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## Exploring the Meanings of *hijab* through Online Comments in Canada

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### ABSTRACT

Controversies surrounding ethnic dress such as *hijab* have increased public awareness about cultural diversity. The number of comments posted on online media make it evident that many people are concerned about ethnic attire, cultural differences and social cohesion. Although researchers have examined the meanings of veiling, the relationships between *hijab* and public opinion have seldom been investigated. The overarching objective of this study was to understand the relationships between Islamic attire and online readers' opinion. In light of the limitations in the previous studies on this topic, this study attempts to fill the gap by studying posters' opinions toward *hijab* through publicly available online information in the form of posted comments.

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### Ethnic/religious attire and Canadian Muslims

Public debate and dialogue about such issues as religious accommodation, integration and social engagement have accelerated and intensified in Canada and elsewhere in the aftermath of 9/11 (Haddad, 2007). The wearing of ethnic/religious attire by women has emerged as a popular and contentious topic in many countries, including Canada (Ruby, 2006), France (Afshar, 2006; Croucher, 2008), the United States (Hamzeh, 2011; Mansson McGinty, 2014; Taylor, Ayoub, & Moussa, 2014), the United Kingdom (Siraj, 2011), Denmark (Warburg, Johansen, & Østergaard, 2013) and Turkey (Sandikci & Ger, 2010), to name a few. In particular, the wearing of the *hijab* (headscarf) has generated a considerable amount of public attention and controversy in western societies, and here too Canada is no exception – partly due to the official banning of full veils in French state-schools (Lentze, 2013), and the proposed ban on religious symbols in Quebec (CTV News, 2013).

According to the National Household Survey (Statistics Canada, 2013), in 2011 the foreign-born population of Canada was 20.6% of the total Canadian population: the highest proportion among all G8 countries. In that year, the Muslim population of Canada had just surpassed the one-million mark, and the median age of this population was 28.9 years

(Statistics Canada, 2013). Toronto had the highest Muslim population among all metropolitan cities across Canada, accounting for about 40.3% of the total population of Muslims.

Although the number of Muslim Canadians has increased over the years, stereotyping and misunderstanding still exist within Canadian society. It is not uncommon to see headlines in the Canadian press about situations where religious dress have led to politically heated debates, discursive disputes and aggressive responses. Many people express their concerns, disappointment and dissatisfaction with the country's immigration policies, religious accommodation, and integration programs (Törne, 2008). Headlines related to Islamic attire are prodigious, and include the following: "My *hijab* rebellion," in the *National Post* (Nawaz, 2014); "Proposed ban on religious symbols in Quebec a 'violation of freedom of religion'" on *CTV News* (CTV News, 2013); "The Charter's veiled threat against Montreal's Muslims" on *Huffpost Style Canada* (Bourgeault-Tassé, 2013); and "Muslim woman attacked in Toronto, told to 'go back to your country': police" on *Global News* (Nielsen, Shum, & Miller, 2015).

Controversies surrounding Islamic attire have increased public awareness about cultural diversity. The number of comments posted on Canadian online news media make it evident that many Canadians are concerned not only about Islamic attire, but also about cultural differences and social cohesion within our society. Although researchers (e.g. Taylor et al., 2014) have examined the meanings of veiling, diverse opinions towards *hijab* and wearers' experiences have seldom been analysed empirically. The current study attempts to fill this void and address some of these complex issues by investigating the following questions: How do readers of Canadian news publications view Muslim women's head coverings? How does head covering signify the identity of Muslim females? What are the correlations between *hijab/niqab* and faith/modesty?

### Experience, perceptions and reactions toward the Islamic headscarf

Islamic attire such as *hijab*, *niqab* and *burqa* are often considered or perceived as visual markers of, or repositories for, religious identity. However, the meaning of Islamic attire can vary in different countries and socio-cultural contexts. For instance, the *hijab* may be viewed by non-Muslims as a symbol of religious affiliation (El Guindi, 1999); solidarity and resistance (Haddad, 2007); threats and enmity (O'Neill, Gidengil, Côté, & Young, 2014); "demarcation, distinction, exclusion and discrimination" (Adelman, 2011, p. 246), "a partition" (Lane, 1984), male oppression and extreme Islamism (Adelman, 2011); and non-allegiance to the adopted country in western societies (Abdurraqib, 2006). However, these interpretations may not be shared by Muslims. Maryam Qudrat Aseel (2003) expressed her personal experience of wearing *hijab* in her memoir *Torn between Two Cultures*, during which she came to the conclusion that wearing *hijab* is an obstacle to understanding in America. In other words, ethnic/religious dress may become a site of stereotypical judgement and scrutiny. As Abdurraqib (2006, p. 59) asserted, "... the veil serves as an erected boundary that solidifies distance and difference. The veil becomes metonymic for the larger difference between 'us and them.'"

In some extreme cases, ethnic/religious dress leads not only to misunderstanding, but also to bullying and racism. According to a study conducted in Britain (Eslea & Mukhtar, 2000), the most frequent bullying in secondary schools was related to clothing and accessories worn by Indian Muslims and Pakistanis. The symbolic meaning ascribed to dress can be ambiguous and lead to different interpretations (Kaiser, 1997). Ethnic/religious

dress does not merely reflect the wearer's identity, but also acts as a "social glue," denoting group affiliation and conformity as well as group differentiation and separation (Horn & Gurel, 1981). In order to be accepted by others, many minority groups and even "hyphenated" populations (e.g. Canadian-born Muslims and Canadian-born Pakistanis) constantly negotiate, construct and redefine their identity over the course of assimilation/integration (Kunst & Sam, 2013).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of issues related to Islamic dress, identity, and faith, a headscarf was used in our study as a vehicle to illuminate these complexities. The overarching objective of this study was to understand the relationships between Muslim headscarves and online posters' opinions and perceptions. The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section reviews the literature related to modesty, the meanings of *hijab*, online readers' opinions and identity, as well as the underlying concepts that were used to guide this study. Research methods and findings are reported in the following two sections respectively. This is followed by the last section, which presents the final remarks and insights.

## Research topics for Islamic headscarf

A significant body of research has examined issues associated with veiling. The taxonomy for our study was developed from an existing body of research found in the literature of *hijab*, including modesty, fashion, body and faith (Lewis, 2013); fashion, politics and faith (Tarlo, 2010); modesty, privacy and resistance (El Guindi, 1999); and visual, spatial and ethical *hijab* (Hamzeh, 2011). The review of these rich and diverse studies provides a primary focus for the current research, and frames our later discussion and interpretation of *hijab* in the following areas – modesty, faith, self-concept, and the symbolic meanings of veiling.

### Modesty, faith and self-concept

The term "modesty" can be defined as "moderate or non-boastful self-presentation" (Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). A modest person is less likely to provoke negative responses, such as envy, in observers' perceptions (Driver, 1999). According to the online *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, modesty can also be defined as "the quality of behaving and especially dressing in ways that do not attract sexual attention." These definitions and perspectives indicate that modesty is not only about covering up or concealing the body, but also about an individual's values and attitudes toward such behaviour (Michelman, 2003). Nevertheless, defining what type of clothing is modest or immodest can be difficult. Certain adornment, attire or ethnic dress may be considered modest in one culture or environment, but may be perceived as culturally/situationally irrelevant or inappropriate in another. It is conceivable that modesty can be defined and interpreted in multiple ways. For example, modesty may be part of "the taste of necessity" (Woodward, 2007), but it may not necessarily be conservative, simplistic or pragmatic (Lewis, 2013). In *A Return to Modesty*, Shalit (1999) argues that clothing that is revealing (e.g. plunging necklines, swimsuits and shorts) is not always associated with immodesty. In a similar vein, Michelman (2003, p. 79) suggests that "the acts of being modest and fashionable are not necessarily two mutually exclusive behaviours." Thus, opinions on whether "to veil or not to veil" may not be the same among different Muslim communities and individuals.

For many Muslim women, wearing a *hijab* during daily prayers is part of her religious requirements and practice (Syed, 2013). In a study of Muslim women conducted by Taylor et al. (2014) in the United States, 67% of those female Muslim participants who wore the *hijab* said they had chosen to adopt the headscarf primarily due to religious obligations and expressions of piety and chastity. In another study, Siraj (2011) also found that wearing *hijab* is a way for some women to demonstrate their obedience to their faith, and that it may be a source of empowerment. However, some non-theological scholars (Ferracioli, 2013; Karam, 1998; Ruitenberga, 2008) argue that Muslim women are not obliged to wear the headscarf because there is no scriptural justification or explicit *Qur'anic* requirement. Although some individuals believe that wearing *hijab* or even full veiling is not a religious requirement, *Qur'an* clearly instructs both males and females to dress modestly. The following verses are often quoted to support this view point:

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that will make for greater purity for them. And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husband's fathers ... and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. (*Qur'an* 24, 30–31)

O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad) ... (*Qur'an* 33, 59)

Another *Qur'anic* verse is also sometimes referenced for the discussion of law of *hijab* and modesty.

And if you should ask them [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a curtain. (*Qur'an* 33, 53)

In addition, some scholars (Siraj, 2011; Taylor et al., 2014) have documented that donning *hijab* and dressing modestly is a way to subvert and police the male gaze, to resist sexual objectification, as well as to gain respect from others. Thus, modesty is one of the common reasons why many Muslim women choose to don *hijab* even when they are living in Western societies.

Much previous fashion communication and self-concept research (Heath & Scott, 1998) suggests that clothing can be used to manifest an individual's image, and to represent how the wearers wish to appear in public or how they want to be perceived by others (Rahman, Liu, Lam, & Chan, 2011). An individual's "self" is often demonstrated through his/her purchases, possessions, consumption and presentation (Rahman, Liu, & Cheung, 2012). The "self" is "a developmental formation in the psychological make-up of the individual consisting of interrelated attitudes which are acquired in relation to body, objects, family, persons, groups, social values and institutions" (Ross, 1971, p. 40). In other words, people learn, negotiate, define, and enhance their self-concepts through daily interactions with the external changing environment. Thus, it is meaningful to further investigate how Muslim women want to portray and present themselves through veiling, unveiling or re-veiling. In order to understand the construction and expression of self through Islamic attire (e.g. the headscarf), it would be useful to review posters' opinions (e.g. online posted comments, chat forums) through the dialectic interaction and juxtaposition between Muslims and non-Muslims, or the opinions of "for" veiling and "against" veiling.

## The symbolic meanings of veiling

*Hijab* is an Arabic word that means a veil (or drape, curtain, screen, partition, barrier) that covers a woman's hair, neck, chest, or even face. The term *hijab* is complex, and the type of veiling varies in different cultures and time periods (Stowasser, 1997). In this article, the word *hijab* is used interchangeably with “headscarf,” meaning a garment that does not cover the wearer's identity – i.e. the face. Many practicing Muslim women start wearing *hijab* when they reach puberty (Taylor et al., 2014) or after marriage (Zuhur, 1992). The meaning that the wearer gives to *hijab* is often intimately connected to her emotional and embodied experiences (Mansson McGinty, 2014). According to a study of Islamic dress in Egypt and Yemen (Jackson & Monk-Turner, 2015), *hijab* represents not only a clothing choice, but also a way of showing modesty. However, there is no universal consensus on the meaning of *hijab* among all Muslim women. The meanings are varied depending on the sartorial types of *hijab*, geographic or situational contexts, wearers' motives, and viewers' interpretations. For example, in Egypt *hijabs* are considered to be popular attire, and in Yemen, *niqabs* (face veils) are always worn by Muslim women.

### Niqab

*Niqab*, also called a face veil, covers the entire face except that there is a slit or holes to allow the wearer see her surroundings (Ramirez, 2015). The wearing of *niqab* is not the norm for Muslim women living in Western societies. According to Warburg et al. (2013), some Muslim women in the West wear the *niqab* only at certain festive occasions and/or during certain periods of time. Many Muslim women in the United States prefer not to wear *niqab*: a recent survey conducted at the University of Michigan (Poushter, 2014) reported that the vast majority of the participants from Muslim-majority home countries (the exception being Saudi Arabia) preferred *hijab* over *burqa* and *niqab*. Although they are worn by only a minority of Muslim women in the West, *niqab* often raise public debates, concerns, objections and condemnations in relation to issues of public safety, identification and women's oppression (Bakht, 2012). Due to the “interest in protecting the public from criminal activities and security threats,” Muslim women in Florida, for example, are banned from wearing *niqab* in driver's license photos (USAToday, 2003). In addition, O'Neill et al. (2014) found that almost two-thirds (64%) of non-Muslim respondents in Quebec considered wearing *niqab* to be unacceptable under any scenario.

### Hijab

In Western society, despite the fact that many Muslim women dress very similarly to their non-Muslim counterparts, when they wear the *hijab* it is often viewed as a symbol of “distinction” between Muslim and non-Muslim (Adelman, 2011). Although *hijab* is distinctive per se, its design and the way it is worn vary among Muslim communities and individuals. Some prior studies (Tarlo, 2010) suggest that fashion and modesty can co-exist as reasons for wearing ethnic dress, and the design of the *hijab* is an example of this. Although some *hijabs* continue to be made from the traditional solid black cloth, *hijab* can also be embroidered, beaded, printed, and pinned with a stylish brooch. A plethora of styles of *hijabs* can be found in many countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Turkey. One study of veiling practice among the young Emirati women in Dubai found that 95% believed that the veil played an increasingly significant role in communicating social class



and fashion rather than religious commitment (Al-Qasimi, 2010). Thus, it is not surprising to learn that fashionable and elegant Islamic attire is sold in high-end department stores such as Harrods and Saks Fifth Avenue to meet the growing demands of those wearing alternative Islamic styles (Meyer, 2010). With this perspective, it is reasonable to suggest that *hijab* can be used as a signifier or non-verbal communicator (Hoodfar, 2003) to construct the wearer's identity, display socio-economic status, convey religious membership, and suggest political affiliation.

### *Internet and posters' opinions*

In this digital age, the Internet has become an important tool to shape and reorient the ways in which all people, including Muslims, think and interact with others in general, and their affiliations with social, religious or political groups in particular. Muslim Internet users can freely express their thoughts, share their experiences, and democratize their Islamic knowledge through such new media as Muslim blogs, online mosques and virtual *ummah* (Islamic communities). In addition, the online world facilitates the creation of a private space for Muslims to experience God as well as to socialize with their significant others. As Zaman (2008, p. 470) put it:

In many ways, the Internet stimulates nostalgia as much as newness. Immigrants who miss the sound of the call to prayer in their home countries can hear the *azan*, *Qur'anic* recitations, and *nasbeeds* from the privacy of their homes.

Due to the popularity and tremendous growth of digital media, a number of studies have examined subject areas that include Muslims and the blogosphere (Varisco, 2010), Muslim identity and cyber-mufti (Zaman, 2008), the involvement of Muslims in media production (Aydin & Hammer, 2010), Muslim engagement with the Internet (Sands, 2010), online *hijab* stores and fashion (Tarlo, 2010), and the Internet subculture of Indonesian face-veiled women (Nisa, 2013). The vast majority of these studies focus primarily on Muslim Internet engagement (e.g. identity, culture and faith). For example, Nisa (2013, p. 245) argues that "engaging with the internet is part of the pietization process for *cadari* [face-veiled women] .... For [female Muslim] women, decisions about which media they should engage with and which internet sites should be visited are acts of piety." Although some studies have examined the significance of Internet and online media to Muslims, in Canada relatively little systematic research has dealt with online readers' opinions about ethnic dress, religious and socio-political issues relating to Muslims, except one article of literature review talks about Canadian multiculturalism (Soroka & Robertson, 2010).

In particular, the complex issues associated with public perception of Muslim identity and the headscarf have not previously been fully investigated. In light of the limitations of previous studies (Al-Qasimi, 2010; Nisa, 2013; Soroka & Robertson, 2010), this study attempts to fill the gap by studying opinions of readers of Canadian online media toward *hijab* through publicly available data (i.e. posted comments) obtained from various news media. We believe that studying this online data will benefit educators, researchers, and the general public – especially in light of the recent attention and concerns over religious accommodation of Muslims in Canada.

### *Importance and concerns of using online data*

Online media make socio-political debate more inclusive, allowing people to interact and exchange information, ideas and opinions through the virtual public sphere (Albrecht, 2006; Mitra, 2001). The authors of this study believe that by representing a range of public voices, online posted comments can play a valuable role in understanding current issues. Particularly in Canada, the number of Internet users has been growing over the years, and many people use digital media to communicate and interact with others. As *CBC* (2015) reported, “Canadians are among the biggest online addicts in the world, visiting more sites and spending more time on the internet than anyone else in the world.”

According to the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1993), some people are afraid to speak out in public when they have different opinions from other people because they do not want to be judged or isolated. Liu and Fahmy (2011) found that due to the anonymous nature of posted comments, the online setting may reduce the effect of the spiral of silence, or decrease users’ fear of social isolation. Being anonymous, people can focus on the issue without risking any social judgement about their identity, status and character (Stromer-Galley, 2002; Tambini, 1999). As a result, online users have more freedom to express themselves and discuss issues raised by the media (Gao & Koo, 2014). In addition, previous studies (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) also found that online comments add meaning and value to the discussed topic.

Although online media provide readers the opportunity to share and express their ideas, opinions and feelings freely, there are some limitations or concerns regarding the online discussion – (1) some online discussions/debates may lead to rudeness and “flame wars” (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011) and irrelevant “babbling” or less thoughtful contributions (Reich, 2011; Tucey, 2010); (2) the amount of data generated from the discussed issue may be overwhelming and difficult for analysis (Faridani, Bitton, Ryokai, & Goldberg, 2010); and (3) readers with strong viewpoints on the issue may dominate the discussions (Sunstein, 2007).

However, the findings from the previous studies are inconsistent and inconclusive. For example, some scholars (Albrecht, 2006; Nonnecke & Preece, 2003) have pointed out that the very active online users did not necessarily overrule the discussion by pushing their personal view points and interests to the others. Instead, they may take on the “latent representative” role or behave as “old hands” (Albrecht, 2006) to offer suggestion as well as to moderate a conflict among the online participants. Another study (Manosevitch & Walker, 2009) also found that online posters offered a great deal of factual information to the discussed issue. As Gao and Koo (2014, p. 24) asserted,

[...] online comments have gradually caught the attention of researchers and are starting to be treated as a valid source of data [...] ... While there are limitations, the analysis of readers’ voluntary comments will be able to collect valuable information that might otherwise be missed by standard survey instruments or structured interviews.

Given these perspectives, we conclude that it is important to collect information from the online media but remind ourselves that we must be cautious about the generalizability of the online data due to posters’ typical desire for anonymity.



**Table 1.** Five focal online news items.

	Online news media	Title of article	Number of posted comments	Link
(a)	<i>Maclean's Magazine</i> (Canada)	"Veils: Who are we to judge?"	243	<a href="http://www.macleans.ca/society/life/who-are-we-to-judge/">http://www.macleans.ca/society/life/who-are-we-to-judge/</a>
(b)	<i>Huffington Post</i> (USA)	"Female Muslim dress survey reveals wide range of preferences on hijab, burqa, niqab, and more"	324	<a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/08/female-muslim-dress-survey_n_4564188.html">http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/08/female-muslim-dress-survey_n_4564188.html</a>
(c)	<i>Huffington Post</i> (Canada)	"I don't care if my doctor wears a hijab, and neither should Quebec"	165	<a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/tou-la-foscolos/quebec-religious-restrictions_b_3790471.html">http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/tou-la-foscolos/quebec-religious-restrictions_b_3790471.html</a>
(d)	<i>Huffington Post</i> (Canada)	"The Charter's veiled threat against Montreal's Muslims"	117	<a href="http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/ramp/quebec-charter-veil-ban_b_4352301.html">http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/ramp/quebec-charter-veil-ban_b_4352301.html</a>
(e)	<i>National Post</i> (Canada)	"Opposition to covered faces is not a sign of Islamophobia"	631	<a href="http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/jonathan-kay-opposition-to-covered-faces-is-not-a-sign-of-islamophobia">http://news.nationalpost.com/full-comment/jonathan-kay-opposition-to-covered-faces-is-not-a-sign-of-islamophobia</a>

## Research methods

In order to gain an understanding of posters' opinions and perceptions toward *hijab*, we focused in particular on current news items and comments posted on various Canadian online news media. In total, we reviewed over fifty articles from 2012 to 2015 that related to *hijab* or veil. With the intention of capturing the richness and diverse opinions of the public, five topics (as shown in Table 1) were selected for this study. The selective criteria of these five topics and related comments were based on the popularity of the news media, the relevance of the topic (*hijab* and public opinions), and the number of posted comments (over one hundred).

Data were collected from five online news items which covered 1482 posted comments related to veiling (as indicated in Table 2). The study involved two analytical methods – sentiment analysis and content analysis. The intention of employing both methods was to acquire as much breadth and depth of knowledge as possible about public opinions and perceptions toward Islamic/religious attire. Through sentiment analysis (Li & Wu, 2010), public opinions were extracted from the textual data and categorized into useful classifications – namely, "for" or "against" Islamic attire (primarily *hijab*, *niqab* and *burqa*). Sentiment analysis is an efficient and systematic tool to identify, extract, manage and analyse massive unstructured data, and automatically categorize the posters' positive and negative attitudes and opinions (Prabowo & Thelwall, 2009) – in this case toward veiling. Content analysis was also employed to gain a deeper understanding of how the public (including Muslims and non-Muslims) perceive veiling. Content analysis provided a systematic procedure to code and evaluate the collected data and form the basis for interpretive analysis.

## Sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis was employed to gain an overview of posters' opinions due to the fact that traditional content analysis may not be effective in dealing with such a large amount of text (Abbasi, Chen, & Salem, 2008). As Li and Wu (2010, p. 354) asserted, "The purpose of text sentiment analysis is to determine the attitude of a speaker or a writer with respect

**Table 2.** Selected online news items and public opinion regarding Muslim headscarf.

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	Total
Online news	SVM	SVM	SVM			
"For" Islamic attire (veiling)	32	21	17	15	39	124
"Against" Islamic attire (veiling)	123	159	67	57	361	767
"Neutral"	76	144	97	45	229	591
Number of posted comments	243	324	182	117	631	1497
Number of words	28,158	19,608	9367	1222	28,864	87,219
Number of commenters	113	131	67	47	189	547
Comment length: average number of words per commenter	249.18	149.67	139.80	26.00	152.72	–

Online news items with posted comments:

(a) "Veils: Who are we to judge?"

(b) "Female Muslim dress survey reveals wide range of preferences on hijab, burqa, niqab, and more."

(c) "I don't care if my doctor wears a hijab, and neither should Quebec."

(d) "The Charter's veiled threat against Montreal's Muslims."

(e) "Opposition to covered faces is not a sign of Islamophobia."

to some specific topic" (Li & Wu, 2010). Sentiment analysis is used for text classification tasks, and has been applied to different forms of web-based discourse including extremist group forums, chat rooms and blogs. In addition, YouTube uses sentiment classification technology to identify and categorize comments into "poor" or "good" categories (Li & Wu, 2010). Sentiment analysis can be used to detect polarity (positive and negative affect) of messages that reveal the emotions of writers or posters. Human emotions can be expressed through words such as "hate," "love," "like," "desire," "happy," and "fantastic," or two conjoined adjectives paired by conjunctions such as "and," "or," "but," "either-or," and "neither-nor." In this study, we employed Support Vector Machine (SVM) (Joachims, 1998) to automate sentiment analysis. The machine-learning-based method was used to extract and annotate sentiment-related information, which can be encoded lexically, syntactically, and morphologically. As Abbasi et al. (2008) point out, "The results using SVM indicate a high level of classification accuracy, demonstrating the efficacy of this approach for classifying and analysing sentiments in extremist forums."

### Content analysis

Subsequent to sentiment analysis of online posted comments, two data sets were selected in order to gain a deeper understanding of posters' opinions and perceptions toward veiling. Content analysis with both qualitative and quantitative approaches were applied to these data sets. Two authors analysed the data by performing open coding and microanalysis independently. This process involved reading the posted comments multiple times, labelling data with codes, and making memos about emergent themes. An initial categorization was developed and frequency of word count was generated. Both authors read through the categorization and coded data together, discussed possibilities for interpretation, and reached a consensus on how data should be organized. However, if a consensus could not be reached, a third person was consulted. After the initial coding was completed, authors went through the data again and coded sub-themes within the nodes – e.g. type of attire/headscarf (*hijab*, *niqab*, and *burqa*); face-covering (identification, public safety and symbol of oppression); and modesty (*Qur'an* teaching, personal protection, resistance to secular values).

## Results and discussion

### Results from sentiment analysis

A diversity of opinion exists among the posters we studied regarding “to veil or not to veil” and to “accept or reject veiling.” According to the results of sentiment analysis (as shown in Table 2), approximately 51.75% of 1482 posted comments were classified as “against,” 39.88% as “neutral,” and 8.37% as “for.” Ironically, regarding article (c), which is titled “I don’t care if my doctor wears a hijab, and neither should Quebec,” many posters expressed that they did care about this topic. In total, 767 comments (51.75%) were categorized as “against Islamic attire” or “oppose veiling.” As shown in Table 2, the results were consistent across all five data sets, which clearly indicated that the majority of the posters were “against” veiling.

As mentioned in the preceding section, this analysis provided only an overview of public opinion toward veiling; it did not explain why some people accepted veiling but others did not. In order to gain a better understanding of the posters’ opinions, content analysis was employed to focus on two sets of posted comments – (a) and (b) – from five data sets. These two sets of data were chosen because of the similarity of the topic (different headscarves), number of posters (113 and 131), and the similarity of the results (see Table 2).

According to our findings, many posters who classified as “against” Islamic attire expressed that they had no/less objection on the issue of donning *hijab*, but they objected to someone wearing *niqab* or *burqa*. It is evident that public opinion on veiling varies depending on the type of headscarf being discussed. Many posters said they felt “uneasy” and “uncomfortable” with face covering that prevented the identification of a person in public.

### Remarks of SVM

In addition to the above insights, it is important to note that SVM is only one of the tools that can be used for this type of study. Other than SVM, there are many classifiers in the research areas of data mining and machine learning such as decision tree, naïve Bayesian, and neural networks. The performance of these classifiers in terms of precision varies depending on the characteristics of the datasets. We employed SVM in this project because SVM has been extensively studied for the purpose of sentiment analysis (Pang & Lee, 2008). The machine learning community has shown the robustness of SVM in different scenarios due to its flexibility for handling high-dimensional data, such as textual data. Although SVM is relatively accurate for prediction, it is a “black-box” method, meaning that it is very difficult for a researcher to explain *how* the SVM classifier derives the predictions. In contrast, some other classifiers, such as decision tree, can clearly illustrate the logical path for deriving the prediction, but the decision tree in general is less accurate than SVM. Therefore, we employed SVM together with content analysis for the current study.

### Results from content analysis of online comments

#### Type of attire/headscarf – *hijab*, *niqab* and *burqa*

In regard to posters’ perceptions and attitudes toward different types of headscarves, three themes emerged from the analysis we undertook to explain the reasons why people felt uncomfortable with *niqab* or *burqa* – (1) issues of identification, (2) issues relating to public safety, and (3) perceptions of the head coverings as a symbol of oppression. For example, a number of the posters wrote variations of the following comments:

There is a legitimate reason to be concerned over IDENTITY [emphasis poster's]. How do I know who the person is? At least the *hijab* doesn't obscure the face. [(a) 3]

I don't agree with a ban, but I do think there are times when it is reasonable to expect them to reveal their faces to prove identity. [(a) 58]

If a woman shows enough of her face (for safety and security reasons), let her dress whatever she wants. [(b) 81]

If you insist on hiding your face in public, I will assume you are up to no good, or more correctly, that your intent is to segregate yourself, which brings up the question of whether that is of your own free will or not. [(a) 85]

### Identification and public safety

Several posters held different viewpoints on face covering as it relates to identification and public safety. For example, one commenter wrote:

No one in this country can cover their faces in public without problems. This has to do with identity and nothing to do with religion. [(a) 48]

Another poster replied:

That is absolutely untrue! [...] people in Canada wear scarves over their faces in cold weather when they are outside "in public" and it has NEVER CAUSED PROBLEMS. Their identities are obscured and this HAS NEVER BEEN AN ISSUE. [emphases poster's] [(a) 45]

Indeed, as some posters pointed out, in addition to *niqab* and *burqa*, many items of apparel such as hoodies, face masks, protective head masks, balaclavas, military cadpat bandanas, motorcycle helmets, and sunglasses could be used to conceal personal identity, protect wearers from cool weather, and create private space. What makes these clothing items different than *niqab* and *burqa*? Some posters repeatedly stated that the situations in which face-covering items are used may greatly affect the perceptions of the observers. The following quotes from the comments demonstrate this perspective:

Walk into a bank with a ski mask on and you will find out immediately what the problem is when you cannot see someone's face. [(a) 48]

If I was a convenience store owner and someone came in to the shop wearing a balaclava on a cold day, I would expect them to remove it so that I could feel secure. Otherwise I would not serve them with balaclava, hood covering their face or a religious veil. Seeing a person's face allows identification. [(a) 49]

As Askins asserts, "emotions are contextual, embodied, and socially constructed [...] emotions are relational across relational spaces" (Askins, 2009). The meaning of face covering varies across different times, cultures and contexts. If someone wears a balaclava outdoors or ski mask on the ski hill in winter, observers may not feel uncomfortable or insecure. However, if a person wearing those face coverings appears inside a bank or a convenience store in the summer time, people may feel uneasy or nervous. Additionally, people with similar enculturation might tend to have a similar interpretation of an object. For example, while the *niqab* or *burqa* are considered the norm and widely accepted in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen, they may be difficult to understand or accept among non-Muslims in Western societies. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that the symbolic meaning of veiling is neither absolute nor stagnant, but is always in transition due to changing situations or socio-cultural contexts. In other words, people may perceive an identical material good or artefact differently in different situations.

I think the discomfort Westerners have for *niqab* and similar garments stems more from social convention than religion. Most Westerners consider it rude to wear sunglasses when being introduced for the first time, or when having an important conversation with someone. It's also generally considered rude to avoid eye contact. [(a) 64]

### Religion and modesty

Although some non-Muslims were concerned that Muslim women wore the headscarf because they were being coerced, a number of female Muslim posters (some of whom explicitly declared their faith in their comments) said that they wore the veil from personal choice and their decision to wear it was related to their relationship with God, and had nothing to do with their husbands. For example, one said:

I choose what I wear. I fully veil (except the eyes). [...] And my husband wanted me to QUIT veiling, but I chose to continue. Because how I dressed had nothing to do with my husband and everything to do with my relationship with God. [(a) 6]

Excerpts from other comments also supported this view point.

[What I wear] is an expression of my spirituality and an act that I believe to be pleasing to God. [(b) 5]

Many women wear what they do, as an expression of their faith. [(b) 14]

In a similar vein, a few Muslim female posters stated that they liked to dress modestly according to the *Qua'an's* teaching, and did not want to conform to secular values reflected in body-revealing clothing styles or sexualized beauty ideals. Their resistance to sexualized representations of female beauty in contemporary culture can be seen in some of their comments. Many of these women wanted to uphold their traditional and religious values, and to show that they felt proud to be Muslim. This finding is consistent with Haddad's study (2007) in the United States, which suggested that the veil became a symbol of rejection of foreign values after 9/11, and many young Muslim women were not afraid to wear their headscarves in public. Clearly, items of Islamic attire such as *hijab* and *niqab* may be worn for reasons of modesty, but the practice is also intertwined with social, cultural, spiritual and political meanings. They may embody internal values and give a sense of empowerment as well as serving as a public manifestation and proclamation.

On a related subject, a few posters questioned why women in North America can wear sexualized or immodest clothing without criticism and condemnation, but Islamic attire seems so often to be criticized and rejected by non-Muslims. As two posters wrote:

If women in America can be dressed half naked with no class, no modesty and very little to no self-respect then why can't Muslim women show modesty and self-respect? [(b) 105]

[She was] dressing with a modest headscarf and covering her body because she felt that her body was private and not for public viewing. [(b) 18]

Other posters wrote:

If you've read the Koran, you would know that the proscription isn't for women to cover themselves. The Koran tells people, both men and women, to dress modestly. [(b) 41]

Being modest is actually written into ALL the ancient texts and is a laudable morality [*sic*] for humans in general, I believe. [(a) 53]

As mentioned earlier, some posters (non-Muslims or people "against" *hijab*) felt uncomfortable and insecure because those who were wearing Muslim garb concealed their identity.

However, some Muslim females felt completely differently – they felt comfortable (both physically and psychologically), safe, and protected when they wore a *hijab* or *niqab*.

### Modesty and protection

Apart from the religious reasons, some Muslim posters expressed their view that wearing a headscarf was their own choice and that they did it for personal protection and safety. As one poster wrote:

I just wanted to say that no one forces Muslim women to wear a *burqa* or *hijab*, we wear it because it is our choice, yes it gets hot but we do it for God and for our own safety. [(b) 97]

However, posters overwhelmingly felt that Muslim women do not have to cover their faces to protect themselves or to keep men's eyes from their bodies. Reasons given for this opinion included the following: (1) men should be responsible for their own behaviour and action, not women; (2) it is not evident that revealing women's faces causes men to lose self-control; (3) sexual objectification may not necessarily link to certain attire or face-covering; and (4) men can control themselves from sinful thought and sexual desire.

Logically, if men can't be held responsible for their impulse control, then women covering up is not the answer. Make all the men wear locking chastity belts, and give their wives the key. Problem solved. [(b) 7]

While I agree that men need to be held responsible for their behavior, some literature on the subject suggests that men are far more stimulated by visual sexual cues than woman. [(b) 61]

In Canada there is no reason for women to hide their faces or bodies for fear of random men attacking them, we have the societal safeguards in place, so here the issue becomes quite the reverse – those hiding their identities [...] are advertising the idea that they do not believe our culture/country can protect them from male assault. [(a) 53]

Anecdotal evidence suggests that sexism may be associated with the objectification of women (Glick, Diebold, Bailey-Werner, & Zhu, 1997). For example, women who wear little clothing or clothing that is skin-tight may be more likely to be perceived as being immoral or promiscuous than are those who dress more conservatively (Grogan, 1999). In other words, the way people dress can play an influential role in how others view and judge them. Thus, it is not difficult to understand why some people link “sexy” or “provocative” dressing to sexual objectification, sexual harassment, and sex crimes. However, this conventional view is “undergoing a serious challenge sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly inspired by feminist thinking” (Kennedy, 1992, p. 1343). The meaning of dress could be interpreted or perceived differently depending on the perceiver and the social setting and context. For example, a woman dressed in conservative clothing can be seen as “very sexy,” and a woman dressed in provocative clothing may be seen as “sexless” in certain situations (Kennedy, 1992). According to Pollack (1990), some men will eroticize any form of female dress, and no specific style can absolutely repel the unwanted male gaze or sexual attention. In a similar vein, Kennedy (1992, p. 1356) asserted that “making everyone dress ‘conservatively’ wouldn't end and (my guess) probably wouldn't even reduce the amount of abuse.”

### Symbol of oppression

Some posters perceived *hijab* or *niqab* as a symbol of the oppression of Muslim women. This opinion is in line with the finding of O'Neill et al. (2014); in their study, a majority of their respondents considered the *niqab* as a symbol of oppression and believed that



accommodation had gone too far. However, Muslim posters in our study disagreed, saying, for example:

Almost all of my female relatives, and my mother wear a *niqab*, and each one of them does so by free will. If you were to ask them if they were “prisoners” behind their veils, they would very boldly tell you that they feel protected and feel greater freedom with the veil. [(a) 36]

I am a Muslim women and I wear *niqab*, and I am not oppressed. [(a) 67]

On the contrary, some felt that Muslim women were actually oppressed by those in Western cultures who would deny their right to wear a veil in public:

I’m not oppressed by my religion, but I certainly feel oppressed by Western society’s attitudes on Muslim women and Islam in general. [(a) 6]

Feminism is all about women’s right to self-determination. How can denying a woman the right to wear a veil in public be a victory for feminism? It is simply another form of oppression under the guise of an arrogant assumption. [(a) 45]

## Final remarks and insights

According to the *Migrant Integration Policy Index III* (2011), Canada was ranked as having the third-best integration policies in the world, after Sweden and Portugal. Although Canada provides one of the better examples of accommodating newcomers – managing the growing diversity, and preventing social exclusion and marginalization as much as possible – “the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ has come under sustained pressure and criticism on a number of fronts” (Hersi, 2014, p. 595) It is evident that newcomers including Muslim immigrants want to be accepted and treated equally in a new socio-cultural environment. They are constantly searching for comforting stability and boundaries. However, integration is a two-way street – effort is required by Muslims to assimilate, but also by non-Muslims to accept them.

The veiling or *hijab* discourse analysed in the current study clearly reveals some misunderstandings among the online readers. Although clothing may provide some information about an individual, it is impossible to tell a complete or meaningful life story of a person from what he or she wears. In other words, a viewer’s interpretations of another person’s attire are not always accurate or in line with the wearer’s intentions. Without fully understanding the user’s intention and background, misunderstanding, stigmatizing or even demonizing of a person may occur. As Feinberg, Mataro, and Burroughs (1992) point out, it is almost impossible to determine all aspects of an individual through his/her clothing. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that the meaning of *hijab* cannot be communicated accurately if the signal is unclear or incomplete – without a mutual agreement and understanding. Nevertheless, *hijab* or veiling plays a central role in the lives of many Muslim women. It is evident that many Muslim immigrants are struggling with various tensions and conflicting ideologies and values (traditional vs contemporary, Eastern vs. Western, secular vs. spiritual). Clearly, the willingness to accept and adopt different culture varies among individuals as well as generations. Mead (1978) suggested that cultural changes can be categorized into three different types according to the magnitude and rate of the change: (1) postfigurative/slow change; (2) configurative/moderate change, and (3) prefigurative/rapid change. Therefore, in the matter of clothing choice, as in other areas, immigrants and hyphenated populations should not be viewed as a homogeneous group. This study

does not merely reveal the posters' opinions and concerns regarding Islamic attire, but also provides insights and information about the symbolic meaning of the headscarf and the cultural differences it represents.

Most of the debates in the online discussions we analysed were related to modesty and immodesty, identity and security, veil and unveil, oppression and liberty, and secularism and Islamism. Several posters expressed their view that the *hijab* should not be used as a yardstick or indicator of a person's level of integration. In order to avoid misinterpretation, reduce confusion, and circumvent ignorance, education on Islamic culture and ethnic attire are deemed to be important to the public. By educating the public about different cultures and different faiths through projects, workshops, and seminars will lead to greater understanding, break down cultural barriers, decrease prejudice, stereotyping and discrimination, and hopefully reduce social problems. For example, in the case of Islam, such initiatives as Islamic art and design activities, collaborative fashion projects (e.g. a contemporary *hijab* design project, multicultural fashion shows) could be proposed and developed within a community to serve this purpose. Apart from Islam-focused activities, programs and projects related to Canadian culture and values (e.g. equality, diversity, identity, modesty) can be promoted to improve social cohesion.

It is important to provide social and networking opportunities to Canadian communities to create a link between Muslims and non-Muslims, as well as to find ways to bridge the cultural divide and reduce misunderstandings within our society.

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