

Making Music, Making Muslims: A Case Study of Islamic Hip Hop
and the Discursive Construction of Muslim Identities on the Internet

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GLOSSARY

The following translations were compiled with the help of <http://www.islamic-dictionary.com>, Pratt (2005) and Ba-Yunus&Kone (2006). They are intended to be general and easy to understand, not thorough explanations.

<i>Alhamdulillah</i>	“Praise to Allah”.
<i>Awrah</i>	Body parts that should be covered.
<i>Dawah</i>	Promotion of Islamic values and beliefs.
<i>Deen</i>	(Islamic) way of life.
<i>Dhikr/Zikr</i>	Remembrance of God; also a Sufi ritual aimed at this.
<i>Dua</i>	Calling to Allah or asking favours of Him.
<i>Hadith</i>	Talk attributed to the Prophet (words, actions, opinions, characteristics); central source of example and knowledge.
<i>Hajj</i>	Pilgrimage to Mecca; part of the five pillars of Islam.
<i>Halal</i>	Permissible, allowed for Muslims.
<i>Haram</i>	Forbidden, not allowed for Muslims.
<i>Inshallah</i>	“God (Allah) willing”; “If Allah wishes”.
<i>Iman</i>	Faith.
<i>Islam</i>	Submission (to God’s will).
<i>Jahiliyah</i>	State of ignorance as 1) forgetting the truth about and belief in one God in the time before the Qu’ran was revealed; 2) general misbehavior of humans.
<i>Jazakallah (Khairun)</i>	“May Allah grant you (goodness)”.
<i>Jihad</i>	1) Personal struggle against evil and sin; 2) Holy war in defence of Islam.
<i>Kufir (sg.)/ Kufar (pl.)</i>	Nonbeliever(s).
<i>Makruh</i>	Disliked, detested. Often refers to actions portrayed negatively in the sunnah or the Quran.
<i>Mashallah</i>	”Whatever Allah (God) wills”; often used in expressing surprise about good deeds or achievements.
<i>Munkar</i>	Wrong-doing, sin.
<i>Nur</i>	Light (from God).
<i>Qur’an</i>	Holy book of Islam; believed to have been sent by God to prophet Muhammad.
<i>Ramadan</i>	A month in the Islamic calendar during which Muslims fast the daylight hours, pray more and try harder to avoid sinning.
<i>Rasul</i>	Messenger of God; e.g. Prophet Muhammad.
<i>Sala(a)m(aleikum)/</i>	“Peace”; an Islamic “hello”.
<i>Assalamu aleikum</i>	“Peace be unto you”; a typical greeting.
<i>Salallahu Alayhi Wasalam/</i>	“Peace (and blessings) be upon him” (pbuh).
<i>SAW</i>	
<i>Shahadah</i>	Islamic profession of faith.
<i>Sunna</i>	Qur’an and the Hadiths.
<i>Tawhid</i>	Central Islamic doctrine claiming that God is One and unique.
<i>Ulama</i>	Muslim scholars.
<i>Ummah</i>	Global Muslim community.
<i>Wa Alaikum Assalam</i>	“And Peace be upon you”; response to ‘salam’ or other Muslim greeting.
<i>Wa Jazakallah Khairun</i>	“And may Allah grant you goodness (too)”.

I INTRODUCTION

1. Muslim hip hop as a reflection of globalization

Over the last years, hip hop culture has become more mainstream and its audience more diverse, including many Muslims around the world. This is related to globalization, a process characterized by accelerating flows, blurring boundaries and increased interconnectedness of economies, cultures, nations, information and people that affects the everyday lives of people in practically every corner of the planet.¹ A recent development linked to globalization is the emergence of Islam-related websites and Muslim hip hop, which are both new forms of global Muslim networks.² This thesis is a case study about how Muslims represent and construct social and religious identities within the global hip hop and Muslim community in an online context, focusing on a single web site entitled Muslimhiphop.com. Many researchers have agreed that hip hop is a truly global phenomenon, but have focused more on local interpretations and case studies.³ Also, the connections between religion and hip hop have not been widely researched. Therefore, a study about Muslim hip hop in an online context represents a new point of view to the academic research about Muslims and hip hop and will provide new knowledge with the help of research that is close to the many interrelated themes of the topic.

The history of hip hop begins in the Bronx suburbs of New York City in the 1970s. The main elements which at that time came together and began to form an emerging hip hop culture are DJing (turntablism), hip hop (music), graffiti art and dance (most notably breaking). Also clothing and talking are often considered as essential parts of the hip hop lifestyle. Since then, hip hop culture has spread all over the world. One of the distinctive aspects of hip hop is that it typically is and has been the venue of young people.⁴

Of the abovementioned elements, this thesis focuses on hip hop music. Music becomes popular when it sounds good, and although music enjoyment is related to social and

¹ Cf. Ritzer & Stillman 2003.

² Cf. cooke & Lawrence (eds.), 2005a.

³ Cf. e.g. Mitchell, ed., 2001; Alim et al. (eds.), 2009.

⁴ Cf. e.g. Chang 2005; Rose 1994, 34; Masquelier 2010, 230. For more about the early history and development of hip hop culture cf. e.g. Chang 2005; Watkins 2005; Rose 1994.

cultural conditioning, hip hop has seemed to transcend such boundaries.⁵ Alastair Pennycook and Samy H. Alim argue that while hip hop culture is widespread and diverse as well as related to a plethora of global issues such as Islam, it is also one of the most important subjects to focus on in the study of globalization⁶; as hip hop music moves across the globe through the Internet and other media, it is altered and reused in culture and identity construction. Since its very beginnings, hip hop culture and rap music have appealed to different people across ethnic, linguistic and class lines.⁷ Rap music's focus on 'realness' and cultural ownership is one of the reasons why it is such a powerful tool for creating identity discourses and reinforcing positive self-image.⁸

The mobility provided by the Internet is also one of the many aspects of globalization and it is closely related with the spreading of hip hop. According to Hine, the content on the Internet is shaped by local social contexts as the Internet users bring their cultural background and expectations with them online, but the connection between the real and the virtual is more complex: both shape one another. This has an inevitable influence on the way identities are constructed; for some, sharing views and experiences online can be the most important way of social belonging.⁹ However, simply realizing that our worldview, experiences and ideas are but one person's among millions can have an effect on identity because the plurality of ideas is easily visible in online content. The Internet is a social environment that challenges local identifications; by visiting chat rooms, discussion forums and websites, anyone can create and experience online cultures. Thus, also Muslims who participate in hip hop culture online do not depend on location either, but simply on connection when creating social ties with other Muslims and hip hop aficionados around the world. Web sites construct Islam and Muslim identities, for example by building representations of religious beliefs that Muslims have.¹⁰

⁵ Cf. Frith 1998, 120. Adam Krims (2000, 10–12) has pointed out that the distinctions between 'real hip hop' and other artists using similar musical styles are often made in order to mark authenticity. Like Krims (2000), I use hip hop and rap interchangeably to refer to a music style that includes rapping, i.e. rhyming to (electronic) beats. The understandings of hip hop in this thesis rely mostly on those that appear in the literature and in the research material. I will discuss some of the different genres of hip hop briefly in Chapter 7.2.

⁶ Cf. Alim 2009, 4.

⁷ Cf. Chang 2005.

⁸ Cf. Krims 2000, 8–9. Rappers and rap consumers often stress that rap music should be 'unique', 'genuine' and 'authentic' and that it is important to 'keep it real'. Also a common theme, occurring e.g. in rap lyrics, is 'representin' [sic], which is a term loaded with several meanings but mostly refers to explicitly expressing geographic and social contexts in the music. (cf. Krims 2000.)

⁹ Hine 2000, 39. Hall (1996) discusses some of the differences of the terms 'identity' and 'identification', but treats both as discursive processes which are constantly constructed, and never completed. Similarly, I use 'identification' and 'identity' somewhat interchangeably. For more on the concept(s), cf. Ch. 3 in this thesis.

¹⁰ Bunt 2009, 1.

Another phenomenon related to globalization is increased migration. Migration requires people to define more clearly their attachments to places, people and ideas, i.e. their identities or identifications. One example of the consequences of migration is the deterritorialization of Islam: Islam is now less excluded to a certain geographical and cultural area than before, and thus, in terms of identification, being Muslim often means religiousness more than anything else. Religious groups are seen more as identity groups than as cultural groups. In countries, where Muslims are a religious minority, Muslims need to establish their religious identity more explicitly in order to sustain it.¹¹ Contemporary politics around the globe are more and more focused on identity and are often based on the assumption that identity is self-defined and thus also e.g. the individual Muslims are seen as representing the entire group they belong to.¹² Migration, like the Internet, increases the spreading and mixing of different cultures and in this way, it is related with the emergence of Muslim hip hop, a mixture of Islam and of an American-born contemporary musical style and culture.

By transcending boundaries in the abovementioned ways, globalization offers new frameworks for creating and reinventing identities. This case study is a multidisciplinary attempt to discuss complex themes of intercultural social life, music and religion in identity construction; as such, it is necessarily only a glimpse at the realities of Muslims as hip hop devotees and as Internet users, as it would be pointless to aim at holism. Muslim rap is promoted through several networks on a local level but according to Sara Dervla Shannahan and Qurra Hussain, especially through the Internet¹³. To my knowledge, representations about Muslim hip hop online have not been researched, hence the aim of this study is to provide new knowledge through a case study analysis and thus initiate the filling of a gap in academic research. Understanding the role of hip hop music and also the constantly changing environment of the Internet in the formation of cultural and religious identities is a research theme, which touches upon hip hop studies, musicology, “sociology of the Internet”¹⁴, globalization studies, culture studies, as well as sociology of religion, to name a few. The main emphasis will be on sociology of religion, i.e. on the study of social, cultural and religious behavior and identification. This results in a study where the role of religion in societies, why people engage in certain activities and more importantly how they identify themselves as a part of a religious group, is under scrutiny.

¹¹ Roy 2004, cf. e.g. pp. 20–23.

¹² Grossberg 1996; cf. Bauman 2004.

¹³ Shannahan & Hussain 2011.

¹⁴ Cf. Dawson 2000.

1.1 Previous research

Muslim hip hop is still new as a research topic, although hip hop culture has been studied academically since the 1980s¹⁵, and the literature has proliferated since. A small portion of hip hop researchers have dealt with the connections of religion and hip hop, but the ones who have, see the connections not only as existing but as rich and complex. Many researchers, including the most notable sociologists of our times, have noted that rap music is present in identity processes around the globe. Some even consider popular music, also hip hop, *as* religion with the spiritual experiences, social structure and a sense of belonging it provides.¹⁶

The existing academic studies merely commence the investigation of the interrelations of hip hop and Islam, yet they have already addressed several important themes. Hishaam D Aidi calls Islamic hip hop a cultural movement and a subculture that is appealing to global youth at the margins of societies.¹⁷ Ted Swedenburg has paid attention to the way ethnic and immigrant identities are mixed with Islam and hip hop.¹⁸ Thomas Solomon notes that for example African immigrants in Europe have found rap and the African-American experience as a reference point to their own sufferings.¹⁹ The identity negotiations often entail the employment of globalized popular culture on a local level, such as creating local cultural interpretations and subjective expressions of rap music and hip hop culture, but as Shannahan and Hussain note, especially through the Internet.²⁰ Rap music provides tools also for performing a cultural critique and combating racism. Muslims around the world are now fighting against islamophobia and in a process of building positive and proud identities.²¹ At the same time, several Muslim rap artists are taking a strong stance against terrorism, claiming it to be against Islamic beliefs and accusing Islamist terrorists of “dishonoring the faith”.²² Muslims are using hip hop as a way to challenge and deconstruct discourses and notions of Islam as a violent religion and culture that have been popular especially in a post-9/11 world; in this way, they are opposing islamophobia and

¹⁵ Cf. Forman 2004, 2.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. Aidi 2004; Alim 2005, 2009; Miyakawa 2005; Smith & Jackson 2005; cf. Bauman 2004; Castells 1997; Krims 2000; cf. Sylvan 2002.

¹⁷ Aidi 2004.

¹⁸ Swedenburg 2001.

¹⁹ Solomon 2010.

²⁰ Swedenburg 2001; Shannahan & Hussain 2011.

²¹ Aidi 2004; Swedenburg 2001; Solomon 2010.

²² Aidi 2004, 7, 11.

stereotyping of Muslims. These interpretations can offer both alternative Islams but they can also unite Muslims globally.²³

Some rappers also evoke ideas of a shared Muslim identity to show global solidarity while some use rap to distinguish themselves as Muslims among a non-Muslim majority. Many Muslim rappers also criticize rap music's materialism, drug abuse and blatant sexuality as undesirable and immoral. Despite this, many Muslims are starting to see Islamic rap with its educational potential as overriding the ambivalence concerning music's permissibility in Islam, especially concerning the Muslim youth and non-Muslims, and its potential to unite Muslims.²⁴

1.2 Research questions and the structure of the thesis

The main material for this thesis is the content of Muslimhiphop.com (MHH) which is a website dedicated to promoting Islam and its values with hip hop music as well as some other music genres. The website is treated as a case study, and chosen parts of its content (cf. Ch. 2) will be examined with the help of the following questions: Based on the interviews, hip hop artist profiles and general sections at the website, how and for what purposes does Muslimhiphop.com construct and represent Muslim identities? How do 'Muslim hip hop' and 'Islamic' music become defined and how do they relate with Muslim identities? How do Muslims negotiate their religious identity with being a hip hop artist? In what ways do Islamic principles and the exigencies of commercial success affect the artistic creativity of a Muslim rapper?

My preliminary hypothesis was that hip hop can transform the way in which Muslims express their religious conviction and can unite Muslims transnationally in a new way. The underlying assumption was that hip hop music allows Muslims to identify themselves not only as Muslims and members of a global *ummah*, but also as members of a more recently developed global hip hop community and that hip hop can support Muslim identification.²⁵ This was seen to be due to hip hop music's inherent expressive power which creates new possibilities for positive, intercultural Muslim self-expression, a way to combat prejudices

²³ Swedenburg 2001; Shannahan & Hussain 2011.

²⁴ Solomon 2010; Aidi 2004; Khabeer 2007; cf. Alim 2005.

²⁵ Cf. e.g. Alim 2005.

and opportunities to gain a more plural voice for Muslims.²⁶ I based the hypothesis on the previous research and also on the fact that throughout the history of hip hop, this musical style has been able to unite individuals and groups across national and ethnic borders²⁷: being a good MC (rap artist) is not dependent on one's background but rather on vocal talent and lyrical content. Despite the hypothesis about hip hop's positive influences on Muslim identities, the debate on whether Islam and hip hop are compatible and whether music is *haram* (forbidden) or not, as well as popular views about Islam as incompatible with "Western" culture (which hip hop is also often seen to be a part of), were acknowledged as contextually relevant discourses.²⁸ During the analysis, it became clear that especially the debate about music's permissibility plays a large role in the construction of Muslim hip hop identities and requires Muslims to constantly justify and negotiate the combination of hip hop music and religion; also, hip hop may not be enough to unite Muslims with non-Muslims or even different Muslim groups. I will demonstrate in the analysis that the above mentioned hypothesis must be revised and the previous research discussed critically.

From here onwards, the thesis is structured in the following manner: first, the research material and the research process is described (Ch. 2). After this, the theoretical framework and the methods are presented and discussed. Before the analysis (part IV), the social and political developments behind the emergence of Muslim hip hop are discussed. This includes research on themes interrelated with the thesis, such as Muslim identity, religion and Islam on the Internet as well Islam's relationship with music. The main focus has been on the few academic studies done on Muslim hip hop. Also, as my research material consists of an American website (cf. Chapter 2), I have paid special attention to American Muslims. A major part of the thesis is dedicated to the analysis of the research material with the help of discourse analysis and the research questions. Finally, conclusions as well as questions for further study are discussed (Part V). Also a glossary of the Arabic terms that appear in the research material and literature is provided in the beginning of thesis after the table of contents.

²⁶ Cf. e.g. Aidi 2004; Solomon 2010; Swedenburg 2001.

²⁷ Cf. e.g. Chang 2005; Rose 1994.

²⁸ The idea of "Western culture" is clearly problematic and cannot be clearly defined because it is essentially a discursively constructed and imagined entity and fluctuates constantly. In this thesis, referrals to 'Western culture' are made primarily from the point of view of the material, i.e. the Muslimhiphop.com web site and the way the idea is represented there. In the material, western culture was commonly seen as problematic from the point of view of Islamic morals. For further analysis, cf. part IV of the thesis. However, Western culture is constantly built also elsewhere (e.g. media), and as an individual surrounded by different social structures and discourses, I am also influenced by them and have pre-conceptions that concern the matter. Nevertheless, I pursue to problematize these conceptions.

II MATERIAL, THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

2. Research material

2.1 Description of research material

The principal material for my thesis is a web corpus compiled from a website called “Muslim Hip Hop – building a movement”, www.muslimhiphop.com (MHH). The main focus of this study will be on the descriptions and argumentation used on the website concerning hip hop music, Islam and being a Muslim, i.e. how Muslim identities are constructed and represented online and in the context of hip hop music.

In total, the material gathered from the site consists of: 20 interviews, of which four were audio interviews featuring e.g. the MHH founder; 64 artist presentations; and general (official) website sections, i.e. criteria for artists, history and mission of MHH, links, and a section called ‘Music in Islam’, which explains the stance of the web site concerning the relationship of music and Islam. Some parts of the web site were not included in the analysis because in this way, the focus of the thesis becomes more specific and also because the length of a Master’s thesis is limited. Because the focus is on hip hop music, I excluded artists of other genres from the analysis even though they were featured on the web site. Also, only the parts of the radio interviews where Mike Shapiro, the web site founder, appears, were analyzed; this is mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, I wish to concentrate on this particular web site instead of the larger phenomenon of Muslim hip hop (cf. the research questions), and secondly, the other Muslim guests in these interviews or even the radio show itself cannot be seen as directly affiliated with or representing the MHH web site, as the interviews were originally recorded and aired in contexts that are separate from the web site (cf. below). Also images, music, videos and links leading to external web sites were not included in the analysis due to the size limitations of the thesis. I collected the material from the MHH website between September 2010 and February 2011 and then began the analysis of the content, focusing more on the texts that were relevant to my research questions. Because the material consists of ca. 150 pages (including transcribed interviews), a deep and detailed analysis of the entire corpus was not

possible: I have mainly focused on the interviews. Although I also followed the MHH Facebook page for updates and comments, I chose not to include it in the analysis as the Facebook content mostly consisted of links to web sites, which was less interesting considering the research questions. Because online content is constantly changing, the website's pages were printed into PDF-format as well on paper.²⁹ I have not participated in the discussions at the former MHH discussion forum³⁰ nor conducted interviews, despite having observed some of the communication related to the web site.³¹

The "Stories", as the interview section of the MHH web site is called, includes written interviews with 16 different artists and 4 audio (radio) interviews with e.g. Mike Shapiro, the web site founder. Two of the radio interviews were featured on Radio Islam, which is based in Chicago (US), one interview was featured on a Californian student radio, KDHR³², and one interview was part of a podcast of *the Guardian*, a British newspaper. The radio interviews, although transcribed into text, form a somewhat different material than the other texts because the interaction took place orally. The title 'Stories' in itself creates an expectation of narratives, perhaps real-life experiences, which is more approachable or even familial than the clinical term 'interview'. It seems that there is an effort to tell the story of the artists: this means not only describing why they are involved in making music but who they are, where they come from and what makes them Muslims.

The majority of the 100 artists featured on the web site³³ were male and classified under the hip hop genre. Despite the hip hop focus, the website features also Muslim artists from related music genres (pop³⁴, reggae, spoken word) as well as nasheed³⁵ artists. Out of the

²⁹ I stopped collecting texts from the website on 31 January 2011. However, the radio interviews at the website, available in audio format, were transcribed during February 2011. Their complete duration varied from 25 to 60 minutes. Also, because one PDF-file was corrupted, I had to reprint one artist profile (Professor A.L.I, cf. sources and references) from the web site in fall 2011.

³⁰ The discussion forum was deleted in the late summer 2010 for a reason unknown to me. I had originally planned to analyze some of the discussions which I had been able to print as they were still cached in late September 2010, but as most of the other material was printed only late 2010 and early 2011, it seemed less fruitful to analyze this old version of the web site to which the forum belonged to.

³¹ In my case, the observing took place mainly in Facebook, as the website remained without many changes during the spring 2010 and early 2011. The following message, which I left on the MHH Facebook page on September 21, 2010, has been my only 'engagement': "Hi, I'm doing my master's thesis on Muslim hiphop, if you know any good websites with interviews or discussion forums on the topic, please let me know!!!". I also became also a 'fan' of the page, because in order to be able to leave a message, one has to click the 'like' button on the Facebook page.

³² "KDHR is a student run radio station operated and funded by the Associated Students, Inc., located on the campus of California State University Dominguez Hills", cf. <<http://www.kdhr.net>> (accessed 20/03/2011.)

³³ This was the number of artists in early 2011. This number can change, as artists may be removed from or added to the site.

³⁴ In radio interviews, the founder of MHH also terms the category as "pop & r'n'b".

64 artists or groups classified under ‘hip hop’ on the web site, 26 were born in the United States, 4 in the United Kingdom, 2 in Canada, 1 in the Netherlands, 1 in Zaire, 1 in Pakistan, 1 in Kurdistan, 1 in Iraq, 1 in South Korea, 1 in Australia and 1 in Haiti. One duo’s members were born in Mozambique and Nigeria, and one duo consisted of an American-born and a Belgian-born Muslim. For 22 hip hop artists, the country of origin was unspecified, but based on their profiles, some were clearly living in the United States and at least a few in the United Kingdom. At least 16 out of the 64 had immigrated themselves at some point or were descendants of immigrant parents. The Muslim artists featured in the database thus form a very culturally diverse group. However, the United States clearly dominates.

The artist profiles are very heterogeneous in terms of whose voice is speaking and what type of information is provided. In some profiles, the use of ‘I’ and ‘we’ were used to indicate that they were - purportedly - composed by the artists themselves. Some profiles contained very generic information regarding e.g. the artist’s country of origin, musical influences and past as well as current endeavors, whereas some stressed mainly or solely the Islamic aspects of the artist’s musical goals. For example, from the 64 hip hop profiles, 19 do not mention the words ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islam’ or ‘Islamic’ at all. It is possible that, instead of aiming towards coherence in the content of the profiles, the site administrator has perhaps negotiated with each artist individually about what type of information they wish to bring forward at the MHH web site.

The site has a clear mission and strict standards of quality for artists (cf. extracts and analysis in Part IV) and also a noticeable target audience if it is assumed that the amount of visitors reflects this; the former discussion forum had over 1,900 registered users and 73,273 posts, and at the end of January 2011 the website’s Facebook³⁶ page informed that “2708 People Like This”³⁷, which gives some indication of the amount of people who are visiting the actual website. By clicking the ‘like’-button of the MHH Facebook page, people can become fans of the website and can thus receive notifications in Facebook whenever the website is updated and also links e.g. to online news articles related to Muslim hip hop. The Facebook page is likely to encourage more frequent visits to the

³⁵ Nasheed is Islamic vocal music very reminiscent of Qur’an reciting, and it is sometimes accompanied by percussions.

³⁶ Facebook is a popular social network that currently has over 500 million users. (cf. <<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>> (accessed 25/1/2011).)

³⁷ I noticed that the number keeps on increasing; e.g. on 25 January the number in question was 2646.

website as social networking sites like Facebook are among the most popular on the Internet.³⁸ A Facebook page can also enhance the MHH “building a movement” mission by spreading the ideas and music more effectively.

2.2 Reflections on the research process and material

After having come across the Muslim hip hop –theme in an academic book in spring 2010, I began the research by googling the words “Muslim” and “hip hop”. I viewed several links that Google provided, but only one of the web sites appeared fully dedicated to Muslim hip hop as a music genre in such an explicit and religiously motivated way as the Muslimhiphop.com–website.³⁹ What also caught my attention was the clear pro-music stance of the website. I kept visiting the website approximately once a week to check for possible updates as well as following occasionally the MHH Facebook fan page, which was created in fall 2010. Later in the fall 2010, I started searching for other material including online newspaper articles about Muslim hip hop and books about Muslims, hip hop culture, identities and methods.

During the writing process, I wrote several chapters at the same time because in this way, I could keep track of the interconnectedness of the themes that are visible in this thesis and discern the differences between topics more easily. It also helped to detach from pre-conceptions after the analysis process in order to reformulate the theory and the method parts of the thesis to better support the results and the overall analysis. Most of the main themes and the discourses occurring in the research material are visible throughout the extracts that I have included in the analysis chapters, which rendered a systematic discussion very challenging. If the extract contained themes or discourses not analyzed in that chapter but occurring later, the relevant chapters were referred to.

Considering the nature of the research material, the fluid and rapidly evolving nature of the online data offers only a restricted image of the themes that are discussed, and as my focus is only on a single website, it is selective; however, as can be detected from the analysis part of this thesis, the material is thematically very rich. The authenticity of the content is

³⁸ Cf. Sands 2010, 143; cf. Bunt 2004, 127.

³⁹ To check the prominence of the website, I googled these words again on 18 January 2011. Then, the MHH website was the first result.

somewhat undeniable, as I merely printed the web pages, i.e. the observation is non-participatory. This naturally poses an ethical question; should I have at least disclosed my research purposes to the website moderators?⁴⁰

In this study, I am analyzing mainly online content, but with a clear connection to offline, as becomes apparent especially through the interviews featured on the MHH web site. This stance assumes that online interaction has a meaning for people also offline. Analyzing online content means entering a more unstable ground than with analyzing face-to-face interaction or interviews, as analysis of text is more prone to misinterpretation. For the researcher, the lack of real life connection with the “informants” may cause the study to miss the context entirely.⁴¹ However, the main focus is on the radio interviews and on the other hand, how being a Muslim and Muslim hip hop are constructed and represented on the website, not on whether they are “true” and authentic portrayals. The emphasis is necessarily on American Muslims, as the Muslimhiphop -web site is US-based⁴² and features mostly US artists⁴³ and also 3 out of the 4 radio interviews were done in the United States.

I consider the web site to be involved in creating a Muslim hip hop discourse⁴⁴ through the use of various existing discourses. This consideration is due mostly to the socio-political message that is apparent e.g. in the criteria for artists featured on the website and in the website’s clear mission to engage people also in real-life to promote Islamic values through hip hop. The aim of the website does not seem to be to create a virtual community as such, but to “spread the word” about Islamic music with the help of modern communication systems. The website creator(s) are building a Muslim artist movement as well actively striving to engage Muslims to take part in it.⁴⁵ The supporters of the MHH website do not represent the entire Muslim community, the *ummah*, yet the MHH website is not a separate communal entity, either, but rather a virtual continuation of the socio-cultural production of a Muslim community and Muslim identities.

⁴⁰ Cf. Hadden & Cowan 2000, 14.

⁴¹ Hine 2000, 76.

⁴² This information is based on the website’s IP address, which is located in Arizona, US. Also other clues, such as the web site creator’s interviews, affirm this.

⁴³ For this reason, I have included a chapter on Nation of Islam and Five Percenters in part III of the thesis. These groups are seen by orthodox Muslims as non-Islamic, but they have had a significant influence in rap music since its beginnings (cf. Miyakawa 2005; cf. Aidi 2004).

⁴⁴ For discussion on the meaning of the concept of discourse and discourse analysis, see chapter 4.

⁴⁵ This is visible e.g. in the website’s artist criteria section: “If you feel that you or someone you know meets this criteria and are not already on our official database, please let us know.” cf. <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/Criteria> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

3. Identity as a theoretical framework

3.1 The concept of identity

The theoretical framework, which is used to discuss and analyze Islam and hip hop music in the context of the Internet, is identity⁴⁶ representation and construction of religious communities and groups. One of the most common ways of theorizing the concept of identity or sense of self is to divide it into social and personal identity; social identity can be seen to consist of a person's social identification, i.e. the social categories or groups (nationality, gender, religion etc.) that the person considers to belong to or not to belong to, whereas the personal identity includes the individual features of a person (e.g. personal tastes).⁴⁷ As John C. Turner notes, the debate on the concept of identity has generally revolved around the question, whether one's sense of self, or identity, remains unchanged through different situations or whether it is situational and multifaceted.⁴⁸ The focus of this study is on social or group identities instead of individual or personal identities. Also, the approach is essentially that of social constructivism where it is assumed that reality is constructed in social interaction⁴⁹; in other words, identity is not perceived here as something inherent or static. I have tried to emphasize the contextual nature of identities as well as the processes of identity construction, yet the following discussion may appear generalizing, especially concerning religious identities. Although the identity framework is visible throughout the thesis, there is a separate chapter on Muslim identities in part III.

Identity is an extremely complex concept, and can be defined in numerous ways depending on the context; yet many use it in everyday life and even in academic text as though it was unambiguous. In this thesis, the focus is on religious and social behavior and on the way individuals construct meanings particularly through social group memberships in

⁴⁶ I use both the singular and the plural forms, i.e. 'identity' and 'identities' in this thesis as well 'identification', and even though they all are understood as contextually constructed, they are used in slightly different ways. In the analysis, the singular 'identity' is usually used in reference to the theoretical concept in general and to a single event of identity construction (e.g. one extract in the material) whereas the plural form usually designates the overall building of several, multifaceted and even contradictory identities as can be seen throughout the material here and in social interaction in general do to the situational nature of identities. Hence, for example the title of this thesis includes the plural form instead of the singular. 'Identification' is used in both senses, as it can be situational, but also an ongoing process and a more abstract concept.

⁴⁷ Turner 2010, 17–18.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 18.

⁴⁹ Fairclough 2003, 8.

discourse. Hence, identity or identification is understood as the constantly ongoing construction and organizing of meanings by social actors, i.e. stressing certain socially constructed features more than others.⁵⁰ As Hall emphasizes, identities are subjective positions, attachments or representations that one takes and which discursive practices create.⁵¹ According to Norman Fairclough, what one commits to in textual interaction is part of who one is and how the world and others are represented; because one's sense of self is always related to interaction with other people, identities are social and relational also in text.⁵² This kind of theoretical framework allows one to focus on how identities are created in interaction and takes into account also the contextual factors; finding some kind of "essential" identity is both impossible and irrelevant from this theoretical point of view. This does not mean that identities would not be constructed in similar fashion in many different contexts, on the contrary; discourses are intertextual in that they use existing discourses⁵³.

Identities are usually thought of mostly when they are put into question, for example when immigrating to a new country and going through a process of acculturation⁵⁴. Living in a culturally diverse world means comparing and choosing between a multitude of ideas, principles and demands advocated by numerous individuals and groups. However, this does not entail only meaning inclusion; identification also always signifies division, exclusion and difference making between individuals and groups, and sometimes identities are not chosen but imposed as part of social or structural power play.⁵⁵ People have an innate need for a positive self evaluation and representation, which applies also to perceived social group memberships.⁵⁶ Thus people often strive to make others see them and their ingroups, i.e. the group or groups which they consider to belong to, in a complimentary way. The opposite of ingroups are outgroups which are not identified with.⁵⁷ I have used both these terms in the analysis in order to highlight how categorization is part of discursive practices and identity construction.

⁵⁰ Cf. Castells 1997, 6–7.

⁵¹ Hall 1996, 6.

⁵² Fairclough 2003, 166. On the meaning of 'text' and 'discourse', see chapter 4.

⁵³ Fairclough 2000, 9;34. Cf. also the concept of 'text' in Ch. 4.

⁵⁴ In social psychology, acculturation has recently been defined as a process where contact between different cultural groups results in changes in one or more cultural elements and in self-identification, e.g. in ethnic identity (Liebkind 2009, 16).

⁵⁵ Cf. Bauman 2004, 11, 38; Hall 1996, 3.

⁵⁶ Cf. e.g. Deschamps & Devos 1998.

⁵⁷ Cf. Liebkind 2009.

Human thought and behavior are often contradictory and inconsistent because they are contextual: for example, one may say one thing and do another, or one may express a certain opinion today and deny it completely tomorrow. Similarly, people have several dynamic, flexible and sometimes conflicting identities between which they shift. ‘Identity’ and ‘belonging’ are processes that one constantly shapes and negotiates with decisions, actions and surroundings.⁵⁸ One may, for example, choose to construct identities through religion, Internet use and music.

3.2 Religious communities, the Internet and music in identity construction

‘Community’ can be described as a social group of people sharing one or several, real or imagined, social practices, beliefs, ‘sentiments’ or values.⁵⁹ Religious communities such as the Muslim *ummah* are a group of people who refer to themselves as ‘we’, and by doing so, these people also view their individual selves through that group membership.⁶⁰ They are usually also influenced by values of the religion they adhere to.⁶¹ In the case of religious communities, this feeling of shared religious identification often becomes the main binding factor. In today’s globalized world, communities are rarely physically bound and fixed entities with daily face-to-face interaction and close, durable ties.⁶² Also the Muslim *ummah* has been dispersed around the globe for centuries. According to the political scientist, Oliver Roy, the virtual allows a Muslim to actively express belonging to the *ummah* and construct the community as well as sense of self.⁶³ Also many sociologists have discussed the matter from several viewpoints.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, ‘surfing the net’ and ‘virtual communities’ cannot serve as a basis for identity, but rather just create an illusion of togetherness and hinder self-

⁵⁸ Bauman 2004.

⁵⁹ Cf. Marranci 2008, 104–107.

⁶⁰ Cf. Coleman & Collins 2004, 2–3; Marranci 2008, 107–114.

⁶¹ Pratt 2005, 139.

⁶² ‘Community’ can sometimes be seen structurally in the form of a network, for example when we want to emphasize their flexibility. ‘Network’ conceptualizes the dynamic link between local and global, i.e. the diverse and continually changing points of connection between different nodes. Though human networks have existed throughout the history, today’s highly adaptable interaction made possible by communication technologies, such as the Internet, is new; consequently, the virtual has also become an important part of social reality. (Castells 2010; cf. cooke & Lawrence 2005b; cf. Karim 2002; cf. Bunt 2009.) The network metaphor also embraces the complexity, connectivity and history of Muslims communities while deconstructing stereotyped definitions of them. (cooke&Lawrence 2005b, 24.)

⁶³ Roy 2004, 183.

understanding.⁶⁴ Contrary to Bauman's views, Christine Hine and Manuel Castells see the Internet as a tool for reinforcing self-representation while increasing social interaction.⁶⁵ Slevin has formulated four ways in which individuals utilize the Internet in identity construction. First, the Internet can provide tools for actively assessing mediated experience while rendering it meaningful to oneself. Second, the Internet aids in collecting skills and knowledge. Third, it facilitates users to not only distinguish themselves from others but also to align with people by introducing new cultures and social groups. Fourth, the Internet can empower humans by enhancing their ability to deal with various challenges and changes in life.⁶⁶ These possibilities can naturally also pose new problems. The Internet allows for more flexibility as for example gender, ethnicity and age are not directly visible and people can thus choose to create new personas, but they can also choose to sustain their offline persona and can use online activities to reinforce self-representation.⁶⁷ Online life is not isolated from the real life because the creators of online content are always real; the content of the Internet is shaped by local social contexts as the users bring their cultural background and expectations with them online. Both shape and potentially support one another. Hine suggests two ways of viewing the Internet. Firstly, it can be seen as a place and cyberspace where culture is formed. Secondly, it can be considered as culturally constructed and socially produced.⁶⁸ Because the Internet is widely accessible and not as heavily controlled as many other mediums of communication, it can potentially support oppressed, marginalized and homogenized groups in making their voice heard and in constructing a self-representation.

This study, however, focuses not only on Islam on the Internet, but also on how hip hop music is involved in the construction of Muslim identities; therefore, some reflections on music's relation with identity are necessary. Music creates experiences, emotions and ideas; it is born as a result of processes which constitute 'the self' and therefore, music can express all aspects of 'the self' as well as of social relationships.⁶⁹ Simon Frith argues that identity can be understood through music because music contains "the subjective in the collective"; in other words, because music in itself contains an understanding of both oneself and of social interaction, it is not simply an expression of cultural values, but it also

⁶⁴ Bauman 2004, 25.

⁶⁵ Hine 2000; Castells 2001.

⁶⁶ Cf. Lövheim 2004, 62.

⁶⁷ Hine 2000, 19–20, 39.

⁶⁸ Hine 2000.

⁶⁹ Blacking 1969, 34–35.

constructs them and collective identities.⁷⁰ Muslims who use hip hop to construct identities and to reassert Islamic values and ideals can be one example of this. The complexity of the relationship between hip hop music and identities is described by Frith, as he argues that “[h]ip-hop (...) is best understood as producing not new texts but new ways of performing texts (...) performing *the making of meaning*”⁷¹ [italics by author]. The meaning of music is not inherent but interpreted in social situations and thus reflects a social process.⁷² The actual content or musical style of hip hop is not necessarily new or original, but the way it is used to build meanings is situational, subjective and discursive. Music is often used to express ideals, such as an ideal representation of identity⁷³, and many also try to promote their views and interests through music⁷⁴.

Whether we are exploring the identities of individuals or groups, it is best to start at self-definitions. The central focus in this thesis is not on what identity is but on “how, where and when identities and realities are made available on the Internet”⁷⁵, or following Castells⁷⁶, on “how, from what, by whom, and for what” identities are constructed. The question is thus: how and for what purpose does Muslimhiphop.com construct and represent Muslim identities?

4. Discourse analysis and identities

The research material that was analyzed for the thesis was collected entirely from the Internet.⁷⁷ The method or approach for analyzing the research material in this study has

⁷⁰ Frith 1996, 110–111.

⁷¹ Ibid. 115.

⁷² Frith 1998, 250–251.

⁷³ Cf. Frith 1996, 123.

⁷⁴ Martin 2004, 70.

⁷⁵ Hine 2000, 118.

⁷⁶ Castells 1997, 7.

⁷⁷ Some researchers of computer mediated communication (CMC) have suggested that language or text on the Internet is a “language that never existed before” (cf. Mann & Stewart 2000, 182). It is possible to detect both written and spoken word online, formal and informal, refined and spontaneous. Sometimes the rules of correct spelling are completely compromised and the text is full of deliberate, stylistic choices such as replacing “s” in a word with a “z” (common in slang). Also the development of abbreviations and acronyms such as “FYI” to speed up CMC is a noteworthy aspect in this context. The rapidity and informality of the textual exchange resembles talk, causing also “writing-before-thinking”, yet the text is usually edited before it is transmitted to others in cyberspace. (Castells 1997, 182–189.) Also in my material features of informal and spontaneous as well as of more formal, polished text are visible.

been discourse analysis, i.e. the analysis of ‘discourses’. There are about as many ways of doing discourse analysis as there are researchers who apply it; therefore it is necessary to specify what is meant by ‘discourse’ and discourse analysis and also how discourse analysis was applied in this study.

In the Foucaultian sense of the word, ‘discourses’ are seen as a form of social behavior where language is used to communicate a particular perspective.⁷⁸ This denotes an understanding of discourse as a wider meaning system than simply words or grammar: language and thus also discourses not only represent but construct social reality.⁷⁹ As discourses take place in social interaction, they are always contextual processes in which social agents (organizations, groups or individuals) can take different positions and can employ many discourses to construct other discourses.⁸⁰ According to Fairclough, discourse is present in social interaction as ways of acting (genres), ways of representing (discourses) and as ways of being or identification (styles), all at the same time. Action (genres) is present in discourse as the mode of interaction, e.g. dialogue in an interview.⁸¹ Representations are the “social construction of practices”⁸²; these can be representations of the physical world, of social practices, or of the person’s inner world. As Fairclough stresses, discourse is present in representations in two senses: as an abstract concept referring to language use in social life, and as a count noun to refer to the different ways of representing. Identification or identities are also present in discourse, as for example expressing judgment entails taking a stance towards the world and others and thus committing oneself in interaction.⁸³ Stuart Hall notes that as identities are produced within discourses, they are to be understood within these historically specific frames⁸⁴; James Paul Gee seems to share this idea as he states that being part of a discourse always means social interaction and negotiation with others and with the previous discourse(s), even when one aims to change the discourse.⁸⁵ Also, in terms of critical discourse analysis, because discourses construct reality, they are always laden with power structures and ideologies.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ Cf. e.g. Fairclough 2000, 3.

⁷⁹ Fairclough 2000, 64–65.

⁸⁰ Jokinen et al. 1993, 17–44; Fairclough 2004, 75.

⁸¹ Fairclough 2004, 26.

⁸² Ibid. 206.

⁸³ Ibid. 27, 166.

⁸⁴ Hall 1996, 4.

⁸⁵ Gee 1999, 18.

⁸⁶ Cf. e.g. Fairclough 1993. Despite this, I am not using the critical discourse analysis approach as my main focus is not on social problems or power relations. The definition, however, is useful due to the ideological perspectives that are visible in my research material (cf. analysis in part IV of this thesis).

According to Hine, a discourse analytic viewpoint denotes a textual approach to Internet content, where the focus is on how the content producers argue ideas and construct authority and identities.⁸⁷ However, as Fairclough maintains, text and discourse are not synonymous: the former is a spoken or written product of discourse whereas the latter includes the text and the actual social occurrence and process(es) of producing the text.⁸⁸ The research material is seen here as social interaction where various discourses are made use of, and which is produced within a variety of contexts (these are discussed later).

When I have applied discourse analysis to the material, the research questions were answered by analyzing the function of language use. This means: 1) looking at socially-situated identities ('who') in socially-situated activity ('what') and how they are negotiated in interaction; and 2) analyzing, in terms of the structure of the text, what kind of (grammatical) patterns of meaning construction and organization can be detected, i.e. the differences in language use and argumentation in the texts.⁸⁹ This entails looking at e.g. ways of classifying meaning (e.g. hyponyms, synonyms, antonyms), collocation, metaphors, nominalization etc.⁹⁰ I have focused mainly on the analysis of pronouns, nouns, adverbs and adjectives; while nouns are used to name and categorize things, adjectives are mainly used to define or modify them (as attribute or predicate). Both nouns and adjectives contain important information about how and for what purpose meanings are represented and constructed, included and excluded. Adverbs are likewise typically meaning modifiers.⁹¹ I have also paid attention to language- or code-switching⁹², in this case the common use of Arabic words in an English-language text, which I argue to convey religious and social meanings to Muslims. By looking at what is done with words, it is possible to find out how meanings are identified and how identities are constructed. Anna de Fina notes that identities that people perform in discourse are "based on ideologies and beliefs about (...) social groups and categories and about the implications of belonging to them", while also stating that categorization is an important process in the

⁸⁷ Hine 2000, 53.

⁸⁸ Fairclough 2000, 3–4.

⁸⁹ Gee 1999, 13, 80–81, 99.

⁹⁰ Fairclough 2004.

⁹¹ The grammatical definitions of nouns and adjectives here were formulated with the help of Oxford Dictionaries Online: <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/>> (accessed 01/05/2011). In the analysis, I have relied on Joanne Scheibman's (2002) classifications and ideas about the functions of these grammatical items on several occasions. However, like many sociolinguists, she utilizes R. M. V. Dixon's work (cf. e.g. Dixon 1991).

⁹² For more on code-switching, cf. e.g. Auer (ed.) 1998.

negotiation and construction of identities because it reflects how people attach features to experiences and make them relevant for their identities.⁹³

The research questions mentioned earlier have guided the discourse analysis in the following way: I have systematically looked at what types of references were made to Muslims and to hip hop music in the material collected from the MHH website. I first formed thematic categories⁹⁴ when possible, for example ‘Islamic content in Muslim hip hop’, to help discern what topics were discussed, and wrote the analysis chapters of the material on this basis. More specifically, I analyzed what types of nouns, adjectives and adverbs etc. were used to represent opinions and arguments concerning Muslim identities and Muslim hip hop, what meanings were included into and what meanings were excluded from ‘Islamic’ or ‘Muslim hip hop’ and being a Muslim, and what discursive ways were employed. After this, I reorganized and rewrote parts of the chapters based on what kinds of discourses were detected in the material (cf. part IV). As a website does not constitute a typical research material to any existing method tradition, even though Internet research is proliferating, the method was adapted in a way that supported the analysis and allowed the material to “speak for itself”, which is also important when doing discourse analysis.⁹⁵

As Fairclough stresses, texts are always highly ambivalent and can be interpreted in a number of ways; because discourse analysis is interpretative (rather than descriptive), the researcher must pay attention to their own social conditioning that may affect the interpretations.⁹⁶ Eero Suoninen has described the discourse analysis process well: discourses are often “scattered” throughout the material and thus the analysis demands constant re-reading and processing of the material; discourses are not simply themes in the material but wider meaning systems that are drawn from and which can be used for discussing and arguing a variety of topics; discourses are very complex and constantly

⁹³ De Fina 2006, 354.

⁹⁴ Susan C. Herring (2010, 238) notes that the categories do not have to be pre-determined but can be derived also from the data in the discourse analytic approach.

⁹⁵ Although I chose to use discourse analysis, content analysis has typically been one of the most popular methods in analyzing web content (Herring 2010, 234): it has mainly focused on describing the structural and visible (often quantitative) features of communication in the data. Also in this thesis some content analysis is visible (cf. the original thematic categorization). According to Susan C. Herring, the content analysis method can be broadened into ‘computer-mediated discourse analysis’ to better embrace the communicative aspects of web content: this refers to “language-focused content analysis supplemented by a toolkit of discourse analysis methods adapted from the study of spoken conversation and written text analysis” (ibid. 238). This kind of application seemed appropriate considering the diversity of the research material at hand: the content and language of the MHH web site in comparison to transcribed radio interviews can be very different. Arja Jokinen et al. (1993, 17) state that discourse analysis is not strictly speaking a method but a “theoretical framework” which contains different possibilities for analysis and methodological applications.

⁹⁶ Fairclough 2000, 75; cf. 34– 35.

constructed, therefore they can become visible especially in the tensions and contradictions found in the material; and finally, words can have a number of meanings besides their literal ones.⁹⁷ These last two points are especially significant when dealing with the theme of identity construction and negotiation. They also highlight that the results of the analysis of the material are always the researcher's interpretation, which in turn is, or at least should be, based on the research questions and interests of the particular study. This also means that the researcher has to be critical towards the material and towards his or her own interpretations.

According to Murray Forman⁹⁸, “[d]iscourse must (...) be an essential element of the study of hip-hop’s relationships to the social production of race and space, for it is in and through discourse that the imaginings of cultural authenticity and the lived practices that express it are merged.” To this argument we might well add the production of religious identities. Also, as stated earlier, because music reflects and expresses identities, the way in which people describe and discuss about its “correct” content and meaning is essential when exploring the processes of identity construction. The quotation by Forman reveals why discourse analysis is an approach relevant in hip hop studies and also in sociology of religion.

The purpose of the next chapters is to give some indication as to what kind of context the MHH web site was assumedly born and developed in. The chapters discuss some of the factors that were and potentially are affecting the web site’s content; they are not intended to be holistic or ‘correct’ interpretations or explanations but rather to help the reader to contextualize the web site and to follow the analysis and argumentation in part IV.

⁹⁷ Suominen 1993, 50–51.

⁹⁸ Forman 2002, 9–10.

III CONTEXTUALIZING THE STUDY: ISLAM, MUSLIM IDENTITIES, THE INTERNET AND HIP HOP

5. Muslim identities

Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion and for many Muslims a complete way of life. Islam started to develop in the Middle East during the 7th century; Muslims believe that during this time, the holy book of Islam, the Qur'an, was revealed by God (Allah) to Prophet Muhammad. The revelation resulted in a religion, which nowadays comprises approximately 1 billion adherents around the globe, a community of believers called the *ummah*. The main denominations are Sunni (approx. 85%) and Shi'a along with Sufism (a mystical branch in Islam). Islam is often seen as a religion characterized by orthopraxy; for example, there are the multiple moral categories of human behavior ranging from *haram* (forbidden) to *halal* (permissible). The Arabic word *Islam* literally means 'submission' to God's will. The five pillars, namely the profession of faith (belief in one God, Allah, and in Prophet Muhammad as his messenger), *hajj* (pilgrimage), almsgiving, daily prayer and fasting during the month of Ramadan are perhaps the most central doctrines in Islam. Hadiths, i.e. talk or traditions (words, actions, opinions, characteristics) attributed to the Prophet along with the holy Qur'an are the *sunna*, i.e. the basic tenets for leading the life of a Muslim. *Shari'a* is the Islamic law based on the *sunna*.⁹⁹

Douglas Pratt suggests seven factors, which affect and construct Muslim identities: the global Muslim community *ummah*; history and tradition (including the Qur'an and the hadiths); personal devoutness; everyday practices; social relations and society (including the use or nonuse of the Shari'a law); geographical location; and values.¹⁰⁰ The *ummah* is generally viewed as perhaps one of the most central aspects of Muslim identity¹⁰¹, yet the community or even the understanding of the concept is far from uniform. For example, the relationship between the two main branches, the Sunnis and the Shi'as, has often been tense. As 'community' is understood here as a social group where people consider themselves to share certain social practices and values, in the case of Islam and the *ummah*,

⁹⁹ Cf. e.g. Pratt 2005; Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Pratt 2005, 138–139.

¹⁰¹ Cf. also e.g. Masquelier 2010.

this refers especially to *tawhid*, the ‘right’ belief in one God (Allah) and in prophet Muhammad as his messenger, as well as to the other four of the five pillars (cf. above) that are at the core of Islam¹⁰². Naturally, this is a generalizing account because Muslims are ethnically as well in many other respects an extremely diverse group and dispersed all over the globe. The salience of these abovementioned elements varies from Muslim to Muslim as do the applications and the interpretations about what the content of these elements truly is. However, many Muslims do try to create a common identity based on one or many of the above elements. This is often true also in the case of young Muslims¹⁰³.

Especially with the increased immigration of Muslims, the political features of Islam, such as the status of Shari’a as a guideline, have tended to become less significant to Muslim identification and the social authority of Islam has diminished. Being Muslim then becomes a matter of social relationships and personal devotion.¹⁰⁴ Identity is as much a part of tradition as it is the reinvention of it¹⁰⁵; Pratt suggests that in case of Islam, the values of submission and unity of the Muslim community in their belief in the oneness of God become central.¹⁰⁶

Muslim identities can be constructed locally, regionally, globally or in all these spheres. Remembering the achievements of the Islamic civilization particularly in the Middle Age or sharing the sufferings of Muslims around the world are some of the ways of evoking a common Muslim identity. Generating a sense of pride, e.g. (local) ethnic pride, among Muslims seems especially important since most reside in the Third World, which is economically, politically and technologically underdeveloped.¹⁰⁷ Muslims living in the West¹⁰⁸ often appreciate the opportunities in education, economical success and freedom of expression, yet are critical of extensive materialism, overt sexuality and lack of family values, and may find unity in this kind of value assertion.¹⁰⁹ Muslims both in Muslim

¹⁰² Cf. Pratt 2005, 75; cf. cooke&Lawrence 2005b, 28.

¹⁰³ Cf. Herrera & Bayat (eds.) 2010.

¹⁰⁴ Pratt 2005; Roy 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Hall 1996, 4.

¹⁰⁶ Pratt 2005, 139.

¹⁰⁷ Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 19–22.

¹⁰⁸ ‘West’ is understood here as societies characterized by liberal, democratic, capitalist and in many ways secularized way of life (cf. Geaves & Gabriel 2004, 1). I do not wish to imply simply Euro- or US-centrism. The term is very context-dependent and relational and in discourses, it may be used to evoke many different things.

¹⁰⁹ Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 19–22.

majority countries and elsewhere are acquainted with all kinds of ‘western’ and other cultural aspects which demand Muslims to reassess Islam and its ‘true’ nature.¹¹⁰

Prophet Muhammad intended to create a theocracy, and in many countries where Muslims are a majority, there still exist close ties between political rule and Islam as well as ‘tribalism’, but especially elsewhere Muslims have had to find new solutions to deal with historical changes such as the end of colonialism.¹¹¹ For many, the question is about how and whether to accept ‘Western’ influences.¹¹² The anti-Western opinions among Muslims oppose the assumed Western secularism (or ‘godlessness’) as well as American influences often viewed as neo-colonialism, and the political and economic support that many Western countries provide for governments which their citizens would want to overthrow.¹¹³

Islam is perhaps the fastest growing religion on the planet.¹¹⁴ Globalization has caused Islam to separate more from local cultures and territories, and especially Muslims living as minorities now have to be more explicit about their beliefs. Herbert states that especially in Muslim minority communities, culture and religion are often separated from one another and religion is emphasized.¹¹⁵ Ba-Yunus & Kone also assert that ethnicity has become less salient for Muslims.¹¹⁶ Roy notes that the religion can be used as a way to “ethnicize” and homogenize Muslims and to mark social status, both by Muslims and non-Muslims.¹¹⁷ Similarly, Bayat and Herrera note that especially after 9/11 and increased islamophobia, many youth in Muslim minorities have been labeled “by everyone” as Muslims first and foremost, which forces Muslims to take a stance regarding their religious identification; many young Muslims all over the world have asserted a clearer identification to Islam as well as a stronger Muslim group identity instead of hiding it.¹¹⁸ Hip hop, among other things, has become part of this identity negotiation work.

Because the case study in part IV focuses on an American web site, a brief overview of American Muslims is necessary to contextualize the birth of the MHH before discussing

¹¹⁰ Roy 2004, 154.

¹¹¹ Pratt 2005, 54; Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 19.

¹¹² Cf. Pratt 2005, 148–159.

¹¹³ Geaves & Gabriel 2004, 3; cf. Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 22.

¹¹⁴ Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 2.

¹¹⁵ Herbert 2004, 155.

¹¹⁶ Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006.

¹¹⁷ Roy 2004, 133, 136.

¹¹⁸ Bayat & Herrera 2010, 16, 21.

Muslim hip hop; hence the next chapter will discuss the specifics of this part of the *ummah*.¹¹⁹

5.1 Muslims in the United States

About six million Muslims were estimated to live in the United States a few years ago by Ba-Yunus & Kone. Muslims are a religious minority in the United States but also the fastest growing one.¹²⁰ The location of the first American mosque as well as the time of arrival of first Muslims is debated, but by the end of 19th century Muslims were already a clearly existing minority. Around two out of three Muslims are either immigrants from Third World countries or their descendants. Most immigrants arrived starting from 1960s due to an encouraging immigration law passed at that time; the law was removed later, but these newcomers started inviting their families to join them, which became a never-ending stream of migrants. Consequently, American Muslims are ethnically a very diverse and dispersed group, with many intersecting identities. Of the American-born Muslims, practically all are African-American and among them several are converts. American Muslims are mainly of Arab or South Asian origin.¹²¹ Ba-Yunus & Kone divide American Muslims roughly into ‘indigenous Muslims’ (mainly African Americans) and ‘immigrant Muslims’. The groups differ mainly in historical respects; the African Americans share the past sufferings of slavery and racial segregation which is still visible today as a poor socio-economic status, whereas the immigrants, who often have more economic stability in the US, are concerned about maintaining and passing on cultural and religious traditions in their new homeland and about socio-economic plight in their countries of origin.¹²² American Muslims belong largely to middle and upper-middle class.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Unless otherwise specified, when I refer to ‘American Muslims’ I denote Muslims currently living in the United States irrespective of ethnic or national origin and of whether they are born Muslims or converts.

¹²⁰ Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 25, 37, 42. The estimated number includes sojourners on visas.

¹²¹ Ibid. 21–25, 34–37, 39, 46.

¹²² Ibid. 59–60, 74.

¹²³ Ibid. As a friend of mine noted, socio-economic status is related with Internet use because Internet access is charged by Internet service providers, and thus the Internet is not necessarily available for those with low income. For this particular study, this means that the Muslims who frequent the web site are likely not amongst the poorest Muslims.

Copying the Jewish minority, the American Muslims have often ended up accentuating distinctiveness in their self-definition in order not to lose their religious traditions.¹²⁴ Many Muslim organizations stress the importance of passing Islamic knowledge, both spiritual and cultural, as well as a Muslim identity onto next generations in America. Also developing understanding concerning Islam among the larger society is one goal. The national Federation of Islamic Associations (FIAA) and the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), which is an umbrella organization, are among the most prominent. Especially mosques, and later also schools run by Muslim communities, have been seen as important in holding back non-Islamic influences. Imams at local mosques are often the source of religious expertise for American Muslims.¹²⁵ However, mosques and imams may not always be able to reach the Muslim youth whereas hip hop music, being extremely popular¹²⁶ and constantly around, often is, and this has also been one of arguments for the creation of Muslim hip hop (cf. later).

One example of a case study of American Muslims is Moustafa Bayoumi's interviews with several Arab Muslim Americans in Brooklyn, NY.¹²⁷ According to Bayoumi, many young American Muslims have increased awareness and feeling of a duty to educate other young Muslims and make *dawah*, i.e. educate Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam and propagate their faith in order to create a positive image of Islam. The aim is to reclaim the right to self-definition as well as strengthen a sense of Muslim identity while creating a Muslim community. The desire to create a "correct" image of Islam to both Muslims and non-Muslims is a result of self-consciousness about their role as Muslims living in times of increased prejudice against Islam in a multicultural Western country.¹²⁸

Many Muslims are proud to be American and are happy to live in the United States.¹²⁹ This is likely due to the opportunities in terms of education, economical success and freedom of expression. Religious freedom especially is something unique to America and other Western countries when compared to many Muslim majority countries.¹³⁰ Some Muslims also see the American society's multiculturalism as positive because it reminds them of the

¹²⁴ Haddad 2004, 97–98.

¹²⁵ Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 45, 47–51, 81.

¹²⁶ Hip hop was the biggest selling genre in the United States in the late 1990s (cf. e.g. Krims 2000, 5).

¹²⁷ Bayoumi 2010.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 166, 168, 170–171, 173. To be noted, however, is that e.g. Pratt (2005, 194) has listed various meanings for *dawah*, including 'propaganda' and 'missionary call'.

¹²⁹ Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, viii; Hermansen 2004.

¹³⁰ Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 25.

diverse *ummah* and Islam's global appeal while some also feel that their ethnicity and national origin have become less salient.¹³¹

Several Muslim states do not allow free speech and in this regard Muslims in the United States and in other Western countries are in a special position. Some now see American Muslims at the forefront of creating a positive representation of Muslims.¹³² At the same time, racial divisions within the US have become more visible, when especially Arab and Asian Muslim immigrants and their descendants are demanded to explicitly support the United States and yet may be denied the recognition of being Americans.¹³³ According to Jane Idleman Smith, the distinction between progressive Muslims and Islamists is becoming more and more important in the West, yet the constant dichotomization only seems to further enhance exclusion, "with us or against us" thinking; Muslim identity is now globally a hot topic especially due to Islamist terrorists, and although many Muslims have condemned violence as against their faith, the media rarely wants to hear about it. Questions about Islamic teachings e.g. on the role of women are being discussed more and more both in the US and elsewhere by Muslims.¹³⁴

The United States is often called 'the Melting Pot' due to strong assimilationist tendencies related to an effort to construct a common, American identity. American Muslims are often considered either as assimilated or as representing the Middle East.¹³⁵ Thus, it is not surprising that new forms of developing and expressing a distinctive Muslim identity are being deployed; hip hop, which is an extremely popular music genre especially in the US, is one of these. Tools for representing Islam positively have been needed particularly after September 11, 2001.

5.2 After 9/11

One can no longer address the topic of Muslim identities without the mention of 9/11 terrorist attacks that resulted in the death of thousands. Over the centuries, there have been

¹³¹ Bayoumi 2010, 169.

¹³² Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 21; cf. e.g. Bayoumi 2010; Hermansen 2004.

¹³³ Hermansen 2004, 87–89.

¹³⁴ Idleman Smith 2004, 211–215.

¹³⁵ Zaman 2008, 471.

tensions of many kinds between Muslims countries and the United States, lately for example the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These tensions were further exacerbated by the 9/11 events in the beginning of the 21st century. Although surrounded by several conspiracy theories, the tragedy is generally considered as the work of a radical Islamist and terrorist network, Al-Qaida. The attacks resulted not only in an overall increase in online religiosity (e.g. virtual prayers), but also in a vigorous online search for information about Islam as well as in an effort to create a dialogue with Muslims.¹³⁶ The 9/11 events touched upon people's lives all over the world, and forced Muslims to answer questions like what is Islam, what does being a Muslim mean', and is Islam is an inherently violent religion. Muslim religiosity has been under a change, and the *ummah* under reinforcement.¹³⁷ Also other terrorist bombings that have occurred after 9/11 all over the world, from Bali to Moscow, have further contributed to a popular image of Muslims as terrorists and extremists and of Islam as the 'Other'. Exclusion and change, more than anything, produce identities, and events like 9/11 along with globalization have been significant triggers of this renegotiation of identities. The boundary construction between what is and what is not religion can reinforce religious commitment. Common identity is often sought at times of crisis¹³⁸, and also among many Muslims.

Especially the United States and its population were shocked by the 9/11 events, because they have rarely experienced a threat on home soil¹³⁹. Muslims were largely ignored in the American society and internal politics until September 11, 2001. Although President George W. Bush rushed to declare Islam as a peaceful religion directly after the events and also later some inclusion of American Muslims was sought as not to create an internal threat, many American Muslims have experienced more prejudice and discrimination, and especially the Christian right along with Zionists demonized Muslims.¹⁴⁰ The PATRIOT Act resulted in several Arabs and Muslims losing legal rights and being rendered under

¹³⁶ Helland 2004, 33.

¹³⁷ Roy 2004, 23–25, 29–30, 33.

¹³⁸ Hall 1996, 4; cf. Herbert 2004, 155–156; Ba-Yunus & Kone 2006, 19.

¹³⁹ Geaves & Gabriel 2004, 7.

¹⁴⁰ Haddad 2004, 103–110. One recent event related to this matter are the congressional hearings organized by congressman Peter King, Homeland Security's chairman, to address "the radicalization of American Muslim community". The hearings were organized after violent incidents with American Muslims as suspects had taken place over the last few years. The discussion around the hearings has, more than anything, highlighted the heterogeneity of American Muslims. One Muslim woman commented that "I don't want to be talked about all the time as a Muslim, I don't want to make an issue of my religion. I just want to be another American." cf. Boorstein, Michelle. American Muslim groups react to views presented in controversial hearing. March 12, 2011. *The Washington Post*; cf. Fahrenthold, David A. & Michelle Boorstein. Rep. Peter King's Muslim hearing: Plenty of drama, less substance. March 11, 2011. *The Washington Post*.

firm surveillance in the United States.¹⁴¹ The war on terrorism deemed to be against militant Islamists seemed for many to be a global war on Muslims.¹⁴² For several Muslims, ‘appropriate’ Islam has appeared to have been defined by (and for) the Western societies.¹⁴³ Many are now reclaiming that right to self definition, for example on the Internet.

6. Muslims online

Several aspects of the relationship between different religions and Internet have already been studied, as for example *Religion Online. Finding Faith on the Internet* (2004a) edited by Lorne L. Dawson and Douglas E. Cowan, and *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises* (2000) edited by Jeffrey K. Hadden & Douglas E. Cowan, show. Both books also stress that religion is one of the most popular elements on the Internet. Dawson and Cowan state that the cyberspace needs to both support and expand the experiences of offline lives, otherwise it will not be considered as worthwhile by its users.¹⁴⁴ One distinction that has been used in analyses concerning religion and the Internet is ‘online religion’ and ‘religion online’. The former is religious participation online, e.g. prayer, counseling etc. whereas the latter simply refers to religion-related information, services and groups that are available to online browsing. Most websites fall somewhere in between.¹⁴⁵

Today, the Internet has a considerable effect on the way Muslims see and practice Islam and how Islam is represented to non-Muslims. It may also cause changes e.g. on the interpretation of Qur’an and Muslim lifestyle; the World Wide Web accelerates the exchange of ideas between Muslims, but also the cultural practices, values and ideas of the non-Muslim world are more easily available for exploration without religious authorities censoring them. Some sites are directed at Muslims only, some are open to all.¹⁴⁶ The

¹⁴¹ “Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism”, passed on October 24, 2001. (Haddad 2004, 104.)

¹⁴² Haddad 2004, 103–110.

¹⁴³ Idleman Smith 2004, 219.

¹⁴⁴ Dawson & Cowan 2004b, 13–14.

¹⁴⁵ Dawson & Cowan 2004b, 7; Helland & Cowan 2000, 8–9.

¹⁴⁶ Bunt 2009.

above heading 'Muslims online' refers to the fact that Internet users and content creators are always real people, not just fictitious personas or immaterial, complex and fluid ideas like 'Islam'. The interpretations of the content are also made by humans. There exists a multitude of innovative expressions of Islam online, ranging from pro-terrorism *jihad*-sites to *halal* fashion blogs, from prayer videos to audio Qur'an reciting. Among the most popular sites are question-and-answer types of pages along with different discussion forums, as many Muslims are used to seeking information also offline about how to lead a proper and pious life.¹⁴⁷ These sites construct Islam and Muslim identities, for example by representations of the central beliefs that Muslims have.¹⁴⁸ Some Muslim Internet users may adhere to official religious authorities offline, but online, there are not as many religious censors who control information or set boundaries and thus, it offers a possibility for pick-and-choose religiosity.¹⁴⁹

Although it is tempting to suggest that the whole range of Islam is present online, it is important to note that Muslim immigrants and their offspring in Europe and America have much better access to the Internet than Muslims in other parts of the world, and most of these users are American Muslims. However, Muslim immigrants may also be more active in searching for a sense of belonging and a community such as the (virtual) *ummah* due to their status as a religious minority amidst religiously and ethnically diverse societies.¹⁵⁰ The Internet can support Muslims as well as other religious groups in practicing their faith, gaining information about their religion and maintaining contact with each other. The content of the Internet is most often an extension to real-life religious activities and traditions. At the same time, traditions may be less and less attached to a physical place. Some re-localization is being done, though, as the US-centeredness of the Internet was becoming irritating to some Muslims¹⁵¹. As said earlier, the notion of a global Muslim community, *ummah*, is not new; the medium for evoking it, the Internet, is. The Internet is nowadays a central vehicle in building knowledge about Islam, Muslims and a positive religious identification.¹⁵² Some Muslims have even included a web site as an important part to their worldview and being online even becomes a religious duty. However, Internet cannot offer one common identity to all Muslims due to its inherent diversity but rather constructs many particularistic identities although the World Wide Web is "on" all the time

¹⁴⁷ Zaman 2008, 469.

¹⁴⁸ Bunt 2009, 1.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Helland 2004.

¹⁵⁰ cooke&Lawrence 2005b, 23; Karim 2002, 37, 51, 53; Zaman 2008, 467, 470.

¹⁵¹ Karim 2002, 51–54.

¹⁵² Bunt 2009; cooke&Lawrence 2005b; Zaman 2008.

the way Islam is expected to, too. New religious language and new religious interpretations emerge constantly.¹⁵³ As Bunt puts it, “studying Internet activities related to Islam should form part of any equation that seeks to approach contemporary Muslim discourse”.¹⁵⁴

7. Islam and music

Music, like many other art forms, often causes us to experience emotions such as pleasure. In this way, music is powerful in influencing identities and personal values because it is not linked only to rationality. However, music does not affect people’s behavior causally, but rather functions together with social and cultural conditioning¹⁵⁵. The complex interplay of our social contacts, values and personal history among other things is what makes some music meaningful to us and some not. Regarding religion, Jeff Chang and Samy H. Alim have even used it as a descriptive metaphor for hip hop to convey hip hop’s allure.¹⁵⁶ Robin Sylvan explains music’s relationship with religion in the following manner:

“[m]usic is capable of functioning simultaneously at many different levels (physiological, psychological, sociocultural, semiological, virtual, ritual and spiritual) and integrating them into a coherent whole. So for a complex multidimensional phenomenon like religion, which also functions simultaneously at multiple levels, the fact that music is capable of conveying all these levels of complexity (...) makes it a vehicle par excellence to carry the religious impulse. Moreover, the musical experience (...) represents a unique phenomenological and ontological mode of being-in-the-world (...).¹⁵⁷

The relationship between Islam and music is complex. In the pre-Islamic era, various folk songs existed. The recitation of classical poetry inspired the birth of nasheeds, a variety of religious musical forms. After Prophet Muhammad’s death, Islam and also many music styles began to develop. Drums were added for making poetry more rhythmic.¹⁵⁸ Also more attention was paid to the emotional and spiritual qualities of a human voice, and vocal music has ever since been prevalent in the Arabian cultures. Listening to music and

¹⁵³ Bunt 2009, 10–11; 14; Zaman 2008, 473.

¹⁵⁴ Bunt 2009, 282.

¹⁵⁵ Blacking 1969, 39.

¹⁵⁶ Chang 2005, cf. e.g. 169; Alim 2006, 45.

¹⁵⁷ Sylvan 2002, 6.

¹⁵⁸ Hip hop lyrics or rhyming are often called ‘poetry’ (e.g. Chang 2005; Krims 2005); hip hop was born when people started talking over the instrumental percussion (break) parts of songs at Bronx house parties (Chang 2005). Thus, the rhythm or the beat is perhaps the most important and distinctive aspect about hip hop music.

its content, however, became a subject of controversy and debate later; opinions ranged from total prohibition to total permissiveness regarding music. The Qur'an is ambiguous about the permissibility of music, yet it does not explicitly deny music. In some hadiths the prophet allows music whereas others are vague like the Qur'an; this is also due to variance in the interpretation of meaning of Arabic terms. Theologians opposing music claim it to be a distraction from pious life due to its capability to incite pleasure and excitement. Nevertheless, the Sufi mystics, or the whirling dervishes, are one example of a group that has continued their musical tradition and music has remained a central aspect of their religiousness through centuries despite the debate. The mystic's longing for God and search for spirituality and the divine is activated through music but the music's value is essentially in the person's own religiosity. For example, the *dhikr* ritual of remembering God consists of music listening and sometimes dancing, where some even attain religious ecstasy. Some religious authorities have considered this heretical. Also many lay Muslims do not accept music making or listening as *halal* (permissible), but clearly there are those who do, and Muslim hip hop is one evidence of that.¹⁵⁹

7.1 The meaning of 'Muslim hip hop': Differences between Nation of Islam, Five Percenters and orthodox Muslims

Two of Islam's American offshoots, namely Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Five Percenters, have strongly influenced hip hop during its entire history. Rap music made by artists who belong to one of these groups has sometimes been termed 'Muslim hip hop', and also hip hop music made by Muslims who do not necessarily include Islam in their lyrics have been categorized this way; for this reason, these forms of "Muslim" hip hop should here be separated from Islamic hip hop or 'conscious' Muslims, i.e. hip hop made by orthodox Muslims, who explicitly include Islam in their lyrics.¹⁶⁰ When I use the term 'Muslim hip hop' in this thesis, I refer to so-called conscious Muslims who clearly bring forward their religion, named by Suad Abdul Khabeer¹⁶¹ as Islamic hip hop. During the analysis I formulated also another way of differentiating between the terms. I frequently use 'Muslim hip hop' when referring to the artists ('Muslim' describing the authors and performers) and 'Islamic hip hop' when referring to the lyrical content. These distinctions

¹⁵⁹ Shiloah 1995, 4–5, 12–16, 31–34, 40–43. Cf. also chapter 2 of thesis.

¹⁶⁰ Cf. e.g. Alim 2006; cf. Khabeer 2007.

¹⁶¹ Khabeer 2007.

are important for at least two reasons: to clarify the focus of this particular study, and to highlight the plurality of meanings of the terms that are used to discuss hip hop music's affiliations with Islam.

Both Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Five Percenters have a connection to Black Nationalism with ideas of Pan-Africanism and strong racial pride.¹⁶² After the death of the NOI leader, Elijah Muhammad, one of his sons transformed the NOI first into The Bililian Community, then into the World Community Al-Islam in the West (WCIW).¹⁶³ The organization now rejected the racial doctrines and embraced the orthodox Islam and the global *ummah*.¹⁶⁴ The Nation of Gods and Earths or Five Percenters derived from the Nation of Islam during the 1960s, and has influenced rap music considerably as the movement's views have been offered to listeners via many of the biggest selling rap artists' lyrics (e.g. Busta Rhymes, Nas, Wu-Tang Clan). The two movements have much in common, as the Five Percenters have adapted all basic NOI lessons but have expanded them towards numerology and esoterism.¹⁶⁵

Orthodox Muslims usually consider these movements heretical and non-Islamic due to their flexible theological interpretations, absence of structure and often free-minded individualism regarding sex, drugs and other moral related issues. The idea of submission to Allah, which is pivotal to all Muslims, is disregarded by Five Percenters. All black men are considered to be Gods and all black women to be Earths. The Five Percenters have also claimed not to represent a religion but rather a culture which sees Islam as a flexible way of life; however, they include God (Allah) in their teachings and refer to Qur'an. Many also align themselves with the global Muslim community.¹⁶⁶

The Black Nationalistic and NOI message has been transmitted e.g. by the rap group Public Enemy; the NOI had come to realize the potential of rap music in educating the youth, and for example a member of Public Enemy explained that youth without authority

¹⁶² Miyakawa 2005.

¹⁶³ Louis Farrakhan separated from the WCIC in 1977, forming a "new" Nation of Islam-organization which continued to follow the earlier racial teachings of Elijah Muhammad. However, in 2000, Farrakhan proclaimed that the NOI would embrace the orthodox Islam and global Muslim community. (Floyd-Thomas 2003, 62–63.) Despite this, the NOI is not considered as part of the *ummah* by all Muslims (cf. Mike Shapiro's interview in Ch. 10).

¹⁶⁴ Floyd-Thomas 2003, 61.

¹⁶⁵ Miyakawa 2005.

¹⁶⁶ Miyakawa 2005; Shannahan & Hussain 2011, 39.

figures listen to rappers because they are their peers who “talk to you every day”.¹⁶⁷ Similarly, many orthodox Muslims have come to realize that if they want the youth to listen, hip hop music is one of the best mediums for making them do so; the number of Muslim hip hop artists, consumers as well as of academic studies on the subject is continuously growing.

7.2 Islamic hip hop music: A subgenre for religious education and identification

I will first position Islamic hip hop music into the field of rap music with the help of Adam Krims’s “genre system”¹⁶⁸, a broad categorization of the main genres of rap. The so-called jazz rap and reality rap are the closest to Islamic rap from the existing genres mentioned in Krims’s categorization, as they both have “conscious” features in their topics (social, political or religious). Jazz rap has sometimes been critical towards “gangsta rap” and has also portrayed the tradition of teaching poetry and stressed the importance of gaining knowledge. Reality rap, which includes also gangsta rap (mostly focused on gang and thug life), comprises mainly realistic themes e.g. concerning life in the ghettos. “Knowledge rap” is a subgenre of reality rap, but it contains elements from both jazz and reality rap. Its didactic nature is influenced by political or historical themes but also by the Nation of Islam and Five Percent Nation ideologies. Oral teaching with cultural and/or spiritual meanings is common in African-American tradition.¹⁶⁹

Samy H. Alim has paid attention to the musical similarities of rapping and reciting of Qur’an.¹⁷⁰ The American rapper Mos Def, who is one of the most commercially successful, conscious Muslim artists, explains to Alim in his interview that both rapping and reciting have didactic possibilities due to their similar rhythmic qualities; using rhymes enhances learning by making it possible to remember long fractions of text.¹⁷¹ Rap’s rhythmic style illustrates not only its genre but its history and geography.¹⁷² Also Khabeer notes that

¹⁶⁷ Cf. Chang 2005, 252; Miyakawa 2005.

¹⁶⁸ Krims 2000, 45–92.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 68–80. Krims includes also e.g. party rap and mack rap (“player” or “pimp” rap) as their own rap genres.

¹⁷⁰ Alim 2005.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 267.

¹⁷² Krims 2000, 48.

many Muslims see hip hop and the centuries old Islamic poetry as analogous.¹⁷³ It seems logical to assume that the same influences that give birth to the recitation of Qur'an were also present in the development of African musical traditions, later brought to the American continent by slaves and then passed on to the African-American music styles.¹⁷⁴

As we will see also later in part IV, teaching Islamic values and way of life is pivotal to Islamic rap. Already in the 1970s and 1980s the hip hop pioneers such as the Zulu Nation's Afrika Bambaata used hip hop to send messages; later, hip hop has been used by hip hop activists to educate people on all sorts of issues, from anti-racism to crime prevention.¹⁷⁵ It is therefore no surprise that also orthodox Muslims are using it now to educate others about Islam. According to Aidi, Islamic rap should be understood in the context of Muslim immigration to the West and especially to the United States as well as in the context of immigration politics of the West (cf. Chapter 5.1 in this thesis).¹⁷⁶ Felicia Miyakawa states that rappers' verbal abilities accord them this cultural role as educators.¹⁷⁷ Also non-Muslims can gain valuable insights about Islam and what it means to be a Muslim. However, for many the most important aspect of Muslim hip hop is perhaps that rapping about Islam can bring both the listener and the rapper closer to Allah by evoking Islamic thoughts and ideas.¹⁷⁸ It appears that many Muslims are starting to see Islamic rap with its educational potential as well as its potential to unite Muslim communities as overriding the ambivalence they have concerning rap music's permissibility in Islam.¹⁷⁹ According to Khabeer, the rappers often stress that they want to convey an Islamic message especially to the youth, and base their choice of music genre on the fact that the youth in particular listen to popular music such as hip hop; the youth use popular culture as a tool to make sense of who they want to be, but Muslims are rarely represented in it.¹⁸⁰ Muslim hip hop is seen by several American Muslims as a way to establish a positive and proud religious identification. Khabeer notes that this is due particularly to the fact that several Muslims' sense of self is affected negatively due to a "Muslim/Modern dichotomy" where the

¹⁷³ Khabeer 2007, 130.

¹⁷⁴ However, Rose (1994, 95) notes accurately that "[t]o interpret rap as a direct or natural outgrowth of oral African American forms is to romanticize and decontextualize rap as a cultural form."

¹⁷⁵ Cf. Chang 2005.

¹⁷⁶ Aidi 2004, 1–2.

¹⁷⁷ Miyakawa 2005, 137.

¹⁷⁸ Shannahan & Hussain 2011, 449.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Alim 2005; Khabeer 2007.

¹⁸⁰ Khabeer 2007, 128–130, 134.

progressive and democratic ‘West’ is seen as superior to ‘backward’ and ‘illiberal’ Muslims.¹⁸¹

7.3 *Halal* hip hop, *haram* hip hop

Several Muslims consider the lyrical content in particular to be an obstacle for accepting hip hop music¹⁸², and also many non-Muslims have criticized commercial rap to be a ‘denigrated’ form of hip hop.¹⁸³ Orthodox Muslims¹⁸⁴ often focus their critique on the many clearly *haram* (forbidden) elements of this kind of hip hop, such as sex, drugs, violence and crimes.¹⁸⁵ Also many Muslim rappers have been known to denounce rap’s materialism, drug abuse, blatant sexuality and misogyny as undesirable and immoral.¹⁸⁶ Islamic hip hop or conscious Muslim rap was born mainly out of the desire to enjoy a music style but with *halal* (permissible) content; as Khabeer notes, many American Muslim artists find it difficult to combine religiously inspired content with hip hop because mainstream success is often linked with content that contradicts Islamic principles.¹⁸⁷ However, these American Muslims who wished to continue enjoying hip hop music as they had until then while growing up in urban environments, started writing lyrics without *haram* elements and instead with clearly Islamic themes. In this way, they supported their religious identification through music and saw themselves as offering a positive alternative to many negative features in existing hip hop.¹⁸⁸ Same types of ideas are visible elsewhere, but with contextual differences; e.g. some Tunisian Muslims interviewed by Shannahan & Hussain condemned many elements in American hip hop as *haram*.¹⁸⁹ Also women are sometimes not mentioned in the lyrics of these Tunisian rappers in order to avoid objectifying women, yet also degrading lyrics do exist, which, according to Shannahan &

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 135.

¹⁸² Cf. e.g. Khabeer 2007.

¹⁸³ Also some Five Percenters have been known to take an anti-materialistic stance (Miyakawa 2005, 70).

¹⁸⁴ The term ‘orthodox’ here refers to those Muslims who follow Islam as a religion and acknowledge its basic tenets (cf. Ch. 5), i.e. Five Percenters are not orthodox in this sense. (cf. Miyakawa 2005.)

¹⁸⁵ The Muslim critique has focused especially on materialism and the overtly sexual music videos and lyrics. According to Krims (2000, 155), excessive highlighting of wealth is a very US specific feature; I would suggest that the rap scene outside US does differ on both regards, i.e. focuses less on money and sex (cf. e.g. Mitchell ed. 2001 for more on non-American rap).

¹⁸⁶ Aidi 2004; Khabeer 2007.

¹⁸⁷ Khabeer 2007, 127.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 127–128.

¹⁸⁹ Shannahan & Hussain 2011.

Hussain, are mainly the result of males having to face the crumbling of patriarchy of some Arab countries.¹⁹⁰

Muslim rappers may feel controversial about rapping or even consider it to be against their religion and identification as a Muslim, yet they continue doing it. Some say that only Allah can be the judge of rap's permissibility.¹⁹¹ The issue of making music is thus not clearcut, and Muslims cannot be divided simply into those who see music as allowed and into those who do not, or into those who enjoy music and those who do not. Some consider all music forbidden, some consider some music or some instruments forbidden and some consider all music to be, if not *halal*, at least not *haram*. There are various ways to make interpretations and form opinions about the matter. For example, the group Native Deen only uses percussion instruments¹⁹². Many African-Americans claim that Islam's function is not to eliminate their cultural heritage such as music but rather to bring out the positive features and thus they can continue to enjoy music.¹⁹³

As regards the feelings of the larger, non-Muslim society, many conservatives have been scared of the influence of rap music on youth and of Islam. As a consequence, for example in the United States, many records were banned in the early years of hip hop.¹⁹⁴ Also the influence of Islamic thought on youth has been debated; for example, one American youth who converted to orthodox Islam and joined the Taliban was speculated to have acquired Islamic ideas from rap music.¹⁹⁵ These kinds of opinions about Islamic rap, however, seem to be largely those of non-Muslims and are constructed to serve an "us" vs. "them" type of dichotomy in order to attract attention away from the real reasons behind social problems.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰Shannahan & Hussain 2011, 53–54.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 49, 55.

¹⁹² Khabeer 2007, 128.

¹⁹³ Ibid. 131.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Alim 2006, 45; Chang 2005.

¹⁹⁵ Miyakawa 2005, 3–4.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. e.g. Aidi 2004, 12.

7.4 Hip hop music as a cultural and socio-political critique

Since the beginning, hip hop music has been used for critiquing injustices and oppressors.¹⁹⁷ Also Muslims artists use it to highlight social and political wrongs in the larger society and especially concerning the Muslim community. According to Khabeer, Islamic poetry has been used throughout its history to defend Islam and Muslims against aggressions, and also for *dawah* for Muslims and non-Muslims and Muslim rappers see themselves as continuing this legacy.¹⁹⁸

Solomon has explored how the Islamic faith is used in hip hop lyrics by Turkish rappers as a way to “create and explore Muslim identities”.¹⁹⁹ With globalization as a larger framework and a case study analysis as a method, Solomon makes a comparison of two Turkish rap groups, one from Germany and one from Istanbul and builds connections between lyrics, the sociopolitical context of the rap and also the discussions he has had with rappers. The song lyrics provide a basis for his assertion about a Muslim identity discourse that is taking place among the Turkish rappers. He notes for example that the rap group Sert Müslümanlar never uses the word Islam, but instead the word ‘being Muslim’ or ‘Muslim-ness’, which refers to a group identity rather than to religion, which is a more abstract concept.²⁰⁰ Both Solomon and Shannahan & Hussain, who have interviewed Tunisian rappers, note that some rappers also convey ideas of a shared Muslim identity and show global solidarity while de-emphasizing theological and ethnic differences.²⁰¹ For example Sert Müslümanlar invites all Muslims to condemn the treatment of Bosnian Muslim during the Balkan wars. Some use rap to distinguish themselves as Muslims among a non-Muslim majority, e.g. Muslim Turks living among Germans.²⁰² Nowadays the identity negotiations that socially underprivileged Muslims, in many cases immigrant youth, are undergoing often entail the employment of globalized popular culture on a local level, such as creating local cultural interpretations and subjective expressions of rap music and hip hop culture.²⁰³ Some American Muslims also perceive Islam as being “colorblind”

¹⁹⁷ Cf.e.g. Chang 2005; Alim 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Khabeer 2007, 130.

¹⁹⁹ Solomon 2010, 59.

²⁰⁰ Solomon 2010.

²⁰¹ Ibid.; Shannahan & Hussain 2011.

²⁰² Solomon 2010, 65, 71.

²⁰³ Solomon, 2010; Shannahan & Hussain 2011.

which helps them to find a common ground and mutual respect with people from different ethnic groups.²⁰⁴

Aidi calls Islamic hip hop a cultural movement and a subculture that is appealing to global youth at the margins of societies.²⁰⁵ Hip hop's origins as an African-American vernacular that developed among the underprivileged class²⁰⁶ are most intriguing considering to which extent Muslims are discriminated against on racist and xenophobic grounds in several societies, and it is no wonder that e.g. African immigrants in Europe have found rap and the African-American experience as a reference point to their own sufferings as socially excluded.²⁰⁷ Rap music provides tools for performing a cultural critique and combating different types of xenophobia and racism. Muslims around the world are now engaging in a struggle against islamophobia and in a process of building a positive and proud identity for themselves, a process which shares similarities to the way Black Nationalist African-Americans fought against racism in the 19th and 20th century.²⁰⁸ To be noted, however, is that the possibilities for performing a critique vary from country to country, and for, example in Tunis, rap artists are challenged by several limitations on free speech as well as on Internet access imposed by the political rule. Also, the shift from revolutionary words to social action and change is not simple.²⁰⁹

Aidi notes that numerous Muslim rap artists are taking a strong stance against terrorism by claiming it to be against Islamic beliefs and accusing Islamist terrorists of "dishonoring the faith".²¹⁰ Hip hop's power of challenging discourses and politics, such as the popular notions of Islam as a violent religion and culture that are popular especially in a post-9/11 world, is one of the reasons why also Muslims are deploying hip hop as a way to create positive identities and self-representation, and be proud of their religious vocation while opposing islamophobia and stereotyping.²¹¹ Muslim rap often entails engagement with the

²⁰⁴ Aidi 2004, 18.

²⁰⁵ Aidi 2004.

²⁰⁶ A friend of mine considered my position as a young, Scandinavian, middle-class white woman researching hip hop to be extremely interesting. One might indeed question whether I have any capacity to understand the cultural framework of hip hop considering my social and ethnic background in relation to the history of hip hop (cf. e.g. Rose 1994). Regarding this I would like to note that my personal interest towards hip hop music and my experiences as an active consumer of the genre have provided me with insights that could not be acquired otherwise. In terms of Islam and Muslim identities that are also central in this study, my knowledge is purely academic and possibly more limited than my knowledge of hip hop culture.

²⁰⁷ Solomon 2010.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Aidi 2004; cf. Solomon 2010; cf. Swedenburg 2001.

²⁰⁹ Shannahan & Hussain 2011, 43, 56.

²¹⁰ Aidi 2004, 7, 11.

²¹¹ Aidi 2004; Solomon 2010; Shannahan & Hussain 2011; Swedenburg 2001.

community, both on a local and on a global level and placing Islam into the public sphere.²¹²

Muslims are not the first ones to express religious or other group identification through hip hop music; hip hop has been used from its beginnings to claim cultural and local origins, raise cultural awareness as well as to perform a sociopolitical critique. Shannahan & Hussain argue that in the case of Islamic rap, it is not only powerful in uniting Muslims across different denominations but also different ethnicities by raising solidarity against poor socio-political conditions, in their study in Tunis and in Arab countries in general.²¹³ In the case of Islamic rap, rapping then becomes a religiously-oriented activity and through its topics, a tool for creating religious and social identities. This can happen both on a personal level (spiritual elevation due to listening) or on a social level (enforced feeling of belonging to a religious community). I will next analyze how Muslim identities are constructed and represented discursively on the Internet.

²¹² Shannahan & Hussain 2011, 42, 46.

²¹³ Ibid. 47–48.

IV A CASE STUDY OF MUSLIM HIP HOP: CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES IN DISCOURSES ON THE INTERNET

8. What is MHH?

The analysis of the web site proceeds in the following manner: I will first describe the frontpage of Muslimhiphop.com and then analyze the “about us” section which contains a description of the history, mission and artist criteria of Muslimhiphop.com. These parts portray the context in which the main material of the analysis, i.e. the extracts from hip hop artist profiles and the interviews, occur.²¹⁴ The chapters are divided based on the main discourses that arise in the material; however, as will become clear, all the chapters include traits from all discourses. As the identity discourse is present throughout the material and it is a central theoretical concept, it was not included as a separate chapter, but is discussed throughout the analysis. After the analysis, I will critically discuss the web site as a whole in the conclusion.

8.1 The front page, mission and history of Muslimhiphop.com

The index page of Muslimhiphop.com (fig. 1)²¹⁵ shows a top banner with the text “Muslimhiphop.com Building a Movement”. Above the banner, the number of people liking the web site’s Facebook page is displayed, and beneath it, there are links to different sections of the site: ‘Hip-Hop’, ‘Nasheed’, ‘Pop’, ‘Reggae’, ‘Spoken Word’ and ‘Buy Music’²¹⁶. In the side banner, there are links to online streaming of MHH Radio Stations

²¹⁴ I have left out some parts from the quoted extracts in order to bring more focus into the thesis. These left out parts are always marked with brackets containing three dots, i.e. (...). I have concentrated on the interviews more than on the artist profiles simply due to the fact that they contain more in-depth information about the artists and their music than the short profiles. Some of these artist interviews were quoted more than others because they contained material that was more interesting considering the research questions (cf. Ch. 1). Mike’s interviews were also quoted ca. 10 times because the web site is his and thus, his ideas and opinions highlight the reasons for the existence and form of the web site well.

²¹⁵ Cf. <<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/>> (accessed and printed 30/01/2011). The screen capture in fig. 1 was taken on 22 April 2011.

²¹⁶ I first noticed this link in early 2011. When I checked earlier printouts, I noticed that the same link was on the very bottom of the page and with a different font and background than the rest of website, which impaired its visibility.

(‘rap and hip-hop’, ‘Islamic Nasheeds’ and ‘Pop and R&B’), to the web site’s Facebook and Twitter²¹⁷ pages, a small frame for news updates that are streamed from Facebook, ‘A-Z Muslim Artist List’, a search field, a feedback form, a newsletter subscription form and ‘tell a friend’ e-mail form.



Figure 1.

Below the top banner there is a text: “Islamic Music: Muslim Hip Hop, Muslim Rap, Islamic Nasheeds | 100% Halal Lyrics”.²¹⁸ As the font is quite big, the phrase is easily visible. The focus is clearly on hip hop/rap, and the meaning of Islamic music is narrowed in the heading to permissible lyrical content. The religious reference invites Muslims to visit the content of the web site, as it is not forbidden by the religion. Beneath the text, one can see a picture with the text “Welcome to MHH”, a hand holding some kind of baton and some calligraphy in Arabic. Next to the picture is a heading, “the latest updates from our artists”, which are streamed from Twitter. In the middle of the page, there are icons: one for each of the three main genres of the website (hip hop, nasheed, pop), and also icons

²¹⁷ “Twitter is a real-time information network that connects you to the latest information about what you find interesting. Simply find the public streams you find most compelling and follow the conversations. At the heart of Twitter are small bursts of information called Tweets. Each Tweet is 140 characters in length (...).” Cf. < <http://twitter.com/about>> (accessed 23/10/2011).

²¹⁸ Cf. <<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/>> (accessed and printed 30/01/2011).

entitled ‘more genres’, ‘radio’ (also featured in the side banner), ‘shop’ (leading to an external web site), ‘stories’, ‘forum’²¹⁹, and ‘about MHH’. There is also a video on the front page about the web site.

Web sites typically have an “about us” section, and Muslimhiphop.com is no exception. At the front page among other icons, there is one with the text ‘About MHH’ and beneath it, the text ‘What is MHH’. A click on the icon directs to a page with a heading ‘Our mission’, below which there is the following list:

- Promote the message of Muslim artists.
- Set the standard and code of conduct for those who partake in Muslim hip hop.
- Show Muslims there is a creative outlet for them to express themselves in a halal (permissible) way.
- Counter the impression given by the media that Muslims are defined by terrorism which Islam condemns.
- Prove that Islam and art, music and comedy can have a strong and appropriate relationship.
- Speak out against the injustices committed against and by Muslims.
- Share Islam with the world through the universal language of music.
- Reach out to non-practicing Muslims who would otherwise never here [sic] about Islam.²²⁰

A mission could be characterized as a commitment towards accomplishing something. Several parts of the above list deal with the promotion of Islam through music and their compatibility, but also with being a Muslim. The mission alternates between identifying what pertains to Muslim hip hop and what pertains to the web site, and in this way, their meanings and goals become intertwined. Also Muslim identification is defined by constructing norms for Muslim hip hop and thus for “correct” Muslim identification and behavior.

In the second point of the mission, Muslim hip hop is established as separate from other musical forms; the phrase could have been formulated differently, e.g. “those Muslims who partake in hip hop”, but by speaking of ‘Muslim hip hop’ as an existing entity instead, the separation between “regular” hip hop and Muslim hip hop is created. The first point emphasizes that being a Muslim is a pre-requisite for becoming a Muslim hip hop artist; however, the criteria of the web site (cf. Ch. 8.2) specifies that it is not enough. The third point emphasizes Muslim hip hop’s permissibility and innovativeness as a form of self-expression, but adjectives throughout the mission (‘creative’; ‘halal’; ‘appropriate’)

²¹⁹ A link named ‘Forum’ was still on the front page in early 2011, but it leads to a page where a heading ‘web discussion’ is displayed, and the text beneath it informs that “we have decided to move our entire community to Facebook: the old forum will no longer be accessible.”

cf. <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Web_Discussion> (accessed and printed 30/01/2011).

²²⁰ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH> (accessed and printed 30/01/2011).

legitimize this form of music as supporting and enhancing a Muslim identity.²²¹ The use of music for promoting Islam is justified near the end of the list by stating that it is a medium understandable to everyone (cf. the adjective ‘universal’) while music’s communicative power is stressed with the metaphor of language.

The mission connects several activities with Muslim artistry: *halal* self-expression, condemning terrorism, communicating Islam to others. Several abstract nouns, such as ‘message’ and ‘standard’, point towards larger understandings about the social value of Muslim-made music and its relation to society, politics and moral issues (cf. especially the expression ‘code of conduct’; cf. also Ch. 11 of this thesis). This is visible also in the last point of the list; the modal adverb ‘otherwise’ and the temporal adverb ‘never’ are discursive ways of enhancing an underlying viewpoint and of convincing the reader. It appears that two potential scenarios are presented: either the secularized Muslims listen to Muslim hip hop and in this way find Islam, or they do not listen to Muslim hip hop and remain in a state of ignorance. A similar idea is visible, but more implicitly, in the preceding point (about sharing Islam). The last point also contains the assumption that non-practicing Muslims will automatically begin to practice Islam once they get to know Islam through hip hop music. The sentence thus supports and legitimizes Muslim hip hop and the web site’s existence, and their role as teaching about Islam (cf. also Ch. 9 of this thesis) and in this way supporting a Muslim identification.

The web site’s mission not only defines Islamic music but also the ‘Islamic’ behavior for the artists (cf. the nouns ‘standard’ and ‘conduct’ in the second phrase). Interestingly, all pronouns in the mission are third person plurals (‘those’, ‘them’) although they all refer to Muslims. They are more neutral than the overtly subjective and inclusive first person plural ‘we’, but as Scheibman notes, the speaker’s point of view is tacitly included in phrases with third person plurals as it blends more with other information.²²² ‘We’ is a stronger referral to an ingroup than ‘they’ and it could have been used here as the web site founder, Mike Shapiro, is also a Muslim. The first person plural is, however, used frequently in Muslim artist profiles and interviews (cf. later) to address Muslims.

²²¹ Cf. Ch. 12 on how creativity and Islam are discussed in reference to artistry. The inclusion of all these three adjectives in the mission suggests that the *halal-haram*-discourse and the creativity discourse (used here in connection to music and arts) are linked in a way that constructs Islamic hip hop as beneficial and permissible for Muslims.

²²² Scheibman 2002, 111.

Mostly, the web site's mission refers to Muslims, but Islam is mentioned four times and once even as an active subject ("Islam condemns"); using 'Islam' rather than 'Muslims' creates an authoritative viewpoint as it can be interpreted to mean that the argument is based on doctrines such as the *sunna*, and thus the web site creators base their arguments on religious dogma rather than on the more fallible, human viewpoints. Islam is clearly separated from terrorism, but elsewhere in the mission it appears in connection with music and other arts, which enhances the argument about their compatibility. Related to this is an interesting adjective-noun combination in the mission, "appropriate relationship"; although it refers to the relationship between Islam and music, it creates an image of sexual moral rather than entertainment, and as such, indicates the level of seriousness that the issue of music has among many Muslims who are striving to be pious and behave morally. However, concrete examples of the meaning of 'Islam' or 'the message' of Muslim artists mentioned in the beginning are not provided here (the term 'message' reoccurs throughout the web site, cf. later). Apparently, the visitors of the web site are assumed to be familiar with Islam; however, it seems likely that the web site administrator(s) simply do not want to define Islam or Islamic too specifically because there is no unanimous and correct interpretation about what Islam or Islamic truly means. Meaning exclusion, what is not Islamic content is stressed here more, and it is further employed on the web site's Criteria -section and in the Music in Islam -section (cf. Ch. 8.2 & Ch. 10).

The mentioning of other forms of entertainment (comedy, art) in the mission seems irrelevant as the site focuses on music, even though the 'Links'²²³ page, which is also placed in the 'What is MHH'-section, refers to them as well. Yet, mentioning other art forms renders the web site's stance more coherent as not only music but also other types of artistic and creative activities are seen as permissible for Muslims if done in an Islamic way, meaning that the arts support Muslim self-expression and Muslim identities (cf. the third point in the mission). Especially the physical property adjective 'strong' in the mission could be interpreted as a positive evaluation about arts and their effect on Muslim identities.

²²³ Cf. <http://muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/Links> (accessed 16/12/2010). Two to five links are categorized under each of the headings, which are 'Islam', 'Record Labels', 'Comedy', 'Clothing', 'Muslim Youth' and 'Community Activism'. The latter two categories suggest that the visitors of the site are expected to be young Muslims who are interested in doing something for the community, while the four others mainly refer to lifestyle and entertainment.

Quite a different point is brought up in the middle of the mission list about the wish to change the image of Muslims in the media. Although I am not focusing on prepositions, ‘by’ is used twice to highlight how the media represents Muslims in a essentialist and fixed way – the statement is probably deliberately polemic, and as such, resembles populist rhetoric about terrorism. Both the involvement in terrorism by Muslims and the stereotyping made by non-Muslims about Muslims are stated to be reprehensible (cf. also the point after this in the mission). Being inherently prone to terrorism is excluded from Islam and being a Muslim. The interview by Radio Islam with Mike Shapiro, founder of MHH, explains more about the background for this statement about terrorism and many other parts of mission (cf. Ch. 11.2 in this thesis). The web site claims to be portraying Islam and Muslims in a correct way which is represented to be the opposite of the mainstream media.

Also the “building a movement” slogan could be added as belonging to the mission of the website, as it is written on the top banner of the site and is visible constantly when navigating on the site. ‘Movement’ suggests that there exists a range social activities and people who have the same goals as the web site and as such, it is more powerful and a larger phenomenon than just a single web site. It could be argued that the slogan points to an attempt to apply social movement or social change discourse (cf. Ch. 11). Also the expression “partake in Muslim hip hop” in the mission section quoted above implies that there exists an social entity called Muslim hip hop, which one can participate in and thus become part of a new form of music.

Also under ‘What is MHH’ is a subsection called ‘History’. The section informs that the web site was created in 2004, and shut down for 6 months in 2005 as it “consumed the lives of its administrators”²²⁴. In a few of the radio interviews which I transcribed, the MHH creator Mike Shapiro mentions that he could no longer handle the traffic coming to the site, as it required constant management.²²⁵ Apparently, he was genuinely surprised about the popularity it received. However, he re-opened the site “with a new focus”²²⁶:

Originally, virtually anyone who was Muslim could be apart [sic] of our database of over 115 artists. MHH is now precise in its focus, showcasing only professional-grade Muslim artists whose message

²²⁴ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/History > (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

²²⁵ Cf. e.g. Ch. 10, or <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/9._Radio_Islam_Interviews_MHH_a_2nd_Time> (streamed and accessed 24/2/2011).

²²⁶ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/History > (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

significantly contains Islamic content. We realized that *quality* [italics in the original], not quantity is a virtue.²²⁷

The adverbs ‘originally’ and ‘virtually’ belittle both the previous version of the site as well as its artists. The improvement visible in the current situation is emphasized with value adjectives ‘precise’ and ‘professional-grade’ and especially with the nominalized adjective ‘quality’. The clear characterization of high standards, whether they are truly applied or not, can be seen to create an image of the web site as morally responsible and enhancing Islamic values and musical quality of Muslim artists. Good quality in Muslim-made music becomes partially defined as lyrics with Islamic content which are given a religious value with the abstract noun ‘virtue’.

Also in the ‘History’ section is a short list of links after the title ‘Press’ to the “most notable” of the ‘numerous’ publications in which MHH has been featured; these adjectives seem informational, but are in fact evaluative and likely used to impress the site visitors and convince them that the web site is prominent and professional also in the eyes of non-Muslims. The Criteria for artists further discusses the issues mentioned in the mission.

8.2 Criteria

The web site has a strict list of criteria for those Muslim artists who wish to be included on the site. I have quoted below the list of criteria in its entirety.

Official Criteria for MuslimHipHop.com Artists

1. Islamic Content: Lyrics significantly about Islamic topics are what separates Muslim Hip Hop from all other forms. Therefore, MHH does not promote artists that simply happen to be Muslim. Additionally, the message must not employ the use of profanity or senseless violence nor promote sects/division.
2. Professionalism: Professional-quality recordings, not dinky beats made with fruity loops.²²⁸
3. Talent: We are showcasing mainstream-quality artists, not OK artists.
4. Approach: A "Muslim Artist" isn't necessarily a career or occupation. First and foremost, it is a role a Muslim takes on to promote an Islamic message through music, only if they first fulfill their financial, familial and other Islamic obligations.
5. Public Conduct: Muslim artists promoted by MuslimHipHop.com must behave in agreement with Islamic principles. Any un-Islamic behavior online or at performances is unacceptable and will result in immediate removal from this website.²²⁹

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ ‘Fruity loops’ refers to a name of a music production software; cf. <<http://flstudio.image-line.com/help/>> (accessed 01/04/2011).

²²⁹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/Criteria> (accessed and printed 21/9/2010).

Muslim hip hop is here again defined as ‘Islamic’ lyrical content but it is also distinguished from other types of music. The meaning of ‘Islamic’ is not directly explained, however, it is possible to detect meanings that are excluded from Islamic and being a Muslim: the use of foul language or references to violence, putting a music career ahead of more important values i.e. family and economic stability, socially reprehensible behavior, advancing division (among Muslims). In fact, every criterion on the list contains some kind of negation. The actual meanings that seem to be referred to are implicit: promoting peace, family values and the unity of Muslims. Also, when looking at the collocation of the adjective ‘Islamic’ in the list, it can be assumed that the content and topics in Muslim hip hop are related to the message, obligations and principles of Islam. The list above creates an assumption that all artists featured on the web site fulfill these criteria and make *halal* music, which may affect the site visitors’ views on the artists.

Even though being an artist is assumed here to be secondary to religious duties, the music must be of the same quality as those who are professional, full-time musicians. The ‘professional’ quality or ‘mainstream’ quality of music is not specified in the list. In the hip hop context, strong beats, “flow” in rhyming and insightful lyrical content are often considered most important.²³⁰ It seems that these elements are described through meaning exclusion in point one, two and three, although ‘mainstream’ vaguely refers to talent. Mike Shapiro also discusses this issue in one of his interviews (cf. later in this thesis).

The abundant use of nominalized verbs and adjectives (‘the use of’, ‘professionalism’, ‘approach’, ‘removal’) generalizes but also replaces activities with constructed entities that are tightly connected to each other due to the list format: identifying both as a Muslim and as an artist is possible, but Islam precedes other identifications and this norm must be visible in the music. All the adverbs (e.g. ‘first’, ‘first and foremost’) intensify this idea. Music seems to become a tool for the expression of ‘Islamic’ ideas more than an art enjoyed in and of itself; a Muslim must follow Islamic principles before their artistic dreams.

After the criteria, there is more text underneath ‘Further Explanation’:

The Official Criteria for MuslimHipHop.com Artists was developed to address a growing trend of problems in the Muslim community. Certain Muslim artists had begun violating the basic principles of Islam. Lyrics riddled with profanity, gratuitous violence, racism and other behavior began to surface while many Muslims began to shun Islamic music all together.

²³⁰ cf. Rose 1994; Krims 2000.

With this in mind, MuslimHipHop.com took a stand and created a code of conduct for Muslim artists. It is not meant to discriminate against those who don't practice the code; rather, it's to encourage them to raise the bar and engage in Islamic music in a way that respects the traditions and values of Islam.

It's important to note that if MHH added every artist that simply had an Islamic message, then there would be no incentive for them to improve themselves and really make a name for Muslim music. It is our intention when people come to this site, they should be given the impression that Muslims can make the same caliber music as any non-Muslim artist while having a message of righteousness and truth.

NOTE: This code of conduct is NOT set in stone. MHH is always open to your thoughts and feedback regarding the code as well as any modifications to it.

We are not trying to be the "authority" or dictate how Muslim hip hop should be; we are simply endorsing the idea that Muslim hip hop should be done carefully, as we do not want to violate the very religion we sing and rap about.

If you feel that you or someone you know meets this criteria and are not already on our official database, please let us know.²³¹

This piece of text clarifies many of the ideas mentioned in the 'mission' and in the 'criteria', while also referring to larger social issues. It also functions as a disclaimer against those who see music as forbidden for Muslims (cf. also Ch. 10). The stand-taking about what Muslim hip hop should be is justified with the list of social problems and forbidden elements in the lyrics such as violence, profanity and racism. Already the adverb 'while' in the first paragraph reveals that these are assumed to be the reasons why some Muslims consider music as forbidden whereas the second paragraph says it bluntly. The text also mentions non-Muslim artists in order to distinguish what Muslim-made or Islamic hip hop should be like. The second paragraph draws a picture of the Muslim hip hop in a way reminiscent of many nationalist discourses where a common identity is constructed on 'traditions' and 'values', as here also these same assumed entities are mentioned. This construction of shared traditions and values seems to imply that there is only one "correct" religious interpretation about Muslim music and its content. However, the opportunity to give feedback about the site and to negotiate this interpretation and the criteria of 'Islamic' music and artist conduct is also offered to the visitors of the web site at the end.

The extract contains a disclaimer statement according to which the code is not a discrimination against those who do not abide by it and that the web site is not trying to 'dictate' what Muslim hip hop should be; yet, if discrimination is understood to mean exclusion, this is exactly what the web site claims to do in the criteria number one and five. It is also stressed that the web site tries to enhance the quality and public status of Islamic music by encouraging Muslims artists; the adverb 'then' (preceded and supported by the conjunction 'if') in the third paragraph creates an assumption that the quality of Muslim music would remain stagnant without the web site and thus legitimizes the site's existence.

²³¹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/Criteria> (accessed and printed 21/9/2010).

Additionally, Muslim artists are required to communicate justice and morality in their music, a norm which is constructed with the nouns 'righteousness' and 'truth' that are contextual value assertions. However, attaining commercial success is also valued (cf. "raise the bar", "make a name", "promote").

The 'What is MHH'-section of the web site creates a framework for a discourse about Muslim hip hop and Muslim music. Muslim hip hop becomes defined as respectful of Islamic values by containing only *halal* lyrics (cf. the text "100% Halal lyrics" on the front page of the site²³²) and as a way to express Muslim identities. Summarizing, the criteria and its elaboration characterize Muslim hip hop as enhancing a Muslim identities and Islamic values and traditions, and because the web site promotes this kind of music, it, too, enhances these. The ideas that are mentioned above also support the subsection 'Music in Islam' (cf. Ch. 10). The main discourses that are present throughout the web site, and which I will further elaborate on in the following chapters, are already present in the mission and the criteria: the halal-haram-discourse regarding music's permissibility, the education discourse, the discourse encouraging social change and the creativity discourse as well as the commercialism discourse. Many of the themes that have been discussed so far are also present in the other parts of the material under analysis. From here onwards, the analysis follows a more thematic format where the different discourses are analyzed.

9. The education discourse: Making *dawah* through Islamic hip hop

The reasons behind the emergence of Islamic hip hop music are numerous. Many artists state that they hope to remind and educate Muslims about Islamic principles and values while offering a permissible form of music which Muslims and even non-Muslims can find enjoyable as well as morally and spiritually uplifting. Several artists specifically mention that by filling their lyrics with Islamic references, they are hoping to make *dawah*, i.e. educate Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam. In the material, Islam is often referred to as the message but also as 'the truth'. Pratt has listed various meanings for *dawah* which also include 'propaganda' and 'missionary call'²³³; some artists on the web site claim that

²³² <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH> (accessed and printed 30/1/2011).

²³³ Pratt 2005, 194.

their music has had an impact on people's conversion to Islam. Here, I have named these references as the education discourse. Below are some examples of how artists are discursively constructing arguments about their own music and Islamic hip hop in general as something that is educative, beneficial and permissible for Muslims and supports a Muslim identity.

The extract below is from the artist profile of the group Baby Muslims. The group members were born in the United Kingdom into immigrant families.

The truth is, it is really not about us, it is all about Allah. The music is just a way to invite people in to Islam and hopefully encourage the ummah to stay true to the din by the will of Allah (...) We use the name 'babymuslims' as we are still relatively new to the din (way of life), and we have found that in Islam, like a child, you never stop learning so our biggest test is trying to remain humble by keeping our egos in check as much as we can. We have been involved in making hip-hop for over 10 years, most of which were in the days of jahiliyyah when we went through many misguided "alter egos" within a very misguided industry which caused us to loose [sic] faith in hip-hop entirely and hang-up our microphones (so to speak). Then, after a clean break from music we found Allah alhumdulilah and focused on our faith before deciding to express this new way of life through the talents that Allah has given us. Our hope is to meet and expand our network of muslim artist for feedback, inspiration and support as we will do the same for you inshallah, and we thank you in advance mashallah!²³⁴

Here, the artist group Baby Muslims defines (Islamic) music as being about God (Allah) but also about inviting people to Islam and encouraging them to follow the Islamic way of life ('din'). 'People' become synonymous with 'ummah' as they are located in the same sentence as objects of 'the way', which gives the impression that the music is meant to address Muslims in particular. Creating a religious group identity for Muslims with the help of music becomes a religiously inspired value. Baby Muslims offer a seemingly honest, humble and pious image of themselves as they continuously use the subjective and personal 'we' and claim that the music is not about them, emphasized with the modal adverb 'really'. The adverb 'just' is used in a similar fashion when the music's function is narrowed down to a tool for reaching a religious goal. The artists also emphasize the recentness of their Islamic lifestyle through a narrative, which devalues their former selves and non-Islamic hip hop while morally revering Muslim hip hop; Muslim hip hop becomes the genre of those who have found God and who have abandoned their egos.

The group's identification as Muslims is presented here in several ways, but the Baby Muslims also discursively solicit this identification in other Muslims and construct a shared ingroup identity e.g. by using Arabic expressions (language switching) and the pronoun 'you' both as generic and as second person plural. The personality or individuality

²³⁴ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Baby_Muslims> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

of a Muslim is seen to be secondary to Islam and Allah; the idea of submission to God, which was discussed earlier in Ch. 5, is seen as central to Muslim identity.²³⁵ By claiming that their talents were given by Allah, they not only express their religious beliefs and thus identify as Muslims, but they also justify their music making through their religion and its most central authority figure. The noun ‘support’ indicates that Baby Muslims seek the acceptance of Muslims for their music.

A Haitian-Canadian artist Brother Yusuf explains in the below extract that after he returned to Islam (cf. ‘reversion’; this term is commonly used instead of “conversion” among Muslim converts), his lyrics became religiously and socially conscious. One central motif is the Islamic monotheism:

“After 2001, my writings have always had messages that reflected religious principles or simply made an honest assessment of the human condition in this world. My reversion to Islam has impacted the words in my music, as well as its values and themes.” His song “Peace Be Upon Them” produced by Constant Elevation is a prime example. It has an entirely Islamic message and expounds upon one of Islam’s central principles – there is only one God without partner and all of the prophets and messengers from Adam to Muhammad (saw) delivered that same message. (...) ²³⁶

The extract resembles a narrative structure: first, the circumstances (time) are described and then an event is mentioned (the conversion), after which its outcomes are explained (music with an Islamic message). The extract is first constructed in the first person voice with the repetitive ‘my’, then followed by the narrator-like neutral voice. The ‘message’ is monotheism, and all those considered as prophets in Islam delivered that message (cf. also the Islamic profession of faith). Now, this message is said to be delivered in Brother Yusuf’s rap lyrics, which is emphasized with adverbs (‘always’, ‘simply’, ‘entirely’). Because the message is claimed to be the same, he also becomes similar to the religious authority figures, the prophets. The evaluative, attributing adjectives ‘prime’, ‘Islamic’ and ‘central’ mark subjectivity about the artist and his music, and because they are immediately followed by the reference to monotheism and respect for prophets, also these religious principles become valued semantically in the same way, as central and Islamic. The artist’s identification with these principles is marked earlier with the possessive ‘my’. In this way, Muslim hip hop is given the status of religious preaching and rappers the status of religious messengers.

²³⁵ This idea about submitting to Allah is even more visible in the interview of the rapper Abu Nurah, cf. <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/16._Abu_Nurah_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²³⁶ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Brother_Yusuf> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

Hip hop artists are sometimes portrayed as role models to the listeners of hip hop, and especially the youth because they use hip hop to teach and spread Islam. The below quotation from the Blakstone interview indicates some of the reasons why hip hop music in particular is used to educate about Islam:

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What inspired you to do Muslim/Islamic Hip Hop?

BLAKSTONE: The state of Muslim youth here in the UK and in the West at large was our greatest inspiration. Hip-Hop is the dominant culture amongst ethnic minorities here in Britain and the Muslims are no exception to this. But often the lyrical content is so contradictory to Islam that it causes friction amongst the youth who wish to express themselves and find an identity, and the wider Muslim community. The artists become the role models, the lyrics become the teaching ground for behaviour and personality. The result is a whole generation of youth that struggle to balance the values of the streets with the values that their belief aspires to. The change in behaviour is reflected in their view of the opposite sex, the treatment of their parents, essentially the criteria they use to define good and bad is not the Halal and Haram but is instead dictated by their desires and the peer pressure they feel. This was the primary motivation for us, reclaiming back our youth and inspiring the future generation of this ummah through a style that they appreciate, love and understand.²³⁷

Hip hop is portrayed as understandable and appealing to the ‘ethnic’ youth in Britain, where the artist group lives. This is likely due to its claimed dominance in their cultural environment. As Muslims are assumed to be “no exception” when it comes to the power and appeal of hip hop, also Blakstone’s engagement with hip hop becomes justified as an effective means to an end, which appears to be the strengthening of Islam. Hip hop is referred to with the entity noun ‘culture’, and not only as music, which gives it a more extensive and prominent status. Hip hop culture is constructed as a powerful tool for teaching, and anyone using it as having power to control especially the minds of young people; in this way, its effectiveness in spreading Islam becomes factual. The usage of the adjective ‘dominant’ constructs authority for the artists as well: because they use an effective tool for teaching Islam, the (Muslim) hip hop artists “become the role models” and thus exercise power.

However, mainstream hip hop lyrics are referred to as ‘often’ contradicting Islam and suppressing Muslim self-expression and identity building. The assumed contradiction is further stressed by juxtaposing “street values” (which can be assumed to refer to values usually conveyed in hip hop music) with the values of Islam; the active subject is ‘belief’, an abstract concept, and not the youth. By using words like ‘struggle’, ‘dictates’ and ‘pressure’, the youth are characterized as being under several, contradictory demands while also the self-determination of the youth is taken away from them. They are seen as having hopes but not expressing them, as well as being in search of an identity. The description

²³⁷ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/5._Blakstone_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

renders them passive and incapable of defining their values themselves, such as good and bad. In this way, the need for Muslim hip hop to help construct Muslim identities is created. Although it is not said directly, Islamic hip hop becomes the permissible and positive alternative through the characterization of the Muslim rappers: the artists are portrayed as teachers and (their) lyrics as authority for Muslim behavior and even for Muslim personality. The justification of the hip hop activity is topped with the artists' motivation to be "reclaiming back *our* youth" [italics mine]; with the possessive form, the youth are the malleable object of their educators.

The idea of making *dawah* reoccurs several times throughout the material. Also e.g. the American group 3ILM claims to use music as a way to spread Islam:

3ILM (Arabic word for knowledge) (...) saw the need for an alternative form of music from which Muslims could benefit Islamically and mentally. Combining a wide array of instrumental flavors and lyrical styles, 3ILM hopes to reach all people with music that is both enlightening and entertaining. The group also hopes to spread the word of Islam to all people through their music as a form of Da'wah. Although the project is on the come up, the brothers are dedicated to unifying Muslim Minds for the sake of Allah, one song at a time. Non-Muslims will also be able to relate to many of our tracks, such as our feature track, "JUSTICE". Staying true to their mission, 25% of all profits from their record sales will be donated to Islamic Schools in the Tampa Bay Area. SPREAD THE WORD...SPREAD THE TRUTH...SPREAD THE DEEN.²³⁸

The extract suggests that Muslims need an alternative form of music which benefits them religiously. There is no explanation as to where this need comes from, but by making an existential statement at the beginning that such a need exists, there now is a possibility to create a causal assumption: a certain kind of music is beneficial for Muslims because it has positive effects both psychologically and religiously and thus, the making and listening of this 'alternative' music is legitimized. Although the music of 3ILM is not directly stated to be this 'alternative', it becomes semantically synonymous to it as their music is described immediately after the proposition in the paragraph and with positive adjectives, as 'enlightening' (Islamically beneficial) and 'entertaining' (mentally beneficial, quality music). *Dawah* is equated here with communicating Islam ("spreading the word of Islam") to "all people" (repeated twice), i.e. not only to Muslims, through music, which sounds quite straightforward missionary propaganda as 'the word' often denotes the word of God in religious rhetoric. In fact, the second and the third sentence have an almost identical content and are structured similarly regarding 'all people' and 'music'. This repetition, not to mention the capitalization of the verb 'spread' at the end, further stresses the point. Even the group's name is said to mean 'knowledge', and thus, the passage constructs an image of the group as being educative and responding to a 'need', which creates a positive image

²³⁸ <<http://www.mus.limhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/3ILM>> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

of their music. Muslim unity is also mentioned; this theme will be discussed more in Chapter 11.1. At the end, the capitals emphasize that justice, word, truth, and the way of life are all connected, if not synonymous, to Islam. Also, the group is portrayed as Islamically exemplary piousness (“staying true to their mission”) as they are mentioned to donate to charity, which is one of five pillars of Islam.

The rap/reggae group Mecca2Medina also states that they are offering an alternative, and delivering the Islamic message, but they also add ethnic origin to their music.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What are you goals with your Music?

MECCA2MEDINA: We would like to create a muslim [sic] youth movement with our music. We want to be the alternate [sic] to the mainstream hip hop. So young muslims can grow up and listen to Halal music that reminds them of the greatness of Allah. For me to insert Islam into the reggae arena is a major goal, nearly 70% of the slaves taken from Africa were Muslims, we need to acknowledge that within our different communities. Our music is also Dawa (delivering the message of Islam) to non-muslims [sic] there are many new muslims that have told us that they were influenced in Islam by listening to our music, we also want to instill pride in the young Muslims growing up in the west where Islam is demeaned daily.²³⁹

This extract is actually one of the few that includes the term ‘movement’, aside from those ideas on the web site that quite clearly pertain to Mike Shapiro, the MHH founder. Here, movement refers to Muslim youth in particular and by creating one with ‘halal’ music, the youth will be reminded of “the greatness of Allah”. The music content is represented as religious and as religiously inspired. It is also stressed that the message is especially aimed at those Muslims living in the ‘west’. The statement constructs a polarization, where unknown agents humiliate Islam and Muslims constantly; this leads to assume that Muslims are better off elsewhere in terms of intergroup relations, and that Western countries are hostile towards those identifying as Muslims. Making *dawah* through music is represented here as not only the act of spreading Islam, but also spreading pride and perhaps joy about being Muslim, and even aiming to convert non-Muslims²⁴⁰ (“to non-muslims there are many new muslims”). The extract also constructs the notion that Muslims are in need of the group’s music, an alternative, to uplift their Muslim identification and that the group is responding to this need. For more analysis on fighting against misrepresentations of Muslims, see Ch. 11.2.

²³⁹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/2._Mecca2Medina_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/9/2010).

²⁴⁰ Also the American rap group with Puerto Rican roots, M-Team, claims in their interview that their music has impacted on people’s conversion to Muslims, although the direct causality is evaded with a reference to Allah. Cf. <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/13._M-Team_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

The group members were mentioned to have been born and raised in London, UK, and a picture of the band members next to the interview shows that their skin color is black. An African Muslim heritage is evoked here and also later the interview (“I found out about the great African Muslim kings who had made a great contribution to world civilization”²⁴¹) which leads to assume that they also have African heritage and that it is linked with their identification with Islam. Although I am here confined to the limits of this thesis and cannot address the construction of ethnic or racial identities any further, I wish to stress that the above extract is an example of the richness of the data at hand and also a case in point that identity is a mixture of very many interrelated components. Even seemingly religious motivation may have some ethnic incentives because these two, religion and ethnicity, are not always separate.²⁴²

The rapper Tyson specifically mentions ‘information’ and ‘message’ but also Muslim identity in relation to music in his interview.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What role do you think music can have in positively affecting the Muslim community?

TYSON: Well, here in the U.S., we kinda just have to be real. The youth when they grow up, they're watching TV, they're watching movies, they like cartoons, they watch videos, they listen to the radio. And so if you as a parent are going to have your child totally removed from this whole "western" way of life, and just protect them from that, then cool...you don't need anything from music. But if not, then your child is exposed to all these things...what do you want them to see? What type of information do you want them to get? Do you want them to get this information from BET, MTV, Disney Channel, all of that stuff where there's really no redeeming Islamic quality in it, or, do you want them to get some Islamic message; a reminder about Allah, teach them about their messenger Salallahu Alayhi Wasalam, and continue to try and inspire and motivate them to hold on to an Islamic identity and really be proud to be Muslim and allow them to progress. And so I think music plays that role, it has that power to influence that because we listen to music. And so we need to have music that is good for the Muslims...and good for the non-Muslims as well because they get to learn about Islam in a new way.²⁴³

The question seems to contain a causal assumption that music does have a positive effect on the Muslim community, and also that there is something that is causing negativity to the community and that needs to be affected in a positive manner. Tyson begins by asserting that one must be realistic (“we kinda just have to be real”) in the United States; continuing with the fact-like temporal ‘when’, he claims that during their childhood, children are under potentially harmful influences (cf. the adjective ‘exposed’ and the verb ‘protect’) of the “western” way of life that he describes by listing TV, radio etc. With his description, he

²⁴¹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/2._Mecca2Medina_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/9/2010).

²⁴² The several other references to ethnicity that were visible in the material were not analyzed due to lack of space. Ethnicity is a very complex aspect of identities; numerous studies are still needed in order to begin to grasp how religion, ethnicity and hip hop are interconnected. As my focus is not on ethnic identities, I have chosen only this one clear example of ethnicity evocation to this thesis.

²⁴³ Quoted from: <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/1._Tyson_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

accentuates the image of “western” entertainment as affecting Muslim children negatively, perhaps trying to also perpetuate the interviewer’s underlying assumption in the question. Music of “Islamic quality” is then portrayed as the antonym to the mainstream media content in the United States and as the positive alternative to it. The word *haram*, however, is not mentioned in Tyson’s interview, and the use of quotation marks with the word ‘western’ suggests that the essentialism of the word is questioned at least to some extent; the entertainment can be allowed under certain conditions, which Tyson then elaborates on. He appears to mask value assumptions as questions, which is an implicit way to create image of what is good for “your child”: the reader is asked to participate in his parental concern and assessment with the continuing use of the pronoun ‘you’ and the questions.

Among the questions, Tyson portrays the situation as a choice: a Muslim parent can deny the consumption of “western” entertainment completely from one’s children or resolve the problem by taking the “western” music style and use it for inciting an Islamic identity (mentioned directly in the text) and pride about being Muslim. Here again, Islamic music is equated with remembrance and knowledge about Allah and the prophet (after which Tyson, as those identifying as Muslims are expected to, cites in Arabic “peace and blessings be upon him”); the phrase appeared also earlier in the interview with an English translation). Tyson claims that entertainment such as music is claimed to possess power to influence people, which he justifies with the assumption that ‘we’, the ingroup, listen to it. Therefore, there is a need for entertainment which conveys an Islamic message and thus is educative and ‘good’ for Muslims and non-Muslims. The un-Islamic music does not enhance a Muslim identification and is thus without positive influence. The adverb ‘so’ which refers to a consequence, stresses that there is in fact a need for Muslim hip hop for reminding people and the youth especially about their identification as Muslims. Music is equated with modernity, on the one hand, and western life, on the other, but negotiating the music’s content by bringing Islam into it seems to change the situation in favor of music listening as opposed to total withdrawal from entertainment.

As was discussed earlier, Solomon has noted that sharing similar circumstances, such as social marginalization, may contribute to groups employing the same medium of self-expression.²⁴⁴ Mike Shapiro also asserts that hip hop is a relevant art form for Muslims to express themselves due to its history and popularity.

I: Why are Muslim artists gravitating towards hip hop and rap?

²⁴⁴ Solomon 2010.

M: Well, hip hop has always been sort of, a voice of the unheard. Muslims especially can't get their voices heard, and hip hop is a very useful tool to communicate your ideas, whether they're good or bad. And we can see hip hop used in a bad way, such as Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent. They actually have an impact on the youth whereas we as, you know, Muslims that believe(?) in Islam have something good come out of it.

I: I guess it's a lot cooler and bit more accessible for younger audiences as well?

M: Exactly, because you can't just talk about Islam in the mosque. There has to be as many avenues as possible; I mean some people would never hear about Islam, but they like hip hop so maybe they'll listen to hip hop sung by one of our artists, and feel(?) "okay hey, this is really cool and it's sort of teaching me about the benefits of Islam", or you know, stuff like that. That is really powerful, and we can reach people who [we] never thought of reaching before.

Mike constructs Muslims as a group that has been silenced more than others (cf. the adverb 'especially'), and thus there is a need for Muslim hip hop to change and correct the situation; with the adverb 'always' he gives the impression that this has been done before and therefore the medium will work now as well. The discourse of positive social change is visible here, and will be discussed further in chapter 11. By claiming that hip hop is currently used wrongly, he creates an image of Muslim hip hop as its opposite and legitimizes it. The interviewer constructs the image of hip hop as 'cool' and as reaching the youth, which enhances the argument about using hip hop for Islamic education. Mike co-constructs this view by imitating the reaction of a young Muslim ("hey this is really cool"). With the adverb 'just', he creates the assumption that mosques are not enough for teaching Islam, and with the adverb 'really', he further stresses that hip hop must be employed because it is more effective in portraying Islam in a positive and interesting way. By referring to "our artists", Mike seems to offer his web site's rappers as this educative solution. He also includes himself in the group of Muslims here with the pronoun 'we'; he does not do this very often in his interviews, and here it serves as a contrast to the 'bad' hip hop and artists to show that 'good' is the result of Muslim hip hop. He even seems to imply that hip hop is the ultimate way of teaching Islam, as he repeats the adverb 'never' twice in his response to highlight how well hip hop can reach youth in comparison to other mediums.

One exception to the common views about hip hop as *dawah* is the profile of the rap group Blakstone²⁴⁵; although hip hop becomes defined as influencing Muslims with its content and it's effectiveness is established by claiming that the traditional authorities such as Imams are incapable of reaching all Muslims, it is separated from the concept of *dawah*. In their interview²⁴⁶, Blakstone does not even mention it at all. Also the rapper Kareem Ali has similar views, as he denies that hip hop could make anyone a Muslim although it has a

²⁴⁵ <<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Blakstone>> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

²⁴⁶ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/5._Blakstone_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

power to influence people.²⁴⁷ This proves that hip hop's educative and expressive role can be seen in more ways than one.

Muslims seem to condemn the content of mainstream music quite unanimously as unsuitable for devout Muslims, whereas Muslim hip hop is portrayed as its opposite on the MHH web site. The next chapter focuses on this frequent use of the halal-haram-discourse.

10. The halal-haram-discourse: Islamic hip hop as a permissible alternative

Many artists on the web site appear to see the combination of Islam and hip hop as positive because together they are argued to become a *halal* (permissible), powerful and educative alternative to the mainstream hip hop, which is claimed to be very often *haram*, e.g. full of references to violence, sex, drugs and profanity. The halal-haram-discourse or discourse on Islamic morals, what is allowed and what is not, is clearly connected with the education discourse discussed in the previous chapter; both are used to justify Muslim hip hop.

“Music in Islam” is a subsection of the ‘What is MHH’-section, but another link to it is visible throughout the web site at the bottom of every page with the words “Before You Judge: Read our Position about Music in Islam” [capitals and underlining in the original hyperlink at the site]. The link name as well as the entire section seems to be a disclaimer directed at those Muslims who claim that music or some types of music are not permissible for Muslims to enjoy. The verb ‘judge’ implies that the web site has received its share of negative feedback about its content.

There are some scholars that say it is haram (forbidden) in all cases, some that say no musical instruments can be used, and some say it's halal (permissible) as long as it doesn't contain content which violates the principles of Islam (i.e. sex, drugs, violence, profanity). We take the latter viewpoint on this matter. While we are not scholars, we have consulted different scholars on the issue and have made an informed decision. Take a moment to view the following resources that advocate this viewpoint(...)²⁴⁸

A short list of online articles follows this text. Here, the existence of a debate around the issue is acknowledged, yet the visitor is overtly encouraged to share the web site's stance that music is *halal*. The standpoint is clarified with meaning exclusion as the content that is

²⁴⁷ http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Kareem_Ali> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

²⁴⁸ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/Music_in_Islam> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

considered to violate Islam's principles is listed in brackets; in this way, the halal-haram-discourse is used to support Muslim hip hop. Similarly to other parts of the web site's "about us" section, the 'Islamic' content or Islam's principles are not described. The web site's viewpoint is given authority with the mentioning of Muslim scholars and on the alleged extensive studying of religious sources.

Web page authors understand the meaning of their pages largely through considering the audience and view visits to their website as a form of acknowledgment.²⁴⁹ The differing viewpoints about Islam's relationship with music and possible negative feedback the site has received may explain why so much space has been employed to justify Muslim hip hop. There are also several quotes of the positive feedback about the web site in the "What is MHH: Music in Islam" -section²⁵⁰. I have quoted some of the feedback below:

Feedback to MHH (on the beneficial effects Islamic Music has had on their faith)

salam alakyum-what a relief to find you! i was just starting to write and perform hip hop when i was led to islam- i just made my shahada- i was so conflicted about whether i would be able to continue writing and performing my music.....now i have found you, and see other muslims and especially other muslimas! making hip hop!!!! a great weight has been taken off my shoulders!
-Eden

Salam to you all brothers and sisters...thanks for this awesome website this has motivated me to listen to more Islamic music and less of our western hip hop with so much dirty things in there.
-Hera

This site is great Mashallah. It will encourage children to keep their Deen.
-Zahira

Thank you for this brilliant website. I used to love listening to other kinds of music, but as a Muslim myself I find it was a hard thing to give up completely, so Alhamdulillah I came across your site and now I listen to these Islamic-based songs. Jazakallah.
-Zahia

Also here it is possible to detect traces of the educational discourse (cf. Zahira's comment), whereas the other comments clearly point to ideas about music's permissibility as well as the possible conflicts it causes for a Muslim identity (cf. Chapter 12 of this thesis). As can be seen from the quotes, the heading does not represent the feedback objectively because the feedback refers to a large variety of other things than personal experience of or even Islamic music. The title constructs an assumption that a great deal of the feedback to the web site praises Islamic music and that these people have personally experienced the assumed "beneficial effects"; simply put, the heading aims to create an image of Islamic music as having, by default, positive effects. However, several aspects in the quotes

²⁴⁹ Hine 2000, 11.

²⁵⁰ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/Music_in_Islam> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010)

contradict this straightforward idea, most of all the experienced contradictions concerning music's permissibility as mentioned by Eden ja Zahia. The quote by Zahira refers to the future whereas the past tense in the heading assumes that the music has already had an effect. Also, the heading refers to people expressing personal gratitude, but again Zahira's feedback does not refer to the writer herself, and it does not actually refer to music at all but to the web site and to children maintaining an Islamic way of life (*Deen*). Some quotes actually praise the website more than they praise the music ("this site is great"; "this brilliant website") and with *Mashallah* (whatever Allah wills) and *Alhamdulillah* (praise to Allah), also surprise is expressed about the existence of the site and of Muslim hip hop. Eden's feedback, however, presents Islamic hip hop as diminishing, or even effacing, music's harmful effects on religious identification. Hera further contrasts Muslim hip hop with the 'western' hip hop by using a very negative evaluative adjective ('dirty') to describe its content, which semantically makes Muslim hip hop its opposite, i.e. positive and permissible. With the temporal adverb 'now', both Eden and Zahia express an evaluation of their current situation with Muslim hip hop as being better than before when they listened to other music.

Muslim hip hop was often claimed not to contradict Islam at the site, whereas other hip hop was often considered to do so. As stated earlier, some researchers have included rappers who are members of Five Percent or the NOI into the category of Muslim hip hop. In one of the radio interviews, Mike differentiates orthodox Muslims from the members of Five Percent and the NOI when he defines Muslim hip hop. In the transcription below of the Radio Islam interview, he is explaining about how the focus of his web site came about.

I: (...) Now, I know you started about two years ago and you said you actually shut down for about six months. What led you to shutting the site down for this short period of time?

M: Yeah, I mean back then I was a little less mature than I am now, I think uhm...

I: Okay.

M: I was twenty-three, and... You know, I just wanted to experiment, see what happens so I basically added any artist that was Muslim. I didn't really care too much about what he talked about or if he cursed or anything like that, and... But then, you know I, as time went on like, the site got really suc--popular and I was like the only one, you know, one of the only guys running things and like I couldn't handle it all and then you know... I don't know, I just lost my focus, like I was like "why the hell, what is this Muslim hip hop, it's just Muslims that happen to be Muslims that happen to rap, I mean that's all it is", so I just said "forget it", so uh... About six months went by, there was actually another web site that came up, uhm, in lieu of mine, and... But I really, you know, I really respected the fact that he tried to put it up but uh... It was totally not, I don't, I think it was totally wrong, the whole approach was wrong because he was having people on that were cursing, that were just like, Five Percent Muslims and Nation of Islam and all these just like, wack people in my opinion, that were totally spreading the wrong message. So, I said okay, I gotta have something up

there that's gonna, you know, set a standard or criteria for Muslims to, to know how to make Islamic music, in a way that doesn't violate the religion, you know? I felt that that was happening so...²⁵¹

Mike's response begins with a narrative structure (cf. the repetition of the adverb 'then'). He explains going through a wearing period stressed with the repetition of the adverb 'only' during which he was in charge of maintaining the web site. With this, and by using the utterance 'you know' several times, Mike seems to ask for understanding for his loss of focus and support for his point of view about a standard for music. He makes excuses for his earlier web site and its less conscious musical orientation by pleading to young age and circumstances, then strongly criticizes another web site, which, for all we know, was not much different from his earlier site. Mike also uses the first person singular along with many verbs of cognition (think, feel, know) throughout the extract, which highlights the subjectivity of his views. The MHH web site and Muslim hip hop in general are perhaps a very personal matter to Mike, yet condemning of the other web site may also be a marketing strategy to enhance his own website and to attain support for his interpretation about Islam and music's relationship.

The extract further stresses the point of view that truly Islamic music is something other than just Muslims rapping. The 'wrong message' of Muslim hip hop, which is attributed to the Five Percenters and the Nation of Islam, seems to be contrasted here with the "right" message that is mentioned e.g. in the Criteria of MHH. According to Mike, 'Islamic' music does not violate Islam, which leads the listener of the radio interview to assume that the 'wrong' music (i.e. music made by the Five Percenters and NOI and which contains cursing) does. Mike accentuates his opinion about these groups and the other web site by repeating the adverbs 'just' and 'totally', which seems excessive as already the value adjective 'wrong' and 'wack' are very powerful in expressing a subjective opinion, in this case condemning what is characterized as non-Islamic music. In this way, he also seems to be separating "good" Muslims from "bad" Muslims, and defines what it means to be a Muslim and a religiously conscious rapper.

The rhetorical device of strongly contrasting Muslim hip hop with music made by non-Muslims appears to be an important way for Muslim rappers to invite support and listeners for their music, as seen below. The rapper Nasiric is said to consider mainstream music 'garbage', un-Islamic and blatantly commercial.

²⁵¹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/9._Radio_Islam_Interviews_MHH_a_2nd_Time> (streamed and transcribed 24/02/2011).

Nasiric believes that if it is not to give our youth an alternative to the garbage that is on the radio today, if it doesn't uplift the purpose of Islam, and if it's for the dollars, it's not worth the time we are given on the Earth.²⁵²

Muslims are established here as an ingroup with the possessive 'our' when referring to young Muslims, and Muslim hip hop as the alternative that Muslim rappers are supposed to give to them. The extract creates a norm for making Muslim hip hop, similar to what is visible elsewhere on the web site, through the conditioning conjunction 'if': the music on the radio and materialism is not Islamic and thus not what Muslim rappers should engage with. Instead, a Muslim artist must focus on promoting Islam in their music. The contrasting here automatically portrays Islamic music positively, because it becomes the opposite of 'garbage'.

Arguing for music's permissibility using the scholarly authority was fairly common in the material. In the KDHR student radio interview, Mike uses the scholarly division on the matter to justify his view about Islamic music and Muslim hip hop. He appears to be explaining the issue to non-Muslims in particular (cf. the Radio Islam interview above).

I: (...) Uh, is music a big part of Islamic culture?

M: Well, the culture is main- if you do hear music in...the Islamic culture, I guess, mainly the Arabic culture it's uh, it's called Nasheed music, which is music that's like, strictly for...dedicated to God. I mean, it's not like, that like, not like secular music, it's just like almost *all* religious. Uh...then you have like Arabic music, which is, could be anything, like, 'cause not...not all Muslims are Arabs as a lot of people think. So you have that, and that could be about anything. But, the whole idea of Islamic music is kind of controversial because, a lot of scholars say that you can't even do music at all, period.

I: Yeah.

M: And it's like, and then, as a musician coming into Islam, I was like "are you sure about that? 'Cause that's kind of crazy, you know." [laughing] And, so I did more research and I looked at like, the different verses that they use to justify that, and there's really a differing of opinion, I mean, there's different scholars that have different opinions, and I think if music is used to s-- to kind of, to promote an Islamic message, then it's positive. I don't see any logical problems with that. I mean, it just doesn't make sense that it would be... I could see if you're talking about sex, drugs and violence and stuff like that that's against the values of Islam, but not, not if it's about like, you know, praying five times a day, and you know, respect your neighbors, you know just... peaceful stuff like that, uh, I think it's, it's fine and... And apparently a lot of people agree 'cause, the site's doing really well so... [I'm] pretty excited about that...²⁵³

When first explaining about the relationship between Islam and music, Mike begins with mentioning two stereotypes of Islamic music, Nasheed and Arabic music. However, he corrects himself ("not all Muslims are Arabs") before mentioning that the issue is disputed; he emphasizes the range of opinions with the adverb 'really' ("there's really a differing of opinion"), after which he, albeit slightly hesitantly, stresses his opinion that music without forbidden elements is allowed ("it's positive"; "it's fine"). By stating that he himself is a

²⁵² <<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Nasiric>> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

²⁵³ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/6._KDHR_Interviews_MHH> (streamed and transcribed 26/02/2011).

musician and was already before he converted, it appears that Mike wants to be able to maintain both music and Islam in his life, to “have it all”, so to say. This personal interest may also lie behind his representations of music as positive to a Muslim identity; if he can convince other Muslims to take his standpoint, the controversy that the issue seems to be causing to his identity might also be reduced. He further supports his own idea by interpreting his web site’s popularity to be a sign of people agreeing with him, and he expresses contentment about it. The subjectivity of his opinion about music is most marked when he calls the opinions denouncing music as irrational (“that’s kind of crazy you know”; “it just doesn’t make sense”). He also uses generic pronouns (‘you’, ‘they’), which allow him to build a general image of the issue without having to specify who said what. In this way, criticizing the arguments that he makes is more difficult. As in other interviews, Mike seems to repeat the phrase “you know”, which seems to happen whenever he hopes to get support for a subjective viewpoint.

Like Mike, many artists justify their musical career with scholarly opinions, or disagreement. The below extract is from the profile of an artist called DJ Cee Life.

So in my attempt to worship ALLAH I stopped listening to haram music and decided to use my musical talents in an Islamic way. THE SCHOLARS of Islam differ on the topic of music, but for the most part some will agree if it reminds you of ALLAH than [sic] it is halal for the Muslims ear. So this is my attempt to give Muslims who may be listening to obviously haram music, an alternative. I also intend to do dawah and give non-Muslims a window into Islam. [all capitals in original text]²⁵⁴

In this text, DJ Cee Life appears to be giving a personal account by using the first person singular pronoun, mostly explaining about music related moral choices by constructing the halal-haram –discourse: he argues against the forbidden music while promoting his own music as the better, religious option.

The rapper relates his music making to his piousness; for example, his personal experience and music making become connected with the adverb ‘so’ twice. He first constructs an entity of ‘haram’ music (repeated twice in the text), then contrasts it with ‘halal’ music which is claimed to be about Allah, and then asserts that his attempt to perform *dawah* is to make this kind of religious music. He bases his views about music mostly on religious authority figures that are capitalized in text, which stresses their importance. Very few adjectives are employed, and in fact all are directly Islam-related except for the superlative ‘most’, which is used when the artist acknowledges the scholarly disagreement about the

²⁵⁴<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/DJ_Cee_Life> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

permissibility of music for Muslims. However, he then belittles it and makes his own interpretation about it. Although my focus is not on conjunctions, I have paid attention to them here and added italics to clarify how the argument is grammatically constructed to give authority and support the artist's viewpoint: "*but* for the most part some will agree *if* it reminds you of ALLAH *than* [sic] it is halal"; the contrast and conditional prepositions as well as the temporal 'then' (misspelled in the original) highlight this semantic meaning by discursively creating conditions in which the viewpoint about music's permissibility becomes valid. The unspecific pronoun 'some' along with the future tense verb 'will', however, deconstruct the authority as they indicate that this is not a majority scholarly viewpoint, or even a presently existing one.

The repetition 'my attempt' (cf. also the verb 'intend') de-emphasizes the act of music making, and is reminiscent of the way some other artists have disregarded the possible negative consequences of their music by pleading to good intentions and to Allah's judgment²⁵⁵. DJ Cee Life claims to be providing an alternative to what is constructed here as forbidden music. This is likely a way to promote his music as more desirable to pious Muslims who perhaps do not listen to music at all, or to those Muslims who are currently listening to music which is not explicitly Islamic. The text implies that anyone identifying as a Muslim should listen to Islamic music instead of other music forms, and those listening to 'haram' music are not pious (good) Muslims. The 'window' metaphor about Islamic music's impact on non-Muslims creates an image of something opening up to people which enhances the educational image of Muslim hip hop. The profile seems to follow many of the ideas mentioned in the overall stance of the website (cf. earlier), but the use of a short narrative and first person singular give a more personal touch, making the text discursively more appealing and convincing as it are more easy to relate than the more impersonal lists featured in the web site's "about us" section, even though the argumentation with several repetitions is not very convincing. Yet, DJ Cee Life creates an interpretation about a Muslim hip hop artist as being religiously conscious because Islam is his supposedly the main ingredient for identity building.

Even though the web site is filled with comments about how Muslims should not listen to music with *haram* lyrics, some artists also openly state that they are musically influenced by these mainstream artists that have foul words, sexual references and materialism in their lyrics. One of the artists, who lists such influences but claims that Muslims are not allowed

²⁵⁵ Cf. also Shannahan & Hussain 2011.

to listen to that kind of music, is the Swedish Saul Abraham. The second question and answer are located later in the interview.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What are your main musical influences?

SAUL ABRAHAM: I've definitely always been influenced by the Beatles. As far as Hip Hop I'd definitely say that I'm influenced by cats such as Common Sense, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Black Thought. Then cats like A Tribe Called Quest, Wu-Tang, Onyx, Nas, and definitely my favourite beatmaker DJ Premier. Though right now I'm not really feeling a lot of people, nobody's really taking it where it has to be taken you know.

(...)

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: Do you feel that you are making a difference with your music?

SAUL ABRAHAM: I'm not sure if I'm making that much of an impact, but insha'Allah ta'ala someone will benefit from it. The Hip hop game is always in need of the Truth, and it's clearly lacking right now. So in that sense I'm definitely making a difference even if nobody even notice it. Muslims in general need to wake up and realize that we can't listen to whatever your [sic] hear on the radio or so on MTV or whatever. Whatever goes against Islamic teachings is clearly forbidden to listen to with the intention of entertainment.²⁵⁶

The adverbs ('definitely', 'always', 'clearly') portray the rapper's world as very black and white and intensify his answers and arguments. While judging Muslims for listening to music that Islam forbids, he stresses that he has been influenced by many non-Muslim artists who have questionable lyrical elements from Islam's point of view – this fact is of course not mentioned here directly because the contradiction between his opinions and behavior (listening to forbidden music) would severely undermine his assumed religiousness and his arguments. Perhaps this is why he uses the conjunction 'though' (short for 'although') to stress that he is supposedly not listening to this kind of music anymore. However, having stated first that he has "definitely always" been influenced by these artists contradicts this idea. Saul portrays himself as affecting hip hop positively by providing a missing element which hip hop needs, i.e. the 'truth', which is Islam. However, he does not clearly indicate what Muslims should not listen to (cf. the reoccurring 'whatever'); by referring to obscure entities, his personal efforts or accomplishments in hip hop or through it do not need to be specified, either.

Also e.g. in the interview of Abu Nurah²⁵⁷, Blind Alhabetz²⁵⁸ and the group Baby Muslims²⁵⁹ this same controversy was visible; for example, the two members of Baby Muslims, who had been answering the questions, named several mainstream artists with the previously discussed "forbidden" lyrical content as their influences. The list contains

²⁵⁶ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/15._Saul_Abraham_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010). I noticed in May 2011 that this interview had been removed from the MHH web site.

²⁵⁷ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/16._Abu_Nurah_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁵⁸ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/19._Blind_Alhabetz_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁵⁹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/14._Baby_Muslims_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

Muslim artists as well, but the list format seems to place all the artists into the same category. It appears that actual behavior may contradict the moral and religious ideals that are constructed in discourses. However, it must be acknowledged that Islamic hip hop was not born out of nothingness; Muslim rappers have been acculturated into hip hop music, which previously did not have many religiously conscious artists. Part of its rebellious nature and history has always been the use of foul language and controversial topics, such as sexual encounters and drug use.²⁶⁰ It would be impossible to become a hip hop artist without knowing what hip hop is and has been.

Muslim hip hop is also used as a tool to counter stereotypes about Muslims and call for the unity of the *ummah* while criticizing social and political injustices. These aspects will be analyzed in the next chapter.

11. Social change discourse in Muslim hip hop

There is a significant amount of discussion on socioeconomic and political issues (racism, secretarianism, power structures etc.) on the web site related to Muslim hip hop and its content. These discussions pertain largely to a discourse which I have named the social change discourse; the discourse constructs a shared Muslim identity by creating a need for a positive change to the social and political issues that touch Muslims and Muslim communities. Also the web site's slogan "building a movement" seems to be related to this. Muslim rappers are portrayed to be at the forefront of advocating this change as they rap about it. The main themes appear to be Muslim unity and fighting stereotypes about Muslims (cf. below). Both Muslims and non-Muslims are seen as the cause of the current problems, but only Muslims, the ingroup, is addressed.

²⁶⁰ Cf. e.g. Krims 2000; Chang 2005. Also, if one considers the web site criteria, it only mentions the public conduct of artists, and thus what they listen to privately is at least officially not a hindrance for being featured on the site.

11.1 Calling for Muslim unity

A recurrent question in the Stories (interviews) is “The Muslim community has been ailing for quite some time now. What do you think can combat this?” Another reoccurring question was “Do you feel that you are making a difference with your music?” These questions solicit answers that suggest changes to the status quo and thus build a discourse of social change. The main ideas in the answers vary only little: the current state of the global Muslim community and local communities is divided and needs unity in Islam. This enhances the notion that Islam is as a collective religion. Many artists use this as an argument for their own music making, as they claim to be re-instating this shared feeling of belonging to a religious group.

Seyfullah MC from Reason Rule goes on at length about the disunity of Muslims in the interview.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: The Muslim community has been hurting for quite some time...what do you think can change this?

SHAADI: Understanding the proper concepts of Islam: fundamentally & comprehensively.

SEYFULLAH MC: Right now it feels like we are divided as to how Muslims can defend themselves, and who's Shia or Sunni. We have to get back to the basics so we can stop fighting with each other. We'll always disagree about something, that's natural, but when we have outside influences exploiting those differences to drive us further and further apart, we need to stop arguing and address these outside influences. (...) Some Muslims like living in a democratic society while others don't. The answer ultimately depends on how we can unite. We need to learn to look past our minor differences towards an ultimate goal. It's like they say, each one teach one. Its grass roots (movements). It's ORGANIZE. It's like in the days of slavery: the house slaves didn't really want change because they benefited from being in the house while the other slaves were out in the field suffering. Now we have Muslims benefiting from living in American society. And then we have Muslims around the world suffering as a direct consequence to American policy. So who's closest to the master? Who's more likely to be able to make a change?²⁶¹

Reason Rule's other member, the female rapper Shaadi, simply states that comprehending Islam is the key. Seyfullah MC seems to suggest that American Muslims should be at the forefront of making a change to the current state of the Muslim community, as he accuses the 'American policy' of causing the plight of Muslims elsewhere in the world. He also compares the current conditions of Muslims to the history of slaves (“in the days of slavery” – “now”) and America to the slave master; this supports Solomon's argument that hip hop has become popular among immigrants and Muslims because they see similarities between their current societal position and the past of the African slaves²⁶². According to Seyfullah MC, although he acknowledges that Muslims differ from one another, the

²⁶¹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/8._Reason_Rule_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁶² Solomon 2010.

answer to the situation is to unite starting from the local level (cf. the verb ‘organize’, which is written in capital letter to stress the need for social activism). “Each one teach one” is hip hop slang, but originally from the Five Percenter philosophy²⁶³; here, this hip hop idiom becomes intertwined with Islam. The rapper belittles the differences between Muslims as ‘minor’ after having given examples of them in the beginning (e.g. the division into Shia and Sunni Muslims), which suggests that he considers Muslims to share similarities because they share a religion. The subjectivity of his opinions is masked into plural pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they’. The first person plural constructs Muslims as an ingroup, and invites Muslims to participate in his discourse. The extract appears highly engaging as most verbs connected with ‘we’ express some sort of necessity to act. Even though hip hop music is not mentioned here directly, the context binds it with the ideas of political and social change presented above: the speaker is a Muslim rapper and the interview appears on a hip hop web site targeted at Muslims. For this reason, the rapper’s opinions and attitudes become connected with his persona, his religion and with Islamic hip hop music.

The theme of Muslim unity is mentioned also among the song topics of some of the artists. Below is an extract from the interview of the rapper Mr. Ameen.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What are some of the key issues you are tackling in your songs?

MR. AMEEN: Muslims being afraid to be Muslims is a big big issue for me because it play into how my children will live in the future and the present. Unity regardless of race. Sectarianism in Islam. Allah says in the Quran that sects are forbidden, but we keep putting things in front of the word Muslim to describe ourselves. Also, I try to reach out to let Muslims who are feeling the hardships of that they are not alone in there day to day struggle. Hold on "Allah Is There". The list continues though. Buy the CD fam.²⁶⁴

Mr. Ameen mentions both racial and religious secretarianism as obstacles for the unity of Muslims; although he speaks of unity in connection to race, the issue becomes connected with Muslimness when he refers to religious authorities (Allah and the Qur’an) prohibiting sects and in this way justifies why unity is important. With the adjectives ‘afraid’ and ‘alone’, he seems to assume that the reluctance to identify as a Muslim is mainly caused by unfavorable societal circumstances. He legitimizes his worry about this issue with his personal life, his parenthood. However, the commercial interest behind his answer is blatantly visible here with the artist’s encouragement to buy his CD. Also emphasizing that his topics vary (“the list continues”) could be an attempt to sell more records, as more versatile topics may appeal to a wider audience. The issue of commercialism will be discussed further in Ch. 12. ‘Fam’ probably is a slang word that refers to ‘family’²⁶⁵, in this

²⁶³ Cf. Miyakawa 2005, 35.

²⁶⁴ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/18._Mr._Ameen_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁶⁵ cf. <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/>> (accessed 27/05/2011).

case Muslims; if it is, the word can only be identified by those who are familiar with it, i.e. those who employ similar vernacular. Muslim ingroup is constructed through ‘we’ and ‘ourselves’. By using the contrasting ‘but’ to express that Muslims are not following their religious authorities but are instead using other ways of identifying (“to describe ourselves”), this extract appears to create a norm where the identity of a Muslim should override all other identities. It is assumed that in this way, the *ummah* becomes unified, which is valued positively. The extract covertly suggests that by buying Mr. Ameen’s CD and listening to his music, a Muslim can perhaps begin to share this idea and build a stronger Muslim identity and a stronger *ummah* instead of “putting things” ahead of Islam.

The extract from the artist profile of Kalasoul names three of Islam’s central elements as belonging to the topics of Muslim hip hop: Allah, the sunna and the *ummah*. The process of constructing a Muslim identity (“becoming Muslim”) appears to be the main issue in the profile.

His [Kalasoul’s] topics are a collage of remembering Allah and loving the Sunnah to the grimy street hustle of living and representing the struggle. “Islam is a community based religion, and within this religion are many people who have taken many paths, all to arrive at the same destination: Becoming Muslim.[quotation mark missing in the original]²⁶⁶

The search for Muslim identity is first introduced with the activity noun ‘struggle’ as life between Islam, its God and rules, and the harsh social realities on “the streets”. “Hustle” in urban slang typically refers to illegal means of earning money but also to a more general state of being active.²⁶⁷ The identity process is then described with the metaphors of path and destination; these metaphors also construct Islam as a direction which everyone should gravitate to, and as based on collectivity and as defining Muslims. The repetition of the adjective ‘many’ seems to acknowledge the diversity of Muslims, however, Islam becomes superior to inner plurality as the people are placed ‘within’ it, and Islam thus unites them (cf. the adjective ‘same’).

The founder of MPAC, Luqman, defines the Muslim group identity through the unity they have in monotheism.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What are some of the main issues you are taking on in your album?
MPAC: There are many issues we have set out to tackle on this album, nationalism being one of the strongest and obvious topics. It is a disease that has spread through the hearts of our Ummah and is one of the many causes of our lack of unity and organization. (...) And the one thing that Muslims around the world share is the beautiful religion of Al-Islam. I do not believe in the necessity of bonds based on anything else besides la-ilaha-illallah (there is no God but Allah). This is why I love

²⁶⁶ <<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Kalasoul>> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

²⁶⁷ Cf. <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/>> (accessed 10/05/2011). The term is common in African-American vernacular, which has strongly influenced the language of hip hop since the beginning.

all my brothers and sisters, the ones I haven't seen, and the ones I will never see. We have a connection that is centered on a principle that can shake the world, humble the hearts, and maintain a balance needed in the world of mankind.²⁶⁸

He condemns nationalism by describing it as infectious ('disease') and causing disunity among Muslims. The rapper stresses, however, that whatever separates them does not matter because Muslims share the religion, a connection, "one thing", which is monotheism as formulated in the Islamic profession of faith. It is enough to bring unity. As in many other interviews and profiles, Muslim identification is evoked here with pronouns 'we' and 'our' but the rapper also speaks of the *ummah* and further addresses 'my' brothers and sisters. He emphasizes that he refers to all Muslims and rhetorically builds the Muslim unity, as they belong to the same "family". It seems that identity is described as something inner, as both nationalism and Islam are said to touch 'hearts'. By naming and describing a clear enemy such as nationalism and describing it to be divisive and malicious, Luqman can build its opposite, unity and Islam, as positive and bringing social stability ('a balance'). In this way, the group's album and music become semantically hyponymous to the supposed effects of Islam and Muslim unity and shared identity within Islam. He uses his own commitment to this opinion ("I do not believe", "this is why I") as an authority to deconstruct the necessity for other uniting factors.

The Puerto Rican-American group M-Team also advocates unity as a response to social hardships that face Muslims; however, they scold Muslims more than non-Muslims.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: The Muslim community has been ailing for quite some time now (external oppression, internal division)... what do you think can combat this?

M-TEAM: The things we are going through is our faults as Muslims. I heard Habib Ali say that it's our lack of us reflecting the true nur and image of the Prophet Muhammad pbuh is why people have a bad image of Islam. As Muslims we need to listen to the Prophet pbuh and be gentle to the believers and firm against the Kufar, but to day [sic] we are doing the opposite we are kind to the non Muslims at work and harsh against our brothers and sisters. We need to make dua for one another and unite what we agree upon and leave the difference in the deen to the ulema.²⁶⁹

M-Team focuses on praising Prophet Muhammad (called 'nur', which refers to the light of God), and claims that Muslims have failed in religious practice, causing negativity towards Islam and problems for the assumed community; the answer to this is claimed to be unity among believers and opposition to non-believers ('Kufar'). Muslim identification is constructed here through the use of Arabic terms, but also through the 'pbuh' abbreviation, i.e. "peace be upon him", which Muslims usually add whenever they say the Prophet's name. A Muslim identity discourse becomes interconnected with the social change

²⁶⁸ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/3._MPAC_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁶⁹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/13._M-Team_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010.)

discourse through the use first person plural as well as several other ingroup references that construct a shared identification (e.g. ‘brothers and sisters’). It is interesting that the group underlines how the social problems are their fault “as Muslims”, and not due to any external circumstances, which the question assumes. The question also mentions the only inner problem in need of change to be lack of unity. The need for a social change is most clearly constructed with the verbal structures (cf. repetition of “we are” as the current situation and “we need to” as the desired future). The context (a hip hop web site) makes the rappers and Muslim hip hop part of this change discourse.

11.2 Opposing socio-political injustices and stereotypes

Many artists and also Mike Shapiro define Muslim hip hop as containing critique about the current social and political problems facing Muslims around the world. It is seen as part of Islam to strive towards justice and towards a positive social change. Correcting stereotypes about Muslims is also deemed important in this and it is part of the education through rap.

Abu Nurah is a bilingual rapper born in the United States, but whose parents are Mexican immigrants. His dual identification as a latino and a Muslim is, according to him, not a problem but a source of solutions.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: How would you say you are different from the other 100 or so Muslim hip hop artists?

ABU NURAH: We all bring our own experiences and culture to bear. I rhyme in both English and Spanish. I try to go beyond identifying problems by promoting solutions. Most of us know about Israeli occupation. Now what? Each of us has a role and responsibility. These problems belong to all of us.²⁷⁰

The rapper also appears to stress his music’s power to reach both English-and Spanish speakers, which shows that many cultural factors become intertwined in Muslim hip hop. Abu Nurah constructs a need for a global Muslims conscience with nouns like ‘role’ and ‘responsibility’, and also the change towards the better must happen collectively (cf. “most of us”, “each of us” and “all of us”). Considering the question, he also seems to suggest that he is more aware of this need for a change than other Muslims are, and that a change in the awareness of rappers and also of other Muslims is necessary.

²⁷⁰ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/16._Abu_Nurah_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

Masikah is a British rapper with an immigrant family background. His profile is one example of an artist who is represented to bring up socially and politically conscious topics in his music and as promoting justice. Islam is thus portrayed as encompassing more than just faith.

Masikah's Music is a sound born out of his love for his belief and the provocation and unprecedented experiences and tribulations of his life with what he has seen and felt. His songs are about growing up around violence and hardship, racial injustice, problems in a turbulent society, and sometimes his journey of life and being a Muslim. Masikah's work is known for advocating global, economic, social, and racial equality and freedom as well as his graphic descriptions of violence, drug abuse, conflicts concerning Muslims and the beauty of his Deen. Many fans, critics, and industry insiders rank him as a very powerful, talented, insightful and inspiring lyrical artist.²⁷¹

The profile is profuse with adjectives that evaluate the rapper positively. Masikah's harsh personal experiences and religiousness is represented as the authority for his music, which is stated to reflect also his identity as a Muslim ("being a Muslim"). Once Islam is stated to have influenced the birth of his music ("his love for his belief") in the beginning, it would be hard to criticize him as being un-Islamic. By portraying a Muslim rapper as promoting equality and freedom of all kinds, these issues become semantically attached to his Muslimness, as his Islamic way of life (*Deen*) is mentioned in the same sentence after the connecting conjunction 'and'. This also becomes visible when looking at the collocation of the most frequently occurring words: the possessive 'his' is connected to the artist's religion and songs, while the conjunction 'and' connects the issues of song inspiration and Masikah's personal features to one another. The adjective 'conscious', which is seen many times on the web site, is not even necessary here because Masikah is built as socially and politically aware as well as musically revered rapper throughout the profile.

It should be noted that Muslim rappers like Masikah speak about drugs in their lyrics but apparently in a negative way; this is, however, not said explicitly anywhere on the web site, instead drugs are mentioned as not being a part of Muslim rap. The non-Muslim rap is assumed to revere drugs whereas Muslims and Muslim rap are portrayed as condemning them, which has become apparent through the way in which the web site appears to praise Muslim hip hop and criticizes other hip hop. As seen in Mike Shapiro's interviews, it is considered Islamic to bring up these kinds of issues in society because Islam is seen to demand justice which Muslims must try to accomplish.

²⁷¹ <<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Masikah>> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

The social and political issues are also claimed to be central in the music of Blind Alphetz. The group members were both born in Mozambique and Nigeria, and later immigrated to Britain.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What are some of the key issues you are tackling in your songs?

BLIND ALPHABETZ: Mohammed Yahya: we try to tackle the problems that mankind face on daily basis such as oppression by corrupt leaders, weak governing structures, poverty in so called third world countries, the rising of crime rate, the effects of a poor education system, the back lash of broken family trees, but at the same time I like to share what I think are the solutions to all this problems.²⁷²

According to one group member, not only does the group discuss the problems, they also offer solutions, which of course are needed for social change; this can make the group's music seem more interesting to many as the issues are global. It seems that many Muslims consider global problems to be theirs instead of bringing up only local level issues, which may be a consequence of their multicultural background; they have ties to more than one country, and therefore express global identifications. This may also be a result of Islam and the centrality of the *ummah* but probably also a result of networks that provide information about global level problems (many Muslims are immigrants fleeing from a conflict zone). This hypothesis would seem plausible due to the rappers' immigrant background and also because the problems listed above do not seem to correspond very well with the British society. The generalizing 'mankind' also seems to attribute the issues to exist on a global level.

As stated, changing existing stereotypes about Muslims are also a theme in Muslim hip hop. Below is an extract from Radio Islam's interview with Mike Shapiro, where he discusses the stereotypes about Muslim hip hop and Muslims in general.

I: Mike, did you think that the Muslim rappers, three or four years ago perhaps had a tough time selling their stick(?) about uh, about what they're conveying during 9/11? I mean I know that was a tough time for a lot of people. Has that started to change as far as the stereotype about Muslims, I mean I could only assume that the medium of rap could only help that, but I could be wrong.

M: Yeah well, it's kinda funny because I saw some conservative papers who wrote articles on my site, and a lot of people were commenting saying like "oh is this like Osama bin Laden rap?" [changes his voice] and all this...

I: [chuckles]

M: So, I forgot, you know, they were saying all these funny things but, you know they're expecting one thing, like it's all about terrorism it's all about killing people and when they go to the site and they listen to it they're like "wow, this is like", number one there's no profanity, there's no talk about sex or alcohol or anything like that and it's all about positivity, and people really like that, even non-Muslims like that. I think a lot of more people are interested, they wanna know more about Islam, 'cause that's all they see on TV, it's just the wrong stuff, that's not what we all do, we, you know that's just a fraction of us and we all condemn that. So, this is kind of like, our chance to speak out against that and other injustices as well.²⁷³

²⁷² <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/19._Blind_Alphabetz_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁷³ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/4._Radio_Islam_Interviews_MHH> (streamed and transcribed 24/2/2011).

The interviewer evokes here the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and claims that stereotypes about Muslims were enforced, which made it especially difficult for Muslims rap artists to convey a message about Islam. The interviewer then uses the adverb ‘only’ twice to stress that rap helps change the situation and the stereotypes, but then denies having the authority of knowledge to discuss the matter. Mike starts his answer with “yeah well”, which shows that the issue is more complicated. Mike gives an example, which pertains to the 9/11 discussion but also to the discourse on terrorism, as he mentions how conservative newspapers labeled his web site as supporting Osama bin Laden (the assumed main character behind 9/11 and former leader of the al-Qaida terrorist network) and terrorism with Muslim rap because of stereotypes that the media constructs (“they’re expecting one thing”).²⁷⁴ Bin Laden has commonly been demonized, and it is not surprising that a reference to him causes Mike to defend his web site and Muslim hip hop as separate from terrorism.

The description of his web site through meaning exclusion (“there is no”) serves as a contrast to enhance the image of Muslim hip hop and Mike’s web site (“it’s all about positivity”), and pertains to the halal-haram-discourse, which was discussed earlier. Here again, Muslim hip hop is contrasted with a stereotype of rap music as filled with negative elements such as drugs and foul language; he further enhances this argument and the contrast between Muslim hip hop and other hip hop by imitating the web site visitors’ surprised reaction. He also stresses twice that “a lot of people” were interested in his web site, and that the site in fact changes people’s perspectives about Muslim rap to a more positive direction, which is intensified with the adverb ‘really’.

This contrasting happens while Mike is in the midst of speaking about Muslim stereotypes; he was asked about 9/11 but he rotates the discussion into complementing and justifying his own web site. When Mike returns to the issue about terrorism, he claims that the TV over- and misrepresents Islam; he emphasizes the truthfulness of his opinion with the adverb ‘just’ and value adjective ‘wrong’. His choice of words after that imply, however, that there is some truth also in what is seen on TV but he belittles it with the same modal adverb ‘just’ and the count noun ‘fraction’. It shows that he does see even the “bad” Muslims as belonging to the ingroup of Muslims (‘us’). Mike seems to build a Muslim ingroup with ‘we’ and ‘our’, whereas he refers to the critics as ‘they’; however, he seems

²⁷⁴ Rose (1994) has discussed the linking of violence and rap in the media at length, and has noted that journalists often feature rap music only in this kind of context while dismissing the self-expression and innovation in rap music (ibid. 137). However here, the stereotype of a Muslim already contains violence.

to alternate between different categories of ‘we’ as “that’s not what we all do” may refer to Muslims globally whereas “we all condemn” only to Muslim artists. By representing Muslims or Muslim artists as condemning terrorism, he makes a subjective representation about Muslims as sharing a viewpoint, which is contradictory to reality; some Muslims and also some Muslim hip hop artists do advocate terrorism as a form of *jihad*.²⁷⁵ Perhaps he simply is not aware of this fact, or he knows that acknowledging this publically would harm his web site and potentially records sales of peaceful Muslim artists, so he cannot admit this reality, or refuses to believe in it. Besides the contrasting, Mike’s other rhetoric devices are for example irony; he repeats the adjective ‘funny’ first in the beginning of his first response and in his second comment to indicate that the opposite of the reaction that he had perhaps hoped or expected was taking place. Mike also uses, consciously or unconsciously, the common English expression “you know” three times in this extract with which he seems to invite the listener to support his assessment. He seems to argue that his web site represents Muslims and Muslim hip hop correctly whereas elsewhere this is not the case, and that outsiders are stereotyping Muslims without grounds. He portrays Muslim hip hop as a vehicle for changing these existing stereotypes (“our chance to speak out”). Interestingly, Hermansen notes that the media in Los Angeles, California, has been especially influential in creating an image of moderate Muslims after 9/11.²⁷⁶ Also the founder of Muslimhiphop.com, Mike Shapiro, is from Los Angeles.²⁷⁷ According to Roy, ‘born-again’ or ‘true’ believers show more criticism towards “non-religious elements”, build religious communities based on individual assertion of one’s beliefs, commonly discuss their experiences as a minority among non-believers, and deconstruct religion from culture, among other things.²⁷⁸ Mike, who is a convert himself, seems to do this as well through the MHH web site and through building a discourse of Muslim hip hop.

In a podcast interview for *The Guardian*, Mike creates interconnections between Muslim hip hop, teaching Islam to the Muslim youth and opposing stereotypes and negative social developments.

I: Uhm, you’ve got a code of conduct. Can you tell us a bit more about that?

M: Yeah, I mean this should be music for, because of... not necessarily because but the overall situation of Muslims in the world for getting, you know, oppressed and we’re also dividing amongst

²⁷⁵ Cf. e.g. Käihkö’s (2010) article (in Finnish): “Islamistirap apuna uskonsodassa”. <http://www.ulkopolitiikka.fi/article/757/islamistirap_aseena_uskonsodassa/> (accessed 03/04/2011); cf. also Aidi 2004, 15.

²⁷⁶ Hermansen 2004, 92.

²⁷⁷ Cf. e.g.

<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/9._Radio_Islam_Interviews_MHH_a_2nd_Time> (streamed and transcribed 24/02/2011)

²⁷⁸ Roy 2004, 27.

ourselves. We're doing a lot of bad things. I want the content of this music to be about those things so we can have some positive change. The code of conduct is all about you know, significant talking about Islamic topics.²⁷⁹

As mentioned earlier, the Internet can be a medium for oppressed to make their voice heard, and it appears that Mike shares this view. Here, the word 'change' is used directly to indicate the discourse on social change and Islamic hip hop as medium for accomplishing it. Mike also justifies the web site's criteria for artists through the social change discourse; without the criteria, and without the content of Islamic hip hop, there would be no change to the current situation where Muslims are "doing a lot of bad things".

In the KDHR interview, Mike brings up the issue of integration when referring to stereotyping.

I: Is there much difference between, uhm, Muslim *American* music and Muslims in other parts of the world?

M: Uh, well in like, the UK and America, it's kinda similar, because a lot of Muslims are... just kinda feel like they're outcast, I mean they don't feel like they've, sort of, integrated, not like they really wanna integrate but, they don't feel like they're a part of the society, like, they're kind of outsiders. So they talk a lot about that, kind of like, when people look at them, maybe praying somewhere or wearing a certain type of clothing, people give them a stare or a dirty look or call them 'terrorists', you know stuff like that, uhm... That's what they're talking about. And it's really kind of cathartic, for them and also a lot of people who can relate, who listen to their music. And it's, it's a really great thing. So, uhm...[laughs]²⁸⁰

Mike's main argument as to why listening to Muslim hip hop is beneficial is that the Muslim rappers talk about experiences, which Muslims are assumed to share: it releases Muslims from their sufferings ('cathartic') as 'outsiders' and 'outcast' and helps also other people with similar experiences to relate to one another. Mike perhaps refers mainly to immigrant Muslims, as he does not use 'we' to indicate Muslims but 'they' and 'them' (he himself is a convert and born in the United States). The arguments about the 'positivity' of Muslim hip hop (cf. also the extracts earlier) are stressed with the adverb 'really' at the end, but only after Mike has given examples of things that assumedly impact the stereotypes about Muslims (clothing, praying) and how the stereotypes manifest themselves (looks, name-calling); once he establishes a negative status quo, he can argue in favor of the music and its power to change the current situation.

Mike apparently has a somewhat American view on integration, which would make it synonymous to assimilation, a loss of one's own culture, as he claims that Muslims do not wish to integrate; he emphasizes the truth value of his statement here also with the modal

²⁷⁹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/12._Islamophonic_Interviews_MHH> (streamed and transcribed 28/02/2011).

²⁸⁰ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/6._KDHR_Interviews_MHH> (streamed and transcribed: 26/02/2011).

adverb 'really'. Some individuals perhaps do want to separate from society, but this is hardly probable when speaking of a large group of people; why would they not want to be recognized as part of the society that they live in? This is visible also later in this same interview when Mike comments on the song 'Fight back' as being about "maintaining your life in this country"; Mike does not refer to abstaining from contact with non-Muslims, which is often seen as the characteristic of non-integration.²⁸¹ It is possible that Mike only constructs the problem of integration here with somewhat vague arguments in order to bring up the main issue which is to sell Muslim hip hop; by suggesting that Muslims can identify with the music, he markets "a really great thing", as he calls the music. Feelings of shared experiences often enhance group identities, and creating such feelings and expectations would benefit the artists to sell their music also in the future.

The hip hop group The Brothahood is stated to put efforts into motivating young Australian Muslims to be proud of their religion in the face of stereotypes:

The Brothahood, are a group of young Australian Muslim Emcees striving to motivate the Muslim youth of Australia to be proud of their faith in a time when it is needed the most. On the frontline of battling stereotypes against Muslims in the west, they bring about a whole new theme to hip-hop whilst keeping the essence...the message. In an age where hip-hop is dominated with [sic] meaningless, material based lyrics, the Boyz bring a hard and smooth blended flow that hopes to give a little more than just a nice beat... They are conscious rappers who prefer to use hip-hop as a tool to smash down stereotypes, misconceptions and tell it how it is(...).²⁸²

It appears that the main issue for the group is countering stereotypes, as it is repeated twice in the short extract. Australia is brought forward but the misrepresentations about Muslims are assumed to exist in a larger area, the 'west', which makes the group's agenda wider. Islamic content is referred to as the 'essence' and group as 'conscious' rappers as they are evoking socially relevant issues and even claim to bring about change (cf. "smash down"); this assumed intelligence and spirituality of the group and their music is contrasted with materialism, which is attributed to hip hop in general. Music is characterized as a 'tool' for changing the current situation, and the Muslim youth as the target group; by naming a target group and a goal, i.e. stirring pride in young Muslims and representing Muslims correctly ("tell it how it is"), the medium (music) is justified as beneficial for the Muslim identities. As discussed earlier, hip hop is the venue of young people in particular, and as the group is said to be made up of young members, they are able to speak as peers to their young Muslims listeners.

²⁸¹ For more on integration, identities and intergroup relations, cf. Jasinskaja-Lahti & Mähönen (eds.), 2009.

²⁸² <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/The_Brothahood> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

12. Creativity, commercialism, Islam: Negotiating Muslim identities and hip hop

Besides being Muslims, many of the artists have grown up with hip hop and thus see it as a natural part of their social and musical environment. Some also argue hip hop music to be a modern way of self expression, and thus even necessary in order to evolve, improve and avoid backwardness. Several claim that it can remind them and other Muslims about God, which is religiously plausible (cf. the education discourse in Ch. 9). Many Muslims on the web site are African-American, and thus I argue that what Khabeer has noted holds true here as well: many African-American Muslim rappers – and quite likely other Muslim hip hoppers, too, I would imagine – seem to believe that Islam’s function is not to eliminate cultural heritage such as hip hop music but rather to bring out the positive features of both.²⁸³ In this way, Muslims negotiate religion with hip hop music and artistic creativity.

12.1 “Hip hop was around”: Arguing for the right to artistic self-expression

Many Muslim artists were socialized into hip hop already in early childhood as it was around all the time and everywhere ; therefore, many found it ‘natural’ to get into that particular genre instead of some other music style, as the American Muslim rapper Tyson explains in his interview.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What was your inspiration to become an MC?

TYSON: Well, you know like just growing up in the early 80's, hip-hop was around, it was live. In the city areas, especially where I was at in San Jose, you know, breakin', rhymin', on the streets, freestylin', things like that. That's what I was exposed to at a very early age, and so my thing was I started out breakin'. But then, I wasn't that great as a breaker (laughs), so I had to come up with a new hustle. I really liked rhymin', I always loved to rhyme and play with words, so that just became the next thing. It just naturally came out. I started rhymin' on the streets, freestylin' and it took me a long time before I actually wrote my first rhyme. Though, my whole style is kinda based off freestylin'. That was it man, just growin' up in the bay area.²⁸⁴

The abundant use of the adverb ‘just’ in the extract highlights how effortlessly hip hop fused with everyday life in Tyson’s adolescence in the area where he grew up (“on the streets”, “where I was at”). This is described with the adjectives ‘live’ and ‘exposed’ as well as emphasizing his young age with the adverbial “very early”. To him, hip hop is so clearly a part of his life that it does not need to be explained any further; this becomes

²⁸³ Khabeer 2007, 131.

²⁸⁴ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/1._Tyson_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

evident from the modal adverbs ‘naturally’ and ‘always’ as well as how he lists hip hop elements and simply settles to conclude the list with “things like that”. Even when he narrates how he struggled in break dancing, he makes it clear with the adverbs ‘then’ and ‘so’ that another hip hop element was bound to follow, and in his case it was rapping (rhyming). The exposure to and socialization into hip hop culture are in this way argued to have inspired Tyson to become a rap artist.

The British Mecca2Medina had similar explanations as Tyson in their interview; they explain their inspiration to become rap artists with expressions like ‘surrounded by’, ‘around us’, and ‘emulated’ when referring to the music they heard in their childhood.²⁸⁵ As stated before, some Muslims who have grown up around hip hop culture do not wish to sacrifice the music for the sake of their religion. This demonstrates that religion is actively negotiated with the social and cultural environments and other possible identifications. In the case of Muslims who make hip hop music and thus engage with hip hop culture, combining both elements, hip hop and Islam, seems to be the only valid option if they wish to create and maintain a positive identity. This also seems to be Mike Shapiro’s argument in the quotation below, where he argues that hip hop is something many Muslims would enjoy engaging in.

Mike talks about “Muslim artistic self-expression”, and connects identity with artistic creativity. This means also talking about “issues relevant to Muslims”.

I: (...) [H]ow does your website respond [laughs] to the need for expression of Muslim youth?

M: Well, currently in, I guess in the West at least uhm, you, you really don’t have many alternatives for, for young Muslims to kind of, artistically express themselves, I mean you got like the mosque, which is like, you read the Qur’an or whatever, and then, you got like, the regular world of non-Islamic things, like going to bars and just doing whatever you feel like, you know, but... So I think that you know, music, if done in the right way, is, is really something that a lot of Muslims would love to do. And they are starting to do, as well as comedy and film making and... you know poetry and stuff like that, just... Something that’s creative that...gives them an outlet to kind of, express themselves and talk about the issues that’re going on, in their lives, and that’re relevant to Muslims.²⁸⁶

Mosque visiting or Qur’an reading’s relevance for youth are belittled with the colloquial expressions ‘like’ and ‘whatever’, whereas the only alternative besides music is portrayed to be going to bars and general indifference. Mike uses the adverb ‘then’ and the adjective ‘regular’ to demonstrate that Islam is separate from what pertains to everyday life in the ‘West’. After first using the adverb ‘really’ to reduce the amount of options that young

²⁸⁵ cf. <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/2._Mecca2Medina_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁸⁶ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/6._KDHR_Interviews_MHH> (streamed and transcribed 26/02/2011).

people have for self-expression and passing time, Mike then repeats it to stress his opinion that many Muslims would like music making and are already engaged in it (“is really something that a lot of Muslims would love”). This assumed liking is justified when he portrays music as a way to express the identity of a Muslim and as a way to discuss life issues that are meaningful to them. It appears that Mike tries to convince others to share his view about the compatibility of music and Islam; by constructing an existential assumption that young Muslims have no other options than engaging in music making or other arts in the West if they wish to express a Muslim identity, he appears to encourage particularly those Muslims, who object music, to support “the lesser of two evils” (careless bar hopping vs. making music). However, Mike seems reluctant to extend the argument to involve non-Western countries; his knowledge of non-Western world might be limited as he was born and raised in the United States.

A recurrent question in the Stories (interviews) section of the MHH web site is “How has Islam shaped your life?”; most artists say that Islam has been a life-changing force and has given direction, focus, as well as balance. Therefore, it does not seem surprising that many Muslim artists on the MHH web site mention some of the Islamic values that they try to bring forward in their music (cf. earlier); by doing so, they are defining what is ‘Islamic’ and what kind of issues are closely related to the identity of a Muslim, but also what kind of artistic expression Muslim hip hop is. Many of the artists refer to Allah and the Muslim community, *ummah*. This is not only visible in lyrics and song names but often also in the artist names; because the name often refers to Islam and being a Muslim, it is part of the identity negotiation between hip hop and the religion.

The interview of Blakstone, one of the most successful Muslim rap groups, is filled with references to Muslim identities, but also their name is one.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: Why are you called Blakstone?

BLAKSTONE: The black stone is an obvious reference to our Islamic identity and we knew Muslims would identify with it.²⁸⁷

The reference to a black stone is not explained any further in the interview, because it is self-evident for Muslims; Muslims know that it refers to the Black stone at the Kaba temple in the holy city of Mecca, to which millions of Muslims make the *hajj* pilgrimage especially during the month of *Ramadan*. This is an example of tacit knowledge which all Muslims are assumed to share solely on the basis that they are Muslims. This shared

²⁸⁷ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/5._Blakstone_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

knowledge between Muslims is also why they are assumed to identify with the name of the group: the name may be understandable to non-Muslims as well, but it is assumed here to be meaningful in a religious sense only to Muslims.

Similarly e.g. the group Mecca2Medina has chosen a name which is meaningful for Muslims in particular, and portrays their identification as Muslims. The historical reference to a journey of Islam's prophet in the group's name builds authority around the group and their music: they, too, appear to bring religious guidance for Muslims, who may lack belief in the oneness of God, the most central aspect of Islam.²⁸⁸

Samir, who was born in Zaire and moved to Belgium and then to the United States, appears to combine Islam and artistry with ease.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What inspired you to do Muslim/Islamic music?

SAMIR: Originally i didnt [sic], i was in a group and we were just positive underground emcees, then i [sic] became Muslim so naturally my content will be Islamic for that is my lifestyle. I mean the music reflect [sic] the person that i am so its [sic] basically a representation of what i do and know.²⁸⁹

Samir states that the music is an expression of his identity, particularly in terms of his behavior and knowledge. He argues that because he leads a life of a Muslim, Islam and music are 'naturally' related and 'basically' illustrate who he is. With these adverbs, he seems to argue that being a Muslim automatically touches every aspect of a person's life and defines him or her as a person, therefore it is also visible in the music of a Muslim artist. The interview extracts shows no signs of controversy in terms of combining music with religion, on the contrary; it legitimizes Islamic hip hop as being an expression of Muslim identity *par excellence*.

As has become clear, many Muslim artists have to defend music making and being an artist (cf. particularly Ch. 10 on halal-haram-discourse). Pleading to Allah's judgement in the matter of music's permissibility came up in the material a few times (cf. also the quote by Shaadi of Reason Rule below). I find it interesting that although some Muslim artists in their interviews evade criticism about their involvement with music by claiming that only Allah can judge them²⁹⁰, this argument is not used in the 'official' standpoints of the MHH web site. Instead, the argument is based on more debatable scholarly arguments (cf. extract

²⁸⁸ Cf. <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/2._Mecca2Medina_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁸⁹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/17._Samir_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁹⁰ Cf. also Shannahan & Hussain 2011, 49, 55.

earlier), and on online resources instead of e.g. the sunna. Based on these, the web site claims to have made ‘an informed’ decision, which evades at least some criticism.

The rap group Brothahood evokes this argument about Allah being the (only) true judge.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: Do you feel that you are making a difference with your music?

THE BROTHAHOOD: We feel that our music is making a difference, and if its not then we hope that Allah judges us on our intentions which we hope and pray are pure (...) insha'Allah.²⁹¹

Although the discussion about music’s permissibility is not directly mentioned in the interview of the Brothahood, it is evident that the answer refers to that. They plead to the sincerity of their intentions, and more importantly, to Allah’s will; this is very typical in Islam, as the use of *inshallah* here and of other Arabic interjections throughout the web site indicates. They serve to mark a religious identification. The preceding and conditioning ‘if’ indicates, however, that the group considers to be judged only if their music has no effect. In this way, they assert having a right to express themselves artistically without being judged by Muslims.

As seen before, particularly in the web site’s criteria (cf. Ch. 8.2), there is a viewpoint according to which being a Muslim is superior to being an artist and the two roles must be negotiated. However, this may be in contradiction to the perceived demands of mainstream-quality music and fame. Also, many artists mention that they have been reprimanded by other Muslims due to their involvement with music in general or rap in particular, and also by non-Muslims (cf. Mike’s comments earlier); negative feedback clearly sets obstacles for building a positive identity and feeling good about music making. Some artists have even considered leaving music industry (e.g. Reason Rule, cf. below), some returning stronger after newly established religious vocation (cf. e.g. Baby Muslims in Ch. 9), some never pick up a microphone again due to the discrepancy it causes to their religious identification (e.g. Soldiers of Allah, cf. Ch. 12.2). The halal-haram-discourse is a considerable issue here as well, as we can see below.

Reason Rule, a husband-wife duo, has not let the negative feedback bring them down. The first quotation belongs to the female counterpart expresses how much ‘hate’ she has experienced from other Muslims.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: This question is for Shaadi: What is it like being a female Muslim artist? Do you get a lot of friction from Muslims?

SHAADI: Well, it is an expected thing to get the responses I get from mainly the women. I really don’t get hated on by men; maybe because their demeanor, let alone nature, is different than a

²⁹¹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/11._The_Brothahood_Interview > (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

woman's. I mainly get sisters telling me that what I am doing is Haram (forbidden) or Makruh (disliked) or simply that I am showing my Awrah. But I have made this statement before that I am not doing what I do for the pleasure of men but rather for Allah and He sees this and knows my intention.²⁹²

As with Sister Haero (cf. below), here also the question contains an assumption that female Muslims experience more difficulties as hip hop artists to be accepted by other Muslims due to their gender. Shaadi co-constructs this assumption with the adjective 'expected' and then elaborates what negative feedback she has experienced. Apparently only Muslim women have scolded her for violating her religion and its principles of proper behavior (cf. the Arabic terms *haram* and *makruh* in the extract) whereas Muslim men have not, which she stresses with the adverb 'really'. She seems to consider that this is essentially due to gender, which she makes factual with the causal 'because' when she claims that men differ from women in personality and behavior. She refers to other Muslim women once as 'sisters' which indicates an ingroup affiliation. Talking about *awrah* (body parts that Islam requires to be covered) as well as her remark that the music is not meant to be for men and their 'pleasure', gives the impression that she has been accused of being sexually frivolous. Similarly to many Muslims artist, Shaadi defends and legitimizes her music making with her religious intentions and also pleads to Allah's judgment. It is clear that she has had to defend herself several times regarding this matter ("I have made this statement before") and it seems that she is not taking the complaints lightly as she uses the strong predicate adjective 'hated' in her response. Her last phrase also indicates that despite the discouraging feedback and false accusations, she continues to identify as a Muslim artist.

The following quotation belongs to the same interview; Shaadi's significant other has similar experiences as her.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What inspired you to become a Muslim artist? (...)

SEYFULLAH MC: There was a time when I wasn't sure if I wanted to rhyme publicly anymore. As a Muslim artist you have more people than ever telling you that what you're doing is haram. So essentially, you have your own brothers in Islam telling you that you have shamed yourself and then you have the mainstream audience telling you that if you weren't so Islam, then you would be off the hinges...or whatever. But all it took was a few brothers and sisters to say that they feel you, they understand what it is that you are saying.²⁹³

As Seyfullah explains, what saddens him the most is that the people who he considers his ingroup (cf. the adverb 'essentially'; "your own") are the ones attacking him and his music; the collective condemnation is meant to produce a feeling of shame. Although he first refers to himself with 'I', he continues with the generic use of the pronoun 'you', and

²⁹² <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/8._Reason_Rule_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

²⁹³ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/8._Reason_Rule_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

in this way, generalizes this issue to touch also other Muslim artists. Yet, also the ingroup support for his music is more valuable than other kind of support; this is visible when he comments the non-Muslims audience's feedback with the belittling 'whatever'. The support of other Muslims also seems to override the negative responses ("but all it took was a few"). The rapper appears to believe that they know and share (cf. the verbs 'feel' and 'understand') what makes music special to him and what he wishes to express with it. The feeling of shared meaning and understanding is very important for any identification. The extract also shows that Muslims artists have to face also the expectations of non-Muslims, who might feel estranged by the religious content. The artists have to negotiate between the demands of Islam, of Muslims and of non-Muslims as well as of the industry which pushes them to attain commercial success.

Also Muslims may stereotype Muslims. Sister Haero, one of the few female rappers at the web site and also in general, explains what kind of stereotypes she has faced.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What is it like being a female Muslim artist? Do you get a lot of friction from Muslims?

SISTER HAERO: I love being a Muslimah artist, because so many people have stereotypes about Muslim women (we don't have fun, we're not allowed to state our opinions or showcase our talents, etc.), and I feel like I'm helping to break those stereotypes every time I step to the mic.²⁹⁴

The question contains an assumption that she is reprehended by Muslims because of her gender; the assumptions she lists, however, could also come from non-Muslims. The female rapper states that she has indeed had to deal with stereotypes that relate to her religion and gender. By stressing that people frequently stereotype Muslim women with the intensifying adverb 'so' and the dimension adjective 'many', she legitimizes her own music making. She boldly claims to be changing this state of things with her performing, emphasized with "every time". The stereotype she mentions lastly in the brackets ("our talents") sounds informative but is in fact evaluative as it portrays Muslim women as being talented; this existential assumption further enhances the image of also Sister Haero's music as good because she has previously in that sentence included herself in the category of (talented) Muslim women with the pronoun 'we'. In this way, she asserts a double identification as a Muslim woman and a hip hop artist.

The comments of Reason Rule and Sister Haero seem to prove that finding an identity that supports both being a Muslim and being an artist involves balancing between the mainstream audiences' prejudice against Muslims rapping and Muslims' prejudices against

²⁹⁴ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/7._Sister_Haero_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

music making. This entails constant legitimization and justification of one's identification as a Muslim, of lyrical content and of artistic capabilities.

In the material, also a discourse of commercialism was clearly visible in relation to the career and promotion of Muslim artists. It became intertwined with the ideas of artistic creativity as well as with the principles of Islam. Also the halal-haram-discourse is clearly linked to the discussion about Muslims pursuing an artistic career as seen above, as this kind of career is sometimes seen to be against Islamic principles. Success and Islamic, good quality music are valued whereas the aspect of commercialism in music seems to cause some friction. The central question seems to be thus: in what ways do Islamic principles and the exigencies of commercial success affect the artistic creativity of a Muslim rapper?

12.2 Mainstream success without the career?

As mentioned earlier, Khabeer has noted that many conscious Muslim artists find it contradictory to their religious values to be striving towards mainstream success when the most commercially successful rap is filled with *haram* topics.²⁹⁵ It has seemed that rap music at least in the United States does not sell without “bling” and sex.²⁹⁶ Appraisal of the artists' religiousness, moral and talent in their profiles is very typical throughout the MHH web site, and it seems to be a marketing strategy.

At the very bottom of the every MHH page, there is the following text in small print:

About MHH: MuslimHipHop.com is your online source to shop download and buy Muslim Hip Hop & Nasheed artist cds mp3s music lyrics pictures interviews news radio rap songs mp3 audio cd and video from Muslim artists and rappers in Canada North America England the UK France Germany Asia the Middle East Europe Africa Palestine Iraq Afghanistan on issues like Islam politics terrorism reform moderation identity and much more...²⁹⁷

The text starts by advertising the possibility to buy music and related products online. The long list of countries accentuates the intercultural nature of the web site and its artists. It is probably no coincidence that Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan are mentioned separately, as they are all countries where Muslims especially have been and are currently in the middle

²⁹⁵ Khabeer 2007.

²⁹⁶ Aidi 2004, 16.

²⁹⁷ <<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/>> (accessed and printed 30/01/2011).

of a political conflict. More interesting, however, is the list of issues named to appear in these “products”: mentioning Islam is quite obvious, but politics, terrorism, reform, moderation and identity are less so. They are issues that are sure to incite interest and discussion among many, both Muslims and non-Muslims, and mentioning them at the bottom is perhaps meant to do just this. It also gives clues about the discourses that are employed at the site, e.g. identity and the social change discourse. However, due to the small font size of the text and its location at the bottom of the page, it is likely to remain unnoticed by many. From this citation alone, it is impossible to say what the web site’s stance towards these issues is.

A ‘buy music’ link at the top banner of the MHH web site clearly indicates a commercial purpose. It seems that many Muslims artists wish to gain mainstream (commercial) success, yet many of them clearly construct the mainstream music as ‘garbage’ due to its assumed commercialism and content. Apparently, to some extent, Muslim rappers intend to change the image of what mainstream music is or can be; their lyrical content and its assumed positive effects on Muslim listeners or non-Muslims’ image about Muslims seems to be used as a way to legitimize the commercial aim.

This challenging situation is mentioned also in one artist profile, in a quotation by the rapper Yung General.

“I know that I’m going to have to marry my conscious material with a good commercial sound if I’m going to have a shot at reaching the masses, but I want it to just flow and sound natural, I don’t want to force it.”²⁹⁸

Commercialism clearly becomes connected with reaching the masses in this quotation. Yet, the rapper expresses reluctance towards altering his music, if it entails constraining and molding his ‘conscious’ content into this kind of mainstream format. It implies that the mainstream music, or what most people listen to, is assumed to be something other than socially and politically aware. What may seem ‘natural’ to him in music making, such as having religious topics, may not be accessible or enticing to non-Muslims. Music that sounds good, however, may resonate with non-Muslims due to or despite its content. Combining religious lyrical content with a good quality sound seems to be something that some or perhaps most Muslim artists struggle with in order to find an audience as large as possible.

²⁹⁸<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Yung_General> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

On the web site it is emphasized that being a Muslim artist is not essentially about creating a career, yet the founder Mike Shapiro talks about ‘being professional’ and striving to become ‘mainstream’ in his interviews. The definitions for permissible content seem to be agreed upon, but living up to these standards is not self-evident.

I: (...) Now, what is your criteria to have an artist on your site, what do you look for?

M: Yeah, well number one is the content, I mean they have to have Islamic content. The lyrics have to be *significantly* about Islam, you know, politics or something related to, you know, the Islamic life. That’s what really separates us from all other forms of hip hop. Naturally(?), we need, we need some like really good, mainstream quality artists. I’m not talking about mainstream in terms of the content, but the professionalism...

I: Okay, I see, right.

M: You know I, because I want everyone, like non-Muslims and Muslims to be able to listen to this music, and say “wow, this is like really good!”, you know, and it’s like, I would bump it in my stereo, you know, but uh... Before I had a bunch of artists that were just kinda, you know, they had their fruity loops and they would just, it just sounded really bad so I wanna create an image of this, of this hip hop, you know, in a way that is respectable. Also, they gotta be talented, I mean just ‘cause you’re Muslim and you rap or whatever, I mean you gotta have really good skills. Or else I mean, you know, it’s cool you know, you can make rap but uh, we need some, we need some good talent here if we’re gonna be respected by other you know, non-Muslims especially.²⁹⁹

Mike specifies that becoming mainstream is not the aim content wise, but on a quality level and this essentially differentiates Muslim hip hop artists from others: the content is Islamic, which becomes synonymous with rapping about the life of a Muslim in the sentence that follows, but the music should still sound good. By using the negative value adjective ‘bad’, emphasized with the modal adverb ‘really’ and three times with the modal adverb ‘just’, Mike tries to prove that lack of quality was truly an issue for Muslim hip hop earlier. Its opposite, and the medium for gaining non-Muslim attention, is represented to be skillful Muslim rappers (“they gotta be talented”; “we need some good talent”), most visibly in the last sentence with the conditioning ‘if’. These ideas seem to pertain to a discourse on artistic creativity; however, Mike does not seem to question whether Islam and Muslims in fact limit not only the content but the quality of the music because of many negative attitudes towards music and music making. Muslims are clearly not encouraged to artistic expression generally speaking.

The separation between ingroup and outgroup appears to be most marked in the end when Mike calls non-Muslims ‘other’ before specifying who’s respect Muslims, named as his ingroup with the pronoun ‘we’, need. Mike seems to believe that mainstream quality artists are the only way to reach non-Muslims, as he employs the adverb ‘especially’ at the end of the extract, and especially with the imitation of a non-Muslims reaction. The respect of non-Muslims seems to be the key for mainstream success (cf. the adjectives ‘respectable’

²⁹⁹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/9._Radio_Islam_Interviews_MHH_a_2nd_Time> (streamed and transcribed 24/02/2011).

and ‘respected’ in the extract), and reaching that audience has been mentioned several times (cf. earlier). One possible reason for this is that especially white youth (who are mostly non-Muslims) consume hip hop.³⁰⁰ However, it is also probable that at least some artists hope that the music will convert people to Islam (cf. earlier e.g. the different meanings of *dawah* Ch. 9).

Even though Mike advances the idea of professional quality musicians in his interviews, he also brings up the idea seen in the web site’s criteria, i.e. that Muslim artistry does not entail having a career, and family comes first. He even calls music a hobby.

M: (...) So I would’ve liked, I would at least like the artists to be compensated for the time they put into it, not necessarily to make a profit, but to you know at least have their work be supported by the listeners, you know. And so I am ready to, in a few weeks hopefully, I’m gonna release a Muslim artist compilation CD...

I: Wonderful.

M: ...which is gonna have about 20 artists and you can actually buy, you know, something that really says what this movement is about. And uh, you know, people can of course, you know, put that on their iPod but you know don’t, don’t share it with everyone...! [laughs at his request]

I: Right, of course. [laughs] So yeah, that’s very important, especially as an artist myself, independent, just if they copy you know, your CD so much it’s like okay, like you were saying, how [do] you make a profit, you know? We’re trying to do that, so...

M: Yeah, and like, this one important point I wanna make is that like, I don’t necessarily think that Muslim music or Islamic music should be like, to have a career or something. I think that it’s the possibility, there, like I think Sami Yusuf is pretty much living on it, a few other artists are, but I think that you know, you should definitely make sure your financial and career and educational goals are being met before you just like, say “I’m gonna be some kind of a rap star”, “Islamic rap star” or something, I mean, I don’t think that that’s a smart way to do it ‘cause the movement is still very young and it’s very... I mean you’re not sure if you’re gonna make it or not, so I think, you know, I don’t want people to get that idea.

I: Have you seen some, uh, bad examples of that? Maybe? [chuckles] Seems like you’re talking from experience, like, “don’t do it!” [laughs] I was kidding! [laughs] Not that I’m saying you, but maybe, you know, you’ve seen people struggling, you know...?

M: Yeah, I mean there, I do know of a few artists that were taking that approach. And, they were like, you know, not paying the bills or, you know, wife was like...

I: Oh no.

M: [indistinct] the money, I was like “look”, you know...

I: You can’t do that with the wife, [indistinct] children..! [laughs]

M: This is Islam we’re talking about. We have to support our families first and foremost...

I: Yes.

M: Then do some kind of hobby like this, and then if it turns into something else, then great, but if not, you gotta have a back-up plan.³⁰¹

Mike first claims that profit-making is not the goal of Muslim hip hop, but the woman interviewer seems to interpret Mike’s Muslim hip hop CD to be meant to do just this, after which she states that as an artist, she and also other Muslims would like to make money with their music (“we’re trying to do that”). However, Mike asserts that family values and their centrality in Islam override artistic ambitions. This idea is emphasized near the end of

³⁰⁰ According to Craig S. Watkins (2005, 102), this fact of music business is why for example one of rap’s biggest producer names, Dr. Dre, invested so much in Eminem, a white rapper; in this way, he could better market a black musical style to white consumers.

³⁰¹ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/9._Radio_Islam_Interviews_MHH_a_2nd_Time> (streamed and transcribed 24/02/2011).

the extract with the explanatory phrase “this is Islam we’re talking about”, i.e. he tries to convince the listener that the Muslim hip hop is essentially about religion and not about career choices. Also the adverbial “first and foremost”, followed by the temporal adverb “then”, indicate the secondary position of music compared to religion. The Muslim ingroup identification is constructed and conjured with ‘we’ and “our children”. Mike first claims that he does not see Muslim music as a career, but then corrects himself by admitting that some Muslims have made a full-time occupation out of music. He seems to assume that risk-taking or compromising is not good (“you’re not sure if you’re gonna make it”) or even necessary in the music business (“if it turns into something else, then great”). By perfecting skills, a hobby can turn into a career, however, Mike’s reasoning seems problematic as in the case of most people it is impossible to reach such a level of expertise and professionalism unless they persistently work hard at it. This also entails making sacrifices, as the history of any successful professional in almost any field exemplifies. Mike seems to deny this reality in order to support his identification with Islam’s values and tries to build an image of the Muslim hip hop genre as respecting Islam.

Mike’s arguments above contradict his other assertions about the need for professional level Muslim artists. This seems to prove that identities and their creation is contextual; by stating that the artists should be or are at a professional or mainstream level, he creates an image of Muslims as equally talented, skillful and appealing as non-Muslims artists, which encourages people to support, listen to and buy Muslim hip hop music. When he needs to create an image of Muslim artists as religious and following Islamic principles, he reduces their career ambitions while emphasizing their family and other Islamic duties as primary. In this way, the different aspects of Muslim hip hop and Muslim identities are negotiated and constructed situationally, which can easily cause incongruity between statements.

Although Mike claims that Muslim hip hop is not a career, he could imagine making a living out of promoting Muslim hip hop. This side of Muslim hip hop came up twice in the interviews related to the CD he is producing, above in the Radio Islam interview and also in the below extract from the KDHR interview.

I: What, what is the future of the website? Anything new, develop things after your hiatus there?

M: Yeah, I’m putting together a compilation CD that’s probably gonna come out in, uh... few months, I think. Less than a few months, hopefully, uhm... And so, that’s gonna bring a little, you know, merchandise in, you know, it’s gonna help spread, you know, the whole movement, you know, ‘cause people can buy it and listen to it in their cars and...

I: Right.

M...uh, at, but, in terms of like, making it a huge business or something, that, that’s an option obviously, but... I’m gonna focus on, you know, my career and the IT-field, and, if something really

good comes out of, you know, the music, and peop--if I get a lot of opportunities, then yeah I'll, I'll explore that and maybe have a business out of it, but...

I: Great.

M: ...right now I'm, you know, gotta take care of the wife and...have kids soon, so...³⁰²

By advertising the compilation CD, Mike implicitly admits that selling merchandise is an important aspect of Muslim hip hop. Like the discussion about career choices, here also a commercialism discourse is present. He admits that expanding the business is an option for him, however, the conditioning 'if' serves to assure and justify that only "really good" results would make him pursue a career in Muslim hip hop. Mike corrects himself and hesitates several times here, which gives the impression that he tries hard not to portray Muslim hip hop as commercial; the merchandise is just meant to expand the current audiences of Muslim hip hop. He also rushes to claim (cf. the conjunction 'but') that he puts his family first, which has been described earlier as an important value in Islam, for example in the web site's criteria. He calls Muslim hip hop a movement, which sounds more like a socially motivated and value-oriented endeavor than a commercial one; by giving this impression, he legitimizes investing in Muslim hip hop. The term 'movement' appears to portray Muslim music as different from other "mainstream" music and its assumed materialism and commercialism (cf. earlier). With these kinds of arguments, Mike justifies the commercialism related to the music.

Showing interest towards money has clearly been established as un-Islamic throughout the web site, and it seems likely that Mike downplays the commercial aspects of Muslim hip hop with the family obligations because he wants to portray himself and others engaged with Muslim hip hop as pious Muslims. He claims he will focus on his career in the IT-field and earning money for his family ("gotta take care of the wife"), however when looking at the web site criteria, it appears that Mike considers being career oriented negative in the music business – perhaps the underlying assumption is that focusing on a career in music entails less secure income and possibly less respect from other Muslims. This attitude towards having a career in music becomes even more ambiguous when looking at the web site's mission (cf. Ch. 8.1), where Islam and music are emphasized to go well together and supporting a Muslim identification.

Mostly, however, becoming a well-known, mainstream artist is portrayed as something worth striving towards based on the way artists are described at the web site and based on

³⁰² <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/6._KDHR_Interviews_MHH> (streamed and transcribed 26/02/2011).

Mike's interviews. Many of the artist profiles contain appraisal of the artists' career and achievements. "Namedropping", i.e. mentioning famous influences or collaborators, was very common throughout the profiles, and most of the artists that were named were commercially very successful and also 'un-Islamic' in the sense that has been described at the MHH web site. An example of this is the profile of Yusuf Abdul-Mateen.

Yusuf and his partner Al-J deliver much-needed positivity and realism in a time when negative stereotypes ruin hip-hop culture. In a few short years, Yusuf and Al-J have recorded songs with members of legendary groups such as Wu-Tang Clan, Brand Nubian and Sunz of Man. They have also shared the stage with the likes of Lupe Fiasco, Brother Ali and Cormega, to name a few. In January 2008, the duo released their debut mixtape "The Opening", and are set to release their debut full-length album "The Sacred Defense" in early 2009. The album, completely free of cursing and negative references to sex, drugs and violence, features guest appearances from Lord Jamar, Hell Razah, Reef the Lost Cauze, REKS and more. Yusuf has already begun work on a solo project, tentatively titled "Fear of a White Muslim", which will feature multiple collaborations with fellow Muslim lyricists.³⁰³

The collaboration with other artists is clearly constructed as positive, as they are praised as 'legendary'. The groups Brand Nubian and Wu-Tang Clan are indeed very successful groups, but also well known for their Five Percenter philosophy³⁰⁴ and the latter has e.g. also notoriously praised the smoking of marijuana. The collaboration album of Yusuf and Al-J is said to be free of *haram* elements, which is emphasized with the adverb 'completely'. However, the name of Yusuf's solo album refers to the famous Nation of Islam rap group Public Enemy (who are NOI members), and their iconic rap album, *Fear of a Black Planet*. This further renders it difficult to differentiate between Muslim artists and non-Muslim artists or between orthodox Muslims and the NOI and Five Percenters. However, contact with non-Muslim hip hop artists can bring Muslims and non-Muslim hip hop aficionados closer together, and in this way, mainstream success may become a reality at least for some Muslim rappers. Some Muslims may not even want to distinguish themselves from Five Percenters and the NOI or it simply does not matter to them, even if they do consider these two as outgroups. It is also possible that these groups and their members are seen negatively in some contexts (e.g. smoking marijuana at concerts) whereas they are seen positively as successful rap artists. The extract suggests that religion or world view differences are not always regarded as an obstacle for artistic collaboration. As seen earlier, some artists may claim that it is not permissible to listen to un-Islamic or *haram* content, yet they list hip hop artists who regularly employ sex and drug references as their musical influences. Yusuf and his partner are portrayed as making positive and realistic hip hop; their music is justified to be necessary (further emphasized with the

³⁰³ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Yusuf_Abdul-Mateen> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

³⁰⁴ Cf. e.g. Miyakawa 2005.

adjective combination ‘much-needed’) due to the current image of hip hop. It is interesting that here, negative stereotypes are said to be the reason behind hip hop culture’s demise, yet this kind of stereotyping of hip hop culture has been visible throughout the MHH web site.

The quotation from Mr. Ameen’s interview below shows that the issue of music is truly complicated and multifaceted among Muslim.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: Do you feel that you are making a difference with your music?

MR. AMEEN: I'd like to believe I am. I hoped to be platinum by now (lol) To do some things within the community, but supply and demand dictates otherwise. Really though, if one brother or one sister hear the CD and it moves them to remembers Allah, I'm satisfied to think that I made a difference.

MUSLIMHIPHOP.COM: What can we expect from you in the future?

MR. AMEEN: That's hard to call. Allah knows best. Muslims are a difficult market to approach. Some say music is haram, but what they are saying is "My cultural music is good and yours is bad." Some actually don't listen to anything. Some don't want to spend money on my CD, but will buy Jay-Z new CD and a small number will get at my CD. My mind tells me to invest my time and money on something that will turn a profit and have plenty to pass on to future generations insha-Allah. My heart tells me that I'm an MC and i [sic] must do what mc's [sic] do regardless if I'm shown the appreciation through net cash flow or not. We shall see.³⁰⁵

It seems apparent that the rapper tries to justify his music making mainly through religious motives but clearly also has financial motives as he mentions his CD four times in this short extract (and already before this), and also tries to joke (cf. the common Internet abbreviation ‘lol’, i.e. “laughing out loud”) about his less than satisfactory record sales (“hoped to be platinum by now”). After complaining how difficult it is to attain Muslim buyers for his music, he actually denies the viewpoint of music as forbidden with the contrasting ‘but’, yet admits that some Muslims do not listen to music. He sounds bitter when assuming that people will buy mainstream music instead of his. He seems to equal records sales and profit making with being acknowledged as a good artist (“if I’m shown the appreciation through through net cash flow”).

Mr. Ameen constructs a Muslim identity for himself by mentioning Allah three times, but also seems to refer to hip hop as “his” culture and “his” music when imitating those who advocate the *haram* point of view. He further stresses the importance of hip hop by using a repetitive structure (“tells me”) when referring to rap music with ‘mind’ and ‘heart’. He also employs the auxiliary verb ‘must’ in order to show that music making is imperative. With these arguments, as well as the phrase “Allah knows best”, it appears that he justifies his music making as necessary and permissible, even though he does not seem to reach many people with it nor gain acceptance for this endeavor. Considering the previously

³⁰⁵ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/18._Mr._Ameen_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010)

analyzed extracts, this one is slightly different regarding the role of commercial success: it is clearly something that Mr. Ameen hopes to accomplish and he even seems to create meaning for his music making through his success or failure. Although he attempts to stress the religious aspect of his music such as remembering Allah through it, calling Muslims a 'market' establishes his stance towards Muslim hip hop as money and career-oriented, which seems contrary to the web site's criteria.

The Soldiers of Allah is a group that ended their career before it really began. The reasons were several, but mainly related to the disappointments they had faced in the music business and in society. The below extract is quite long, and I have left out some parts out as they merely stress the several points made in the text. I decided to include this interview here to demonstrate that the obstacles that artists may face are several in the Internet-age, and that many of the themes on the MHH web site are employed here as well.

In the context of the mainstream media, the phrase 'Soldiers of Allah' brings many pictures to mind: terrorists, suicide bombing, beheading. Before all that in the late 90's, Soldiers of Allah was a group of young Muslims making music to spread the message of Islam. Soldiers of Allah was one of the first, if not the first Islamic hip hop groups to put their music on the net and get major attention. When MP3.com was the only hub for new artists to share their songs to the masses, Soldiers of Allah was a hugely popular feature. (...) "(...) The name could easily be misunderstood because it sounds too militant, something that we definitely weren't" said the founder of the group. What has perplexed Soldiers of Allah's fiercely loyal fans is why the group suddenly vanished into thin air. Some think they were silenced by the government, given the band's departure from the net shortly after 9/11: "The project was only meant as temporary project. The goal wasn't to start a music band up and make money, but rather use the tool of music to pass the message of Islam. After a while, I noticed that the music was increasing the emotions of the people, instead of making them think. This was not my intention and I decided that the tool of music may not necessarily be the best tool to use since people's emotions can easily be attached to it. Also, since there was no copyright with the music, random people started taking the songs, putting pictures of other people on it, and claiming it that they were Soldiers of Allah (...)" (...). The group had its fair share of hate mail from non-Muslims who heard their music on MP3.com. In terms of their Muslim listeners, the feedback was quite different: "Alhamdulillah, we received a lot of positive feedback. Although many people became emotional with the song, there was still a large group of people that emailed us that told us the songs made them think. Many of them told us that they came back to Islam because of it". (...) I know you are all wondering when Soldiers of Allah will come back, well it's probably not going to happen: "It has been brought up a few times but no action has ever really been taken to think that it would. Brothers have moved into different cities, got married, etc. When you're young and single, you have much more time".³⁰⁶

Especially non-Muslims are portrayed here as viewing Muslim hip hop negatively, whereas Muslim peers are said to have given positive feedback. Despite the feedback, the group did not continue their musical endeavors. One reason was the group's disappointment, as the music allegedly caused emotional reactions instead of intellectual ones among their listeners. Music is called a 'tool' three times and then disregarded with the adverbs 'necessarily' and 'easily' as ineffective in educating about Islam. Yet the

³⁰⁶ <http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/10._Soldiers_of_Allah_Interview> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010).

positive effects are stressed more with the ‘although’- ‘still’ structure closer to the end of the extract, and people are also claimed to have converted to Islam as a result of the music; the causal role of music is made clear with ‘because’. The music is portrayed as having mostly positive effects, whereas the negative effects are mainly used in the context of the group leaving the music business (cf. after “goal wasn't to start a music band up”) and to justify why the group “failed” their musical career. This issue is re-evoked later, when the discontinuance of the musical endeavors is stressed with the approximating adverb ‘probably’ and temporal modal adverb “ever really”; the speaker appears to stress the permanency of the situation. The temporariness of the activity was pointed out already earlier by calling the rap group a ‘project’, which seems surprising as they are claimed to have been “hugely popular”; it appears they were successful without the career.

The 9/11, terrorism and conspiracy theories related to it are evoked here as well; it seems that the writer/interviewer uses them as evidence of Muslims being wronged by authorities and society. The adverbs ‘suddenly’ and ‘simply’ create mystique around the Soldiers of Allah’s online disappearance. The 9/11 discussion is a powerful way to criticize non-Muslims because everyone is familiar with the event and due to its tragic nature, the discussion affects everyone emotionally. Similarly, unfair treatment and erroneous portrayal of Islam and Muslims by “the mainstream media” were resorted also elsewhere on the MHH web site when the aim was to highlight that Muslims are good people wronged by the media. The media representations are a recurrent theme on the site, and it is also visible here in the beginning. Whether the Soldiers of Allah shares these ideas, or they are simply the interviewer’s subjective opinions, remains unclear.

Claiming that earning money was not an aim for the Soldiers of Allah may be an implicit way to contrast religion and Islamic music with the perceived materialism of hip hop and music business in general, as has become clear earlier and in this way, to maintain the positive image of Muslim music. Copyright violations, such as people posing as the Soldiers of Allah online and spreading their music, were considered a problem (cf. also earlier the Radio Islam interviewer’s comments); however, the indignation in this case is portrayed as having more to do with identity theft than with the illegal spreading of copyrighted music, which also makes the group seem more interested about their Muslim image than their monetary gains. The copyright issues are hardly unique nowadays, yet many bands continue to pursue a career. However, in the case of a religious group, the

moral issues and identity are centrally related with music, as has become clear also in this study, and thus an identity theft may have a more profound effect.

It is surprising that a group which no longer functions is still presented on the web site. Including them may support a kind of victim identification and create a collective Muslim identity, caused by the stereotypes that many Muslims face. As in the case of almost any artist on the site, the Soldiers of Allah is marketed in the beginning with the adjectives 'the first', 'major' and 'popular'. Once the image and music of the band is established as successful and interesting, the conspiracy ideas and other reasons behind the band's departure from the music scene no longer seem to be their fault. The group becomes portrayed as the innocent victims of circumstances and as highly popular among Muslims due to the sound message in their music, Islam.

V CONCLUSION

When I was in the process of writing this thesis and people asked me about my topic, it was not unusual to encounter a bewildered “does Muslim hip hop really exist” type of question. These reactions seem to prove that this study has relevance for current research, if not for anything else than to educate people about existing cultural practices. In this thesis, I have discussed several aspects that connect religious identities and religiously inspired music; this was done through analyzing how Muslim identities and Muslim hip hop are constructed and negotiated discursively on the Internet. By grammatically and semantically discerning what is done with words, the Muslim identity discourse as well arguments about Muslim hip hop and its content became visible. It has become evident that identities are negotiated and thus vary circumstantially, and therefore identity representations may be contradictory from one situation to another.

Hip hop was argued to be a culturally relevant form of self-expression for Muslims in the 21st century.³⁰⁷ Many artists were surrounded by hip hop as they grew up, and the socialization into hip hop culture is without a doubt an important reason as to why these people have chosen hip hop instead of some other music genre as their expressive medium, and why they also wish to solve some of the possible contradictions between their love for hip hop and their love for Islam. They can keep both, if they find a way to negotiate between them, and it seems that Islamic hip hop is the result of this negotiation: it is used as a way to express a Muslim identity and identification as a hip hop artist. However, this kind of dual identification is not simple as some Muslims seem to consider that Islam must reign over musical artistry, or that music must be rejected entirely. The demands of some Muslims, who see hip hop music as affecting Muslim identity negatively, can cause conflicts to artists who themselves consider hip hop music to support their identification as Muslims. Either the Muslim artists abide by these demands or ignore those voices that do not accept their musical endeavors. In either case, it cannot be assumed that engaging in religious hip hop always results in positive self-identification and stronger sense of belonging to a religious ingroup, nor is it a given that the critical voices in the religious community entail the end of Muslim hip hop. It is not always possible to choose any medium for artistic expression, because the social environment may restrict artistic

³⁰⁷ I borrowed this formulation from the profile of Baraka Blue. cf. http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Baraka_Blue (accessed and printed 05/11/2010).

creativity. In the case of Muslimhiphop.com, the ethnic plurality of the artists on the site creates an image of hip hop as uniting Muslims across borders, but the criteria that the artists have to fill in order to be featured there separates the “right” Muslim hip hop and rappers from the “wrong” ones. The division that may result from Muslims making Islamic hip hop appears to be two-fold. Firstly, it can divide Muslims based on their opinions concerning music’s permissibility into those who allow it in some cases, and into those who consider all music forbidden. Secondly, Muslim hip hop artists are building a distance to non-Muslim hip hop (sometimes including the NOI and Five Percenters) due to its perceived un-Islamic nature as filled with profanity, sex, drugs and violence. However, artists are not homogeneous or consistent in their relation with music and religion and therefore, the meanings of Islam and hip hop and the reasoning behind their potential separation or combination varies. For example, a Muslim may consider listening to mainstream music or Muslim music generally speaking *haram*, yet he or she may listen to it anyway in some cases.

Islamic hip hop was portrayed as being positive and having beneficial effects on Muslim identities, such as instilling pride about being a Muslim. These were often the main selling points for Islamic music. However, Islamic hip hop was also heavily contrasted with mainstream hip hop, and the halal-haram-discourse was frequently employed in that. Most artists state that they are giving Muslims a *halal* alternative to the existing un-Islamic, *haram* hip hop, which often features morally problematic content. By constructing a general condemning attitude, they build a common identity for Muslims as opposing this type of musical content. *Halal* music serves as a reminder of Allah, and as such, it also builds and reminds of a shared religious identity. Muslim hip hop was also claimed to represent Islam and Muslims correctly, as opposed to the mainstream media for example, and to fight stereotypes in this way. Yet, although the web site and many artists claim to oppose stereotyping, the juxtaposing of ‘western’ and Islamic and “mainstream” hip hop and Islamic hip hop was a recurrent theme in the material. It appears that this claim only concerns the stereotyping of Islam and Muslims. Changing stereotypes about Muslims and Muslim unity were some of the social and political themes on the web site that were discussed using a discourse of social change; the discourse constructs a shared Muslim identity by creating a need for a positive change to the current social and political situation of Muslims and Muslim communities. Muslim rappers and their music were portrayed as advocating the need and sometimes also the means for a positive change. Whether Muslim hip hop actually instigates these changes remains to be seen. It appears that the MHH web

site and Muslim hip hop are aimed at Muslims more than non-Muslims, yet also the potential of hip hop music and the web site to impact the image of non-Muslims about Islam is portrayed as significant.

The power of music in educating has been noted by many throughout history; thus it appears logical that the Qur'an has been taught through recitation, and now Muslims claim to have turned to rap and other types of music for the purpose of *dawah*, as the spreading and teaching of Islam was frequently called on the MHH web site. The education discourse employed on the web site suggests that Islamic music, at least for some Muslim artists, is purely instrumental; it is referred to as a 'tool' and a 'hobby' for educating people about Islam. This might also be one reason why the music is not always "mainstream" quality. Music often sounds good when it is appreciated as an art form for and by itself and when people are passionate about making music.

Internet users are negotiating offline life, practices, beliefs, and attitudes in many ways. The MHH web site, with its online content such as Muslim artist interviews and its "building a movement" slogan, can be considered to continue what hip hop journalism started in the late 1980s, but now in the context of the *ummah* and using the World Wide Web as a medium instead of print media. This means giving "youth a sense of hip hop nation (...) populated by others exactly like them"³⁰⁸. Through the website, Muslims who are rap aficionados can potentially gain a sense of belonging to the hip hop nation while remaining religiously devout; when they hear someone rhyming about Muslim life or read interviews of Muslim artists, this can support their identification as Muslims. The potential positive effects can take place both on a personal level (spiritual elevation due to listening) and on a social level (enforced feeling of belonging to a religious community). If for example that person lives in an environment which prohibits the enjoying of music altogether, via the Internet he or she can find out that music is not considered *haram* by all members of the *ummah*; alternative interpretations and alternative ways of expressing identity are available online. However, the Internet does not replace real life experiences such as going to a mosque nor will it make all Muslims culturally uniform³⁰⁹. Similarly, while Islam is a way of life and a culture with clear normative features that support interdependent self-construal, it would seem contradictory to state that the simple influence of religion would override the societal or other influences that come about when living for

³⁰⁸ Chang 2005, 415.

³⁰⁹ Zaman 2008, 467.

example in the United States, or vice versa. In today's globalized world, people have been socialized into many cultural norms through social interaction and thus have various possibilities for self-construal; on a web site like MHH that features Muslims artists from all over the world, this becomes all the more apparent.

One should question, whether the themes that come up in the artist profiles and written interviews are what the artists themselves wish to bring up or whether they are Mike Shapiro's selective views on what Muslim artists should concentrate on, or if he has simply compiled together some of the common concerns of the artists. The basis for this questioning is that Shapiro has the power to pick and choose the artists of the website, and he evokes many of the same themes in the radio interviews that are mentioned in the artist profiles and interviews. The themes include e.g. creating a positive image of Islam and pride about being a Muslim, supporting family values, artists being role models and educating the Muslim youth, Islam as a transforming power, and defending the view of music as *halal* and as an alternative to mainstream music when its content is 'Islamic'. Shapiro, along with a few artists, also actively constructs an idea of a Muslim hip hop movement, which gives the web site and its core ideas a more prominent status and creates an image of something becoming bigger and better; Islamic music should strive towards mainstream success and make the voice of Muslims truly heard, yet avoid open commercialism. It thus becomes apparent that the term 'movement' is not only a label given by academics.³¹⁰ The web site appears to be building a discourse of Muslim hip hop.

The MHH website contains discursive representations of Muslim identities and Muslim hip hop and as such, it is necessarily partial, situational and subjective. One must be careful not to over-generalize the opinions and constructions on the site to represent all Muslim hip hop artists; for this reason, a material as rich as the one found on Muslimhiphop.com is both challenging and rewarding for a researcher. It contains a wide scale of stories and experiences and thus enables to better detect the differences in identities and their relation with the multiple factors affecting them. The interpretations about Muslim hip hop are flexible and because of their situational nature, even contradictory. The music and its content also overlap with other identifications, e.g. ethnicity, and thus Islam is not necessarily the only meaningful aspect in Muslim hip hop. A clear causal relationship cannot be identified in the words of Muslim artists regarding Islam's influence on music or the Islamic music's influence on Muslims; both the music and the religion are shaping one

³¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Alim 2005, who refers to a hip hop cultural movement as well as to a "transglobal hip hop *umma*".

another to some extent. However, based on this research and the previous ones, albeit most of them case studies, Muslim artists do have some similar themes in their music and similar incentives for making music.

Partly due to the lack of previous researches, this study has exceeded the standard length of a Master's thesis; this was necessary due to the complexity of the context, the Internet, and the thematic richness of the material. A researcher has the power to select the material for his or her study, and also interprets the material from a certain point of view; a different theoretical approach or a more thorough analysis of the material might have resulted in a more comprehensive study. The web site's content was radically narrowed down to a few extracts in this thesis, yet they proved to contain new and versatile information about how Muslims employ hip hop in negotiating religious identities. The previous research on Muslim hip hop that was discussed in this thesis (cf. Chapter 1.1 & 7) has stressed the positive effects and educative and uniting potential of Muslim hip hop music while ignoring to a large extent the possible contradictions this may cause to Muslim identification, and the divisions it may create among Muslims as well as between Muslims and non-Muslims. This study has expanded the current scope of academic research on Muslim hip hop and Muslim identities in at least four ways: by moving from local level to a more global level, from offline to online, by discussing the commercial aspect of religiously inspired music, and by bringing into focus new important facets about how being a hip hop artist may contradict a Muslim identity. This study does not invalidate the central research result of earlier studies according to which hip hop can potentially support the construction of a positive and proud religious identification. This study does, however, prove that Muslims and also Muslim hip hop artists are a heterogeneous group and differ in their experiences and opinions, and that there is a need for more research in order to map the several, unexplored aspects of how Muslim and hip hop identities are negotiated. More attention needs to be directed at the interplay of local cultures and ethnicity and religion, and at the minority-majority power relationships and political and socio-economical factors in societies that are affecting religious identities and their cultural expressions. Gender is also clearly a factor that influences the negotiation of religious identities, yet it has remained a curiosity in this research and in most other Muslim hip hop researches. Also the relationship between religious music, Muslim artists and the music industry's commercial interests would be worth further studying. Naturally, it must be acknowledged that the academic research of Islamic hip hop is still very young, scarce and consists mostly of case studies; currently, the research possibilities are still wide-ranging, almost endless.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

The main material for this thesis was collected from <http://www.muslimhiphop.com>. Because the corpus includes ca. 90 links, they have been categorized below following the section headings at the web site in order to facilitate the reader. The links under the headings are in alphabetical order. The thesis also includes a CD-attachment, where the analyzed material is in PDF-format.

What is MHH?

<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/>> (figure 1 accessed and printed 20/04/2011; PDF-file accessed and printed 30/01/2011)
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH> (accessed and printed 30/01/2011)
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/Criteria> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010)
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/History> (accessed and printed 05/11/2010)
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/Links> (accessed and printed 16/12/2010)
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=What_is_MHH/Music_in_Islam> (accessed and printed 21/09/2010)
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Web_Discussion> (accessed and printed 30/01/2011)

Hip Hop

(all artist profiles accessed and printed 05/11/2010 unless stated otherwise)

<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Hip-Hop>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/3ILM>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Abdul-Fateh>> (accessed and printed 16/01/2011)
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Abu_Nurah>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/After_Hijrah>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Amir_Sulaiman>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Baby_Muslims>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Baraka_Blue>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Basheer_Jones>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/belikeMuhammad>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Blakstone>>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Blind_Alphabetz>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Born_Tragedy>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Brother_Yusuf>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/DJ_Cee_Life>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/ElevenFiftyNine>>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Five_Eighty>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Good_Brother_Musa_%28Pious_Poet%29>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Halal_Productionz>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Imam_Jihad>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/INFINITE>>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Jabbar_and_Ali>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Jakattak>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Jamila>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/J-Seriyus>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Kalasoul>>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Kareem_Ali>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Khalil>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Kozi-Moe>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Kumasi>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/M-Team>>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Manifest_ONE>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Masikah>>
<<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Mecca2Medina>>

<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/MeccaCentric>
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Mickey_Boston
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Miss_Undastood
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Mohammed_Yahya
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http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Mr._Ameen
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Ms._Latifah
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Mustafa_Abdul-Basit
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Nasiric>
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Native_Deen
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/ontheD>
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Poetic_Pilgrimage
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Professor_A.L.I (accessed and printed: 14/10/2011)
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Rakin_Niass
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Rashid_Bhikha
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Reason_Rule
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/RukhSoul>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/SAID>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Samir>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/SEN>
<http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Shahed>
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Sirraj_L.K
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http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Sonz_of_the_Crescent
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/Tahir_Rashid
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/The_Brothahood
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php/index.php?p=Hip-Hop/The_Faculty
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http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/2._Mecca2Medina_Interview
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/3._MPAC_Interview
http://www.muslimhiphop.com/index.php?p=Stories/4._Radio_Islam_Interviews_MHH (streamed and transcribed 24/02/2011)
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