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Christoph Günther

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Universität Bremen
ZeMKI Zentrum für Medien-, Kommunikations- und Informationsforschung

Universität Bremen | University of Bremen
ZeMKI, Zentrum für Medien-, Kommunikations- und Informationsforschung
Linzer Str. 4, 28359 Bremen, Germany, E-mail: zemki@uni-bremen.de
www.zemki.uni-bremen.de | www.zemki.uni-bremen.de/en/

Christoph Günther (christoph.guenther@uni-erfurt.de)
Christoph Günther has been a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Erfurt (funded by the DFG's Heisenberg Programme) since February 2023. Trained in Islamic Studies, History, and Arabic, his research and teaching touch upon issues of religion and digital media, visual culture, as well as social change and the role of religio-political actors therein. His current research focuses on the ways in which Muslim actors design audiovisual mediations on social media platforms and how Muslim practitioners engage with such videos and images in the course of their daily religious and media practices. He is the author of *Entrepreneurs of Identity: The Islamic State's Symbolic Repertoire* (Berghahn Books, 2022) as well as co-editor of *Jihadi Audiovisuality and its Entanglements: Meanings, Aesthetics, Appropriations* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020) and *Disentangling Jihad, Political Violence and Media* (Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

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“German Version better”: Mimetic Normativity in TikTok Daʿwa[1]

Abstract

This article explores how TikTok’s short video format facilitates a distinctive mode of religious instruction that simplifies Islamic norms into binary categories of "right" (*ḥalāl*) and "wrong" (*ḥarām*). Focusing on two case studies, I highlight how Muslim content creators convey ethical guidance by referencing the Qurʾan and Hadith while omitting the nuanced discursive traditions of Islamic jurisprudence and contextual knowledge. The brevity of the videos limits critical engagement with complex theological discussions, presenting norms as supra-historical and detached from human experience. This leaves audiences to debate the norms presented in comment threads, without explicit acknowledgment of scholarly expertise. Additionally, I employ a performance-centred approach to analyse how TikTok’s functional logics and affordances, including collaboration, humour, spatial settings, and app features like hashtags and captions, shape the presentation and reception of religious content. These elements, combined with audience interactions and the app’s user interface, constitute a "technosocial setting" that frames the couple's performative enactments of Islamic teachings. This setting not only influences audience interpretation but also facilitates memetic engagement, reinforcing TikTok’s role as a platform for disseminating simplified religious norms in an engaging, collaborative manner.

Keywords

TikTok; daʿwa; Erving Goffman; team performance; imitation; religious norms

1 Introduction

“Who can do your makeup?” a man in his mid-twenties, wearing a dark greenish-blue t-shirt, brown trousers and a black skull cap, exclaims enthusiastically as he steps close to the camera, waving two make-up tools in his hands and almost touching the camera lens with his face. A woman in probably the same age, standing in the right half of the picture and dressed in a cardigan matching the colour of the man's T-shirt, a dark flower-patterned dress and a light-coloured face-veil (*niqāb*) responds "Let’s go!” - not less enthusiastically – as she throws her hands in the air. A blank wall provides the background of this short video and the camera is mounted roughly at eye level with the couple. In their 16-second-long conversation, he names seven groups of people, e.g., her mother or their female followers, asking her whether they would be or would not be allowed to do her makeup. Upon each question, she succinctly agrees or disagrees or briefly describes the conditions under which they may do so.

[1] This contribution has benefited significantly from joint interpretations of the research data in workshops with colleagues at the Universities of Bochum, Erlangen, Leipzig, a Data Session at the Chair of Sociology of Religion and Culture at the University of Bayreuth, and the Digital Anthropology Lab at the University of Tübingen. I am very grateful for this productive exchange. All remaining errors are of course my own.

The interaction between the two protagonists in this video is both entertaining and educational, imparting serious instructions on how Muslim women should or should not interact with their environment. As these instructions form the main message of the video, many viewers address and debate them in the comments thread of the video on the social video platform TikTok. One viewer, however, succinctly states "German version better". Their comment laconically points to this particular video not being an isolated occurrence, yet it may be just one of a number of similar videos on the platform. As it stands, the general nature of their statement does not allow any conclusions to be drawn as to whether the (or *a*) and in what ways this "German version" is "better" in terms of subject matter, structure, format, or other features, neither to how the video at hand relates to the unspecified other. However, their short comment shows at least that this TikTok user is aware that other videos similar to this can be found on the platform.

The user's comment also resonated with my own observations. In summer 2023, I had embarked on a new research project exploring the ways in which Muslim actors on various social media platforms articulate their interpretations of how Islam should be lived, explained, and proclaimed as well as probing the ways in which Muslims engage with these texts, images, and videos.[2] I utilise dedicated user accounts on the respective platforms, which identify me as a researcher in my profile description. I employ these accounts on both my laptop and mobile phone.

My thematic preferences, the accounts I searched for and whose videos I watched, as well as a number of other factors that are opaque to me, also contributed to the TikTok algorithms directing my attention relatively quickly to the profile of a couple that contained the aforementioned video. The account in question, designated as "mehdinatv," featured a number of videos that were tagged with the hashtag "#muslimcouple." Upon clicking on said hashtag, a series of videos from both the same and other accounts where Muslim couples present themselves was returned. Upon closer examination of these accounts, it became evident that a TikTok user account belonging to a German couple also addressed similar topics. Moreover, in at least three videos released a few weeks after mehdinatv, the exact same topic was covered in a strikingly similar manner. Although TikTok encourages its users to cross-reference other content in their own videos through a series of built-in features and conventions of use rely on reference structures, no explicit links to other content can be found in these examples. Rather, these remain implicit and must be recognised by the viewers.

The starting point for writing this essay is hence the hypothesis that the above-mentioned viewer, commenting on the superiority of the "German version", explicitly corroborated my own observation and assertion. Beyond this phenomenological impulse, however, the aim of this article is twofold. I will examine the audiovisual conveyance of Islamic religious knowledge and norms through a specific type of TikTok short videos. Specifically, I focus on how content creators design their setting of religious norms visually and acoustically by way of their performance in a given space, directing the viewers' gaze and, as a result, also potentially shaping their perception of the topic. Although both aspects, namely performance and its reception, necessitate a comprehensive examination, this study aims to prioritize an analysis of the performance itself and the extent of its reception as is discernible from user comments. I will, however, not elaborate extensively on the ways users engage with these videos in both online and onsite contexts. Secondly, I also argue that, with regard to the visual, acoustic and performative design of videos on TikTok, the format of the short video has specific effects on the presentation of religious

[2] The research project *Contemporary Muslim Preaching and Religious Media Practices* is conducted at the University of Erfurt's Department of Religious Studies and generously funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) as part of its Heisenberg Programme.

norms and at the same time connects to modes of summarising complex textual interpretations that are known from Islamic intellectual history. I hence elaborate on the ways in which the format of TikTok short videos as well as the platform itself encourage the generation of memetic elements and a multitude of (oftentimes implicit) references between individual videos and content creators.

2 Muslim Daʿwa on TikTok

The operating company ByteDance describes TikTok as "the leading destination for short-form mobile videos worldwide."[3] Launched as an application for iPhone and Android mobile platforms outside of China in 2017, TikTok developed a high level of popularity globally – particularly among teenagers, young people, and music artists all of whom came to appreciate it as a social video platform where dance videos were preeminent in the early days. Alongside the ongoing critical public discourse surrounding the app's management of user data and its role in fostering political influence, a substantial corpus of academic research has emerged, examining the technological underpinnings and functional logic of TikTok. These studies, conducted from diverse vantage points, also provide insights into the platform's usage patterns across diverse social collectives (El Sayed and Hotait 2024: 2).

A central focus of this article is the notion of imitation logic, a concept that has been identified as a significant contributing factor to the platform's popularity. Zulli and Zulli (2022), for example, suggest to understand TikTok's popularity among young people through a focus on the ways in which TikTok's logics and design encourage its users to engage along the principles of mimesis, i.e., imitation and replication. They argue that some of the platform's built-in features bolster the emergence of a specific, content-driven, and highly mimetic form of sociality shaped by TikTok's architecture. Zulli and Zulli theorized this form of sociality as 'imitation publics', analysing how content creators piggyback on trending videos to achieve their own popularity on the network. Interactions layer atop each other through TikTok's array of editing effects, memetic templates, relational and serial formats, where remixed videos supersede prior messages within this multifaceted dialogue (see also Cervi and Divon 2023; Otto 2023). The original video then undergoes a transformative journey, shedding old connotations and acquiring fresh interpretations as it traverses the digital network.

I will go into these aspects in more detail below but would first like to describe the field of research that interests me in the context of this essay. Understood as a video platform on which people - beyond the aspects of imitation and replication - can enter into social interaction with each other, TikTok is of interest to all kinds of social actors who would like to gain attention for their concerns. This naturally also includes religious actors, regardless of their respective religious tradition and institutional affiliation. Alongside YouTube and Instagram, in recent years TikTok has developed into one of the social media platforms on which Muslims also talk about their faith, religious practice, religious norms and values and on which people (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) obtain information about Islam and Muslim life. Noticeably, Sunni actors in particular, some of which can be described as overtly conservative in orientation, have been very quick to solidify their presence on the platform. As I will argue in more detail below, the efficacy of their messages on the short video platform that is TikTok can be attributed, in part, to the form in which they are presented, i.e., clear and concise content that is highly action oriented.

[3] See https://www.bytedance.com/en.

TikTok therefore also shapes forms and formats of dissemination of Muslim *daʿwa*, that is the call to all people to adopt the message of Islam or to encourage fellow Muslims to a more pious conduct. Over the past fifty years, audiovisual mediations of *daʿwa* evolved from the distribution of audio cassettes over religious programmes on state-owned television channels in Muslim majority countries to a great variety of programmes available across the globe on satellite TV, as well as a wide range of web platforms. Video and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others offer a variety of forms ranging from professional studio productions over semi-professional recordings of sermons, to mobile phone recordings or live streams in everyday situations (see i.a. Pink 2019: 108–9; Patel 2022). In this context, Muslim scholars employ the affordances of these platforms to present more traditional formats like a sermon (*khuṭba*), instructional session (*dars*), and public lectures, as well as publish brief exhortations on specific topics and snapwas (a portmanteau referring to religious *fatwas* communicated over the instant messaging app Snapchat, see Muslim News Staff 2018) that cater to the preferences and media habits of a younger Muslim demographic (Nisa 2018; Stjernholm 2019; Stjernholm 2020; Alatas 2022). Equally, a young generation of Muslim lay people and activists draws upon the affordances and logics of these platforms to create and negotiate texts and (moving) images that render particular performative and embodied articulations of Muslim identity, faith practice, and pious self-fashioning visually tangible, and thus also shape the ways in which Muslims and Non-Muslims alike perceive Islam (Nisa 2018; Baulch and Pramiyanti 2018; Chitwood 2019; Peterson 2020; Piela 2022a; Piela 2022b).

The production and negotiation of knowledge as well as the establishment and negotiation of social relationships is generally not limited to TikTok or any other platform, as many users most likely follow a 'polymedia' practice (Madianou and Miller 2013; Madianou 2014) and use different platforms as well as, in some cases, multiple user profiles on the respective platforms (Costa 2018). It is also clear that usage practice and affordances, i.e. technically defined logics of use, of the respective platform are in a reciprocal relationship with each other.

3 Muslim Couple Videos and Mimetic Normativity

With regard to the visual, acoustic and performative design of TikTok short videos, I would like to use the example offered by the creators of the above described video *Who Can Do Her Makeup?*. The protagonists, a couple from Canada, employ channels on TikTok, Instagram and YouTube under the name of mehdinatv. Both also operate individual accounts on TikTok and Instagram where they cross post videos from their joint accounts in addition to videos that feature him or herself only. In their self-description on YouTube, they characterise themselves as "an interracial couple trying to break stereotypes on Niqabis (veiled women) and Muslims in general. Mehdi Isa is an Armenian-Portuguese Muslim revert Mubina is Pakistani." Their videos primarily cover practical religious issues and centre on the lifestyle of a Sunni Muslim couple with conservative orientations in a non-Muslim majority context. The two showcase themselves as an example of a specific set of norms, values and beliefs, and articulate the educational nature of their videos primarily through the use of hashtags such as #learnfromus, #todayilearned and #needtoknow.

In their way of addressing these themes, the interaction between Mubina and Mehdi, which alternates between humour and seriousness, and their supposedly clearly assigned performative roles are key elements. Many of their videos are determined by the couple’s physical performance, including voice, gestures, and facial expressions. By way of

example, in one of their videos, entitled *Who Can See My Hair?? (So many have asked!!)*,[4] the couple stands in front of the camera, which is mounted slightly above their heads, capturing their upper bodies up to the waistline (Fig 1). The background of the video shot in portrait format is a bare, light grey wall in a room that appears to have been illuminated with professional lighting. Both protagonists stand at approximately 45° to the camera and, as the video progresses, turn their posture either towards each other or towards the camera to simulate eye contact with the audience. The couple's clothing is colour-coordinated and contrasts with the plain background. Mehdi is dressed in a dark blue shirt with a stand-up collar and white buttons, beige trousers with a dark brown belt and a black skull cap (*ṭāqiya*). Mubina wears a dark blue dress with a floral print, a black blazer, and a *hijāb* with a grey-blue batik pattern under her black *niqāb*. A white synthetic flower about the size of a palm is also pinned to her *hijāb* at her left temple. Although their clothing is colour-coordinated and fashionable, the contrast between what we are allowed to behold of Mubina whose garment only allows gazing at her eyes and Mehdi's gown could hardly be any stronger as the sleeves of his shirt are rolled up to his elbows and the top three buttons are unbuttoned, revealing his chest hair.

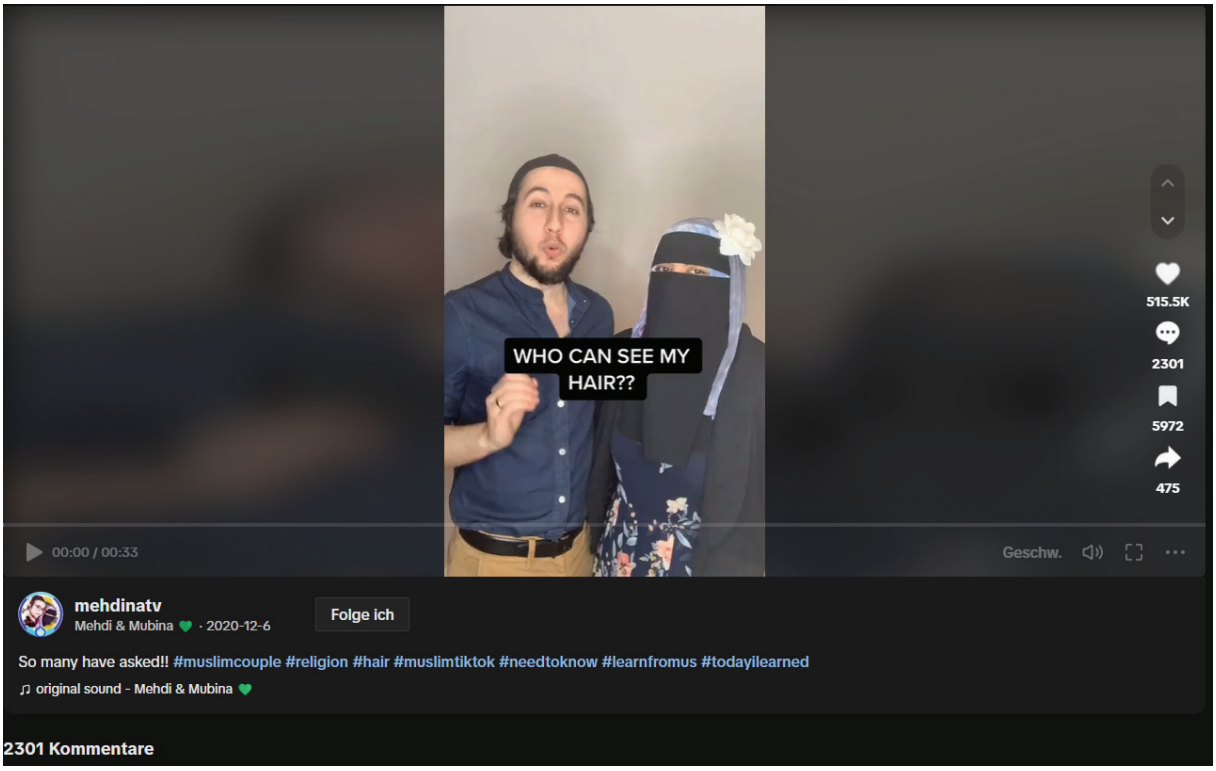

Figure 1: Screenshot of WHO CAN SEE MY HAIR??, displayed on the author's PC screen

Mehdi and Mubina have published a whole series of videos on their channel with a dialogue-based format that relies very much on humorous twists. The interview format, in which he asks her which groups of people are allowed to interact with her and in what way, is quite common on their channels and probably popular with their followers. Remarkably, their dialogue in this and many other videos is limited to a keyword-like

[4] https://www.tiktok.com/@mehdinatv/video/6903220556754144513 (published 6 December 2020; last accessed 26 November 2024). By the time of writing in December 2024, this video had received approximately 516.000 likes and evoked 2.225 user comments.

exchange (Fig. 2). In the course of this 34-second video, Mehdi names 8 people or groups of people and asks Mubina in each case whether they are allowed to see her hair or not. We realise that Mubina's social interaction with other people is regulated and that only certain groups of people are allowed to see her hair (and face for that matter).

Figure 2: Screenshot of WHO CAN SEE MY HAIR??

I would now like to redirect the focus to the 'German version better' user comment that initiated this article, because a scene that is strikingly similar can be found in a video posted on the German-language TikTok channel muslim.cpl[5] on 24 February 2021 under the title *Wer Darf Ihre Haare Sehen?😯 (was als nächstes?🤔 FOLGT UNS AUF INSTAGRAM❤️)*[6] (Fig. 3), which, by the time of writing, had received approximately 765.000 likes and elicited more than 10.000 user comments.

[5] By the time of writing, the creators have renamed their account to *itsdzamina* while their Instagram account is still named muslim.cpl.

[6] https://www.tiktok.com/@muslim.cpl/video/6932800023960767750 (last accessed 26 November 2024); the video title translates to WHO CAN SEE HER HAIR? 😯 (what next? 🤔 FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM❤️).

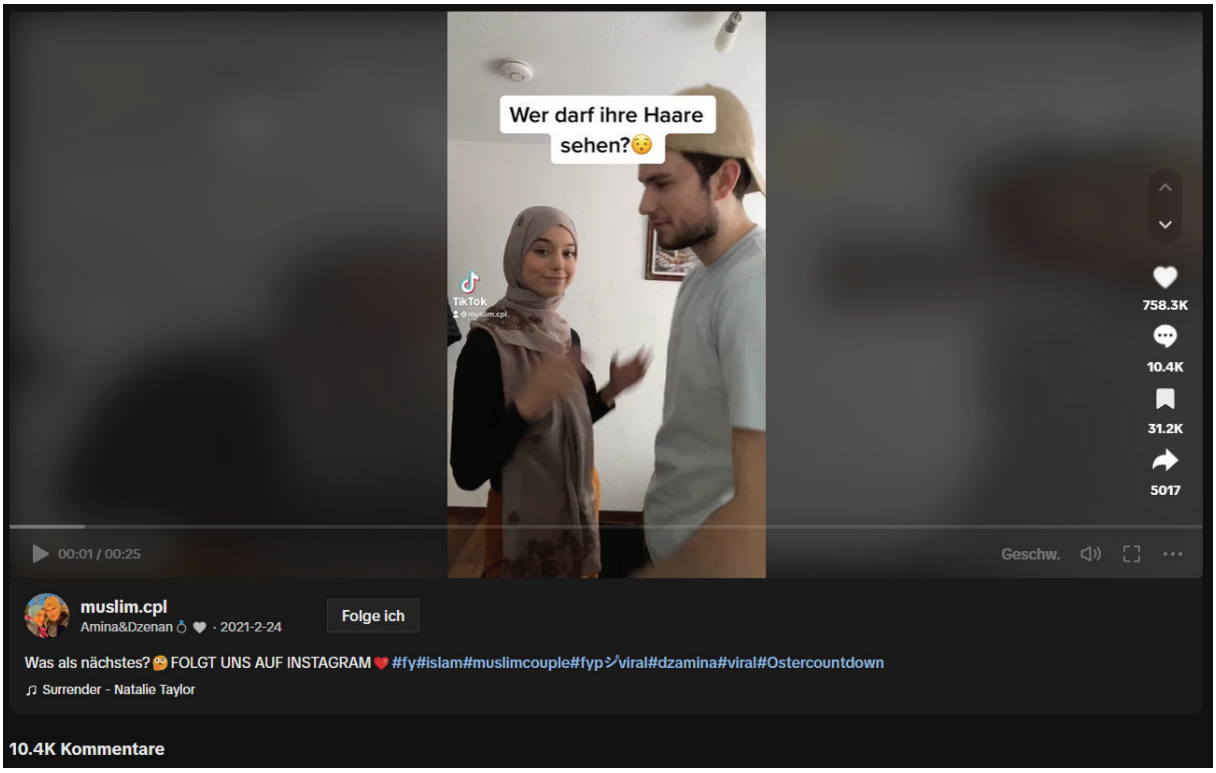

Figure 3: Screenshot of 'Wer darf ihre Haare sehen?', displayed on the author's PC screen.

Amina and Dzenan, who run the account, also have joint user accounts on Instagram and YouTube, where they describe their media productions as ‘couple content and much more’. The above video is also produced in portrait format and the camera is mounted slightly below the eye level of the protagonists, who appear to stand in a whitewashed interior - apparently a flat - illuminated by daylight. Details such as the floor, a photograph of the Great Mosque in Mecca, a ceiling lamp and a smoke detector can be recognised in the image. Amina is positioned on the left of the picture, wearing an orange skirt, a black jumper and a grey hijab with a floral pattern, the ends of which are draped forwards and backwards over her right shoulder. Dzemin, on the right, is dressed in dark grey trousers, a white T-shirt and a beige baseball cap, which he is wearing upside down on his head. Similar to the interaction between Mubina and Mehdi, the dialogue between the two in the 25-second video is characterised by a keyword-like exchange in which Dzemin names 9 people or groups of people and asks Amina whether or not they are allowed to see her hair (Fig. 4).

In both videos, the couples demonstrate their understanding of the regulations governing interactions of a married woman wearing a hijab with other individuals. The key words invoked by both men and displayed in the respective video provide a fixed framework for this regulation, which is set against the background of the question 'Who can? / Who cannot?' and confirmed by both women's clear answers. That this regulation is based on religious norms is not explicitly addressed by the protagonists. Therefore, it is up to the viewers to deduce the religious meaning and significance of what is said and shown from contextual information provided through visual cues in the video such as the women's garment, the photograph of the Great Mosque in Mecca, and Mehdi's skullcap. Additionally, textual cues on the platform's user interface provide further insight, including hashtags such as #islam, #muslimcouple, #religion, and #muslimtiktok; Amina and Dzemin's account name at the time of the video’s release, i.e., *muslim.cpl*; and Mehdi and Mubina's

mehdinatv. The fact that both content creators, however, do not explicitly address the religious foundation of the normative framework presented, suggests that they presuppose their viewers' awareness or recognition of this religious rationale.

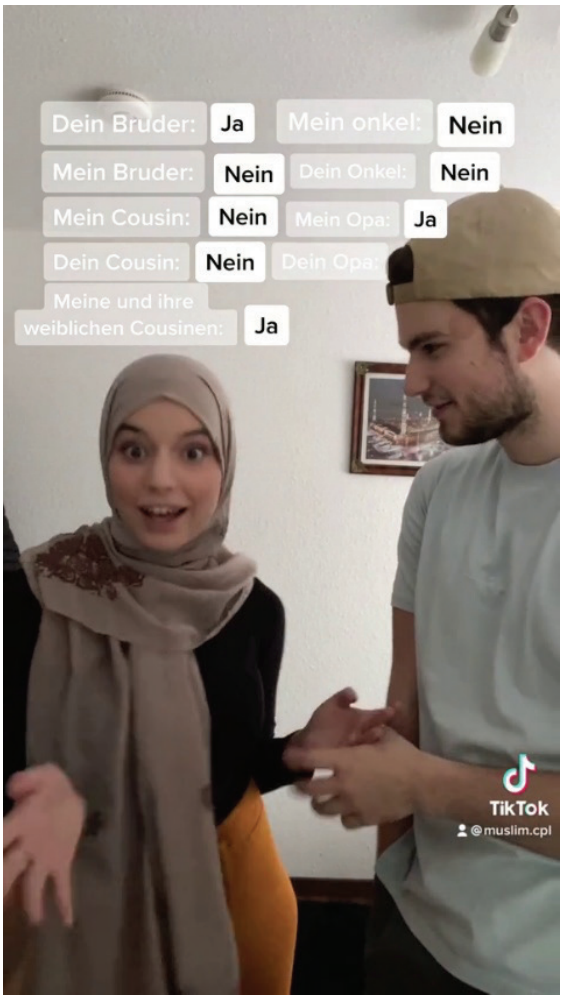

Figure 4: Screenshot of 'Wer darf ihre Haare sehen?'

The groups of people referred to in both videos are first and foremost first-degree relatives (mother, father, brother/brothers) and members of the wider family (male and female cousins, grandfather) as well as other groups of people outside the kinship framework (any children, male doctors, an astronaut). Both videos refer to regulations set forth in the Islamic social and normative order that govern social interactions of married or unmarried women with other individuals. Despite the transfer of lived religious practices and understandings of this complex, these regulations are based on Q. 24:31[7], corresponding exegetical literature (*tafsīr*) and specifications in legal texts, e.g., *fiqh* and *fatāwā*, which

[7] {And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and guard their chastity, and not to reveal their adornments [i.e., hair, body shape, and underclothes] except what normally appears [i.e., the face, hands, outer clothes, rings, kohl, and henna]. Let them draw their veils over their chests, and not reveal their hidden adornments [i.e., hair, arms, and legs.] except to their husbands, their fathers, their fathers-in-law, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, their fellow women, those bondwomen in their possession, male attendants with no desire, or children who are still unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not stomp their feet, drawing attention to their hidden adornments. Turn to Allah in repentance all together, Oh believers, so that you may be successful.}

altogether dictate (diverging) rules for marriage, casual relationships, and the disclosure of women's *ʿaurāt* only to those men to whom the woman is in a kinship relationship (*maḥram* relationship, primarily based on Q. 4:23[8]) that excludes marriage.[9] Regarding the same individuals and groups in both videos, namely the father, brothers, grandfathers and uncles, the norms presented by the protagonists – with one exception, namely her maternal and paternal uncles – are found to be identical. Although this contradiction could be interpreted in the sense of a pluralistic interpretation of Sunni norms, it nevertheless points to an essential characteristic of the videos examined in particular and of the social norms conveyed as binding in short videos in general. This characteristic is the narrowing of complex textual interpretations in Islamic intellectual history to unambiguous yes/no answers in the sense of a *ḥalāl*/*ḥarām* scheme.

The content creators' presentation of this normative framework through speech and text overlays yet only covers two dimensions of the sensory stimuli offered in their videos. Their decision in favour of a specific type of media therefore also entails consequences for the manner of communication as well as the social interaction between the authors and their audience. The most obvious aspect here is the image frame and format, which, carefully set up (or not), creates „the appropriate place" (Goffman 1956: 13) that constitutes and determines the beginning and the end of the performance as the protagonists seek out the camera's gaze and direct their bodies and attention in relation to the recording device. In particular, I argue that the performance of the protagonists as a couple is key in this regard. The ways social actors present themselves and their individual actions in front of the camera on social media platforms is the subject of a lively discussion in research, and not only on religion in the digital age (see i.a. Dörre 2020). It is often emphasized that we, as viewers, witness a production in which we are presented with figures that have little or nothing to do with the 'real' people (whatever that may mean) behind the camera. This perspective, which is based on a distinction between truth and staging that can hardly be established empirically, however, seems an unpromising approach because it assumes that the staged character of what we, as viewers, are offered to see and hear is to be attributed to the medialization of the performance. This problem is essentially insoluble. Instead, I would like to try and approach it from a perspective proposed by Erving Goffman (1956; 1961), assuming that performative elements are inherent in all human interaction. With regards to individual social actors and their actions in specific contexts, he suggests that individual abilities, talents, and character traits are best brought to bear where the respective socially perceptible (and expected) actions correspond most closely to individual dispositions. In Goffman's (1956: 47) words, "the personal front of the performer is employed not so much because it allows him to present himself as he would like to appear but because his appearance and manner can do something for a scene of wider scope." Beyond the individual and their position in the social structure, Goffmann also draws our attention to the fact that any socially perceptible action requires a counterpart as well as a certain extent of co-operation. This understanding brings cooperation and setting into perspective, i.e., two elements that are of great import to the performative design of the couples' videos.

[8] {Prohibited to you [for marriage] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your father's sisters, your mother's sisters, your brother's daughters, your sister's daughters, your milk mothers who nursed you, your sisters through nursing, your wives' mothers, and your stepdaughters under your guardianship [born] of your wives unto whom you have gone in. But if you have not gone in unto them, there is no sin upon you. And [also prohibited are] the wives of your sons who are from your own loins, and that you take [in marriage] two sisters simultaneously, except for what has already occurred. Indeed, Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful.}

[9] In a comment to their video on the day of its publication, Mubina and Mehdi drew on the Arabic concept, confirming "We believe mahrams can see my face and hair and non-mahrams can't."

In both videos the men assume the role of host. They introduce viewers to the theme of the video by asking the question “Who can see her hair?” At first glance, this might seem to suggest that both men are exercising what Goffman (1956, p. 62) refers to as *dramatic or directive dominance* over what is happening. However, through their introductory words to the audience, they first point out that their own role is part of the co-operation between themselves and their partner. Mehdi underlines this reference to performative collaboration with a gesture a few seconds into WHO CAN SEE MY HAIR? As it is concealed by her *hijāb*, however, Mehdi instead with both his hands touches the edges of the *hijāb* draped over the side of her head, as if they were a functional equivalent to or even identical with Mubina's hair (Fig. 5).

Figure 5: Screenshot of WHO CAN SEE MY HAIR??

Mehdi’s gesture encapsulates the video's theme and normative framework in that he affirms Mubina being a *munāqaba* who, in the presence of most people, covers her body fully except for her hands and eyes. At the same time, his gesture plays with this normative framework as it invites an imaginative gaze of the viewer directed at the as-if-these-were-hair pieces of fabric held in Mehdi’s hand while the viewer’s gaze meets Mubina’s eyes. Generally, Mehdi seems to emphasise his questions to Mubina through gestures with his right hand and underlines the humorous conclusion of the video with a 'strike gesture' with his right fist. Doing so, his gestures and physical movements serve to set the pace of the dialogue, as well as determine the scenery and rhythm of the video. The brief questions regarding individual people or groups and Mubina's concise responses, with two

exceptions, may evoke an impression of Mehdi’s superiority, akin to an interrogation within the context of a teacher-student relationship. However, Mubina's body language and facial expressions indicate that, as the person providing the responses, she has the authority to determine the nature of the answers and the level of detail she wishes to convey to the audience. In *Wer Darf Ihre Haare Sehen?*😯, Dzemin not only acts as interviewer, introducing the video with an opening prompt, but also constitutes the prime visual anchor, establishing the scene through a series of dynamic body movements and rocking gestures. Additionally, he accentuates specific elements of his inquiries through gestural expressions with his left hand, while maintaining his right hand in his trouser pocket throughout the duration of the video. Amina, on the other hand, responds to all questions with a simple "yes" or "no," and exhibits minimal physical movement. Nevertheless, she employs vocal inflections, facial expressions, and gestures to balance Dzemin's apparent dramatic and directive dominance of the scene.

On the performative level, the men’s gestures thus connect their own and their partner’s and individual rendition and initiate a layer of interaction between the two that, for the viewer, establishes the couple - in Goffman's (1956: 50) words, "the team" in the sense of a group of performers working together to present a single performance - and their rendition as a focal point for the audience’s sensory impressions. In these videos, the two are not only connected as a couple, but also enter into a relationship of mutual reference through their performance. At the same time, this relationship of mutual reference is created by Mehdi's manipulation of the fabric, which here is not only a piece of clothing covering Mubina's hair, but is rendered a constituent of the performance. The materiality of the clothing and its visual appearance is hence part and parcel of what Goffman (1956: 13) has termed the *setting*, i.e., the social or physical context in which social interactions take place, “[…] involving furniture, décor, physical lay-out, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it.” I argue that insofar as we understand the couple's clearly coordinated clothing as a prop in this sense, the garment materially and visually establishes the couple's relationship of mutual reference and underpins this relationship in the video. At the same time, clothing is also an eminent element of the protagonists' shared knowledge of the video's meaning and purpose, and of the social situation it is intended to create.

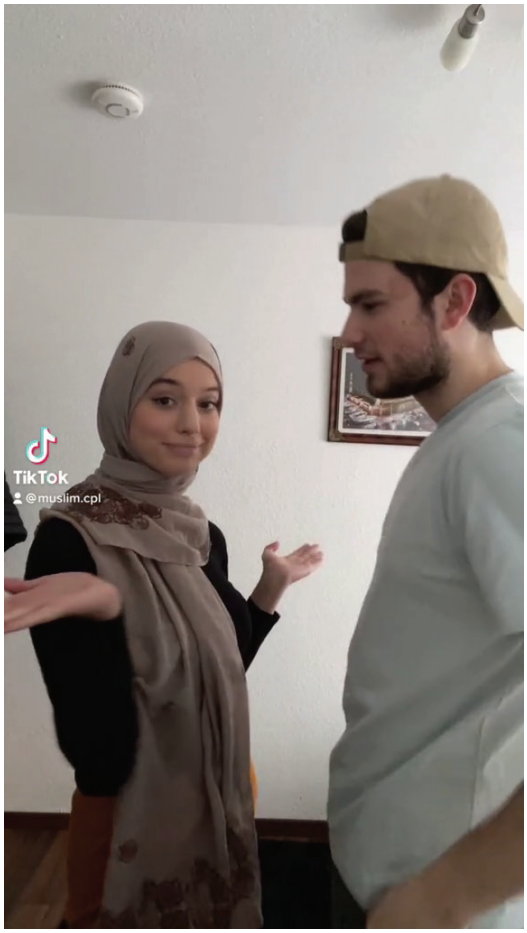

Figure 6: Screenshot of 'Wer darf ihre Haare sehen?'

The choice of clothing, background and image frame also indicates that the actors are in control of the setting. Control of the setting; involves selecting the location and creates an opportunity of conveying information not only about a given subject but also, by shooting on their home ground, provides an opportunity for the content creators to convey information about themselves through (more or less) carefully designed scenic means. Despite the mimetic elements in the design of both videos' settings, there are clear differences: While the dark grey whitewashed wall provides a harmonious background for the colours of Mubina's and Mehdi's clothes, thus drawing the viewer's full attention to the protagonist, the image frame chosen by Amina and Dzemin offers considerably more detail (fig. 6). We see a brownish floor covering and a dark carpet, an item of clothing (probably a jacket on a coat rack) on the left edge of the picture, a smoke detector on the whitewashed ceiling and part of a ceiling lamp. The night-time photograph of the al-Ḥarām mosque in Mecca on the whitewashed wall is also a marker of the protagonists' religious identity. The photograph is an element of the setting that, as a prop, creates a link to the content and normative framework of the video, and at the same time a reference to the intimate connection to Islam's holiest site that such images create for many Muslims. (Shafer 2023).

All these elements suggest that the video was filmed in a living room, to which the content creators now allow the viewer access. This gives the impression that we are looking into the private lives of the protagonists. Such a living room setting is not only suitable to create a sense of intimacy for the viewers (and potential followers), but also to blur the boundaries between the private and public spheres. (Papacharissi 2010). In her study on

social media practices of Niqābī women, Piela (2017: 75) further notes that here "notions of both the private and the public are undermined in the self-portraits where niqabis are seen in their own home (usually considered as private spaces), but dressed modestly as they normally would in public spheres due to the fact that the photos can be viewed by everyone." This is evident in the two videos discussed here and is also noticed by some viewers whose comments address the question of whether or not it is admissible for Mubina and Amina to appear in public videos on social media in the first place.

Their statements - like those of most users - make explicit reference to the religious norm articulated in the videos. The user comments on most of the videos in this study reflect this, with vibrant debates about the norms and beliefs conveyed in the respective videos taking place in the comment threads. It is also worth noting that the content creators are basically absent from this part of the platform infrastructure and hardly interact with viewers. Their involvement in the interaction logic of the social video platform seems to be limited to the production, distribution and promotion (e.g. using hashtags) of content that exhibits a normative and action-guiding character - not least because an orientation towards right/wrong also holds out the prospect of acquiring goods of salvation.

Perhaps it is therefore not surprising that TikTok users respond primarily to this religious framing of the videos, with comments revolving around details of the religious norm presented in the videos as well as specific groups of persons, enquiring whether these are allowed to see Mubina's hair (and face), e.g., children (before or after puberty), transgender, or non-binary people. At the same time, the interaction offered by the nature of the rendition is hardly addressed by the users. Accordingly, the comment threads of both videos contain some, yet strongly affirmative comments, which positively evaluate the couples' performance and interaction dynamics as a team in the Goffmanian sense, with comments such as '"both of you guys are so cute together 🥰😄" or "you come across as really sympathetic, I'll follow you". In addition to a discussion about the specific standard, some viewers emphasise the educational nature of the videos: "I think your videos are so interesting and educational. You're so lovely and awesome 🥰🥰 please keep it up 🥰🥰", hence re-affirming the content creators' use of hashtags such as #learnfromus. In relation to the total number of comments, other elements of the couples' rendition and the videos' setting are, however, hardly discussed. For example, only a few users praise the women's voices,[10] address their beauty regardless of whether they show their hair (and face in Mubina's case),[11] leave a positive comment on the mood evoked by the videos,[12] or even reflect about the fact that the videos may be carefully designed.[13] Lastly, Mubina and Mehdi's viewers were not the only ones to recognise that the imitative logic constitutive of TikTok was evident in Amina and Dzenan's video.[14] However, user comments make it even more apparent that imitation on social media platforms also involves ethical aspects, the recognition of which is ensured through the use of built-in features and should at least create a reference to the 'original'. Amina and Dzenan's failure to include this information prompted some viewers to explicitly mention and refer to Mubina and Mehdi's video.[15]

[10] "I love ur voice" / "I love her voice"

[11] "I bet you she's beautiful" or "'she's so pretty I'm crying" vs. "your pobably hugly"

[12] "guys I like your vibe"

[13] "that what at the end makes me feel like it wasn't scripted"

[14] "But you're also available in English, aren't you?" ("Euch gibt es doch auch auf Englisch"); „is nicked but nice" („ist geklaut aber ist schön").

[15] "you copy the idea and then don't even give credits"(„ihr kopiert die Idee und gibt dann noch nicht map Credits"); "'wow just copied that from the English one. 👏 Folks the original is called 'Who can see your face'" („wow einfach das vom englischen kopiert. 👏 Leute das originale heißt „Who can see your face"").

4 Conclusion

In this article, I have used two examples to try and argue that the format of TikTok short videos in general, and of the couple videos discussed here in particular, is conducive to a particular kind of religious instruction media, which present religious norms, values and beliefs in up to a minute, and on that basis classify human behaviour as conforming to these norms – hence as 'right' (*ḥalāl*) or 'wrong' (*ḥarām*). In these videos, Muslim actors offer normative and ethical guidance, thus addressing fundamental questions concerning the right and proper behaviour of humans vis-à-vis their environment. However, given the short duration of the videos, I argue that the ethical guidance offered by the actors reverts to clearly defining certain actions as right or wrong – sometimes using the Arabic terms *ḥalāl* or *ḥarām* – even if these categories are not explicitly invoked. A one-minute sequence does not allow for a critical reflection on the categories of right and wrong themselves, which have informed concerns with human practice and right action from a Muslim perspective in dogmatic and jurisprudential works from the very beginning. Whether or not the actors discussed here are guided by Muslim scholarly legal opinions when assessing the questions raised in their videos is beyond the scope of my deliberations. Although they arguably act rationally and take responsibility for their attitudes and actions, due to the time constraints of a short video, however, they cannot (or will not) - at least not explicitly - refer to the authority of Muslim scholars and their expertise and situate the norms proposed in Islamic intellectual history. A deep engagement with this complex intellectual tradition and the inclusion of rational or contextual modes of knowledge in the exploration of norms thus becomes unlikely or, at the very least, invisible and inaudible to the audience, which is left alone in the comments thread to debate the religious norm presented. Instead, the content creators focus primarily on the Qurʾanic text and the Hadith for the sake of clear and unequivocal statements, to the exclusion of the complexity of human experience and social context. Norms appear here as supra-historical instructions for human conduct that do not take into account or make comprehensible to the audience the underlying discursive diversity and processual nature of Islamic legal practices.

Second, I have utilized a performance-centred approach to examine the ways in which the two videos cater to the functional logics and affordances of the social video platform that is TikTok, which invite memetic appropriation and continuation of these forms of religious instruction. I have aimed to demonstrate that the couples' rendition, which is based on collaboration and co-operation, works with humorous elements, and creates a specific setting through the use of space, gestures, clothing and more, plays a decisive role in conveying religious norms via TikTok short videos. This setting and the ways in which the protagonists create and play with it fundamentally shapes their interaction, the audience's interpretation of this interaction, as well as the ways in which the audience potentially perceives their interaction with the protagonists. Given that many among the audience view these and similar videos on smartphones and other mobile devices using the TikTok app, I argue that its user interface as well as practices of usage equally shapes the audience's perception of their interaction with the protagonists. I hence suggest to extend Goffman's conceptualization to encompass not only what is visible in the video itself but also the choice of format, background sounds or music, the choice of hashtags, video titles and captions, the ways in which they interact with their audience, as well as the mediated audiences themselves, their expectations and stances, their reactions and interactions amongst each other and many more elements. This dense web of references and relations that serve the affordances and interaction logics of TikTok may hence, I suggest be referred to as the *technosocial setting* that constitutes both stage and environment of the couple's performative conveyance of their interpretation of how Islam should be lived, interpreted, and proclaimed.

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