

How are Muslim women who wear headscarves represented in American porn?

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

As Islamophobia spread in the United States after 9/11, so did the popularity of a subgenre of pornography that shows headscarf-wearing women engaging in sex. The videos are available on streaming platforms,

where they draw millions of views.

Martine Boulanger examined the phenomenon for her master's thesis at Université de Montréal, "Représentation des voiles islamiques et des femmes les portant dans la pornographie en ligne états-unienne entre 2001 et 2020."

Completed under the direction of Julianne Pidduck, a professor in UdeM's Department of Communications, the study is based on Boulanger's analysis of 15 of the most popular American porn videos made between 2001 and 2020.

Until 2022 there had been only one academic article on the genre in the scientific literature. "Voiler les beurettes pour les dévoiler: Les doubles jeux d'un fantasme pornographique blanc," de Fassin et Trachman, published in 2013, studied the sexual and social phenomenon in France.

A variety of headscarves

Boulanger didn't just look at about burqas and hijabs.

"Islamic head coverings include a variety of traditional garments and headscarves linked to Islam," she said.

"There's the niqab, a head covering that conceals the face with a small opening for the eyes; the burqa, a garment that covers the entire head and body with mesh covering the eyes; and the chador, a traditional Persian garment that consists of a large piece of fabric that covers the head but leaves the face visible.

"All are completely different from the hijab. The word hijab, which means 'cover' in Arabic, consists of a headscarf that covers the hair, ears and neck."

In the collective imagination, all of these head coverings are a key difference between people from Western and Eastern cultures. They are more often worn by [women](#) from various regions of the Middle East, North Africa and the south Asian countries, including Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The veil is never lifted

Although she thought that removing the headscarf would be a key element of the pornographic content she analyzed, Boulanger noticed that headscarves were most often kept on throughout the [sexual encounters](#). In fact, headscarves were only removed in four of the 15 videos in her sample.

They are more often treated as part of a costume.

"In one of the videos, the garment in question resembled a chador," she said. "It was a long-sleeved dress that was entirely black, with a section that covered the actor's neck, ears and hair. But it was too short to meet the modesty standards that the chador fulfills."

In the videos analyzed, the women were treated as identical and interchangeable.

"The headscarves weren't just objects," Boulanger said, "They're also used to show that the women who wear them are all the same, just because they all wear headscarves. For example, in one video, a stepfather mixes up his wife and stepdaughter because they both wear headscarves and similar clothing."

By covering their heads, these women turn into fetish objects as part of a binary opposition: "In all of the different scenarios, 'us' only becomes meaningful because of its opposition to 'them': 'West' versus 'East,'

'Americans' versus 'foreigners,' man versus woman, secular versus Muslim, bareheaded individuals versus women in headscarves," Boulanger said.

"These oppositions are needed to provide meaning, but they are also related to the power structures that govern the relationship between good and bad, dominant and dominated."

Reduced to a product

The women are objectified, she said.

"They reduce women to a consumer product, just like food. For example, a woman's vulva is compared to baba ghanoush, which is an utterly ridiculous comparison. They turn the woman into a lesser being, like an item that can be consumed."

In these scenarios, headscarves are used to build a relationship of dominance.

"Headscarves are also a way of saying 'this woman is under control. As an American man, I can use her to gain sexual satisfaction, as well as the satisfaction of having power over someone or something,'" said Boulanger.

This kind of violence toward women who don't have the same rights as men is treated as erotic.

"For example, in some videos, women are shown as subordinate to the man, as if they were chattel owned by their husbands. Not being considered as your own human being is a form of violence," she concluded.

Provided by University of Montreal

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