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The Digital Life of a Muslim Movie Star: The Case of Mahershala Ali

In spite of steady anti-Muslim hostility in American society there is an increasing visibility of Muslims in the public sphere. American actor Mahershala Ali is widely recognized in the entertainment industry and is the embodiment of a contemporary Muslim movie star. He has risen to such a level of fame that he is able to leverage his celebrity privilege to unapologetically express his Muslim self-understanding and address public concerns about Islam in conversation with new popular audiences. This presentation centers on Ali as a juncture for critically investigating the online mediation of a Black Muslim American celebrity identity and its public consumption by various audiences. My analysis relies on Graeme Turner's definition of "celebrity" as being an intersection of representational, discursive, industry, and cultural formations (2010), and considers how Ali's stardom is produced and circulated through his digital presence. As opposed to filmic analysis, I examine the digital contexts through which Ali constructs his public internet persona, including social media accounts, promotional efforts, and interviews with online fashion and entertainment news outlets. These spaces serve both as domains for the representation of personal ideals while also opening up how audiences engage and interpret Ali. Altogether, Ali serves as a case study to understand how the digital lives of Muslim celebrities enables us to think about the mediatization of new Muslim publics and the articulation of contemporary Muslim identities online.