined community with online which is an adhoc public representation where formed through certain hashtags. In digital activism, hashtags are a crucial aspect of cultural movements. In the end, hashtags were able to take over and form a bigger movement massive or strong. Hashtags take something that has been hidden and become it secret to women by transforming into a movement (Gilbert, 2017). These efforts are intertwined with an orientation towards increasing visibility as a major role in related movements. There is a change in the status of hashtags as a tool symbols are in line with Debord (1992) that there is a thin line between spectacle and reality. Where if reality is continuously produced as a spectacle then the spectacle can be become a reality. The display of a movement carried out repeatedly as a publicly manifested spectacle can position it in the current main. In the contemporary era, social media has become a big space in the movement for popularizing the veil both on an individual and community basis. The construction of the normal use of the veil was created by the practice of self-presentation through online promotions.

## 1.2 Discussion of the Facts Found



**Fig. 3. #niqabsquad selfie content**

The openness of niqab-wearing women (cadaris) in posting selfies or personal photos on the social media platform Instagram with the hashtag #niqabsquad is not exempt from negative tendencies associated with the niqab. Niqab-wearing women have often been subjected to negative comments, labeling, and discrimination through hegemonic ideologies, leading to the marginalization of Muslim women who wear the niqab by society. The different identity from the dominant society results in negotiations occurring within niqab-wearing women. This is related to how niqab-wearing women contemplate themselves in embracing principles, accepting their identity, and presenting it to the public. Through posting selfies on social media, niqab-wearing women attempt to showcase their existence, which has been hindered by societal judgments that impose expectations of public modesty. This action is related to connective action as part of digital activism to distribute messages collectively based on specific orientations (Anduiza et al, 2014;



Vaast et al, 2017).

**Fig 4. Muslimah community #niqabsquad**

On social media, niqab-wearing women (cadaris) can also showcase their friendships through posts with the hashtag #niqabcadaris. By using this hashtag, cadaris demonstrate to the public that they are not exclusive and are connected to a community of Muslim women who also wear the niqab. However, cadaris are also consistently part of a broader Muslim women's community, including



those who do not wear the niqab, and they embrace differing views on the use of the niqab. This creates a space for cadaris to build extensive friendships without considering religious symbols. Niqab-wearing women always have the desire and ability to maintain positive relationships, aiming to create positive connections (Rahman & Chatamallah, 2022). Cadaris make efforts to show the public that the perceived closed nature associated with them is a myth. They strive to counteract this perception by empowering themselves to present and establish connections with the wider community, free from limitations imposed by patriarchal thinking or religious attributes.

**Fig 5.** Romantic relationships #niqabsquad

Through the hashtag #niqabcadaris, it can be observed that niqab-wearing women (cadaris) use social media space to showcase the romantic aspects of their relationships with their partners. Intimacy is presented through content that represents love and affection between partners. The private sphere, traditionally considered something to be kept hidden, is now transformed and presented for public consumption. Social media platforms have become a central medium for initiating and maintaining romantic relationships among the younger generation (Hand et al., 2013). This is related to Gillberg's concept (cited in Istiqomah, 2020) of public display of affection, understood as the act of displaying affection with a partner in front of the public. Social media users on Instagram can observe the affectionate aspects of romantic relationships presented by cadaris. Cadaris demonstrate that they are ordinary women who desire romantic relationships with the opposite sex. Additionally, these virtual expressions can be interpreted as cadaris being ordinary individuals who have a natural desire for affection from their husbands.





**Fig 6.** Red veil selfie #niqabsquad

The use of the niqab has become dynamic, featuring contrasting colors and not limited to dark colors like black, which has been negatively perceived by society. Culture plays a role in describing specific lifestyles related to expressing meanings and values (Williams, 1961). Fashion and clothing are not merely expressions of messages but are integral to social relations. The niqab, as a form of fashion in Muslim women's lives, serves as a marking practice in today's social society. The niqab as fashion is now a dynamic aspect explored, communicated, and reproduced within a social framework. The niqab, as part of the communication process, goes beyond personal feelings; it carries expectations and beliefs associated with specific social groups followed by certain individuals. Furthermore, the use of the niqab can indicate membership in a particular religious group and reveal one's status and depth of belief.



**Fig 7.** Umrah Worship

Through the hashtag #niqabsquad, women who wear the veil also show their existence in worship. Worship is immortalized through photos and uploaded by him into a digital space that can be accessed by the public. This shows the existence of a dualism between his obedience in carrying out worship according to God's commands and the desire to appear pious in the eyes of the public. Worship which has become a private domain is transformed into an object of consumption for the public and shifts sacred values over individual spirituality. Due to this condition, it can be interpreted that worship becomes a spectacle construction presented by a veiled woman through her Instagram social media account. Like the Commodity as Spectacle theory by Guy Debord, that spectacles are always produced repeatedly by society and present certain social values.



**Fig 8.** Birthday Celebration

Women who wear the veil also exist in showing their personal activities by uploading content on Instagram social media. One of them is a birthday celebration, where for some parties this anniversary is a crucial thing every year. Women who wear the veil, who until now were considered closed to private information, are now always producing information related to themselves. The ritual implementation of birthday celebrations is not only enjoyed personally in real life. However, this is one of the materials distributed in digital space to the public. Popular culture of personal life celebrations is always circulated and used as a mode to confirm the existence of openness through social media. In line with Khairi (2020), Muslim identity on the one hand and the customs (traditions) of celebrations in a socio-cultural context are increasingly complicated to examine.



**Fig 9.** Fancy Lifestyle

Women who wear the hijab also show their lives in the media. For example, using luxury goods that are a pleasure for someone. That luxury, success and freedom are a form of someone's happiness (Shofa & Astri Utami, 2017). The Muslim woman above uses a luxury item in the form of a smartphone which is considered by society to be an expensive item and then takes a photo in front of the mirror following the current trend. In the form of a depiction of a fancy lifestyle carried out by a woman wearing a veil. They distributed the photo in cyberspace to show their openness in following developments in existing trends. The presence displayed by women wearing the veil in the media seems to show that they are not always closed, they can know the outside world, and are even able to follow current trends.



**Fig 9.** Traveling



The photo shows that women who wear the hijab can also live freely, they can travel wherever they want. This photo also shows that women wearing the hijab want to be known as free individuals. Women who wear the niqab are stigmatized as someone who is closed and exclusive, which sometimes makes them strangers in society (Rahman & Syafiq, 2017). However, through media uploads that show veiled women carrying out activities like women in general, being able to do any activity, visiting new places, and so on, this can be an effort to make themselves more open. Then in the journal (Rahman & Syafiq, 2017) it was also stated that women who wear the veil try to fight the stigma that exists in society, they want to blend in, carry out social activities, and so on. So that efforts to present oneself in this media can become digital activism for those who wear the veil.

## CONCLUSION

Muslim women, who have been marginalized in physical religious spaces, are transforming to resist the power of dominant society. Muslim women now consistently collaborate to create movements for support and empowerment, striving to establish spaces of openness. These efforts are carried out through social media as a digital platform that connects people and fosters intimate interpersonal relationships. Additionally, there is a role in strengthening communities that have not been the focus of existing systems. The digital space serves as a means to showcase religious experiences through various practices and specific symbols. The hashtag #niqabsquad on the social media platform Instagram is a massive digital activism phenomenon carried out by veiled Muslim women in Indonesia. This hashtag is created and constructed to form identity and becomes something followed by the public. Through posts on Instagram with the hashtag #niqabsquad, niqab-wearing women (cadaris) strive to showcase their existence to the public. They do this by being open about themselves through selfies, participating in Muslim women communities, engaging in fashion culture, and displaying romantic relationships.

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