

ON BEING MUSLIM AMERICANS:
MIPSTERZ AS A SITE FOR NEGOTIATING IDENTITY

Aidatul Chusna*

Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Purwokerto, Indonesia
aidatul.chusna@unsoed.ac.id

Erni Dewi Riyanti

Universitas Islam Indonesia, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
erni.dewi@uii.ac.id

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Abstract

The arrival of immigrants from various countries and continents to America has become part of a very long history for this country. In fact, the United States was founded by group of immigrants. History accounts the arrival of Muslim immigrants in America in several waves; nonetheless, Islam and Muslims remained foreign for American people. For Muslim Immigrants, the tragedy of September 11 (2001) had profoundly impacted them. They endure prejudices, discrimination, verbal abuse, and hate crimes due to the increasing Islamophobia among American society. The study highlights a group of young Muslims known as Mipsterz (Muslim Hipsters) and examines how Mipsterz becomes a site for negotiating identity as a Muslim American. Started as a small group of Muslim youngsters from New York City in 2012, Mipsterz develops into a space for minorities to speak up and define themselves through their creative works. Unluckily, along with the growing number of white supremacists, Islamophobia and negative stereotypes are keep growing and felt by Muslim Americans, even among American-born Muslim generations. Mipsterz aims to keep producing stories and marginalized voices to the fore front of American public, as its members do not want to be identified either Muslims or Americans; they are Muslim Americans.

Keywords: *Immigrants, Muslim American, Mipsterz*

A. Introduction

“Our attitude towards immigration reflects our faith in the American ideal. We have always believed it possible for men and women who start at the bottom to rise as far as the talent and energy allow. Neither race nor place of birth should affect their chances.”

The above passage is Robert F. Kennedy's foreword to a book titled *A Nation of Immigrants* written by his brother, Senator John F. Kennedy, who later became President of the US. The statement expressed the welcoming tone of the United States on the coming of immigrants to this country; that people equally had the right to fight for their American dream and get better lives in this country. This warm atmosphere; however, is not the real portrait of Immigrants in America, especially Muslim Immigrants.

The arrival of immigrants from various countries and continents to America has become part of a very long history for this country. In fact, the United States was founded by group of immigrants. The arrival of Puritans from the European continent in the sixteenth century became the beginning of the formation of colonies in America which attracted more and more immigrants. America is considered as a new world that opens opportunities for a better life. Then came myths of America as "The Promised Land", "The Land of Plenty", "The Land of Opportunity", and "The American Dream", which promote America as a new world to start new life for people worldwide. These ideas about American land affected people from different areas, including Muslim countries.

History accounts the arrival of Muslim immigrants in America in several waves. The first three waves of Muslim immigrants came to America ranged from the late 1800s to the early 1900s. The group was dominated by immigrants from Arab countries, many of whom came from rural and uneducated communities. By the Second World War, known as the second wave in the history of American Muslim immigrants, more and more Muslims from countries other than Arabs came to America, such as the South Asian region, the Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe. Unlike the previous wave, in this period, more immigrants came from elite groups and refugees. Since the repeal of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which marked the third wave, more Muslim immigrants have come to America and come from various countries¹. Despite its long history of immigration, Islam and Muslims

¹ There is another version of historical account in dividing the Muslim immigrants in the United States. The first wave occurred from the late 19th century until World War II and was primarily from Arab Muslims. Between World War II and 1965 marks the second wave

remained foreign for American people. They are disengaged from the American culture, until the terrorist attacked the Twin Tower of World Trade Center (WTC) conducted by Islamic Extremist group on September 11, 2001.

The tragedy of September 11 (2001) had profoundly impacted to Muslim American. Islam and its adherents who have so far seemed unseen turned into the main spotlight in America. Two decades before the terror happened, in mid-February 1993, an opinion poll conducted by Los Angeles Times regarding Islam. The poll showed that more than half of Americans (64 percent) had no opinion about Islam, and 37 percent of the respondents answered “Nothing” or “I don’t know” when asked about their thinking of Islam. The indifferent perception on Islam changed significantly as the terror happened. People who previously had no opinion about Islam began to be more interested and attentive to the religion which was initially in positive views. A month following the terror, in October 2001, Washington Post- ABC News opinion surveys found that a plurality of Americans (47 percent) had favourable opinion about Islam, which surprisingly higher than the negative views of the public (40 percent). However, in the proceeding years, the views were in setback, as more Americans inclined to the negative impression of Islam. When associated to violence, public were increasingly believed that Islam encourage violence against non-believers than other religions².

The negative impression abounded among Americans profoundly affect Muslim Americans in their daily lives, as they endure prejudices, discrimination, verbal abuse and hate crimes due to the increasing Islamophobia among American society. Even today, the discriminative attitude is still found in various forms. A recent survey conducted by Pew Research Survey (March 2019) reveals that most American adults (82 percent) believe that Muslims are subject to discrimination, with the majority (56 percent) saying that Muslim are discriminated against a lot.

of Muslim Immigrants who began to introduce religious institutions, which reflects the immigrants’ hope to live in this country. The third wave include all Muslims that migrated to America after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. (Schaefer, 2008)

² Thomas, J. L. (2015). *Scapegoating Islam: intolerance, security, and the American Muslim*. Santa Barbara: Praeger.

Meanwhile, from the perspectives of Muslim American themselves, many admit that they underwent specific acts of discrimination, including “being treated with suspicion, singled out by airport security or called offensive names”³

In 2013, a short video titled “Somewhere in America #Mipsterz” hit the internet and became viral. Since firstly published on November 20, 2013, there has been 104,844 views⁴. It features a group of young women who are strong, confident, fashionably dressed and wearing hijab hang out, pose, laugh, with the background using Jay-z’s song ‘Somewhere in America’, which is also borrowed as the title of the video. They are known as Mipsterz, short for Muslim Hipsters. The three - minute video has put Mipsterz in a big arena of discussion. It leads to topics of debate about the meaning of fashion for Muslim American. However, Mipsterz concerns with wider aspects. It also represents the way Muslim minority group is coping with American life and becomes part of the society. This writing is about to examine how Mipsterz becomes a site for negotiating identity as a Muslim American.

B. Mipsterz, in Brief

Mipsterz was initiated by a small group of Muslim youngsters from New York City in 2012. Yasmin Chebby, one of the founders, remembers that Mipsterz was originally a listserv which the group to share any subjects of discussion, including music, politics, available housing, and ethical consumption⁵. The community is evolving rapidly as the video of ‘Somewhere in America #Mipsterz’ became a big sensation in digital media. Mipsterz becomes an open community for any Muslim American to join and participate in the community’s agenda. Along with the development of digital technology in this era, Mipsterz uses various digital media, as such website (mipsterz.com), Tumblr (muslimhipsterz.tumblr.com), Instagram

³ Masci, D. (2019). Many see religious discrimination in U.S., especially against Muslims | Pew Research Center. Retrieved December 18, 2019, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/17/many-americans-see-religious-discrimination-in-u-s-especially-against-muslims/>

⁴ Somewhere in America #MIPSTERZ - YouTube. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2019, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68sMkDKMias>

⁵ Cunningham, E. (2017). Meet the Mipsterz. Retrieved December 2, 2019, from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/meet-the-mipsterz>

(mipsterzofficial), Facebook and Twitter, to introduce the community to wider society.

The community is now developed by a team, led by Sara Alfageeh (Creative Director and Illustrator), Abbas Rattani (The founder, filmmaker, and the producer), and Yusuf Siddiquee (Musician and Producer). These three figures have similarities: all are both Muslim and American; they come from immigrant family generations (Sara Alfageeh is a Jordanian-American, Abbas Rattani is a Tanzanian-Indian American, while Yusuf Siddiquee is a Bengali-American); and lastly, they are creative persons. They share their marginalized and conflicted identities (of being Muslim and non-white immigrant generations) and their passion (of making creative works) in one place, the Mipsterz. In addition, they represent what Mipsterz is meant for; a space for minorities to speak up and define themselves through their creative works.

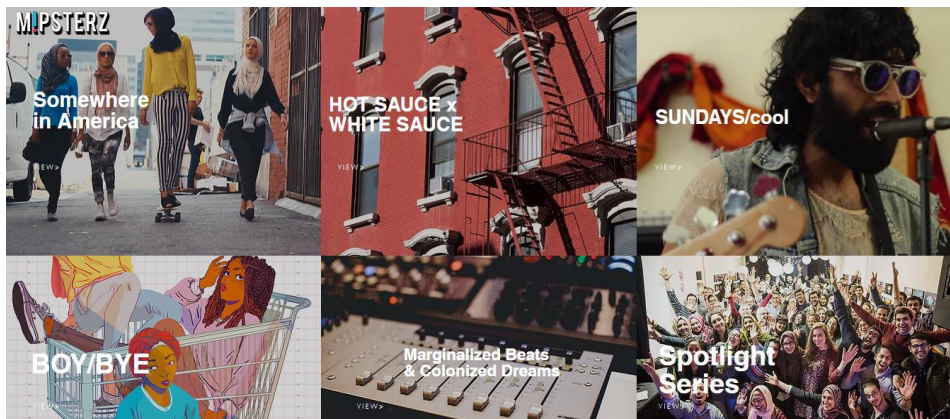


Figure 1. Various agenda and creative products of Mipsterz

Focusing on creative works, Mipsterz has various agenda on supporting Muslim creatives to be heard and known by wider public. As mentioned in its Facebook page, Mipsterz is meant as “a home for creators to build, collaborate, or experiment with diverse folks who share a common connection to a larger tradition.... provide mentorship, resources, and a platform to enable ideas and

expression”⁶. Various agendas and creative products are created by the members and posted in the digital media. These media become the sites for Mipsterz community to show and represent themselves as an American Muslim.

Through the various agenda, Mipsterz carries “Enable, Amplify, Curate” as their three-step works, which they explain in more detail as follows: Enable (“We enable Creators”) means that Mipsterz encourage their fellows to voice their stories and help them carry out their ideas through a series of “mentorship, collaboration, and in-kind resources”, which is then posted in their digital media. Meanwhile, amplify (“We Amplify Original Content”) is the next step of their work, which is to boost the successful content by submitting to larger platform, such as museums, brick and mortar stores, and major media networks. Then, the last principle is Curate (“We Curate Expression”), is conducted by “hosting live events and fostering spaces for next generation of Muslims to express themselves, share their talents, and collaborate”. Thus, the catchphrase of “A People. A Platform. A Project” aptly describes what Mipsterz is.⁷

C. Mipsterz and The Intersecting Cultures

Mipsterz is a group of American-born generations of Muslim Immigrants who live in the intersection of their parents’ root culture and the dominant culture in America. Through this community, they are trying to cope with tension of the two cultures by producing their own style and creative works.

As an open community, Mipsterz becomes the site for its members to deal with the interplay of different cultural beliefs and values in their life. Most of the members come from Muslim immigrant families whose parents are still culturally engaged with their homeland. Living in America; on the other hand, these Muslim immigrants have to be able to mingle with the dominant group in the society, whose religious and cultural background are different, even sometimes are conflicting, from their

⁶ Mipsterz, a space for Muslim hipsters - CNN. (n.d.). Retrieved December 16, 2019, from <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/03/living/mipsterz-muslim-hipsters/index.html>

⁷ About Us | Mipsterz - Muslim Hipsters. (n.d.). Retrieved December 18, 2019, from <https://www.mipsterz.com/about>

parents' cultural values. Al Wekhian⁸ notes that Immigrants from Middle East have the most difficult experiences in the process of acculturation due to the differences in language, cultures, ethnicity, and religious practices. Even if the tension is decreasing, along with the length of their stay, Middle Eastern keep their homeland culture and religious practices in their daily basis. A study by Amor⁹ shows that Middle East immigrants tend to design their houses with decorations and furniture imported from their home countries. It is to compensate their alienation from the dominant culture.

Despite the diverse ethnicities in the US, the white Christian group has dominated American society. The belief of white supremacy that white people are superior to people of other races become political ideology that is maintained until now. Ansley, as quoted by Gillborn, defines white supremacy as

“[By] ‘white supremacy’ I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.”¹⁰

In today's world, this ideology is seemingly revived by those who feel threatened by the increasing number of people migrating to the U.S. By convincing public about the danger of illegal immigrants and the relentless negative stereotyping of certain religion and ethnic groups. Islamophobia is continuously yielded as part of the culture of fear created to maintain the negative image of Muslim immigrants. Consequently, the negative stereotypes are keep growing and felt by Muslim Americans, even the American-born Muslim generations.

⁸ Al Wekhian, J. (2015). Acculturation Process of Arab-Muslim Immigrants in the United States. *Asian Culture and History*, 8(1), 89. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v8n1p89>

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Gillborn, D. (2006). Rethinking white supremacy Who counts in “WhiteWorld.” 6(3), 318–340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796806068323>

D. Mipsterz as A Site for Negotiation

At the front page of the website (<https://www.mipsterz.com>), Mipsterz puts a very brief description of the Mipsterz's content, as follows:

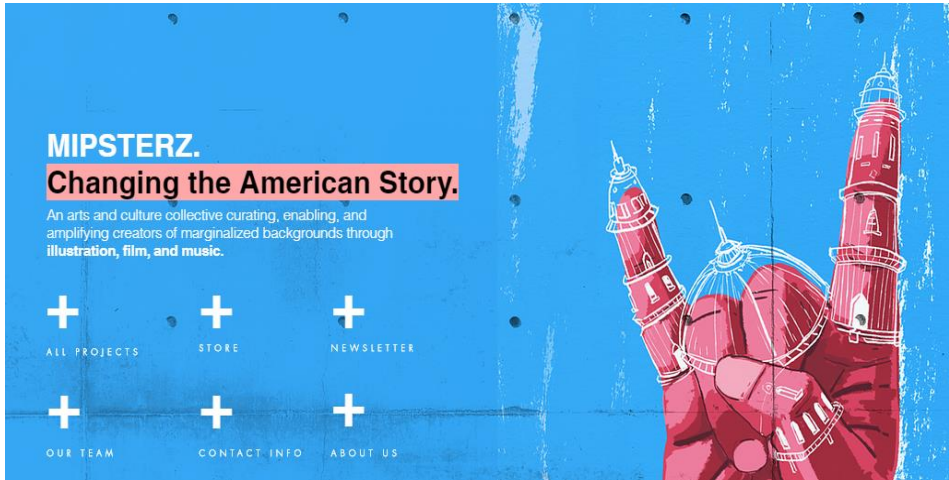


Figure 2. The front page of Mipsterz website

The brief description above (“An arts and culture collective curating, enabling, and amplifying creators of marginalized backgrounds through illustration, film, and music”) shows that this community’s main concern is with the marginalized group¹¹. As previously mentioned, these young Muslims of the Mipsterz community have to deal with any kind of stereotypes due to their ethnic and religious identity. Born from an immigrant family, many young Muslims do not get equal treatment as American citizens. As minorities, they are considered ‘other’ by the dominant group of American society. Moreover, their being Muslim also puts them as the marginalized in a White Christian dominated society. Mipsterz becomes a site of recognition for these Muslim youngsters as part of American society.

Moreover, in response to the dual standards and values, members of the Mipsterz community make appropriation with other cultural objects/style in their creative works. The name of the community itself has represented this practice. Mipsterz, short for Muslim Hipsters, means that these Muslim youngsters adopt some

¹¹ Mipsterz - Muslim Hipsters. (n.d.). Retrieved December 2, 2019, from <https://www.mipsterz.com/>

hipster's style in their daily life. In America, hipster is a member of loosely defined but highly self-conscious subculture who favours certain styles, like retro fashion and obscured musical style¹². Dated back in 1950s to 1960s, hipster referred to a culture which challenged the avant-garde values and a style which distinguished itself from the mainstream dominant (white) culture. It emerged in the post-WW II period, marked by capitalist Fordism with consumerism, colonialism, and imperialism, along with the flowering of mass production and the rise of living standard of middle class. At that time, multicultural society is growing, especially the black subculture, especially the jazz. Some white people who came from middle class society articulated themselves non-conformity with the mainstream culture by adopting jazz and black culture. In the 21st century, the term hipster is used in different frame. It grows in a neoliberal era, not only characterised by mass production, consumerism and commodification and globalised market, but also shaped by the globalised mainstream media and technology¹³. The term 'hipster' is used in Mipsterz not to identify themselves as part of hipsters, but to define their own individuality. They believe that individuals have their own stories, experiences, and style, which make them who they are. With the religion identity and ethnic background, members of Mipsterz are trying to speak up and articulate their self-identity as well as social identity as part of the American society.

Other forms of cultural appropriation are seen by the production of creative arts, music, and fashion, among them. The hipster's style is adopted in Muslim fashion style variously. Muslim women combine the colourful retro fashion and various style of hijabs. Muslims, especially the women, feels the urge to be able to mingle with the society; thus, they tend to hide, or leave, their being Muslims, to be accepted. As Sana Saeed, one of the founders of the Mipsterz, mentions that

"We're so incredibly obsessed with appearing 'normal' or 'American' or

¹² Thorne, T. (2014). *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

¹³ Maly, I., & Varis, P. (2016). The 21st-century hipster: On micro-populations in times of superdiversity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19(6), 637–653. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415597920>

'Western' by way of what we do and what we wear that we undercut the actual abnormality of our communities. ... And in all of this, we might just lose that which makes us unique: our substance,"¹⁴

Through the video of “Somewhere in America #Mipsterz”, the community is trying to express their identity as American Muslims. The video shows a group of women wearing various styles of hijabs and colourful clothes, are doing activities that are common for Americans’ daily life, as such skateboarding, bicycling in the park, playing basketball, enjoying ice cream, and many others. This video is trying to say that these women are also Americans, like other people, regardless their religious and ethnic identity.



Figure 3. Hijab style as a negotiated identity

Fashion becomes a means to express their identity as American Muslims. Hijab is Muslim fashion style which has always become a debatable topic of discussion among academicians, feminists, and wider public. There are two polarized opinions about veiling (hijab); those are opinion which mentions that hijab is “an oppressive practice”, while; on the other hand, hijab is seen as “an expression of women’s

¹⁴ Mipsterz, a space for Muslim hipsters - CNN. (n.d.). Retrieved December 16, 2019, from <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/03/living/mipsterz-muslim-hipsters/index.html>

agency and empowerment”¹⁵. In conformity with the latter opinion, the female members of Mipsterz are trying to show that wearing hijab is one part of their religion identity, and another part is their style. Wearing hijab is a choice, which symbolizes Muslim women’s agency.

Another cultural appropriation that the community has made is through their music creativity. Members of Mipsterz who musicians are also adopt music from their parents’ origin culture in their creation. They borrow traditional music or instruments and combine them with the modern ones to create their own music. Or else, they insert Arabic, Indian, or their ancestors’ language in the lyrics. The hybridity through music that they created put them between two cultures, without conflicting them. The hybridity in music shows the way Mipsterz negotiate their identity through the consumption of two cultures, the root culture (traditional music and instruments) and the dominant culture (modern music instruments and popular/mainstream music genres), and produce their own culture – the Mipsterz music style.

Mipsterz music production, which is collected under the name of “Marginalized Beats & Colonized Dreams” is a collaboration project featuring original music created by Mipsterz and other popular musicians like Haseeb the Few (from *Blame the Label*), Malik Yusef (Kanye West’s G.O.O.D Music), Emily Afton (*Live Nation*), and Big Baby Gandhi. These are professional musicians who are widely known for their music creation. Malik Yusef, or known as DJ Good Music the Angel, for instance, is a six-time Grammy winning artist, rapper, and song producer who has involved in big projects with popular musicians including Kanye West, Wiz Khalifa, and Jay Z. The collaboration project reflects Mipsterz’ fortitude in bringing their music creativity to be recognized by wider public.

“Marginalized Beats & Colonized Dreams”, the title of the music anthology, shows that their music was born out of the feelings of being marginalized and colonized. As minority group, Muslim Immigrant is mostly being marginalized and

¹⁵ Rahbari, L., Dierickx, S., Coene, G., & Longman, C. (2019). Transnational Solidarity with Which Muslim Women? the Case of the My Stealthy Freedom and World Hijab Day Campaigns. *Politics and Gender*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X19000552>

colonized by the dominant group- white Christian Americans. Not only about their creativity, the music anthology that they created also implies their shared feelings and hopes for being part of American society.

Hybridity is also shown through their music agenda. *Sundays/cool* is a music program held to introduce music created and performed by members of Mipsterz community. As written on its web page, the musical showcase is featuring a wide range of Mipsterz musician, from the newbies to older generations. The showcase performs various musicians from Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan, Bengali, and America. The music played is also various: from the classical Bengali songs, raps, jazz, to punk rock¹⁶. Also, the agenda becomes a space for members of Mipsterz to articulate their identity as Americans and their appreciation to their cultural heritage.

Mipsterz has lots of agenda which is aimed to support and motivate Muslim Americans to create and be creative. *Colonized Dream* is a case in point. It was an event held on May 9, 2019 in Knockdown Center New York, which presented musical performance from Muslim artists and exhibition of artworks created by Mipsterz community members. The event also featured food and beverages from their parents' homeland, such as Kolkata Chai Co, Abu's Homestyle Bakery, Taste of Lahore, and Allan's Bakery. Moreover, copies of a best-seller novel entitled *A Place for Us*¹⁷ by Fatima Farheen Mirza were sold in the event. What we can imply from what were presented this event- the artists, the artwork, the culinary, the novel – is that they have similar message, that is voicing and bringing the marginalized to the forefront.

Information technology has put Mipsterz in the spotlight, initiated by the popularity of the short video of Somewhere in America #Mipsterz. By using various media platform, Mipsterz is growing to be a global community, despite its main association with the minority and marginalized groups. Besides holding events in

¹⁶ SUNDAYS/COOL | Mipsterz. (n.d.). Retrieved December 16, 2019, from <https://www.mipsterz.com/sundayscool>

¹⁷ *A Place for Us* by Fatima Farheen Mirza is a story about love, family and faith. It also examines what it means to be both Muslim and America as experienced by an Indian American Muslim family, the main characters of the novel. (“*A Place for Us* by Fatima Farheen Mirza,” n.d.)

some cities, Mipsterz broadcasts a talk show program in their web platform. *Hot Sauce X White Sauce (HSxWS)*, the name of the program, is series of talk show which invite Mipsterz creators to share their stories. As the description of the talk show stated:

“HOT SAUCE x WHITE SAUCE is a light-hearted, all-over-the-place talk show that encourages Mipsterz (aka Muslim hipsters) to tell their stories. HSxWS is the first of many programs featured on the online MIPSTERZ network; an opportunity for us to speak for ourselves and be the masters of our narratives. We hope to inspire, embolden, and empower fellow Mipsterz to create and be creative!”¹⁸

Based on the description of the talk show above, we can conclude that by sharing lived experiences, Muslim youngsters, the Mipsterz, would feel connected and inspired to speak up and be proud of their identity. The idea of “to speak for ourselves and be the masters of our narratives” is important for minority which is marginalized and silenced by the dominant narrative. The talk show is thus aimed at inspiring, encouraging, and empowering the Mipsterz members to be active and creative subjects.

As stated on the web page, “Mipsterz is about presenting and producing”¹⁹. The productivity of Mipsterz is significant for this community. By creating and producing their own style, members of Mipsterz community have their own spaces to tell and share about their experience, their narrations, their agitation, and their struggle as Muslim Americans. Their creative products symbolize their resistance to the domination and repression of the dominant culture and their parents’.

¹⁸ EPISODE 1: Hanif Yazdi | HOT SAUCE x WHITE SAUCE - YouTube. (n.d.). Retrieved December 17, 2019, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe2cbG9AurE&list=PLPta8Rw91io_-k1OEz2HopwU1_-X_G8XA

¹⁹ About Us | Mipsterz - Muslim Hipsters. (n.d.). Retrieved December 18, 2019, from <https://www.mipsterz.com/about>

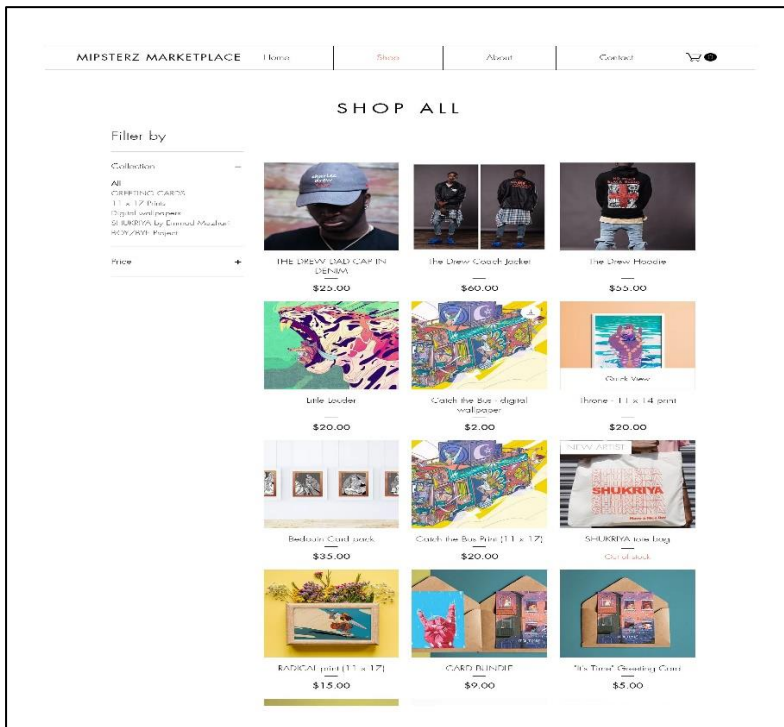


Figure 4. The online marketplace of Mipsterz' creative production

E. Conclusion

Mipsterz, through its agendas, is striving to provide spaces for its fellows to engage with their religiosity and tradition and being Americans as well. The double articulation, of their parents' Islamic and root cultural tradition and White Christian dominant culture, is manifested in a negotiating acts and resulted in creative works. And through these creative works they produce, Mipsterz fellows present their stories and marginalized voices to the fore front of American public. They do not want to be identified either Muslims or Americans; they are Muslim Americans.

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