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A NEW GENERATION OF MUSLIM ROLE MODELS: A Case Study on Northern Caucasian Mixed Martial Artists and Their Digital Footprints

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A NEW GENERATION OF MUSLIM ROLE MODELS:

A Case Study on Northern Caucasian Mixed Martial Artists and Their Digital Footprints



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Abstract

A new wave of Muslim mixed martial artists originating out of the Northern Caucasus have taken the MMA world by storm. In the last couple of years various athletes have managed to gain global influence. Research on the rise of these prominent athletes remains rather underdeveloped, partly because of the niche origin of the topic. This study attempts to research the social media representation from prominent Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists to discover to what extent they represent a new modest Muslim masculinity. To do so two representatives of Dagestan and Chechnya are researched, Khabib Nurmagomedov and Khamzat Chimaev.

After having established background information on different aspects of the Northern Caucasus, the research showed that all of the researched aspects contain major issues, and that furthermore all developments in the different aspects were closely tied to the importance of Islam.

Such importance of Islam is not only recognizable in different aspect of Northern Caucasian society but furthermore proved recognizable in different social media platforms from the Muslim Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists. Both Nurmagomedov and Chimaev utilized their social media to represent their personal importance of religion. However, what proved more interesting is their creation of a new modest Muslim masculinity. By linking their personal victories and accomplishments in mixed martial arts environments purely to a greater plan of Allah, they removed themselves out of the equation. Thus, they presented a new sense of Muslim masculinity, one which is heavily affiliated with martial environments, while at the same time being modest.

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Introduction

The biggest Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) event in history took place on 6 October 2018, a mixed martial arts (MMA) competition which would feature the lightweight title fight between former featherweight and lightweight champion Irish superstar Conor McGregor and the current champion, the lesser-known Dagestani Muslim Khabib Nurmagomedov. A 6 month build up to the fight, including previous altercations between the two would make for a great rivalry for the American mixed martial arts promotion.¹ In this buildup McGregor would even make Islamophobic comments to mock the Dagestani, further fueling the rivalry between the two. A grand total of around 2.4 million pay per view buyers would witness the Dagestani Khabib Nurmagomedov submit McGregor in the fourth round after showing a wrestling masterclass. What ensued however is what captured mainstreams media attention. Nurmagomedov jumped into the crowd attempting to reach McGregor's team, a brawl ensued between both teams, with some of Nurmagomedov's teammates entering the UFC octagon attempting to start a conflict with the just beaten McGregor.² What could have been a way for Nurmagomedov to silence the numerous Islamophobic comments by McGregor instead turned into a post-fight melee, capturing global media attention.

The fight between the two mixed martial artists signified more than just a mixed martial contest, it formed a popular arena for a "clash of cultures".³ Furthermore, the contest and its run-up highlighted the great influences which fighters like McGregor and Nurmagomedov have through social media on their audiences. Nurmagomedov, however, is only the leading figure in a wave of Northern Caucasian fighters making an entry into the global mixed martial arts scene. Many natives from the Northern Caucasus, a mountainous region which is known for its martial culture, have entered the UFC and other MMA promotion companies, creating a name for themselves. All the while, fighters from the Northern Caucasus promoted themselves as global Muslim role models in combat sports. These self-promotions vary from various social media platforms such as personal Instagram accounts as well as personal YouTube accounts.

¹ The Associated Press, "Khabib Nurmagomedov Could Face Fine and Suspension After Brawl at UFC 229," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/sports/mcgregor-khabib-ufc-229.html>.

² Mike Coppinger, "Khabib Nurmagomedov Taps Out Conor McGregor Then Sparks Melee in Crowd," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/oct/07/khabib-conor-mcgregor-fight-crowd-brawl-report>.

³ Umer Hussain, "Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) 229: Orientalism vs Occidentalism in the Media," *Journalism and Media* 2, no. 2 (November 2021): 657-658.

These self-promotions of on social media, however, contrasts the Western mainstream media's presentation of Northern Caucasian athletes, which often present the fighters in different manner. For example, research on the fight between Nurmagomedov and McGregor had highlighted that the western media attempts to use discriminatory, racist, and Islamophobic motivations and vocabulary to describe Nurmagomedov.⁴ Thus, Nurmagomedov and other martial artists from the region are portrayed and perceived in a different light than fighters from North America and Europe, which remains a problematic issue. Especially when one considers the fact that MMA has become the fastest growing sport on the planet, with Northern Caucasian athletes gaining importance. This problematic misrepresentation, however, is not just reserved for the martial artists from the region, but instead the case for the representation of the region in its entirety. The Western media continually has presented the Northern Caucasus incorrectly by not considering various factors. Examples of such are the fact that western media often portrays the region as a homogenous one, even though the region has great diversity. Another example is the fact that western media tends to handpick stories which will promote and highlight the otherness of the region, thus sketching a false image.⁵ These distorted portrayals and discriminatory depictions in Western media however remain very much problematic, also in regard to academia. However, even though this misrepresentation exists, Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists themselves have created their own way of representing themselves in the media. The athletes themselves instead put an emphasis on their various ways of representing modest Islam, whilst at the same time combining it with MMA, which is why this issue of representation needs attention from an academic perspective.

The existing literature on the media representation of Northern Caucasian martial artists however seems to be rather underdeveloped, or instead rather limited. There have been some articles written on the topic, even though most of these do not originate out of an academic environment, but instead originate out of journalism. There is a distinction however within these journalism articles, with some of them being influenced by the Islamic nature of the outlet, and others being secular in nature.

The first and most notable author who has written on the topic out of a non-Islamic media outlet is sports journalist Karim Zidan. Zidan has written multiple journalism articles which focus on the media influence and representation of martial artists from the region, such

⁴ Hussain, "Ultimate Fighting Championship," 662-665.

⁵ Irina Kosterina, "The Media Still Misrepresents Russia's Northern Caucasus. Here's How to Stop," *Open Democracy*, last modified April 28, 2021, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/how-not-to-do-colonial-journalism-north-caucasus/>.

as Nurmagomedov. A first example of such an article which to a certain extent highlights this social media influence is the article named “‘Dagestan, Wake up’: Khabib Nurmagomedov and the Role of Cultural Censorship in the North Caucasus”. The article highlights a play performance which took place in Dagestan, where in which a woman was seducing a man as part of their performance. Zidan highlights that as a result of a videoclip recording the play, Nurmagomedov went to his social media to label the performance as “filth” as well as “pornography”. As a result of these comments by Nurmagomedov locals from Dagestan became outraged, even threatening the creative team which worked on the play. Furthermore, Nurmagomedov’s comments even gained traction among other athletes, the mufti of Dagestan, as well as government politicians from the republic. The article furthermore highlights other cases in which Nurmagomedov also showed his discontent through social media with practices taking place in Dagestan, as a result of his religious conservatism. These other cases also highlight the support which Nurmagomedov has among the Dagestani people, which might even offer him a political career.⁶ Thus, in the article Zidan highlights the influence and content from Nurmagomedov’s personal social media. However, what remains problematic is the fact that the article solely focusses on mainly one example which shows the representation and influence of religion on Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists social media.

Karim Zidan furthermore has written another article which to a degree also highlights the importance of MMA as means of propaganda. The article with the title “How the Warlord Who Controls Chechnya Uses Sports to Rule” delves deep into the political influence which mixed martial arts has, specifically in the Chechen republic. In the article, Zidan focuses on the leader of the Chechen republic Ramzan Kadyrov’s regime and how in the last decade it has attempted to use mixed martial arts, as well as other sports such as soccer to present a specific image of the Chechen republic to the outside world. As Zidan describes, Kadyrov attempts to do so, by for example using social media accounts from prominent athletes, such as Khamzat Chimaev to his advantage, letting the athletes promote a certain image, an image which in this case promotes Chechenness. Through these social media platforms Kadyrov attempts to promote a romanticized warrior spirit as well as a strongman image, according to Zidan, Kadyrov has been largely successful in his attempts of promoting a specific image of the

⁶ Karim Zidan, “‘Dagestan, Wake Up’: Khabib Nurmagomedov and the Role of Cultural Censorship in the North Caucasus,” *Bloody Elbow*, last modified March 5, 2019, <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2019/3/5/18251644/khabib-nurmagomedov-cultural-censorship-dagestan-politics-putin-kadyrov-mma-crime>.

Chechen society.⁷ However, as is the case with other journalism sources from journalists such as Zidan, the research remains limited in the sense that it only offers a broad overview of the issue, an overview which does not contain detailed research on the social media accounts from Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists.

On the other spectrum of journalism on Islamic representation from MMA fighters out of the Northern Caucasus are Islamic news outlets. These sources find their way of reasoning on the topic mostly through Islam. An example of such a journalism article is called “The Khabib Halal/Haraam Ratio: Good Character, Bad Sports, and the Conundrum of Muslim Representation” written by Zainab bint Younus. This article offers a very different perspective on the social media representation of Nurmagomedov. The article is written from the perspective of a Muslim journalist and on an Islamic media outlet, which is why the article differs in perspective, it instead criticizes Nurmagomedov’s media representation. At first the article recognizes the fact that Nurmagomedov for many Muslim men serves as a role model, also stating that Nurmagomedov’s social media representation is religion focused, which the article sees as a positive. For example, his remembrance of Allah is mentioned in the article, as an example of such Islamic representation. However, following these positive statements, the article delves into the negative sides of Nurmagomedov’s great influence. The article mentions that Nurmagomedov is indeed an influential figure, but that this should not be the case in the first place, since his influence is based around a practice which is considered *haraam* in Islam. Thus, such a social media representation is problematic in its core. According to the article, such a Islamic representation in social media should not be celebrated, but instead the only thing that should be celebrated is Nurmagomedov’s retirement. Furthermore, the article mentions that whenever women attempt to represent Islam through platforms which are considered *haraam* they receive negative backlash from the *ummah*. This, according to the article, leads to a paradoxical issue in regard to Islamic representation through social media.⁸ Due to the Islamic fundamentals of the article however, such criticisms are indeed valid, but they do not originate out of an unbiased position, which makes the source somewhat problematic.

“Khabib Nurmagomedov’s Global Appeal”, featured in the *Crescent International* is another source which draws on the topic from an Islamic perspective. This article contrasts the

⁷ Karim Zidan, “How The Warlord Who Controls Chechnya Uses Sports To Rule,” *Deadspin*, last modified July 19, 2017,

<https://deadspin.com/how-the-warlord-who-controls-chechnya-uses-sports-to-ru-1797065629>.

⁸ Zainab B. Younus, “The Khabib Halal/Haraam Ratio: Good Character, Bad Sports, And The Conundrum of Muslim Representation,” *Muslim Matters*, last modified October 25, 2020, <https://muslimmatters.org/2020/10/25/the-khabib-halal-haraam-ratio-good-character-bad-sports-and-the-conundrum-of-muslim-representation/>.

previous article written by Younus in the sense that it celebrates the Islamic social media representation from Nurmagomedov. It notes that even though Nurmagomedov is not the first prominent Muslim figure in sports, he is unique due to his background. Furthermore, putting an emphasis on the fact that Nurmagomedov is situated in a time period where such a social media representation is crucial, which puts a responsibility on the shoulders of Nurmagomedov. The article also seems to notice that Nurmagomedov's representation in social media to a certain degree is split, arguing between the fact whether Nurmagomedov is a symbol for Russian soft power, or instead Islamic soft power. After which the article concludes that Nurmagomedov represents himself in the media as both a soft power for his Russianness, as well as his Muslimness.⁹

Other than the literature written by journalists there is a small presence of literature on the topic written in academia. One of such articles is an undergraduate dissertation on the connection between politics and MMA in the Northern Caucasus, written by Luca Leonardo Difato. The thesis contains extensive research on the topic, which leads to important discoveries on the topic. For example, the article highlights how UFC fighters such as Magomed Ankalaev, among others, have direct ties with Ramzan Kadyrov. This highlights what was previously mentioned among the secular journalism literature, where Kadyrov attempts to use mixed martial artists to his own personal advantage. He does so by making the athletes not only promote Kadyrov himself, but furthermore making the athletes promote the Chechen republic, as well as Kadyrov's own mixed martial arts organization. The research then offers unique insights into the goals which Kadyrov tries to achieve through his social media power, but instead does not focus on the importance of religion. It focusses on how Kadyrov attempts to showcase a warrior spirit, but not its direct connection with Islam.¹⁰

Michael A. Reynolds, an associate professor in Princeton is another author who has briefly mentioned the social media representation of Islam from North Caucasian fighters, such as Nurmagomedov. In his article "The Brawl of Civilizations? A Tale of a Mixed Martial Arts Fighter from Dagestan" Reynolds attempts to research the event between Nurmagomedov and McGregor in a more detailed manner than previous attempts. In his research Reynolds delves deep into the history of Dagestan as to find reasoning behind the warrior culture which exists.

⁹ "Khabib Nurmagomedov's Global Appeal," Crescent International, last modified October 27, 2020, <https://crescent.icit-digital.org/articles/khabib-nurmagomedov-s-global-appeal>.

¹⁰ Luca L. Difato, "The Hidden Politics of Sport: The Chechen Mixed Martial Arts Experiment," Luca Difato WordPress, last modified May 10, 2021, <https://difato246.wordpress.com/2021/06/28/the-hidden-politics-of-sport-the-chechen-mixed-martial-arts-experiment>.

While doing so Reynolds also mentions Nurmagomedov's way of representing his faith. Reynolds states that Nurmagomedov represents his faith as a central element in his life, and that it is his faith which combines all of the different aspects of Nurmagomedov's life, such as being a family man, as well as being an athlete. This representation of faith as a central element, according to Reynolds is thoroughly represented in Nurmagomedov's social media, stating that "He peppers his Instagram and Twitter accounts with notices of Islamic holidays, reminders of God's presence and power, and images of the devout."¹¹ This information provided by Reynolds offers a small insight into the social media representation of religion by martial artists from the Northern Caucasus, but it does not cover the topic in an in-depth manner. Instead, it is a mere side component of Reynolds research, which thus means that the research could be extended.

All in all, the research which has been done on the representation of Islam by North Caucasian mixed martial artists remains scarce. The amount of research which has been done on the topic is low, partly because of the specificity of the topic. However, the journalism articles which have been written on the topic, as well as the academic research which has been done on the topic still shows gaps in the literature. In regard to non-Islamic journalism outlets, the research remains limited in the sense that there is no room for extensive research on many primary sources, which leads to either a broad overview on the topic, or instead focusses on a specific example which shows the representation of Islam in social media. This however still leaves a gap for improvement. Furthermore, some of the sources which originate from journalism which operates out of an Islamic field also show gaps. These sources either heavily criticize the way in which Islam is represented by the athletes, openly showing their dissatisfaction, or the sources try to focus on the balance of Russianness and Muslimness in the social media from the Northern Caucasian athletes. The small number of research done on the topic by academia also leaves gaps which could be filled by new research. The academic research often does not focus on the media representation, but instead merely mentions it as something noteworthy, as was the case with Reynolds source. When there is however more detailed research, it focusses on the political connection between mixed martial artists and social media, thus not focusing on the religious aspects. All of these different gaps in the already scarce literature leave a place for research which can instead focus on the actual representation

¹¹ Michael A. Reynolds, "The Brawl of Civilizations: A Tale of a Mixed Martial Arts Fighter from Dagestan," Foreign Policy Research Institute, last modified January 2, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/01/the-brawl-of-civilizations-a-tale-of-a-mixed-martial-arts-fighter-from-dagestan/>.

of Islam by Northern Caucasian on social media on a case-to-case basis. Thus, being able to delve into specifics and details from different primary sources, which will sketch a more detailed view on the issue, something which previously had been scarcely, if at all, researched.

To make this research possible the thesis will answer the following research question.

To what extent do prominent Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists represent a new Muslim masculinity through their different social media platforms?

Although Islamic motives in the social media usage of prominent Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists have been recognized both by journalists and scholars who are interested in this relative niche topic, nevertheless, I argue that the way in which their social media platforms represent Islam creates a new form of modest Muslim masculinity, because firstly the Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists position themselves in a martial masculine environment, while simultaneously putting a large importance on religion. This is a phenomenon which was previously not present. And secondly because the mixed martial artists seem to credit almost all of their achievements to a greater plan of Allah, thus portraying a sense of religious modesty.

To support the claim of the theory of creating such a new modest Muslim masculinity the research is grounded in a theory of Muslim masculinity. Such a theory on Muslim masculinity is a new phenomenon which originates out of the West. A notable book on the subject, which further elaborates on the topic of Muslim masculinity is called the “Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities”. A chapter in the book, written by Shahin Gerami, focusses its attention on the diversity of Muslim masculinity. Part of the theory which the book presents is that the phenomenon of Muslim masculinity is a new one, partly because of the fact that academics have mostly focused on Muslim femininity, instead of masculinity. Furthermore, the theory contains that the phenomenon has much more variety than what is commonly believed. It argues that there is no simple homogenous Muslim masculinity, but that instead it differs from time and place, which is why such variations as a potential Northern Caucasian modest Islamic masculinity ceases to exist. Furthermore, according to the theory and its claim for diversity there for example exists a more modest conservative Muslim masculinity, as well as a liberal Muslim masculinity. Furthermore, what the theory also entails is that a Muslim masculinity throughout time has been represented by a role model, which in history often were political figures. These role models would entail a Muslim masculinity which

primarily existed out of maleness, purity, and faith.¹² This position of a role model could thus potentially be filled by other prominent Islamic figures, such as mixed martial artists. Thus, all in all these different aspects of the Muslim masculinity theory validate and support the research on a new modest masculinity, partly because of the many common grounds between the two which support each other.

To discover such representation the methodology of the research is essential. In order to attain the right results a qualitative content analysis will take place which will analyze the social media accounts from Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists. Such qualitative content analysis functions as a way to analyze data within a particular context. This is particularly helpful in the case of Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists since the data will be able to provide the context in which the content from their social media falls. Other research on celebrities their social media's accounts, which also utilized content analysis has proven a successful way of drawing an image on the representation of celebrities in social media. In the case of the Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists Instagram and YouTube have proven to be the best media which allows such a qualitative content analysis. These platforms provide a visual way of posting content for the athletes, instead of a literate one, which is helpful in representing aspects such as religion, hence why platforms such as twitter are not utilized. Having selected these platforms, an individual, by hand, qualitative selection takes place which selects the most relevant content in regard to the social media research. Once the selection of relevant social media content is established all content will be researched and critically analyzed. Thus, this research will be able to highlight particular tendencies in the social media platforms from the Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists. After such a qualitative content analysis the research question will be able to be answered.¹³ However, since the research operates in such detail it only allows for a limited view in regard to the amount of North Caucasian mixed martial artists being researched. Hence why only a small number of fighters are researched, two fighters specifically, Khabib Nurmagomedov and Khamzat Chimaev, since these two are the most significant representatives for both the republic of Dagestan, as well as the republic of Chechnya.

¹² Shahn Gerami, "Islamist Masculinity and Muslim Masculinities," in *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*, ed. Michael Kimmel, Jeff Hearn, and R. W. Connell (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 448-457.

¹³ Klaus Krippendorff, "Content Analysis," *International Encyclopedia of Communication* 1, no. 1 (1989): 403-407; Janabeth Ward, "A Content Analysis of Celebrity Instagram Posts and Parasocial Interaction," *Elon Journal of Undergraduate research in Communications* 7, no. 1 (2016): 1-1; Chen Yang, "Research in the Instagram Context: Approaches and Methods," *The Journal of Social Sciences Research* 7, no.1 (January 2021): 15-21.

After the necessary information on not only the background of the research, but furthermore the relevance and significance of the research in this introduction, the research is divided into two main parts. The first of the two parts, “The Society and Culture of the Northern Caucasus” will give an overview of the Northern Caucasus after the fall of the Soviet Union through four different aspects. These four different aspects being youth, crime, religion, and sports. These different aspects will provide crucial information to put the last and final chapter into context, furthermore it will provide the reader with the necessary background information on the region. The following chapter “The representation of Islam by MMA fighters” will contain the main body of research. This chapter uses Khabib Nurmagomedov as a representative of Dagestan, and Khamzat Chimaev as a representative of Chechnya, to highlight their representation of Islam in social media. Furthermore, the necessary background information on both fighters will be provided, such as their childhood and their rise to fame. After which their personal social media accounts will be researched which will enable a critical observation on their representation of Islam to take place.

1. The Society and Culture of the Northern Caucasus

The purpose of this chapter is to offer an overview of the culture and society of the Northern Caucasus through different lenses, specifically Dagestan and Chechnya after the fall of the Soviet Union. These lenses highlight important parts of the society and culture, such as youth, crime, religion, and sports. These mentioned elements are all crucial for understanding the eventual research in the last chapter. This part of the thesis will draw a map of the Northern Caucasus and its society to see how it has developed in different areas since the fall of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the chapter will answer the following sub question, to what extent are there correlations and similarities between the causes of developments in these different researched aspects of society?

Societal issues of the North Caucasian Youth

Both within the youth in Dagestan and in Chechnya there seems to be somewhat of a divide between two different trends, the first one being a very traditional society and the second one being a growing influence of modern developments and social media. For both, it seems as though there are many problems among the youth, ranging from education to identity.

The youth in Dagestan is currently in a space of crisis in regard to education, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union. For the youth of Dagestan, their academic degrees are important, which leads to a youth motivated to enter universities. However, a problematic situation arises for the youth when there are not many follow-up options after university. The available jobs for Dagestani youth remains limited, which leads to high numbers of unemployment. Furthermore, the jobs which are available to the Dagestani youth are underpaid. From the unemployed Dagestani population around, 50 percent is aged from 15-30, which shows the problematic situation for the youth of Dagestan.¹⁴ Furthermore, another potential problem arises in regard to education when one considers the number of religious schools and academic institutions. That is particularly the case, because the secular schools do not get the same attention as Islamic schools, which leads to an overall increase in Islamic education. This seems to be another problem, or occurrence rather, in regard to education in Dagestan.

¹⁴ Elena Omelchenko, Sviatoslav Poliakov and Alina Mayboroda, "Peers/Strangers/Others? The Youth of Dagestan in Search of Group Identities," *Cultural Studies* 33, no. 5 (2019): 845.

Especially because the public conscience on secular science has gained an overall negative image.¹⁵

Another important aspect of the Dagestani youth is related to its identity. For Dagestan being a republic in the Russian Federation ensures that its Muslim majority population can define their own relation to Islam. However, with the rise of new technologies there are also waves of youth arising trying to go against societal norms. These youth instead attempt to focus on more Western and contemporary issues, such as materialism. According to the researchers themselves such an increase in “materialism” and decrease in “spirituality” is an urgent and negative matter. Even going as far as to state that the implementation of Western values has become a significant threat to inner values.¹⁶ However on the other side, when one takes these individuals themselves into account, it seems as though they are satisfied with the arrival of new Western values and concepts. They feel as though the old Dagestani traditions are limiting them and their behavior. The reaction of the traditional Dagestani society, however, is to harass the people who try to use Western values to their advantage.¹⁷ This sole example however might indicate that the Dagestani society might be undergoing a divide with both traditional and Western values racing for support.

A last aspect of the issues for the Dagestani youth which will be discussed here is related to the increase of Islamic influence for some of the Dagestani youth. As previously mentioned, there is an increase in youth accepting Western values. However, it appears as though this is also the case the other way around with a large number of Dagestanis showing an increase of interest in Islam. This is especially the case for the more rural areas of Dagestan where Islamic, as well as traditional values are appreciated to a higher degree.¹⁸ It is this increase in the importance of Islam which led to other developments such as Dagestanis travelling to Syria in order to join ISIS. It was estimated that between 2011 and 2014 around 5000 Dagestanis travelled to Syria to join ISIS, even though the age of these people travelling to Syria is not known. However, the fact remains that the popularity for ISIS was especially present among

¹⁵ Mustafa I. Bilalov, “Traditions and Tendencies of the Dagestan Education,” *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 3, no. 1 (February 2015): 166-167.

¹⁶ Madina Z. Kazieva, Alena G. Lukyashko, Ramazan I. Gazimagomedov, Guria I. Yusupova, Gadzhi S. Maluchiev and Siyadat Y. Alibekova, “Inner Health of Dagestan Youth: State and Trends,” *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education* 12, no. 1 (May 2020): 631.

¹⁷ Anastasiia Fedorova, “Dagestan’s Youth are Fighting for their Right to Self-Expression,” *Young Russia*, last modified August 20, 2021, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/13029/youth-of-dagestan-fighting-for-their-right-to-self-expression-russia-z>.

¹⁸ Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, “Religion, Migration and the Dreams of Dagestani youth,” *New Eastern Europe*, last modified January 8, 2018, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2018/01/02/religion-migration-dreams-dagestani-youth/>.

the youth of Dagestan. An example of such a support can be recognized by the fact that 47,6 percent of Dagestani youth would prefer a Sharia law, indicating that they would prefer to live in an Islamic state.¹⁹ All in all, when it comes to Dagestan, education, identity, and religion all show their problems and developments for the Dagestani youth.

For Chechnya there are both commonalities and differences when compared to Dagestan on these aspects of the youth. When it comes to education Chechnya also shows the same problems as present in Dagestan. There are only a few universities in Chechnya with a total number of three. Because of this limitation of higher education and the lack of variety which is actually available in the higher education different developments are taking place. For example, it leads to migration for students from Chechnya to Moscow. It is there in the capitol that they are to receive better education. However, since a return to Chechnya awaits after graduation, Chechens are often confronted with the same realities as Dagestanis. The reality for Chechens is the fact that there are not enough jobs available, and for the available jobs there seems to be an overall overqualification among the returning Chechens. Where in Dagestan from the entire unemployed population a total of 50 percent was part of the youth, in Chechnya a total of 70 percent of the youth remains unemployed. For the Chechen youth this high percentage of unemployment creates a gateway into forms of gang violence and extremism as a result of poor education and employment opportunities.²⁰

When it comes to identity, there seems to be a different development in the case of Chechnya. The republic has a stricter regime when compared to Dagestan, which might explain how such an identity aspect could differ. In the case of Dagestan, there is the presence of a movement pushing the boundaries of tradition, which is separate from the aspect of religion. In Chechnya, however, such identity movements are closely-knit with Islam. Such a quest for identity for Chechen often leads to youth gangs, these gangs are affiliated with extremism as well as terrorism. The participation into such a gang could be a result of overall dissatisfaction for example with unemployment. These groups then offer the Chechen youth a way to show their dissatisfaction with the traditional values in the Chechen republic by means of Islamic extremism.²¹ For the Chechens participating in these extremist groups, around 30 percent is

¹⁹ Domitilla Sagramoso and Akhmet Yarlykapov, "What Drove Young Muslims to Join ISIS? A Study Based on Social Movement Theory and Collective Farming," *Terrorism Research Initiative* 14, no. 2 (April 2020): 47-49.

²⁰ Evgeniya Goryushina, "Youth Initiatives in the Context of Extremism: the Chechnya Case," *Connections and Disconnections* 2, no.1 (December 2014): 78-79.

²¹ Michael Vishnevetsky, "Youth Gangs and Terrorism in Chechnya: Recruitment, Activities and Networks," in *The Faces of Terrorism: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. David V. Canter (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2009), 151-159.

under the age of 25.²² In some instances these extremists' groups will eventually lead to actions of violence in which the youth participate. For example, in 2018 a series of coordinated attacks took place from young Chechens, who were affiliated with ISIS, the youngest person being only eleven years old.²³

This highlights the fact that the quest for identity in Chechnya, unlike in Dagestan, is not based on necessarily progressive ideas, but rather more conservative and religious ideas. Furthermore, the link between youth identity and religion is present for the Chechen youth, even though this was not the case for the Dagestani youth. All of these differences could be a result of different factors. The first possible reason could be the fact that among the Dagestani youth the old traditions are seen as a limitation. This leads to this youth trying to extent these limitations by embracing core Western values. Furthermore, such difference can also be as a result from the stricter regime in Chechnya. Under Kadyrov a strict regime has emerged which might make the acceptance of Western values a more difficult task for the youth. Especially since Kadyrov's regime is known for human rights violations against practices which could be seen as representing Western values, such as the presence of LGBTQ support groups.²⁴ Both of these factors could explain the presence of a difference between the Northern Caucasian youths in either embracing Western values or instead adhering to traditional values.

The different forms of crime in Dagestan and Chechnya and its development

The Northern Caucasus has an overall high rate of crime. However, one is able to distinguish between different forms of crime, such as political crimes motivated by Islamism, which was previously briefly discussed. Especially after the fall of the Soviet Union and with the newfound importance of Islam crime rates started to rise. Statistics however do not suggest there is a direct cause-effect relation between the two. Thus, offering the possibility that the Islamist renaissance and rise in crime are two developments completely separated from each other.

For Dagestan, the crime rate rose particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union, it brought a new wave of crime to the republic. This wave existed mostly out of the formation of

²² Goryushina, "Youth Initiatives," 79.

²³ Andrew Roth, "Chechnya attacks carried out by children as young as 11, says officials," *The Guardian*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/21/chechnya-attacks-carried-out-by-children-as-young-as-11-say-officials>.

²⁴ Adam Taylor, "Ramzan Kadyrov says there are no gay men in Chechnya — and if there are any, they should move to Canada," *The Washington Post*, July 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/07/15/ramzan-kadyrov-says-there-are-no-gay-men-in-chechnya-and-if-there-are-any-they-should-move-to-canada/>.

groups from rural areas which would all operate out of their own village. These rural groups would first mostly function as a way of self-defense for the people of the rural areas. However, later developments would transform these groups into paramilitary organizations which were battling amongst each other for higher positions of power. Hence why the crime rate rose from the 1990's and onwards, especially regarding assassinations. It is important to note however that this wave of crime took place in a transitional phase for the republic. Therefore, one should be careful to label this crime as a result of the Islamization. Later however, this struggle for political power by these rebellious groups would decrease again.

Instead, what can be recognized as two important forms of crime in Dagestan are firstly drug related crimes, and secondly seditious crimes by extremist groups. The former is a development in the region which gained most attention after the fall of the Soviet Union, especially with the introduction of a new capitalist economy. Partly due to its geographical location Dagestan has become a good location for international drugs trade. The geographical location also favors the actual production of drugs in the republic, which explains the large number of found plantations. Furthermore, the presence of corrupt officials has made the illegal drugs trade easier, which then in its place leads to higher rates of addiction in the republic. An official figure out of 2003 suggested that a minimum of 23.000 people in the republic were addicted to drugs, but that the actual figure could potentially be much higher.²⁵ Even though the figure is somewhat dated, the presence of drugs and its problems in the region still seem present, as is noted by popular Dagestani figures who claim the government is responsible for the causes of the issue.²⁶

The second important form of crime in Dagestan is largely related to Islamic extremism. This form of crime is also a result of the concept which is called the "forest issue". This concept entails the fact that Dagestani men mostly, leave for the forests as a result of their continued dissatisfaction with the government as well as other factors such as dominant ideologies in society. The forest in this metaphor is the location where rural extremist groups are hiding like bandits. This topic is often related to the Salafi-Sufi struggle in Dagestani society, hence why these groups are often either Salafist or Sufi and use violence as a measure to establish dominance. This wave of crime became more prevalent at the beginning of the 21st century and

²⁵ Musa Musayev, "Drugs Traders Exploit Dagestan," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, last modified August 29, 2003,

<https://iwpr.net/global-voices/drugs-traders-exploit-dagestan>.

²⁶ Ross Markey, "Khabib Nurmagomedov Questions Russian Government Over Dagestan's Drug Problem," LowkickMMA, last modified June 22, 2021,

<https://www.lowkickmma.com/khabib-nurmagomedov-questions-russian-government-over-dagestans-drug-problem/>.

had a focus of crime on government officials, as well as the elite of society. This highlights that this forest issue was mostly a way for rebellious groups to show their dissatisfaction.²⁷

For Chechnya there was also a high rate of crime after their struggle for independence from the Soviet Union, especially with the occurrence of both the Chechen wars, which fueled the crimes committed. Reports and statistics on the actual rate of crime in Chechnya are not easily accessible, however, leaked reports out of 2003 give a small insight into the crime of the republic. In these reports, the main crimes which took place were largely murder as well as abductions. Because of the time period in which these crimes took place one can assume that they are largely related to the guerilla warfare, which was present in Chechnya at the time, therefore making the actual crime statistics less representable for actual crime rates.²⁸

However, what is then particularly interesting in the case of Chechnya are the developments which took place in the following, more recent, years. Where previously Chechnya was considered a region with a high rate of crime, an article out of 2017 suggested otherwise. With the new statistics presented it was no longer the case that Chechnya was necessarily filled with crime. The republic carried low rates of street crime, which then enabled the republic as well as the other North Caucasian republic Ingushetia to enter the list of safest regions in the entirety of Russia. According to the statistics the amount of street crime decreased when compared to statistics from 2015. However, what is essential to note with these statistics is the fact that street crime does not consider acts of terrorism and extremism. Hence why these statistics could be sketching an image which does not represent the true crime in the region, instead it could be a measure by Ramzan Kadyrov to ensure the view on Chechnya from the outside world.²⁹

In contrast to this decrease in crime from 2017, new evidence from 2021 shows that crime in Chechnya was again increasing. These statistics instead show that in the first 7 months of 2021 the crime in Chechnya increased by 28.8 percent. This then placed Chechnya as the region in Russia with most crimes, in contrast to 2017 where it was placed as one of the safest places in the country.³⁰ The reason as to why such an increase has taken place is uncertain, but different factors such as corruption among others could have an influence.

²⁷ Magomed-Rasul Ibragimov and Kimitaka Matsuzato, "Contextualized Violence: Politics and Terror in Dagestan," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 2 (December 2012): 289-292.

²⁸ Michael Wines, "Crime Reports Defy Russian Claims of Greater Calm in Chechnya," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/14/world/crime-reports-defy-russian-claims-of-greater-calm-in-chechnya.html>.

²⁹ "Chechnya and Ingushetia 'Safest Regions' of Russia," OC Media, last modified June 1, 2017, <https://oc-media.org/chechnya-and-ingushetia-safest-regions-of-russia/>.

³⁰ "Chechnya keeps the lead in crime growth in Russia," *Caucasian Knot*, last modified August 29, 2021,

As was the case with Dagestan, Chechnya also seems to have a crime related issue regarding drug usage, however it seems as though the Chechen regime is more active in limiting its usage. Already in 2003 there were reports of drug addiction in Chechnya, especially heroin was a utilized drug among what could be thousands of drug-addicted Chechens. The estimate back then was that at least 10.000 people were addicted to drugs, with the number possibly being twice as high. Alongside this number of users is the number of crimes related to drugs, which back then made up a total of 1000 drug related crimes each year.³¹ In a Muslim society such as Chechnya the usage of drugs is frowned upon, which already in 2006 led to a reaction from Kadyrov, stating that the usage of drugs is equal to acts of terrorism.³² As of 2017 Kadyrov still stands strong against drugs and furthermore he has adopted a more direct approach to stop the drug issues, as well as the drug related crimes. In an attempt to limit these activities measurements have been taken against supposed drug users, who not only were jailed, but furthermore had to endure practices such as torture. In 2017, the number of cases related to drugs in Chechnya was a total of 507, which is significantly lower when compared to the 1000 cases from 2003.³³ This might suggest that Kadyrov's hard measures against drug usage have to a certain extent rewarded him.

Religion in the northern Caucasus and the development of Wahabism

Dagestan and Chechnya republics with a majority Islamic population. The region saw a growing influence of Islam after the fall of the Soviet Union. This increasing religious importance is to be recognized in different statistics on the region, such as the numbers of mosques built, the amount of people performing the *hajj*, the amount of people following Islamic education, and other statistics. These statistics offer an insight into the growing importance of Islam in the region after the fall of the Soviet Union.

For Dagestan approximately 90 percent of all inhabitants are Muslim, even though the Islamic schools of jurisprudence might differ on an individual scale. This however is a

<https://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/56583/>.

³¹ Zaurbek Eskirkhanov, "Chechnya's Hidden Drug Crisis," Relief web, last modified, August 29, 2003, <https://reliefweb.int/report/russian-federation/chechnyas-hidden-drug-crisis>.

³² Oliver Carroll, "Chechnya's Ramzan Kadyrov Launches New Crackdown on Drug Users," *Independent*, last modified January 16, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/chechnya-drug-users-ramzan-kadyrov-gay-torture-detain-arrest-russia-a8162001.html>.

³³ "Chechnya Initiated Brutal Crackdown on Drugs Last Year Investigation Says," *The Moscow Times*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/01/16/chechnya-initiated-brutal-crackdown-on-drugs-last-year-investigation-says-a60194>.

significant number of people who affiliate themselves with Islam. As was stated, an increase in the influence of Islam can be recognized by looking at statistics. An example of such is the number of mosques in the region, which in a decennium increased from a total of 27 mosques to more than 2000 mosques in the region. Not only the mosques attract a growing Islamic interest, but furthermore the presence of Islamic universities, schools, and political parties all highlight the people's increasing need for religious presence in different spheres of life such as politics and education.

However, this does not indicate the presence of a homogenous religious society in Dagestan, instead there is some variety in regard to religion. First it is important to acknowledge the presence of a small Christian minority. Secondly, Dagestan in a sense has a split in regard to the Islamic community. On the one hand there are many Sufis in Dagestan, however in recent years there has been an increase in popularity for a Saudi Islamic school known as Wahhabism, a wave of Islam which is often labeled as fundamentalist. Both schools of Islam have an audience in the region, however the fundamental beliefs of both schools differ from each other. Wahhabism on the one hand is a form of Islam which solely focusses on the two main sources of Islam, the Quran and the sunnah, thus not believing philosophy and theology which originates from after the death of prophet Muhammad.³⁴ And Sufism on the other hand being a more mystical form of Islam which instead focusses on personal experiences with God, thus focusing less on the two main sources of Islam.³⁵ In the past this fundamental difference between the two schools has escalated into acts of violence.³⁶ The emergence of Wahhabism took place at the end of the 21st century, however the actual transformation of Wahhabism into something which was more radical primarily took place from 1991 till 1999. This is also the development which made the Wahabi movement transform from what was previously an educational movement into a semi-militarized group, hence why military training became an essential part of the Wahhabi movement in Dagestan, thus showing an increase in the radicalization. The goals of the movement furthermore transformed such as establishing an Islamic caliphate in the region. Furthermore, concepts such as jihadism were adopted by the Dagestani Wahhabi movement.³⁷ At the end of the 21st century in 1999 this even led to armed

³⁴ Robert B. Ware and Enver Kisriev, "The Islamic Factor in Dagestan," *Central Asian Survey* 19, no.2 (2000): 235-240.

³⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, "Sufism," Britannica, last modified November 20, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sufism>.

³⁶ Ware and Kisriev, "The Islamic Factor," 240-241.

³⁷ Kaflan Khanbabaev, "Islam and Islamic Radicalism in Dagestan," in *Radical Islam in the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Galina M. Yemelianova (New York: Routledge, 2010), 97-98.

jihad from Wahhabis against who they thought to be non-believers.³⁸ The Wahhabi movement has gained some traction in the region, especially among young men. There is however a distinction to be made there between young men who believe in a peaceful re-Islamization and others who support a more extreme approach. Even though this extreme approach has gained more attention than the more measured peaceful re-islamization, it is not necessarily representative for the entirety of Dagestani Wahhabi Muslims, with most Wahhabis opting not to use violence.³⁹

Chechnya, like Dagestan, carries some religious variety, and for both regions there was a rise in Islamic interest after the fall of the Soviet Union. This was the case partly due to the repression which had previously taken place during Soviet time, but also due to the search for a Chechen identity, an identity which came to be closely related to Islam. For Chechnya this Islamic identity was also mostly based on Sufi schools. The Islamic renaissance after the Soviet period eventually led to the emergence of Islam in Chechen politics, and Islam became an essential factor for the Chechens in establishing their own state. Such an Islamic renaissance is also visible in the statistics covering the percentage of the population which is Muslim. In 1989 a total of 68.3 percent of the population was Muslim, this number had increased to 94 percent in 2002.⁴⁰ Furthermore, this claim for increasing Islamic influence is also recognized when one looks at the increase in Islamic institutions such as mosques.⁴¹

Around the same time as Dagestan, Chechnya also saw an introduction of Wahhabism in the region, which again produced an alternative to the previous Sufi traditions in the region. For the Chechens, who affiliated with Wahhabism, it offered them a more personal relationship with God, and furthermore it opposed the regime, which they did not accept. As was the case in Dagestan, Wahhabis in Chechnya also attempted to use military means to gain influence in for example politics. This did however not lead to great successes for the Wahhabis who encountered mostly political opposition. The political regime instead opted for the traditional Sufi form of Islam. The dividedness of Islam in Chechnya also gave way to clashes between the Wahhabis and the traditional Sufis, furthermore, clashes between Islamic schools and the state also arose, as was the case with Wahhabis.⁴² This seems to be a trend for Wahhabis in

³⁸ Khanbabaev, "Islam," 100.

³⁹ Khanbabaev, "Islam," 104-105.

⁴⁰ Judyth Twigg, "Differential Demographics: Russia's Muslim and Slavic Populations," *PONARS Policy Memo* 388, no. 1 (December 2005): 134-136.

⁴¹ Mairbek Vatchagaev, "North Caucasus Builds More and Bigger Mosques," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 12, no. 95 (May 2015).

⁴² Emil Souleimanov, "Chechnya, Wahabism and the invasion of Dagestan," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 9, no.4 (December 2005): 54-59.

Chechnya who became known as militias notorious for challenging the regime.⁴³ However, with the arrival of Ramzan Kadyrov as new president there also came new developments in regard to Wahhabism. Kadyrov who follows the traditional Sufi school is opting for more anti-Wahhabi measures, which he made public. He stated that he would “do everything to root out “Wahhabism””, which he sees as closely related to religious extremism. In order to do so he has opted to promote the traditional Sufi practices instead, furthermore he tries to promote the tradition by building new mosques as a symbol of the Sufi power.⁴⁴ Kadyrov also made other comments considering Wahhabism by stating that it is a misguided sect.⁴⁵

Both Dagestan and Chechnya have an Islamic history which is rooted in traditional Sufism. Furthermore, both republics saw the entrance of Wahhabism as a new phenomenon which found its roots in Saudi-Arabia. The Saudi state among other states even funded the Wahhabi movement in the Northern Caucasus, offering them considerable financial support.⁴⁶ The entrance of this Islamic school led to religious and political issues in both republics, sometimes even leading to acts of violence between the old traditional Islam and the new Wahhabi doctrine. The Wahhabis managed to take a place in society, but only to a small degree which was underwhelming when compared to their initial goals, which involved forming an Islamic state.

The importance of MMA and other sports in the Northern Caucasus

In the Northern Caucasus there exists a large emphasis on the practice of sports, and it has a great importance in the male society of the region. From a young age, males especially, are expected to perform in sports and they are more or less forced to do sports by their parents. For some, their interest lies in volleyball or football, but these young males can also be introduced into mixed martial arts by their parents. The emphasis on sports in the region can be seen from

⁴³ Miriam Lansky, “Daghestan and Chechnya: The Wahhabi Challenge to the State,” *SAIS Review* 22, no.2 (2002): 181.

⁴⁴ Joanna Paraszczuk, “Serious Fears Of ‘Wahhabi’ Threat Behind Chechen Leader’s ‘CIA-Sponsored IS Devils’ Comments,” RadioFreeEurope, RadioLiberty, last modified October 21, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/under-black-flag-wahhabi-fears-behind-kadyrov-cia-sponsored-devils/26648551.html>.

⁴⁵ “Chechen Leader Kadyrov Apologizes to Saudis for Wahhabism Snub,” *The Moscow Times*, November 28, 2016, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/11/28/chechen-leader-kadyrov-apologizes-to-saudis-for-wahhabism-snub-a56316>.

⁴⁶ Robert B. Ware, “Why Wahhabism Went Wrong in Dagestan,” *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, last modified September 13, 2000, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/7166-analytical-articles-caci-analyst-2000-9-13-art-7166.html>.

two different perspectives. First, for Dagestan, it can be seen as a result of the athletic specialization of the region from the 60's and 70's, a period which supported and financed different sports in the region. A development which has even continued after the fall of the Soviet Union.⁴⁷ Second, it can also be regarded as a result of the Chechen-Dagestani tensions after the war at the end of the 20th century. These tensions in society were mostly religious of origin, since because of the harsh societal conditions a path to extremism was paved. The Dagestani government opted to counter some of these, mostly religious, tensions in society after the war by promoting different combat sports.⁴⁸ This is what then led to the high participation in sports, especially some of the martial arts such as wrestling, combat sambo, judo, and others.

This participation went accompanied with large degrees of success for the region in sports events. If one takes wrestling as an example, figures show that in the entirety of Russia, 70 percent of skilled wrestlers are either natives or residents from the Northern Caucasus.⁴⁹ The increasing popularity of wrestling and other sports are accompanied by the large infrastructural and financial investments by the Dagestani government to promote these sports and to make them their trademark. The infrastructural investments range from wrestling schools to private gyms and also highlight the politics behind sports in the Northern Caucasus, in this case Dagestan.⁵⁰

For Chechnya this is not different. Political developments on Chechen mixed martial arts have arisen in the last decades, especially after the appointment of president Ramzan Akhmadovich Kadyrov in 2007. He is a significant figure when it comes to the relationship between sports and politics in the region. Furthermore, he is well-known for his support of mixed martial arts and his affiliation with Chechen as well as Dagestani athletes. As a result of his rule, the Chechen government has exerted extra control on national sports, doing so to gain more power. This increase in political control over sports can be recognized in an event which took place in 2015 where Kadyrov placed two persons from his close circle to have command over the two most important Chechen sports, the first one being mixed martial arts and the second one being soccer.⁵¹ Furthermore, Kadyrov himself is the main sponsor of the Akhmat MMA Fight Club, perhaps the most notable MMA promotion in Chechnya. Through this

⁴⁷ Sviatoslav I. Poliakov, "Wrestler Masculinity in Dagestan as a Local Hegemony," *Sociology of Youth* 11, no. 10 (2021): 214-215.

⁴⁸ Karim Zidan, "Dagestani Dynasty: How Fighting Became the Nurmagomedov Family Business," last modified March 19, 2015, <https://karimzidan.com/dagestani-dynasty-how-fighting-became-the-nurmagomedov-family-business/>.

⁴⁹ Poliakov, "Wrestler masculinity," 214.

⁵⁰ Poliakov, "Wrestler Masculinity," 214-216.

⁵¹ Zidan, "How the Warlord."

gateway he is able to keep close relationships with fighters and benefit them when necessary. This is however not exclusive to Chechen martial artists, since Western martial artists have also made visits to the leader's residency. Even on Kadyrov's own social media are many hints at his close ties with influential mixed martial artists, who he uses as a way of promoting Chechnya, not only as a location, but as a place of warriors.⁵²

However, it is not solely the ongoing politics behind the sports which pushes its presence, it is also a result of the Northern Caucasian consensus on societal mobility. For many North Caucasians wrestling and other martial arts are seen as one of the only ways to climb the social ladder and gain for example political influence. This has been the case since Soviet times, where it was already present that successful athletes would gain positions of power in politics, as well as in other structures.⁵³

Lastly, for the Northern Caucasus it is also noticeable that sports have become more intertwined with religion. The gaining of importance of religion in this instance is the Islamization of sports. And furthermore, the public image of Caucasian athletes has become more tied to their religiosity. Many Chechen and Dagestani fighters firstly portray themselves on their social media as pious Muslims primarily, the portrayal of the fighter comes later.⁵⁴

All in all, the Northern Caucasus has been through large developments after the fall of the Soviet Union. All the different aspects which have been discussed show their own related issues. For the youth in the Northern Caucasus there appear to be many issues, mostly relating to education, identity, and religion. It appears that religion plays a big part in both the education as well as the identity among the youth, often leading to cases of extremism due to large dissatisfaction among the youth. Furthermore, the different forms of crime have also undergone development after the fall of the Soviet Union. At first this crime seemed to be centered around extremism, even though the statistics do not make a distinction between religious and non-religious crimes, and later issues regarding drug related crimes also became present in both republics. In regard to the religion in the republics it seems as though they both endured similar experiences. Both the republics have a Muslim majority population, which for the majority adheres to Sufism. However, a rise of a new Saudi doctrine took place with the emergence of Wahhabism, a Muslim revivalist movement. As a result, both republics saw an increase of

⁵² Dominic Scicchitano, "The 'Real' Chechen Man; Conceptions of Religion, Nature, and Gender and the Persecution of Sexual Minorities in Postwar Chechnya," *Journal of Homosexuality* (2019): 1-2.

⁵³ Poliakov, "Wrestler Masculinity," 214-216.

⁵⁴ Poliakov, "Wrestler Masculinity," 216.

Islamic violence due to the emergence and struggle for power by Northern Caucasian Wahhabis. This quest for power however reduced, which led to a small presence of Wahhabism in both republics. Furthermore, regarding sports there are also interesting developments which have taken place. Sports contain a crucial part in life for North Caucasian males, who already from a young age perform. Political interests also seem prevalent in the sports circuit, especially in Chechnya under leadership of Ramzan Kadyrov. Furthermore, the practice of different sports in the region have become more closely tied to Islam, for example by notable sportsmen who intertwine their public image with religion. All of the researched areas seem to have one mutual cause for development, which is the importance of religion. In all of the different fields, the importance of religion has urged new developments to arise, whether that be the emergence of Wahhabism in the religious scene, the connection between Islam and sports, or the crime issues related to extremism.

2. The representation of Islam by prominent MMA fighters

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how different North Caucasian mixed martial artists have represented themselves, and how they have represented their religion in social media. To do so two fighters, one out of each republic, which will serve as an example on the representation of Islam. For Dagestan, the most notable figure is Khabib Nurmagomedov, one of, if not the most successful Dagestani martial artist. For Chechnya, Khamzat Chimaev will be researched, an up-and-coming mixed martial artist. Both fighters have gained their popularity mostly in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). In this chapter there will be a focus on a biography on both fighters, their rise to fame, and lastly their representation of Islam. The chapter will also highlight how these prominent mixed martial artists have been able to showcase a new Muslim masculinity. To highlight and answer these questions there will be usage of their own personal social media accounts, as well as some primary sources highlighting their representation and importance of religion.

The upbringing of Khabib Nurmagomedov and his youth

The first prominent figure which will be discussed is Khabib Nurmagomedov, an Avar Dagestani mixed martial artist. Khabib Abdulmanapovich Nurmagomedov was born on September 20, 1988, in a village in Dagestan called Sildi, where he would follow a traditional Muslim upbringing. As mentioned in the first chapter, it is only natural for Dagestani youth to easily become involved in martial arts such as wrestling and sambo. This was also the case for Nurmagomedov, especially when considering his family history. His father, as well as his uncles, had great successes regarding martial arts, achieving championships in freestyle wrestling and sambo, one of his uncles even became sambo world champion in 1992. Therefore, it was only natural that Nurmagomedov would also enter a sphere where martial arts were central, for him this entry took place at the age of 5 when he started to train.⁵⁵

At the age of twelve however this process of training and its importance increased when Nurmagomedov moved to the capital of Dagestan, Makhachkala. It was there that his father took him and according to Nurmagomedov fifteen other kids, some of which were his cousins,

⁵⁵ Mary Myers, "Dagestani Eagle: Biography of Khabib Nurmagomedov," *Hardcord*, last modified November 13, 2020, <https://hardcord.com/news/dagestani-eagle-biography-of-khabib-nurmagomedov>.

to live in a house where they would focus on training and school. Nurmagomedov tells in an interview that for almost 8 years he and his peers lived in a house in the capital, training every morning, afterwards going to school, and training again in the evening under the rule of his father. Even being engaged in street fights on a regular base. Furthermore, there was no female presence in the Makhachkala household, which according to Nurmagomedov led to greater discipline since he and his peers now had to cook and wash for themselves, next to their other daily activities.⁵⁶ He himself even called the life in the house a military lifestyle in an interview describing his upbringing and the start of his MMA career.⁵⁷ Up until this point, most of the sports focusses were still pointed at freestyle wrestling and later on judo, however when he turned 17 he made a switch to combat sambo, a sport which in a way resembles mixed martial arts, the sport which he would eventually practice. All in the meanwhile Nurmagomedov's education also showed promises when he graduated from the Makhachkala Finance and Economics college.⁵⁸

After having had some experience in combat sambo and even becoming world champion two times, a transition to MMA became more likely and a prolific choice. This transition into the sport took place for Nurmagomedov at the age of 19, after a final decision was made whether his professional life would indeed revolve around combat sports. The first professional fight of Nurmagomedov's career took place in a Ukrainian promotion where he would claim the first victory of his career. His domestic fighting career would continue for another total of 15 MMA bouts, in which Nurmagomedov would go unbeaten, partly because of the low-level competition which he faced. These total 16 fights would be spread over different MMA promotions, most of which have a Russian association.⁵⁹ The early fights in his career all happened quite quickly one after the other, which highlights the intensity of his young MMA career. Eventually in 2011 his qualities were recognized by international organizations, which led to the president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, Dana White to offer a 6-fight

⁵⁶ Mike Swick, "Khabib Nurmagomedov Details Growing Up in Dagestan and His Combat Upbringing | Mike Swick Podcast," Quick Swick Clips, August 24, 2020, YouTube video, 4:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebj-uiex47s>.

⁵⁷ Rohini Kottu, "'We Had an Army Life' – Khabib Nurmagomedov Reveals How His Father Trained Him," Essentially Sports, last modified December 23, 2021, <https://www.essentiallysports.com/ufc-mma-news-we-had-an-army-life-khabib-nurmagomedov-reveals-how-his-father-trained-him/>.

⁵⁸ Ryan Mutuku, "Khabib Nurmagomedov Bio: Wife, Children, Net Worth, Childhood and Parents," Tuko, last modified November 5, 2020, <https://www.tuko.co.ke/387991-khabib-nurmagomedov-bio-wife-children-net-worth-childhood-parents.html>.

⁵⁹ "Khabib 'The Eagle' Nurmagomedov," Sherdog, last modified, May 23, 2022, <https://www.sherdog.com/fighter/Khabib-Nurmagomedov-56035>.

contract to the Dagestani mixed martial artist which he accepted.⁶⁰ This is what internationalized his career and what eventually led to him gaining global importance and a bigger platform.

Nurmagomedov's entry into the UFC and his rise to fame

Upon his entry in the UFC, Nurmagomedov achieved a debut match up against Kamal Shalorus in 2012. It was in this fight that Nurmagomedov showed himself to the American audience as a promising newcomer using a variety of skillsets, primarily his dominance in fighting thanks to his background in combat sambo. After this matchup he quickly returned to the UFC octagon to fight again, all the while extending his winning streak. From here on it was a smooth sailing for the Dagestani mixed martial artist, apart from an almost career-ending knee injury which he endured in training. Nurmagomedov seemed to gain some traction in the UFC, after racking up numerous wins in dominant fashion one after the other.⁶¹ In the process he also set some records to his name, such as the record which still stands today for most takedowns achieved in a three-round contest in his bout against Abel Trujilo in 2013. This record gave a boost to his name for the international audience.⁶²

Afterwards Nurmagomedov continued his UFC career in successful fashion and one of the first most notable events which took place was after his bout with UFC lightweight contender Michael Johnson. In his post-fight interview after another dominant win Nurmagomedov put his own name into relevancy by calling out the world famous Irish world champion Conor McGregor.⁶³ McGregor is one of the most well-known mixed martial artists of all time who has 45.5 million followers on Instagram.⁶⁴ He challenged McGregor by making several statements, such as when he stated that “Irish only 6 million, Russia 150 million,” with which he aimed at highlighting the size and power of Russia. Furthermore, he named Conor McGregor a chicken multiple times, all the while he was present in an audience full of Irish

⁶⁰ Mutuku, “Khabib Nurmagomedov bio.”

⁶¹ Sherdog, “Khabib.”

⁶² UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, “Khabib Nurmagomedov Sets Landmark Takedown Record to Secure the Win at UFC 160 | 2013 | On This Day,” September 25, 2018, YouTube video, 1:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHpQZEopWnA>.

⁶³ UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, “UFC 205: Khabib Nurmagomedov Octagon interview,” November 13, 2016, YouTube video, 2:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NaF0TUvWEk0>.

⁶⁴ “Conor McGregor Official,” Instagram, last modified June 7, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/thenotoriousmma/>.

fans, which naturally led to discontent from the audience.⁶⁵ This event increased his popularity and gave more importance to his name.

This claim by Nurmagomedov to not only fight with Conor McGregor, but also to fight for the UFC lightweight title became reality in April of 2018 after adding another victory to his record. On April 7, 2018, Nurmagomedov fought against Al Iaquinta for the UFC lightweight title which he won, which solidified his name in the UFC as well as in MMA history.⁶⁶ Furthermore, establishing himself as the first Muslim UFC champion in history.⁶⁷

His popularity was now at an all-time high, as well as the successes in his career. As a result of his post-fight interview with Michael Johnson there was now an established rivalry between Nurmagomedov and McGregor. After different events taking place, such as a brawl between Nurmagomedov and a teammate from McGregor, Artem Lobov, the interest in a fight between the two only increased, gaining further international attention.⁶⁸ This international attention on the McGregor-Nurmagomedov saga was furthermore increased by an Islamophobic tweet from McGregor. The Irish star took to twitter to insult Nurmagomedov's wife. In one of his tweets McGregor posted a picture from Nurmagomedov's wedding day showcasing Nurmagomedov's wife presented in modest clothing, namely a burka, after which McGregor would state that Nurmagomedov's wife looked like a towel. Thus, mocking the Islamic wedding attire from Nurmagomedov's wife. Nurmagomedov replied by stating that McGregor was a rapist, and that justice would find him, with which Nurmagomedov aimed at a potential sexual assault case from McGregor.⁶⁹ This twitter feud between the two not only fueled the rivalry, but furthermore highlights Nurmagomedov's intentions of protecting his religious beliefs. It also highlights Nurmagomedov's Muslim modesty, considering Nurmagomedov's wife's modest Islamic clothing.

The fight between Nurmagomedov and McGregor eventually took place later in 2018, where Nurmagomedov won in a dominant fashion, even engaging in a riot after the fight had

⁶⁵ UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, "UFC 205."

⁶⁶ Tim Burke, "UFC 223: Khabib vs. Iaquinta Results and Post-fight Analysis," BloodyElbow, last modified April 8, 2018,

<https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2018/4/8/17211712/ufc-223-khabib-vs-iaquinta-results-post-fight-analysis>.

⁶⁷ J.L. Seto, "Khabib Nurmagomedov Hit a Major Religious Milestone When He Joined the UFC," Sportscasting, last modified October 23, 2020,

<https://www.sportscasting.com/khabib-nurmagomedov-hit-a-major-religious-milestone-when-he-joined-the-ufc/>.

⁶⁸ Darragh Murphy, "Artem Lobov Forced to Switch Hotels After Altercation with Khabib Nurmagomedov," SportsJoe, accessed May 17, 2022,

<https://www.sportsjoe.ie/mma/artem-lobov-forced-to-switch-hotels-after-altercation-with-khabib-nurmagomedov-155918>.

⁶⁹ James Dudko, "McGregor Deletes Tweet Saying Khabib's Wife's A Towel'; Khabib Calls Him a Rapist," Bleacher Report, last modified April 3, 2019,

<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2829316-conor-mcgregor-tweets-deletes-post-calling-khabibs-wife-a-towel>.

been stopped by the referee. Such a mega fight meant great popularity for the Dagestani mixed martial artist, especially due to the popularity of Conor McGregor. The fight sold 2.4 million pay-per-view buys which is a record for the UFC, and it made it the most viewed UFC event in history.⁷⁰ Some academics argued that the fight and the antics around it represented it as a clash between Orientalism and Occidentalism, highlighting some of the biases in the media regarding both fighters.⁷¹ It was also the fight between Nurmagomedov and McGregor which gave Nurmagomedov the opportunity to meet multiple heads of states such as Russian president Vladimir Putin, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov that tried to capitalize on his multiple identities as a Russian citizen, a Muslim fighter, and a Dagestani national. This once again shows the extent to which Nurmagomedov had gained popularity and how he had become an international superstar.⁷²

Following this event Nurmagomedov would return to the octagon on two different occasions facing Dustin Poirier, and in his next fight facing Justin Gaethje after which he would retire. What is notable about these two fights however is not the backlash which followed or the number of viewers, but rather the location of both fights. Both fights took place in Abu Dhabi, an Islamic emirate background, like Nurmagomedov. This has also led to a great following for Nurmagomedov in Abu Dhabi and other emirates. It appears the following for Nurmagomedov is particularly high among Muslim peoples. Nurmagomedov himself has often praised the United Arab Emirates, among other Muslim majority countries, for example stating the following ahead of his fight against Dustin Poirier, “Because this part of the world, this is different: Dagestan, Russia, Arabic countries – this is my part.”⁷³ This shows that Nurmagomedov himself also feels as though Arabic, or perhaps Muslim countries, feel like a home soil for the mixed martial artist, which can also be recognized in his social media presence where he highlights some of these aspects.

Nurmagomedov’s social media presence, a devout Muslim

⁷⁰ Jake Skudder, “UFC: Top Ten Biggest Earning PPV Events in History (Ranked),” GiveMeSport, last modified March 4, 2022,

<https://www.givemesport.com/1766855-ufc-top-10-biggest-earning-ppv-events-in-history-ranked>.

⁷¹ Hussain, “Ultimate Fighting Championship,” 657-658.

⁷² Karim Zidan, “Khabib Nurmagomedov’s UFC Victory Tour Turns into a Case of Political Puppetry,” *The Guardian*, November 6, 2018,

<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/nov/06/khabib-nurmagomedovs-ufc-victory-tour-turns-into-a-case-of-political-puppetry>.

⁷³ John McAuley, “Khabib Nurmagomedov Interview: UFC 242 in Abu Dhabi the Next Stop on the Road to Global Greatness,” NSport, last modified, September 3, 2019,

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/sport/other-sport/khabib-nurmagomedov-interview-ufc-242-in-abu-dhabi-the-next-stop-on-the-road-to-global-greatness-1.905072>.

To gain a good perspective on how Khabib Nurmagomedov represents himself in his digital presence there has been made a choice to use the following platforms, which are his personal YouTube channel, his Instagram account, his post-fight interviews, and other small documentaries uploaded on YouTube. On each of the platforms there has been made a selection on content and posts from Nurmagomedov which best highlight his religious worldview and lifestyle and their representation. Furthermore, in regard to his own YouTube channel the decision has been made to cover content which was released after the announcement of his fight with Conor McGregor, since at that point he had gained the most importance.

Firstly, Khabib Nurmagomedov's own personal YouTube channel covers some videos which cover his religiosity and how he represents it towards other people, as well as his audience. The channel itself was created in 2017,⁷⁴ however one of the first most significant and relevant video uploads was done on September 29, 2018. In a video series covering his preparation for his bout against Conor McGregor, Nurmagomedov was swarmed in his gym by a group of fans all wearing shirts which stated "*Allahu Akbar*",⁷⁵ which translates as *God is the greatest*.⁷⁶ The aim of the fans being to show their support ahead of his then biggest fight. In doing so the group of fans used several examples of Islamic vocabulary such as "*Allahu Akbar*" and "*Mashallah*", the second term translating to *that which God wanted*.⁷⁷ The most interesting part about the video, however, is when the fan group demanded a speech by the Dagestani fighter. He talked about the importance of God for him and the fans. In the beginning of his speech Nurmagomedov talked about his victory on Al Iaquinta, which granted him the UFC title, Nurmagomedov stated: "I say if Allah want I am going to become UFC champion, now we here, we UFC champions [*sic*]." Thus, Nurmagomedov claims that it was Allah's will which helped him win the UFC title, and that without God it possibly would not have been possible. Later in the speech, he also made a reference to his upcoming fight against McGregor stating that "One week before the biggest fight in UFC history, and you know if Allah want, we are going to win this fight." Once again highlighting the determinism of Allah for Nurmagomedov and his eventual victory over McGregor. This particular example does a great job of

⁷⁴ "Khabib Nurmagomedov," YouTube, accessed May 18, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/c/KhabibNurmagomedovEagle/about>.

⁷⁵ Khabib Nurmagomedov, "Training camp for UFC 229 – episode 2," September 29, 2018, YouTube video, 12:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8zbJ0rbLao>.

⁷⁶ Imam Omar Suleiman, "What 'Allahu Akbar' really means," CNN, last modified November 1, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/01/opinions/allahu-akbar-meaning/index.html>.

⁷⁷ "The Meaning of Mashallah," My Islam, accessed May 19, 2022, <https://myislam.org/meaning-of-mashallah-or-inshallah/>.

highlighting the Muslim modesty which Nurmagomedov carries. Since he credits this potential victory completely to Allah, taking his own dedication out of the achievement. Afterwards he continued his speech by stating that “When Allah with you, nobody can stop you” which was happily cheered by the fan group. Another notable statement he made during his speech was when he spoke for himself and his fans stating that “Number one important, most important for us, stay connect with God [*sic*],” following this he furthermore stated that “You always have to pray, you always have to stay humble and stay focus and stay connect with God, this is very important for us.” Afterwards he also noted that this is the case for everybody and not just for him as a fighter, which once again the fans agreed upon.⁷⁸ The fact that Nurmagomedov talks about the importance of God not only for him, but also for the others present in the gym room, shows that he is aware of the influence which he has on them, and it shows that he is aware of his platform. It is then interesting to see that he in this instance directly uses his platform to incentivize his fans to focus on their relationship with God. Perhaps it furthermore shows that he has consciously decided to take his ability to be a role model and used it to show the importance of religion.

In another video on his YouTube channel Nurmagomedov shares one of his trainings in Dagestan during the Ramadan. In this fashion, he can share his Ramadan and fasting experience with his audience, which in this video was more than 900 thousand people. Furthermore, in the video he shows how he tries to combine both training and the fasting. For example, Nurmagomedov mentions that “I train twice a day: before the iftar and before the Suhur.” In the process of explaining his experiences, he also mentions some of the struggles he experiences such as the fact he and his teammates must train slowly, since they cannot eat and drink until sunset. Lastly in the short video Nurmagomedov also mentions that he does not spar during the holy month and that it is better not to hit each other in the face during such a period.⁷⁹ Such a video like this does an even better job at highlighting his religiosity than the previous one, since in this one the sole focus of the video lies on Nurmagomedov’s Ramadan experience. It offers his fans and viewers a way to see how the athlete experiences the Ramadan, and furthermore it potentially offers his viewers some tips which they could use during the holy month. This video is then a prime example of how Nurmagomedov tries to represent himself as a modest Muslim role model who is openly devout but also at the same time portrays himself as a dedicated and

⁷⁸ Khabib Nurmagomedov, “Training camp.”

⁷⁹ Khabib Nurmagomedov, “Khabib training in his Native Village During Ramadan,” May 21, 2019, YouTube video, 3:31, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXw_AaoHP4.

professional athlete. However, what is also a result of such a video in which he represents his Muslim modesty is the potential shame which Nurmagomedov puts on Muslims who do not fast. Such a shame is even exaggerated by the fact that Nurmagomedov is enduring the fast, whilst being in the midst of harsh training sessions, thus further delegitimizing Muslims who are not fasting. Thus, Nurmagomedov's representation of Muslim modesty also has an effect on the Muslim viewers.

Such a dual representation of being a devout Muslim while at the same time being a fulltime athlete can also be recognized in other videos on Nurmagomedov's YouTube channel. Most athletes in the UFC and other MMA organizations undergo a process known as weight-cutting, a process where the point is to lose as much water weight as possible, so that they are able to fight in lower weight classes. This process can be dangerous and even life-threatening for the athlete attempting to lose weight.⁸⁰ Nurmagomedov and his teammates are also involved in such a process, as is shown in some of his videos. One of such a video shows Nurmagomedov himself cutting weight for his contest against Justin Gaethje. While cutting weight and being extremely dehydrated, however, Nurmagomedov does not forget his Islamic background and representation. While looking fatigued the Dagestani mixed martial artist talks about his weight cutting process while in the meantime, he uses Islamic vocabulary such as "*Alhamdulillah*" and "*Subhan 'Allah*",⁸¹ the first term translating to *All praise is due to Allah*⁸² and the second term translating to *Glory be to Allah*, even though multiple interpretations exist.⁸³ These terms however stress the Muslim modesty by Nurmagomedov. Even though Nurmagomedov is enduring his own physical pain to lose weight, he credits the fact that he has lost the weight to Allah, thus seeing it as part of Allah's greater plan. He does not see the weight-cut as a result of his own actions, but instead as a result of the actions of Allah, thus representing his Muslim modesty. Furthermore, later in the video after realizing that the goal weight has been achieved Nurmagomedov performs a quick prayer.⁸⁴ In another video during another weight cutting session some teammates of Nurmagomedov also perform some similar acts. This time Nurmagomedov even reminds his teammate Zubaira Tukhugov of the fact whether he has

⁸⁰ Callum Carthy, "Weight Cutting in Combat Sports: What is it, and What are the Dangers?," Express, last modified September 21, 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/sport/ufc/1021134/Weight-Cutting-Dangers-In-Combat-Sports-Mixed-Martial-Arts-Boxing-UFC>.

⁸¹ Khabib Nurmagomedov, "UAE Training Camp | Episode 7," December 11, 2020, YouTube video, 11:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hlRC4AHs4k>.

⁸² "The Meaning of Hamdullah," My Islam, accessed May 19, 2022, <https://myislam.org/hamdulillah-or-hamdullah/>.

⁸³ "The Meaning of Subhanallah," My Islam, accessed May 19, 2022, <https://myislam.org/meaning-of-subhanallah/>.

⁸⁴ Khabib Nurmagomedov, "UAE."

performed his prayer or not. This time Nurmagomedov himself does not cut weight, but this video highlights that for the entirety of his team and friend group religion is very important.⁸⁵ What these weight cutting examples do best is once again showing a sense of modest Muslim masculinity. It shows a process which could potentially be deadly taking place, but Nurmagomedov and his teammates still fulfill their Islamic duties such as prayer, regardless of the dangerous situation. Furthermore, all the while enduring this process, they remain thankful of Allah and that if it is the will of Allah's they can be able to cut the right amount of weight. Thus, they see their results as the will of Allah, while not taking any personal credits for the results in the process, this again highlights the sense of modest Muslim masculinity. Overall, the documentation of this process delivers a combination of extreme toughness by the athletes and still their desire to complete their religious duties, thus creating an image of modest Muslim masculinity.

A second source which highlight Nurmagomedov's active representation of Islam takes place after each of his fights. After mostly dominant performances Nurmagomedov after the fight gets interviewed in front of full crowds, and naturally on live television. Once again as with the earlier mentioned weight cutting process Nurmagomedov seems to combine the physical toughness of an athlete which represents modest masculinity with his personal religious beliefs. In all his post-fight interviews the first thing Nurmagomedov does is thank God by saying *Alhamdulillah*. After his dominant performance against Michael Johnson, he did so in combination by stating that everything he had was given to him by God. Furthermore, Nurmagomedov also made a movement symbolizing, or perhaps actually performing a prayer to Allah after his performance.⁸⁶ Once again after his performance against Edson Barboza, Nurmagomedov repeated the same process by making a praying motion, as well as thanking God multiple times. This time he also stated that God was number one and that everything else meant nothing, once again showing his submission to Allah.⁸⁷ The same went after Nurmagomedov's title winning performance against Iaquinta, where he repeated the same process, this time perhaps accidentally aiming at the importance of monotheism by stating that "Number one, believe only in one God."⁸⁸ Finally in his last two performances against Dustin

⁸⁵Khabib Nurmagomedov, "Khabib's Teammates Cutting Weight For UFC 267 [BEHIND THE SCENES]," November 6, 2021, YouTube video, 7:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f38V7ZVGkgw>.

⁸⁶ UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, "UFC 205."

⁸⁷ UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, "UFC 219: Khabib Nurmagomedov – Octagon Interview," December 31, 2017, YouTube video, 3:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owCOuCVhGBM>.

⁸⁸ UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, "UFC 223: Khabib Nurmagomedov Octagon Interview," April 8, 2018, YouTube video, 4:59,

Poirier and Justin Gaethje, Nurmagomedov also praised God multiple times on the big stage, this time the big stage being in Abu Dhabi in front of a Muslim majority crowd.⁸⁹ As was the case with the weight cutting process what the result of these post-fight interviews references to Islam is, is the fact that in front of a huge amount of people Nurmagomedov still reminds the people of his Muslim modesty, after showcasing his athletic capabilities. He does so especially by once thanking Allah after each of his performances, thus not taking any credit for the performance, but instead crediting his creator. This is a key example of how Nurmagomedov highlights a new sense of modest Muslim masculinity. This then leads to the creation of a new kind of masculinity, one which was not present beforehand.

What is however interesting to see is that in MMA affiliated situations outside of his personal social media Nurmagomedov also represents a less modest masculinity. This especially takes place around the time of his fights when the concept of trash talk becomes very prominent. It is in these situations that Nurmagomedov threatens and intimidates his opponents in a less modest fashion. In these instances, Nurmagomedov often talks about how he will “smash everybody in the division” or that he will “eat” his opponents in a street fight. Furthermore, he also makes remarks towards his opponents by calling them “stupid” or a “chicken”. Other than dragging his opponents down in his trash talk he also every now and then praises himself by stating that he has never lost a street fight, and that he will “smash” his opponents with ease.⁹⁰ These moments of trash talk showcase aspects of Nurmagomedov which goes against this concept of a modest Muslim masculinity, since in these instances he not only profiles himself as the best, but also talks down on his opponents, thus not portraying himself as a modest Muslim.

A third source however which once again highlights the importance of religion is on Nurmagomedov’s personal Instagram. Nurmagomedov carries great influence on his Instagram which can be recognized from the fact that his account has more than 33 million followers.⁹¹ Upon researching his Instagram a distinction can be made between different kinds of posts which the Dagestani shares. Some of these posts highlight what would be described as his

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H78P-eAvWqg>.

⁸⁹ UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, “UFC 242: Khabib Nurmagomedov and Dustin Poirier Octagon Interviews,” September 7, 2019, YouTube video, 5:55,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rh8NGE4u4xI>; UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, “Khabib Nurmagomedov Announces Retirement | UFC 254,” October 24, 2020, YouTube video, 5:31,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05HuTGeF5AA>.

⁹⁰ MMA Crazy, “Khabib Nurmagomedov Best Lines and Best Quotes Compilation,” October 29, 2020, YouTube video, 15:25,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iX6bcmUZYvo>.

⁹¹ “Khabib Nurmagomedov,” Instagram, last modified June 13, 2022,

https://www.instagram.com/khabib_nurmagomedov/.

personal life, which in this case means pictures of him with friends and teammates. What is however interesting is that these posts never highlight any presence of females, no matter their relation to Nurmagomedov. This is a result of the religious modesty which Nurmagomedov represents through his social media, by not representing himself with females. These posts with his friends and teammates however highlight how Nurmagomedov lives his life outside of his work regarding the octagon, such as dinners and other leisure activities.⁹²

Another category of posts which can be discovered however are posts regarding his life revolving around MMA. With these posts he sometimes shares some footage from training with his colleagues. Other times it is simply a picture of Nurmagomedov after a training session. The frequency of these mixed martial arts related posts seems to be rather high with Nurmagomedov posting such a picture every other, if not every week. It also appears that these posts are a way for Nurmagomedov to share his appreciation and love for his teammates, often appreciating and promoting them in the posts.⁹³ Furthermore, the mixed martial arts content is centered around actual fights of his or his teammates, as of lately mostly the latter since Nurmagomedov retired.⁹⁴ Lastly, Nurmagomedov in regard to mixed martial arts posts a significant amount of

⁹² Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Позавтракали обедом после тренировок, @zubairatukhugov не привык к такому распорядку, хотя @islam_makhachev говорил ему что будет не легко))))”, Instagram Photo, October 11, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CU5KJeCshjk/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “SanJose, CA,” Instagram Photo, February 7, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZsBd80P2n9/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Пойдём да говорит погуляем, а сами”, Instagram Photo, March 18, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbPVO0XMxr8/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “🇷🇺,” Instagram Photo, May 4, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdIaHbMseQ5/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Пророк Мухаммад- да благословит его Аллах и приветствует, сказал: «Человек исповедует ту же религию, что и его ближайший друг, так пусть же каждый из вас обращает внимание на то, с кем он водит дружбу».,” Instagram Photo, May 10, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdYqYN3sFZS>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “No Way,” Instagram Photo, May 30, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CeKMz9bvax5/>.

⁹³ Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Оставь да меня, запарился я сегодня))))”, Instagram Photo, July 1, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQxcWgHMCvs/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Это было неуважительно с твоей стороны @islam_makhachev)))Ведь @gadzhi_rabdanov тоже готовится к бою (31 июль) 🇷🇺🇷🇺Но в конце, я всё-таки сделал маслиат 🇷🇺”, Instagram Photo, July 6, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ_2KcIMUwr/; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Эти люди внесли огромный вклад в мой успех, и теперь, когда им нужны : положительная энергетика,опыт и мои советы,конечно же, я буду рядом и сделаю все возможное для,того чтобы они достигли результата. My team.My Family,” Instagram Photo, July 8, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRDt6SPsZrZ/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Все идёт своим чередом 🇷🇺Для нашей команды это неделя очень важна. @islam_makhachev придётся доказывать и отстаивать многое в субботу вечером, а мы будем рядом. Everything on the track,”Instagram Photo, July 13, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRPmrsBscs1/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “@islam_mamedov готовится выступит на #Bellator263 31 июля. Только вперед, только победа 🇷🇺,”Instagram Photo, July 14, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRSnH3ns8Jw/>.

⁹⁴ Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Our connection will forever be fixed in my heart coach, you was a great inspiration for me always, since the first days I came to AKA. Love you coach @akajav 🇷🇺”, Instagram Photo, October 28, 2020,

content on Eagle FC.⁹⁵ An MMA promotion which according to the website from Eagle FC is a continuation of Nurmagomedov's MMA legacy.

In regard to Nurmagomedov's Instagram however there is another category of posts which is mostly centered around religion, which on its own has three subdivisions. The religion related posts on Nurmagomedov's Instagram page can be organized as follows, posts around his personal experiences with Islam and Islamic practices, posts which highlight Quran verses and recitations, and lastly posts on Islamic scholars and other authorities shedding light on certain topics with religious importance.

The first subcategory from the religion related posts are Nurmagomedov's personal experiences with his religion. These posts are not necessarily centered around every day Muslim practices such as praying and others, but instead are focused on important Islamic events. Hence why it appears that most of the posts surrounding Nurmagomedov's personal religious experiences are connected to for example the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, or the *Hajj*. There are multiple posts on Nurmagomedov's account showing his trip to Mecca and visiting religious sites, such as the Kaaba. The captions of these posts often show Nurmagomedov's praise to God by using Islamic vocabulary such as "Alhamdulillah". Other times these posts are

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CG5CNHpMboU/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), "У этих Братьев я учился всю свою жизнь, как драться так и жить. пророк Мухаммад- да благословит его Аллах и приветствует, говорил: «Души подобны воинам. Если они находят что-то общее – они объединяются, а если не находят общего – они расходятся». (Аль-Бухари 3336, Муслим 2638)," Instagram Photo, October 29, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CG5CNHpMboU/>;

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), "It was 2020.," Instagram Photo, December 21, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJeWOGPqV8v/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), "Guys, it was just our night. Alhamdulillah for everything 🕌 Просто это был наш вечер, ребята сделали свою работу как они и умеют. Поздравляю Братья: @islam_mamedov @usman_nurmagomedov

@khasan_magomedsharipov @gadzhi_rabadanov #победатолькоотВсевышнего," Instagram Photo, August 1, 2020, Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), "It was great job brother @islam_makhachev Alhamdulillah идём дальше, ещё один бой в этом году и будет просто космос обстановка.

- На этой фотке многих не хватает, вся команда выполнила феноменальную работу и конечно же нужно отметить самого @islam_makhachev который выполнял все инструкции как внутри клетки, так и снаружи во время подготовки.," Instagram Photo, July 18, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRdl-fsMpac/>.

⁹⁵ Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), "Today is FIGHT NIGHT! We are LIVE with our first us US show at 6:30pmET on @flx | Sign up at EagleFC.com Russia audience have to go to goFLX.com.," Instagram Photo, January 29, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CZSpr_2ubdh/; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), "We are here and we are ready for EagleFC 46 tomorrow. Мы на месте и чуть пообщались про завтрашние бои на #EagleFC46.," Instagram Photo, March 10, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca79YCLoGd-/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), "MAIN CARD! #EagleFC46 LIVE and FREE at EagleFC.com or the FLXcast App 📺 @eagle.fightclub @eaglefcmma," Instagram Photo, March 12, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca_GTc5sCkZ/; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), "Cigano' Junior Dos Santos makes his @eagle.fightclub debut against Cape Verde's own Yorgan De Castro in a heavyweight blockbuster. Hector Lombard faces Thiago Silva in the co-main event alongside a STACKED fight card featuring some of the best talent in the world of combat sports. I can't wait for this one! 🥊 #EagleFC47: Dos Santos vs. De Castro | Friday May 20 | Watch Eagle FC LIVE and FREE. Sign up today at EagleFC.com @eaglefcmma," Instagram Photo, May 10, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdY5Z2Ksj-k/>.

accompanied by Quranic verses to accompany the post. Lastly, since these posts are often connected to Islamic practices such as the Hajj, the caption often reads a message to his fans stating that they should celebrate the end of the Ramadan.⁹⁶ All in all, this subcategory amongst the religious content on Nurmagomedov's page does show his importance on showing these personal religious experiences with his millions of followers, since he does so on a frequent base. Furthermore, it highlights his Muslim modesty by constantly thanking Allah for the opportunities which he provided, such as the ability to travel to Mecca. However, as was the case with one of the videos which covered the Ramadan on the YouTube channel of Nurmagomedov, his Instagram posts also imply a message which could potentially make Muslim followers feel pressured. By constantly highlighting his trips to Mecca he implies Muslim followers to act the same way, as was the case with the practice of fasting during training, which potentially pressures Muslim followers.

Another subcategory in regard to religion is based on Quranic verses and recitations. On his personal Instagram Nurmagomedov often posts entire videos of Quranic verses including their recitations in the background. Most of these videos have both an Arabic transcript of the verse, as well as a Russian transcript, which highlights the fact that Nurmagomedov's target audience of sharing these posts are either Arabs, Russian Muslims, or Muslims familiar with

⁹⁶ Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “🕌🕌,” Instagram Photo, June 1, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByKoiXwiv-e/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Отец говорит, что своего Отца по настоящему начал ценить, когда его не стало. Всевышний сказал: «Твой Господь предписал вам не поклоняться никому, кроме Него, и делать добро родителям. Если один из родителей или оба достигнут старости, то не говори им: «Тыфу!» – не кричи на них и обращай к ним почтительно. Преклоняй пред ними крыло смирения по милосердию своему и говори: «Господи! Помилуй их, ведь они растили меня ребенком» (сура «Аль-Исра», аят 23-24) #Ramadan2019 #Отец,” Instagram Photo, June 2, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByNJCtrCULe/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Вместе с Братьями пару лет назад поднимались на гору Савр, расположенная южнее Мекки, в 5 километрах от города, в которой скрывался посланник Аллаха Мухаммад (салаллаху алейхи ва саллям) вместе с Абу Бакром - من يبعد مكة، والذي جنوب في يقع الذي ثور جبل إلى الإخوة مع صعدنا سنوات عدة قبل. - عنه الله رضي الصديق بكر أبو ورفيقه عليه الله صلى النبي اختبأ كم، وفيه ٥ مسافة على مكة” Instagram Photo, June 13, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBYsl6PlxBz/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Eid Mubarak my Brothers and Sisters around the World 🌍🌍 Поздравляю всех Мусульман со священным праздником Ураза-Байрам. Пусть Аллах примет все ваши посты, закаты, молитвы и благие дела, которые вы совершали в этом месяце🕌 #Ramadan2021 #EidMubarak,” Instagram Photo, May 12, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/COx9tu8sSyt/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Assalam Aleikum Wa rahmatulLahi wa barakatuhu. I want to congratulate all Muslims with blessings of Eid Al-Adha. May Allah forgive all our sins and guide us on the right path, and lead to the heaven by his mercy. - Поздравляю всех Мусульман с праздником. Пусть Аллагь простит все наши грехи и ведёт прямым путём, и введёт всех нас в рай по милости своей,” Instagram Photo, July 20, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRh975RMG-C/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “My vacation was in Mecca 🕌🕌,” Instagram Photo, November 15, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CWS4hcfsmkg/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Alhamdulillah 🕌🕌,” Instagram Photo, December 5, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXGnkqOMPLg/>; Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov), “Alhamdulillah for everything 🕌🕌🕌 #Ramadan2022,” Instagram Photo, April 28, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cc5qCVUslZr/>.

of all these different kinds of categories of Instagram posts adds to a finalized image where religion, or rather Islam, takes a huge part of his Instagram account. This shows the modest Muslim masculinity which Nurmagomedov represents, since he utilizes such a platform with millions of followers to honor Allah. He honors him by not only representing his personal experiences with Islam, but furthermore by sharing a vast amount of information on the religion, among many other Islamic references which are present on his Instagram.

Khamzat Chimaev his upbringing and his introduction into combat sports

To cover both sides of the spectrum it is essential to both cover a Dagestani fighter, as well as a Chechen fighter. Which is why the following mixed martial artist, Khamzat Chimaev, will be discussed in the same manner as Khabib Nurmagomedov. First his upbringing and youth will be covered, next his rise to fame and prominence, and lastly his religious footprint in social media.

Khamzat Chimaev, born on the first of May of 1994 is a Chechen mixed martial artist who has only in the last couple of years rose to prominence in mixed martial arts.⁹⁹ Like Nurmagomedov, Chimaev grew up in the Northern Caucasus in a traditional Muslim household. Furthermore, like Nurmagomedov he grew up in an environment where it is only natural for young males to enter combat sports such as combat sambo and wrestling. As Chimaev himself describes, if one did not compete in such a sport they would not be seen as tough. The village where Chimaev grew up, as he himself describes, was a small environment where it felt as though everybody around him was his family. It was in this environment that Chimaev started to love wrestling, even entering competitions to win prizes for his family. These competitions also varied in sports such as sambo and judo as a result of his brother making the choice to enter him in these competitions. These choices are what paved the way for Chimaev into combat sports.¹⁰⁰

A big change occurred however when his brother, who previously supported his combat career, had to travel to Sweden for medical reasons. After receiving his surgery, he insisted that

интересное рассуждение ¶ Что может быть лучше, чем быть человеком, который направляет людей к Всевышнему ¶,” Instagram Photo, November 10, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CHZ81hoqIB1/>.

⁹⁹ Mukhar Ghosh, “All You Need to Know About Khamzat Chimaev’s Family and Childhood,” SportsManor, last modified April 7, 2022,

<https://www.sportsmanor.com/ufc-news-all-you-need-to-know-about-khamzat-chimaevs-family-and-childhood/>.

¹⁰⁰ ESPN MMA, “Khamzat Chimaev Talks Fight vs. Li Jinliang and Opens Up About his Childhood | UFC 267 | ESPN MMA,” October 17, 2021, YouTube video, 16:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBRFqWd-Zvo>.

Chimaev and his mother and sister would move to Sweden to follow a different path. Thus, at the age of 19, Chimaev moved to Sweden with the intentions of starting a new life which would benefit his family. Initially he would live in a two-room apartment with his mother, brother, and sister, which highlights the need for financial measures, even though Chimaev himself used these needs as motivation for his mixed martial arts career. After having arrived in Sweden for a couple of years Chimaev's brother granted him permission to compete in combat sports,¹⁰¹ which led to Chimaev entering Swedish wrestling tournaments. It was there that Chimaev won the Swedish national competition three times, which landed him an undefeated wrestling record of 23 wins and zero losses.

After having succeeded to such a degree in wrestling Chimaev decided that it would be favorable to invest his time in mixed martial arts competitions, in which he would get three immediate victories in his amateur fighting streak.¹⁰² This motivation to compete in mixed martial arts was not only fueled by the potential financial benefits, but also by Conor McGregor. This is the case since Chimaev witnessed McGregor's bout which made him the lightweight champion of the UFC, which led Chimaev to believe that he could achieve the same since he thought himself to be mentally, as well as physically stronger.¹⁰³ After having succeeded in his first three amateur fights Chimaev decided it was time to make his professional debut in MMA. On the May 26, 2018, Chimaev made his pro debut in a Swedish MMA promotion, where Chimaev would win by technical knockout. After this debut win Chimaev would switch from MMA promotions two more times before in total achieving a mixed martial arts record of 6 wins and zero losses.¹⁰⁴ After achieving this 6-0 record Chimaev received an offer which made him sign a contract with the UFC, which would start the internationalization of his mixed martial arts career.¹⁰⁵

The rapid rise to international prominence, and political recognition

¹⁰¹ ESPN MMA, "Khamzat Chimaev Convo: Why he got into Fighting, Living at the Gym in Sweden & More | ESPN MMA," April 4, 2022, YouTube video, 11:36, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZnJbcVaFMc>.

¹⁰² Braeden Arbour, "Khamzat Chimaev: The Anomaly Explained," The Body Lock, last modified October 29, 2021, <https://thebodylockmma.com/ufc/khamzat-chimaev-the-anomaly-explained/>.

¹⁰³ ESPN MMA, "Khamzat Chimaev."

¹⁰⁴ "Khamzat "Borz" Chimaev," Sherdog, last modified, May 26, 2022, <https://www.sherdog.com/fighter/Khamzat-Chimaev-280021>.

¹⁰⁵ "Khamzat Chimaev Signs with UFC, Booked for Fight Island," MMA Viking, last modified July 9, 2020, <https://www.mmaviking.com/khamzat-chimaev-signs-with-ufc-booked-for-fight-island/>.

Chimaev's first performance in the UFC octagon came against John Phillips on July 15, 2020. The Chechen would make easy work of his first fight, finishing his opponent in dominant fashion in the second round using his wrestling-heavy approach.¹⁰⁶ The performance itself was impressive and would lead Chimaev to gain some fans, however a significant boost in hype would follow a week later.

Unlike Nurmagomedov, Chimaev's hype would very quickly take off after the following took place. In the week after his UFC debut, Chimaev would return to the octagon to fight against Rhys McKee on 25 July, showcasing a quick turnaround for Chimaev.¹⁰⁷ At the time, this made Chimaev set the record for the quickest turnaround in UFC history, which resulted in Chimaev beating his opponent once again in dominant fashion, this time in a different weight class.¹⁰⁸ These two consecutive wins handed the Chechen some star power and gave his career a huge boost, as was shown by UFC president Dana White who in an interview said that he believed Chimaev was the "real deal", thus recognizing the Chechen's potential star power, furthermore saying he believed the Chechen would get close to a title shot. Where Nurmagomedov would get political recognition only after his performance with Irish Conor McGregor, Chimaev would already get it after his second performance in the octagon. Chimaev would get praised by previously mentioned leader of the Chechen republic Ramzan Kadyrov who went to social media to congratulate the UFC prospect, even referring to him as what he would call a "true Chechen". The fact that Khamzat had moved to Sweden and trained there seemed not be of importance to Kadyrov.¹⁰⁹

Thus, it is visible that Chimaev in his very early MMA career had already gained significant influence, attracting political attention. Two months later Chimaev would once again return to the octagon to fight Gerald Meerschaert, which would be his toughest challenge to date. This time Chimaev had secured himself a co-main event place on the card, which means that he would normally be the second most important fight of the night. This fight, as was the case with his debut would be in the middleweight division, which means it is one weight class higher than where he normally fights, thus highlighting the huge challenge in front of

¹⁰⁶ Shawn Bitter, "UFC Fight Island 1 Results: Khamzat Chimaev Steamrolls John Phillips," Cageside Press, last modified July 15, 2020, <https://cagesidepress.com/2020/07/15/ufc-fight-island-1-results-khamzat-chimaev/>.

¹⁰⁷ Sherdog, "Khamzat."

¹⁰⁸ "Khamzat Chimaev," Tapology, last modified January 7, 2022, <https://www.tapology.com/fightcenter/fighters/188143-khamzat-girikhanov#:~:text=He%20has%20been%20signed%20to,days%20later%20on%20July%2026th.>

¹⁰⁹ Karim Zidan, "The Chechen Wolf: How Ramzan Kadyrov Plans to Utilize UFC Breakout Star Khamzat Chimaev," Bloody Elbow, last modified August 13, 2020, <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2020/8/13/21366446/ramzan-kadyrov-ufc-star-khamzat-chimaev-chechnya-mma-sports-politics>.

Chimaev.¹¹⁰ Upon fight night Chimaev would have one of the best outcomes possible by knocking Meerschaert out after less than twenty seconds in the first rounds. Which resulted in Chimaev once again earning a performance of the night bonus,¹¹¹ which he had also received in his first two fights granting him a 100.000 USD bonus.¹¹² Thus Chimaev once again enlarged the significance of his name in the organization.

However, a disturbance in the rise of Chimaev's career occurred when the athlete got diagnosed with covid-19. The disease took the athlete by surprise in a negative fashion, even going as far as to prevent the athlete from being able to train. Pictures on the web of him coughing up blood even led some to believe that the young fighter had cancer.¹¹³ The disease which threatened to end his professional career was treated multiple times. First under the supervision of Kadyrov who urged the fighter to fly to Chechnya in a private jet where he would undergo a surgery. And secondly under the supervision of Dana White who instead urged Chimaev to fly to the United States where he would be treated for his sickness.¹¹⁴ In the meantime Chimaev went to social media where he would hint at his potential retirement, which immediately led to a reaction by Ramzan Kadyrov. The Chechen leader let social media know that in a conversation between the two Kadyrov convinced Chimaev to continue fighting for the Chechen people and all other Russian fans.¹¹⁵

Eventually Chimaev recovered from covid-19 which led to hints for a return to the octagon in the summer of 2021. Such a fight was eventually realized, even though a delay took place. Chimaev would return to the octagon to face the biggest challenge in his career which was rising Chinese prospect Li Jinliang. Chimaev stating that he felt stronger than ever would

¹¹⁰ Brady Briggs, "UFC Feature Fight: Khamzat Chimaev vs. Gerald Meerschaert Breakdown," My MMA News, last modified September 25, 2020, <https://mymmanews.com/khamzat-chimaev-vs-gerald-meerschaert-breakdown/>.

¹¹¹ Stephie Haynes, "UFC Vegas 11 Post-fight Bonuses: Chimaev Stuns with Massive KO," Bloody Elbow, last modified September 19, 2020, <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2020/9/19/21446847/ufc-vegas-11-post-fight-bonuses-chimaev-stuns-with-massive-ko>.

¹¹² Dave Doyle, "UFC on ESPN 14 bonuses: Khamzat Chimaev's second in 10 days among six on the night," MMA Junkie, last modified July 26, 2020, <https://mmajunkie.usatoday.com/2020/07/ufc-on-ESPN-14-bonuses-khamzat-chimaev-second-in-10-days>.

¹¹³ Harry Davies, "Khamzat Chimaev was told he may have Cancer after coughing up Blood in Training," The Mirror, last modified April 9, 2022, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/other-sports/mma/khamzat-chimaev-cancer-blood-ufc-26672967>.

¹¹⁴ Brett Okamoto, "Khamzat Chimaev says he's Healthy and Hungry after COVID-19 threatened his MMA Career," ESPN, last modified April 20, 2021, https://www.espn.com/mma/story/_/id/31295378/khamzat-chimaev-says-healthy-hungry-covid-19-threatened-mma-career.

¹¹⁵ Steven Marrocco, "Ramzan Kadyrov: Khamzat Chimaev not retiring, will return to Chechnya soon to rehab and train," MMA Fighting, last modified March 2, 2021, <https://www.mmafighting.com/2021/3/2/22309553/ramzan-kadyrov-khamzat-chimaev-not-retiring-will-return-to-chechnya-soon-to-rehab-and-train>.

make this return in Abu Dhabi, this time in front of a full crowd. Once again Chimaev rose to the occasion and defeated Jinliang by choking him unconscious without the Chinese landing a single strike on him. Thus, in front of a pro-Chimaev crowd he once again uttered a win in dominant fashion, further solidifying his star power.¹¹⁶

After having secured this victory common believe was that Chimaev was ready to face the highest competition in the UFC welterweight division. This led to his most recent outing against a veteran in the sport in Gilbert Burns. Chimaev faced Burns who at the time was the number 3 ranked welterweight in the world on April 9, 2022.¹¹⁷ When compared to his earlier four contests in the UFC, Chimaev's outing against Burns proved more difficult than before. Burns at times even made the Chechen look venerable in the three-round contest. Chimaev in the end by a less dominant performance than previously walked away with a decision victory, which became the first time the Chechen did not win by way of stoppage in the UFC.¹¹⁸ At this point Chimaev had achieved his most significant moment in his career by winning his bout against Burns. Furthermore, the Chechen had gotten his deserved credibility for his mixed martial arts skills. As a result, Chimaev's popularity and prominence has increased in a rapid fashion, for example when compared to Nurmagomedov. His Instagram followers highlight such an increase in popularity with the fighter already having near 4 million followers on the platform after only 5 performances inside the octagon.¹¹⁹

Chimaev's social media footprint and the representation of Islam

One could state that perhaps Khamzat Chimaev is not capable of playing the role of a counterpart against Khabib Nurmagomedov, since unlike Nurmagomedov, Chimaev moved out of Chechnya at the age of 19. However, as Chimaev's Instagram shows he makes regular visits to his home country and still portrays himself as a Chechen fighter, or even citizen. As a result, I have chosen Khamzat Chimaev to function as a Chechen counterpart to Nurmagomedov, especially since the Chechen has also received great social media influence. Chimaev has an

¹¹⁶ Okamoto, "Khamzat Chimaev."; Brian Campbell, "UFC 267 results, highlights: Khamzat Chimaev submits Li Jingliang in first round in dominant showing," CBS MMA, last modified October 30, 2021, <https://www.cbssports.com/mma/news/ufc-267-results-highlights-khamzat-chimaev-submits-li-jingliang-in-first-round-in-dominant-showing/>.

¹¹⁷ Sherdog, "Khamzat."

¹¹⁸ Damon Martin, "Khamzat Chimaev reveals biggest mistake he made against Gilbert Burns, promises to 'smash somebody' next time," MMA Fighting, last modified April 10, 2022, <https://www.mmafighting.com/2022/4/10/23018745/khamzat-chimaev-reveals-biggest-mistake-made-against-gilbert-burns-promises-smash-somebody-next-time>.

¹¹⁹ "Khamzat Chimaev," Instagram, last modified June 6, 2022, https://www.instagram.com/khamzat_chimaev/.

Instagram as well as a YouTube account which often highlights his religious beliefs and shares his religious thoughts. For example, the general appearance of Chimaev, like Nurmagomedov already highlights some of his religious beliefs, since both athletes have a beard which often characterizes conservative Muslims. Furthermore, both fighters do not have any tattoos since such practices are forbidden in Islam. However, the representation of religion is not solely limited to appearance and instead is more extensive. As was the case with Nurmagomedov, to research the more extensive part of Chimaev's religious social media footprint there will be a close inspection of his personal YouTube channel, his post-fight interviews, and lastly his personal Instagram.

The first source which can highlight Chimaev's religious beliefs and how he decides to share his religion with his audience is his personal YouTube channel. The YouTube channel has only been created on January 16, 2022, and already has over 200 thousand subscribers with some of his videos reaching over half a million viewers. This highlights that in such a short amount of time Chimaev has already assumed a large following on the platform where he uploads regularly on different topics.¹²⁰

In almost every single one of Chimaev's videos there is usage of Islamic vocabulary with words such as *Inshallah* and *Allahu Akbar*, as was the case with Khabib Nurmagomedov's personal YouTube channel. The first video however where he actively mentions his religious thoughts is in a training video uploaded at the end of January. In the video Chimaev is greeted by one of his teammates from whom his religious affiliation is unknown, who greets Chimaev by saying "Hello", which to a certain degree leads to some irritation from Chimaev. Chimaev seems to be surprised by the fact that he is greeted in this non-Muslim manner, which eventually leads to him saying "Why you say hello? Say as-salamu alaykum, Allahu Akbar, takbir, mashallah!". After stating this in a somewhat cynical manner Chimaev did not get a reaction by his teammate who simply continued the conversation. In the same video in a conversation between Chimaev and his Georgian teammate Guram Kutateladze another reference to religious beliefs can be recognized. Kutateladze, like Chimaev has a long distinct beard, with the difference between the two being the presence of a moustache. In the conversation between the two Kutateladze in a laughing manner talks about wanting to grow his moustache so he can grow more "Georgian power". Chimaev as a reaction urges Kutateladze to shave his moustache,

¹²⁰ "Khamzat Chimaev," YouTube, last modified May 3, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/c/KhamzatChimaevBORZ/about>.

except for the beard, since that would be preferable.¹²¹ Both men seem to laugh about it, however, as was described in the first chapter most of Chechnya follows the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. And it is this school of jurisprudence that according to the practices of prophet Muhammad urges Muslim men to trim, or preferably, shave the moustache while keeping the beard. This comment by Chimaev shows a reference to his religious beliefs, in this case showing that he follows the Hanafi school of law, which urges him to shave his moustache.¹²² This speculation however is potentially justified when one looks at another video posted on Chimaev's channel on the 20th of February. In this video another interaction takes place between Chimaev and Kutateladze, where once again the moustache of Kutateladze seems to be the topic of discussion. Chimaev urges the Georgian fighter to shave his moustache after which Kutateladze replies cynically by saying "Allahu Akbar". Following these words Chimaev states that he has Muslim power and all the while pointing at the sky with his index fingers, which is a symbol which resembles pointing at God.¹²³ This footage once again indicates the religious importance regarding facial hair for Khamzat Chimaev. Furthermore, the footage puts pressure onto Muslim viewers, since Chimaev shows a discontent with Kutateladze's facial hair. Thus, implying that all Muslims, also the ones watching, should apply the same type of facial hair.

Apart from these two videos there is one more video on Chimaev's YouTube channel which hints at some religious importance, and which also might combine religion with a new form of masculinity, as was the case with Nurmagomedov. This takes place in a video which is made at the time of Chimaev's fight with Gilbert Burns. The hour-long video highlights Chimaev's preparations for the fight, including his weight cut and his post-fight recovery. It is after having succeeded this weight cut that the teammates of Chimaev use Islamic vocabulary like *Alhamdulillah* as a way of thanking God for ensuring a successful weight cut. Furthermore, after having defeated Gilbert Burns there is once again the same usage of Islamic vocabulary to praise God for ensuring the eventual victory.¹²⁴ What the result of this footage then is, is that

¹²¹ Khamzat Chimaev, "Khamzat Chimaev - TRAINING W/ UFC HEAVYWEIGHT & LIGHT HEAVYWEIGHT feat GURAM," January 28, 2022, YouTube video, 13:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oiGHvU41e0>.

¹²² Shaykh Faraz Rabbani, "What is the Ruling of Shaving One's Mustache in the Hanafi School?," Islam Q&A, accessed May 30, 2022, <https://islamqa.org/hanafi/qibla-hanafi/35547/what-is-the-ruling-of-shaving-ones-mustache-in-the-hanafi-school/>.

¹²³ Khamzat Chimaev, "Khamzat Chimaev - Darren Till & Gustafsson training together," February 20, 2022, YouTube video, 17:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52te8uUts5Y>.

¹²⁴ Khamzat Chimaev, "Khamzat Chimaev - WEIGHT CUT / BTS Fight Day UFC 273," April 18, 2022, YouTube video, 58:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dx7HSDxOtdc>.

it takes credit away from Chimaev in not only his weight-cut, but also his performance, since all the thanks should be aimed towards Allah. It is in this fashion that once again a modest Muslim masculinity is promoted.

Apart from these videos in particular most videos cover vast amounts of training footage from Chimaev accompanied with footage of the fighter outside of the gym, for example doing charity or buying furniture among other goods for his personal life. Some of these activities outside of the gym, such as charity do promote a modest image of the fighter. There are however no further clues to his religious beliefs, since there is no footage of him either fasting, praying or any other Islamic rituals. Most of the videos do however contain Islamic vocabulary which is heavily used by Chimaev and some teammates. Especially when compared to Nurmagomedov's personal YouTube channel it seems as though Chimaev does not put the same weight on the importance of the representation of religion in his videos. This could however be the result of different factors. It could be the case that Chimaev sees religion as something private, which would result in him not promoting a new sense of Islamic masculinity. One could instead assume that instead Chimaev promotes more of a Chechen masculine identity which is still connected to religion.

A second source of information which gives a little insight into Chimaev's public spread of religion are his post-fight interviews. Some of these interviews received up to almost three million views on YouTube, excluding the actual live viewers. In Nurmagomedov's post fight interviews it seemed as though it became a tradition for the Dagestani to emulate a movement which would resemble an Islamic prayer, as well as to thank and praise God. For Chimaev the latter is also the case, in the sense that he has also praised and thanked God in his post-fight interviews. However, it appears as though the Chechen fighter does so in a less consistent manner. It is mostly in his pre-UFC fights that the volume in Islamic influences in his post-fight interviews increases. He did so for example in India in a fight in December 2018 when he defeated his opponent in the first round. After grabbing the microphone from the interviewer Chimaev spoke two simple phrases stating "Alhamdullilah, Allahu Akbar".¹²⁵ On another occasion in October of 2019 after defeating his opponent Chimaev once again ceased the microphone from the interviewer. This time however to greet the fans in attendance by simply stating "As-salamu alaykum", a common phrase among Muslims to greet each other.¹²⁶ Lastly,

¹²⁵ BRAVE MMA PAKISTAN, "Brave 20 | KHAMZAT-CHIMAEV Cage Interview," January 23, 2019, YouTube video, 2:56, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVV6eN54yXs>.

¹²⁶ BRAVE MMA PAKISTAN, "BRAVE CF 27 CAGE INTERVIEW Khamzat Chimaev," October 31, 2019, YouTube video, 2:09,

there was one time inside of the UFC where Chimaev also used his post-fight interview as a way of spreading his religious beliefs, which was the case after his victory over Li Jinliang. A pumped Chimaev once again grasped the microphone from the interviewer. This time exclaiming numerous times that he will come for everybody and that he would kill everybody, aiming to threaten the rest of the UFC fighters. Furthermore, Chimaev yelled Allahu Akbar numerous times in the interview, thus spreading his religious beliefs with all people in the audience, as well as with the people watching at home.¹²⁷ When comparing his post-fight interviews with Nurmagomedov's it seems as though Chimaev only occasionally refers to his religion, even though for Nurmagomedov this takes place after every single fight. This might suggest that Nurmagomedov simply values the public display of religion towards an audience more than Chimaev. However, in the instances where Chimaev did indeed credit his performances towards Allah, he, like Nurmagomedov, promoted his image of modest Muslim masculinity by implying that his victories were part of Allah's greater plan, instead of a result of his own hard work.

What is however interesting to see is that, as was the case with Nurmagomedov, Chimaev also attributes less importance to Islamic modesty in MMA affiliated situations. When trash talking his opponents Chimaev often uses the terms "smash his face" and "smash everybody" to indicate what he plans to do to his opponents. Like Nurmagomedov, Chimaev also uses the term "chicken" a lot to refer to his opponents. Furthermore, Chimaev also states every now and then that he plans on killing his opponents and that it does not matter who the opponent is, and that he will kill them regardless.¹²⁸ It is in these moments where he talks down and threatens his opponents that a less modest masculinity shines through. By using these terms which have become iconic Chimaev presents himself as a dominant fighter, even though a less modest image of himself is presented in the media.

Lastly Khamzat Chimaev's personal Instagram will be examined to discover how he publicly shows his religion on the platform. As was the case with Nurmagomedov a distinction can be made regarding religious posts on his personal Instagram. In the case of Chimaev this distinction is a little different, however. In regard to religion there is one category of posts which highlights personal experiences with Islam and the second category is connected to quotes and

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAEgGytZI5w>.

¹²⁷ UFC – Ultimate Fighting Championship, "UFC 267: Khamzat Chimaev Octagon Interview," October 30, 2021, YouTube video, 1:49,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuLPaHnRH9I>.

¹²⁸ UFC - Ultimate Fighting Championship, "Best Khamzat Chimaev Moments," October 27, 2021, YouTube video, 5:12,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgBTZz0RsMg>.

recitations from the Quran. There is however another category of posts which can be recognized, these however are not connected to religion.

The first subcategory in regard to religion are Chimaev's personal experiences with Islam which he shares with his followers. The number of posts which actually fit this categorization is limited and only limited to a short time span. The dates of the posts range from October of 2019 until April of 2020, after this date there are no more posts which fulfill the same purpose. Two of these posts highlight Chimaev's visit to Abu Dhabi, more particularly his visit to the Sheikh Zayed Grand Masjid. Both posts are accompanied by a caption which uses Islamic vocabulary by stating "Mashallah" as well as "Alhamdulillah".¹²⁹ The last of these posts which fall in this category is a post which dates back to April of 2020 where Chimaev posted a picture of himself performing prayer together with his teammate. This post also went accompanied by a caption which once again read "Alhamdulillah".¹³⁰ He thus praises Allah by posting these images, even though in these instances there is no direct correlation between this presented modesty and a form of masculinity.

The second subcategory are his posts which feature Islamic verses or recitations. Once again as was the case with his personal experiences, these posts are limited to a certain time frame. This time these posts exist from April of 2022 till May of 2022, thus operating in a small timeframe, hence why the volume of these posts is low. Only two of these posts can be found on Chimaev's Instagram. The first of these posts showcases an Arabic recitation, which is accompanied by both Russian and Arabic subtitles. The second of these posts is a post which features a text in Arabic script, accompanied by an English text which states "Eid Al Fitr Mubarak to all of you, May Allah swt accept from you and us." Which thus shows that the post is related to the holy month of the Ramadan for Muslims.¹³¹

What is interesting on Chimaev's Instagram however is a different subcategory, one which cannot be recognized on Nurmagomedov's Instagram. This category, even though not largely related to religion, is very prominent among his posts. This category is one of political nature, more specifically a category which focusses on Chimaev's appreciation of Ramzan Kadyrov and his father. Ever since January of 2021 Chimaev has posted pictures with the leader

¹²⁹ Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), "#MASHAALLAH 🕌," Instagram photo, October 1, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B3FAA0OIff/>; Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), "**ALHAMDULILLAH**," Instagram photo, December 21, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B6V_69hlqFB/.

¹³⁰ Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), "#Allhamdulillah 🕌," Instagram photo, April 8, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-uj3itlOSV/>.

¹³¹ Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), Instagram photo, April 22, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcQRI8ULRjI/>; Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), Instagram photo, May 2, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdCNyuiPEAm/>.

of Chechnya. The posts highlight Chimaev's trips to his country of birth and his visits to Ramzan Kadyrov. All posts, except for one, showcase both men smiling, while the caption reads Chimaev's praise for Chechnya and Ramzan Kadyrov.¹³² The posts thus highlight Chimaev's support for the Chechen leader, even though it is a well-known fact that Kadyrov is linked to human right abuses as well as linked to crimes against people of the L.G.B.T.Q. community. It appears as though Khamzat Chimaev is only part of a bigger scheme in which Kadyrov attempts to use mixed martial artists to his advantage by attempting to portray himself as a leader involved in sports, instead of a leader known for cruelties against humanity.¹³³ Even though these posts are not heavily associated with Islam, they do still show an interesting development and category in Chimaev's posts.

All in all, there appear to be some minor differences between Nurmagomedov and Chimaev their representation of Islam towards their audience. Both fighters have had different childhoods growing up, even though both were what some would consider difficult. And furthermore, both fighters would eventually make it to the biggest mixed martial arts promotion in the world and eventually gain significant popularity by promoting their fighting style, culture, and religion.

What is however interesting to see is the way in which both fighters represent this religion, if they do it at all. For Nurmagomedov such a representation of religion is present in all three of the platforms which were chosen to research. Nurmagomedov's personal YouTube account is filled with references to his Islamic faith. Not only his vocabulary highlights his religion, but also practices such as prayer are highlighted. The representation of such practices was not necessarily the case for Chimaev's YouTube channel, however it did make deliberate references to Islam in specific instances. Furthermore, on their YouTube channels both fighters

¹³²Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), “@ya_pomoshnik_kra_95 Дал сий дойл хъа Ваша 🕌 Дал сах дойл ахъ мел динаг 🕌,” Instagram photo, January 6, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CJtSHukFmEH/>; Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), “@ya_pomoshnik_kra_95 ДАЛ СИЙ ДОЙЛ ХЪА ВАША 🕌💖,” Instagram photo, May 17, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CO-9FVJIZ-4/>; Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), “@ya_pomoshnik_kra_95 Ваша Дал сий дойл хъа, Дал сах дойл ахъ мел динаг 🕌🕌,” Instagram photo, December 2, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CW_hv_Oo6d4/; Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), “@ya_pomoshnik_kra_95 Хъо сан Ваш юххе мел ву Борз хил дла летам хал дацар, Дал сий дойл хъа Ваша 🕌,” Instagram photo, December 7, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CXMidlPoUg3/>; Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), “Къонах вехар ву даимна Къонахой дегнашчоъ. Дал г1азот къобал дойла хъа Ахьмад-Хъаж 🕌,” Instagram photo, May 8, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdUBy-RtAFU/>; Khamzat Chimaev (@khamzat_chimaev), “@ya_pomoshnik_kra_95 Дал сий дойл хъа Ваша, Ахмат Сила 🕌💖,” Instagram photo, May 23, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cd56XuINdqB/>.

¹³³ Karim Zidan & Kevin Draper, “Some U.F.C. Fighters Have Ties to a Chechen Leader Loyal to Putin,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/sports/ufc-kadyrov-khamzat-chimaev.html>.

deliberately portray themselves in both positions of victory, as well as positions of pain, all the while crediting Allah for their hard work.

As far as their post-fight interviews go there exist some minor differences between the two North Caucasian super stars. Nurmagomedov after all of his fights started his interview by thanking God, even though for Chimaev such a practice remained somewhat more inconsistent. Furthermore, Nurmagomedov would reenact a movement which symbolizes prayer which can also not be recognized in Chimaev's post fight interviews. However, both fighters continually credited their performances towards Allah, thus representing their Muslim modesty. What is however interesting to see that in the buildup to the fights this Muslim modesty would somewhat decrease, especially when trash talking their opponents.

Lastly, both fighters their personal Instagram offer an insight into their public representation of Islam. In the case of Nurmagomedov all different types of Islamic posts are high in numbers and posted regularly, such as his personal visits to Mecca or some recitations of the Quran. This was however not the case for Chimaev where such posts were extremely low in numbers. Furthermore, these posts on Chimaev's account were only limited to a certain amount of time, even though for Nurmagomedov these types of posts seize to continue. However, both fighters in their Instagram do continually praise Allah, which once again takes credit away from the fighters themselves, and instead gives credit to Allah. A notable difference however in regard to Chimaev's Instagram is the existence of an entirely different subcategory, a subcategory which is highly connected to Chechnya and Ramzan Kadyrov, which is not the case with Nurmagomedov.

Conclusion

This study has researched the role which Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists serve by means of their social media, this research went accompanied by the following research question: To what extent do prominent Northern Caucasian mixed martial artists represent a new Muslim masculinity through their different social media platforms? To answer this question the research was divided into two main parts, the first of which provided background information on the topic through secondary sources, and the second of which contained the actual primary research.

As was stated, the first chapter focused on providing background information of the topic, which in this case meant an overview on the Northern Caucasus, namely Dagestan and Chechnya, after the fall of the Soviet Union. This overview on the two republics was divided into four different areas of research, youth, crime, religion, and sports. Furthermore, the chapter attempted to answer a sub question which was focused on the possible similarities in the developments of these four areas of research. It appeared as though all four aspects of Northern Caucasian society which were researched contained issues after the fall of the Soviet Union. The youth in both Dagestan and Chechnya have and continue to face issues in regard to their identity, education, as well as religion. Furthermore, the crime in the region has also gone through several developments, with crime initially being focused on extremism, and later on being focused on drug related issues. Religion also seemed to be an area in which significant developments took place for the Northern Caucasus. Both Dagestan and Chechnya are regions with a majority Sufi Muslim population, however both republics also saw a rise of a new Saudi Islamic doctrine, Wahhabism. The rise of Wahhabism in both republics led to a power struggle, which eventually slowed down. The last aspect of both republics which was researched focused on sports in the region. Both for Dagestan and Chechnya sports is of great importance, with almost all young males competing in sports, mostly combat sports. Sports in the region also seemed to become more closely knit with Islamic influences. All in all, what is interesting is that all of the developments in these aspects which were researched to a certain degree all seemed to be influenced by religion. Thus, it highlights the importance of religion, or rather Islam, in the region with it being connected to these various aspects of society.

The second chapter contained the body of research focused on primary sources. By ways of qualitative content analysis different social media platforms of both Khabib Nurmagomedov and Khamzat Chimaev would be researched. In the chapter Nurmagomedov and Chimaev

served as representatives of both Dagestan and Chechnya, as a result of their childhoods in the republics, as well as their affiliation with the republics. Both athletes grew up in the Northern Caucasus and at an early age came into contact with combat sports, namely wrestling and combat sambo. As per usual in the Northern Caucasus both fighters were raised according to Islamic traditions and values. Eventually having both made their way into MMA, they would gain relevance in the MMA scene following their dominant performances and unbeaten records. Eventually both would furthermore gain international importance and relevance through the American MMA promotion, the Ultimate Fighting Championship. Having both become global super stars they would gain not only social media followers, but naturally social media influence. Through various platforms such as Instagram and personal YouTube accounts, both Nurmagomedov and Chimaev would be able to represent their importance of religion in their lives. Both frequently post content which is affiliated with Islam on these social media platforms, often using Islamic vocabulary in the process. However, even though this mere representation of Islam is certainly interesting, what is even more notable is the role which both athletes fulfill. Nurmagomedov and Chimaev both became Muslim role models, which would feature a new form of masculinity. This new form of Muslim masculinity is both affiliated with their martial aspects, as well as their importance on Islamic modesty. By positioning themselves in martial settings, such as the UFC octagon and training rooms, while at the same time showing their importance of Islam, they have created a new Muslim masculinity. A more modest masculinity, this modesty can be recognized in their social media through different ways, but great examples are the post-fight interviews of both fighters. After training for several weeks, enduring a dangerous weight cut, and lastly fighting in the octagon, both fighters would continually praise and thank Allah, as if Allah had done the work for them, thus representing Muslim modesty in a moment of victory. It is in these crucial moments which are situated in martial environments that both fighters continually put the emphasis on Allah and his greater plan, thus taking themselves out of the equation and representing modesty.

However, it is important to realize the limits of this research. Due to the timeframe, among other factors, the thesis was only capable of focusing on these two representatives of both republics. However, both Nurmagomedov and Chimaev were only a mere part in a wave of not only Caucasian, but also Muslim mixed martial artists who have entered international relevancy. This highlights the possibilities of further studies in regard to their social media influence and the concept of a new modest Muslim masculinity. Further research could furthermore entail this new concept in different sports outside of martial arts. Furthermore, North Caucasian prominent athletes and their connection to political figures and dynamics also

remains a topic which is understudied. As was highlighted in the last chapter Chimaev appeared to have close ties with Ramzan Kadyrov, however due to the limits of the research these ties were not capable of being researched. All in all, the Northern Caucasian wave of prominent Islamic figures in regard to MMA, as well as other areas, proves to be an understudied area of research which leaves opportunities for further research.

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Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “Вместе с Братьями пару лет назад поднимались на гору Савр, расположенная южнее Мекки, в 5 километрах от города, в которой скрывался посланник Аллаха Мухаммад (салаллаху алейхи ва саллям) вместе с Абу Бакром - مسافة على مكة من يبعد مكة، والذي جنوب في يقع الذي ثور جبل إلى الإخوة مع صعدنا سنوات عدة قبل. - عنه الله رضي الصديق بكر أبو ورفيقه عليه الله صلى النبي اختبأ كم، وفيه ٥.” Instagram, June 13, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBYsl6PlxBz/>.

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “It was great job brother @islam_makhachev Alhamdulillah идём дальше, ещё один бой в этом году и будет просто космос обстановка. - На этой фотке многих не хватает, вся команда выполнила феноменальную работу и конечно же нужно отметить самого @islam_makhachev который выполнял все инструкции как внутри клетки, так и снаружи во время подготовки..” Instagram, July 18, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRdl-fsMpac/>.

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “Очень познавательно, про день АРАФА. ﷻ.” Instagram, July 30, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDPjAqNqne3/>.

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “Guys, it was just our night. Alhamdulillah for everything ﷻ Просто это был наш вечер, ребята сделали свою работу как они и умеют. Поздравляю Братья: @islam_mamedov @usman_nurmagomedov @khasan_magomedsharipov @gadzhi_rabadanov #победатолькоотВсевышнего.” Instagram, August 1, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CSBILyLLOQ4/>.

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “ﷻ.” Instagram, August 17, 2020. https://www.instagram.com/p/CD_Mlm5KMsp/.

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “Our connection will forever be fixed in my heart coach, you was a great inspiration for me always, since the first days I came to AKA. Love you coach @akajav ♥.” Instagram, October 28, 2020. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CG5CNHpMboU/>.

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “У этих Братьев я учился всю свою жизнь, как драться так и жить. пророк Мухаммад- да благословит его Аллах и приветствует, говорил: «Души подобны воинам. Если они находят что-то общее – они объединяются, а если не находят общего – они расходятся». (Аль-Бухари 3336, Муслим 2638).” Instagram, October 29, 2020.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CG5CNHpMboU/>.

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “АКТУАЛЬНО. Holy Quran 85:8 - نَفَعُوا وَمَا - أَلَّا مِنْهُمْ - الْحَمِيدُ الْعَزِيزُ بِاللَّهِ يُؤْمِنُوا أَنْ - Они вымещали им только за то, что те уверовали в Аллаха Могущественного, Достохвального,.” Instagram, October 29, 2020.

https://www.instagram.com/p/CG7rT1WKLO_/

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “Holy Quran 9:24 **وَأَبْنَاؤُكُمْ آبَاؤُكُمْ كَانِ إِنَّ فَلٌ** **وَرَسُولِهِ اللَّهُ مِّنَ إِلَيْكُمْ أَحَبُّ تَرْضَوْنَهَا وَمَسَاكِنُ كَسَادَهَا تَحْسَنُونَ وَتِجَارَةٌ أَفْزَرْتُمْوهَا وَأَمْوَالٌ وَعَشِيرَتُكُمْ وَأَزْوَاجُكُمْ وَإِخْوَانُكُمْ** - Скажи: «Если ваши отцы, ваши сыновья, ваши братья, ваши супруги, ваши семьи, приобретенное вами имущество, торговля, застоя в которой вы опасаетесь, и жилища, которые вы облюбовали, милее вам, чем Аллах, Его Посланник и борьба на Его пути, то ждите, пока Аллах не придет со Своим велением. Аллах не наставляет на прямой путь нечестивых людей».” Instagram, October 30, 2020.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CG-qX9VKcvT/>.

Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “Пророк Мухаммад ﷺ - лучшее создание Всевышнего. Наш Пророк ﷺ - признавал права представителей различных религий, разрешал им свободно совершать поклонение и исповедовать свою религию. Аллах говорит: بِسْمِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ وَلَا - الَّذِينَ تَسُبُّوْا لَا يَكُوْنُ لَكُمْ عَلَيْهِمْ سَبٌّ شَيْءٍ مِّنْ دُوْنِ اللّٰهِ فَيَسُبُّوْا اللّٰهَ عَدْوًا بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ كَذٰلِكَ عَلَّمَ اللّٰهُ لَعْنَةً لِّلْكَافِرِيْنَ «Не оскорбляйте тех, к кому они взывают помимо Аллаха, а не то они станут оскорблять Аллаха из вражды и по невежеству. Таким образом, Мы приукрасили для каждого народа их деяния. Потом им предстоит вернуться к своему Господу, и Он поведает им о том, что они совершали». (Сура «Ан`ам», аят 108).”
Instagram, November 3, 2020.

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<https://www.instagram.com/p/CN8DT8LqgrI/>.

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Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “🕌🕌.” Instagram, June 30, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQvjqkSKChU/>.

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Khabib Nurmagomedov (@khabib_nurmagomedov). “Это было неуважительно с твоей стороны @islam_makhachev)))Ведь @gadzhi_rabadanov тоже готовится к бою (31 июль) 🕌🕌Но в конце, я всё-таки сделал маслиат 🍷.” Instagram, July 6, 2021. https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ_2KcIMUwr/.

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I want to congratulate all Muslims with blessings of Eid Al-Adha. May Allah forgive all our sins and guide us on the right path, and lead to the heaven by his mercy. - Поздравляю всех Мусульман с праздником. Пусть Аллаh простит все наши грехи и ведёт прямым путём, и введёт всех нас в рай по милости своей.” Instagram, July 20, 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CRh975RMG-C/>.

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