QUÉBÉCOIS FRANCOPHONE ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN WEARING THE HIJAB AND NIQAB: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE "CHARTE DES VALEURS QUÉBÉCOISES"

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Using computer generated photos, this study investigated Québécois Francophone attitudes toward women wearing the Islamic veil and toward immigrants in Québec. Results revealed that Québécois Francophones had the least favourable attitudes toward a woman wearing the niqab followed by one wearing the Catholic veil and one wearing the hijab. The most favourable attitudes were held toward a woman dressed in western clothing. Analyses showed that negative attitudes toward Arab Muslim immigrants were correlated with unfavourable attitudes toward women wearing the hijab and the niqab.

In Québec as in Canada, the Islamic veil has become the flashpoint of intergroup tensions between Christian host communities and immigrants of Arab Muslim background (Biles & Ibrahim, 2002). In French Québec, perceptions of Arab Muslims are aggravated by the wearing of the Islamic veil in public spaces such as the street and within state institutions of the Province. In the autumn of 2013 the Parti Québécois Government proposed the Charter of Québec values as part of its identity platform designed to win its bid for an early re-election from a minority to a majority Government. Known as "la Charte des valeurs québécoises" (Bill 60) the law proposed a modification of the Québec Charter of human rights and freedoms to in effect legislate Muslim, Jewish and Sikh employees to either remove their religious signs at work or be expelled from Québec State jobs including the public administration, the courts, municipalities, hospitals, social services, daycares, schools, colleges and universities. However the proposed law allowed religious symbols such as the Catholic cross to prevail in institutions such as the Québec National Assembly in the name of its cultural significance for the Québécois Francophone majority. In essence, this Charter targeted mainly the few Muslim women actually employed in the Québec provincial government who also happened to wear the hijab, thus unsettling vulnerable religious minorities about the legitimacy and security of their position as valued members of Québec society.

To what degree did this Charter of Québec values proposed by the nationalist Parti Québécois Government cater to underlying prejudicial attitudes towards Arab Muslims and especially toward women wearing the Islamic veil? The present study was conducted in 2007 and explored Québécois Francophone attitudes towards women wearing the hijab and the niqab during the Québécois debate on "unreasonable accommodation" during the Bouchard-Taylor commission (2008). Together these debates stigmatised the presence of Muslim women wearing the hijab and the niqab in an avowed secular Québec society (Milot, 2008).

As with speech style, dress styles can serve as a marker of religious affiliation, gender, geographical and ethnic origin, profession, and social class. Majority reactions towards religious dress styles can be polarized given the perceived voluntary nature of their adoption by religious minorities. There are different types of Islamic veils worn not only across Muslim countries, but also in receiving societies of the western world. In line with religious prescriptions requiring women to dress modestly, many Muslim women wear a scarf covering their hair, but not the face: a veil commonly known as the "hijab". The hijab is the most commonly worn Islamic veil in Muslim countries and in western societies, including Europe and North America. The "niqab" is prescribed mainly in Saudi Arabia and is a black cloth covering the whole body and entire face, leaving only the eyes visible. The niqab is rarely worn in receiving countries of the western world but is the focus of much media attention and is being banned from public spaces in a growing number of European countries including Belgium and France (Welch, 2007). Despite sustained alarmist media attention, it is estimated that less than 50 women actually wear the niqab in Québec (Ouimet, 2007).

Interview studies have sought to understand the Islamic veil from the point of view of Muslim women who wear it (Alvi, Hoodfar, & McDonough, 2003). For many Muslim women settled in western democracies, the veil can symbolize personal and collective identification with particular varieties of the Islamic faith, while it can also serve as a marker of social differentiation from the Christian mainstream. Qualitative interviews with veiled women in Montreal and Toronto have shown that the veil can also be worn by Muslim women for strategic reasons related to freedom of movement and individual upward mobility (Hoodfar, 2003). Furthermore, wearing the veil can be used to reassure Muslim family members that one remains loyal to the precepts of Islam while pursuing western educational and professional achievements not otherwise acceptable without wearing the Islamic veil (Hoodfar, 2001).

Host communities of the western world are often ambivalent or hostile toward Muslim women who wear the Islamic veil in public settings. Attitudes toward the hijab and especially the niqab are very negative in the European Union (Allen & Nielsen, 2002). For example, a study measured Belgian host majority attitudes toward the Islamic veil, subtle prejudice, and anti-Arab attitudes (Saroglou, Lamkaddem, van Pachterbeke & Buxant, 2009). Results showed that willingness to ban the veil and being uncomfortable with its use were related to subtle prejudice against immigrants in general and strong scores on the anti-Arab western ethnocentrism scale. The study concluded that "aversion toward the veil thus seems to reflect both ethnic prejudice and anti-religious disposition" (p.427).

In Québec, the Islamic veil also triggers negative reactions and is seen by many as a religious symbol challenging fundamental French Canadian values (Lepicq & Ciceri, 2001). Muslim women wearing the hijab and niqab are seen by some as a threat to the hard fought equal rights achieved by the women's movement of the last fifty years as well as the secular gains achieved in Québec after a century of struggle against the domination of the Catholic Church (Baril & Lamonde, 2013). Some also perceive the veil as a political symbol of the rising power of religious fundamentalism in the world, while others perceive it as a refusal by immigrant Muslim women to integrate within mainstream Francophone society in Québec (Benhabib, 2009; McDonough, 2003).

The Québec government selected immigrants from North Africa because, as former French colonies, much of its educated population were French/Arabic bilinguals. As a result, more than 85% of the Arab background population in Québec speaks French thus contributing to the ascendency of the French speaking majority in the Province. However, as a sizable proportion of immigrants from Arab countries are

Muslims, they tend to be perceived negatively by Québécois Francophones (Antonius, 2002; Helly, 2004). Census data showed that the Arab Muslim population of Québec increased from 108,620 in 2001 to 243,430 in 2011, thus representing 3.1% of the Québec population whose majority remains overwhelming of Christian background (82.2%). Attitude studies showed that Québécois Francophone undergraduates were least comfortable with Arab Muslims and evaluated them less favourably than other immigrant groups, while feeling more threatened by their presence than by other immigrant groups including Haitians and West Indians (Bourhis, Barrette, & Moriconi, 2008; Montreuil, Bourhis, & Vanbeselaere, 2004).

Negative attitudes toward Arab Muslims can be aggravated by the issue of the Islamic veil. A public opinion survey showed that 62% of Québec Francophones believed that Muslim women who wear the Islamic veil pose a problem for Québec society (Roy & Gagné, 2007). Another polling survey found that 57% of Québec respondents thought the Québec government should ban religious signs such as the Islamic veil worn by some civil servants in the public administration (Castonguay, 2010). Because the niqab covers the whole face, public attitudes toward this type of veil are more negative than those toward the hijab. In March 2010, a Muslim woman wearing the niqab was expelled from a French language course offered to new immigrants by the Québec Government at a college in Montreal. Following this incident, the Québec Liberal government proposed Bill 94 banning the niqab from the public administration, schools, and hospitals. At that time a public opinion poll showed that 95% of Quebecers and 80% of Canadians supported a ban on the niqab for all employees of provincial and municipal government institutions (Angus Reid Public Opinion, 2010). However, Bill 94 was allowed to die at the end of the legislative session of the Québec National Assembly in 2012.

Other than snapshot opinion polls concerning the Islamic veil, few detailed social psychological studies investigated host majority attitudes toward the hijab and niqab. Given the contentious issue of the Islamic veil in Québec, our study was designed to assess attitudes endorsed by Québécois Francophones in Montreal.

Québécois Francophone undergraduates completed a questionnaire containing photos of a woman dressed in western clothing, dressed as a Catholic nun, wearing a hijab, and wearing a niqab. Participants were asked to give their impressions of each woman depicted in the photos. We expected attitudes to vary depending on the dress code of the stimulus women. The white woman in the photo wearing western clothing was the most similar to our Québécois Francophone participants and could be perceived as an ingroup member. Reflecting the classic ingroup favouritism effect, Francophone undergraduates were expected to have the most favourable attitudes toward the woman dressed in western clothing (Brown, 2010). We included a picture of a woman dressed as a Catholic nun with the veil and cross because Catholicism was an important dimension of French Canadian identity and it was only a generation ago that Québec pupils were taught by veiled Catholic nuns (McDonough, 2003). Despite the fact that the majority of Québec Francophones categorise themselves as Catholics, we expected attitudes toward the woman dressed as a nun to be less favourable than toward the woman wearing secular western clothing, but more favourable than women wearing the Islamic veil, who are both religiously and ethnically dissimilar from Québécois Francophones. We expected attitudes to be even less favourable toward the woman wearing the niqab than the one wearing the hijab. By virtue of covering the whole face other than the eyes, the niqab represents a more extreme manifestation of religious differentiation than the more familiar hijab.

METHOD

Only participants who were born in Québec, had French as their mother tongue, whose parents were born in Québec, and self-identified as Québécois Francophone were retained for the analyses. The final sample of respondents consisted of seventy-six Québécois Francophone undergraduates enrolled in the Faculty of Education of l'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). These education undergraduates are the future teachers to be employed in the Francophone primary and secondary school system of greater Montreal with its mainly multiethnic, multilingual and multi-religious pupil population. The mean age of the students was 22.7 years; 32 were male and 44 were female.

A white French-Canadian male experimenter dressed in western clothing distributed French language questionnaires to UQAM education undergraduates during class time. Following the instructional set voiced in French, participants completed the 30 minute questionnaire, returned it to the experimenter, and were debriefed in class.

FIGURE 1: PHOTOS OF SAME COMPUTER GENERATED IMAGE OF A FEMALE DRESSED IN DIFFERENT ATTIRE



Western Nun Hijab Niqab

On each page of the questionnaire, black and white photos of the same computer generated image of a white female in the following attire were shown to participants: western clothing, nun clothing, wearing a hijab, wearing a niqab (see Figure 1). Participants rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1= Never / None;

7= Always / All) each of the photos on the following five items: How often have you personally seen women dressed this way on the street, in stores, at University, or in health clinics? How many women dressed this way have you had as a friend or colleague? How much would you like a woman dressed this way as a close friend? How much do you like the way this person is dressed? How religious is this person? Attitudes toward each stimulus photo were also measured on a 7-point Likert Scale (1 = Not at all, 4 = Moderately; 7 = Very much) using the following five items: I think this person is attractive; friendly; intelligent; competent; threatening.

More general ethnic attitudes toward different immigrant groups in Québec were also measured using the thermometer scale ranging from very unfavourable (0˚), to neutral (50˚), to very favourable (100˚) (Esses, Haddock, & Zanna, 1993). Favourability ratings were obtained for the following six groups: Québec Francophones, Québec Anglophones, French immigrants, Chinese immigrants, Haitian immigrants and Arab Muslim immigrants. An intergroup bias score was computed for each target group in the following manner. First, an overall favourability score was computed toward all ethnic outgroups other than Québec Francophones. Then, the overall attitude toward outgroups was subtracted from the score given by a respondent for each target group. These difference scores were used as measures of intergroup bias toward each target group. A positive score indicates that the target group was more favourably rated than all ethnic outgroups taken together, while a negative score means that the target group was less favourably rated than all the ethnic outgroups taken together.

RESULTS

As seen in Figure 2, Québécois Francophones reported mostly seeing women dressed in western clothing in public settings. They often saw women wearing the hijab while they seldom saw Catholic nuns and they rarely saw women wearing the niqab. Participants reported having mostly friends and colleagues dressed like themselves in western clothing, but almost none wearing the hijab or Catholic veil and none at all wearing the niqab. As regards preferences for close friends, Québécois Francophones preferred women dressed like them followed by women wearing the hijab, while Catholic nuns and niqab-wearing Muslims were least desired. Participants liked western clothing most, followed by the hijab while the Catholic veil and the niqab were least preferred. Results in Figure 2 also show that participants rated the Catholic nun as the most religious, followed by the Muslim woman wearing the niqab. The woman wearing the hijab was rated as highly religious, while the woman dressed in western clothing was rated as least religious.

FIGURE 2: RATING WOMEN WEARING WESTERN CLOTHING, MUSLIM HIJAB, THE CATHOLIC VEIL AND THE MUSLIM NIQAB. QUÉBÉCOIS FRANCOPHONES AT UQAM

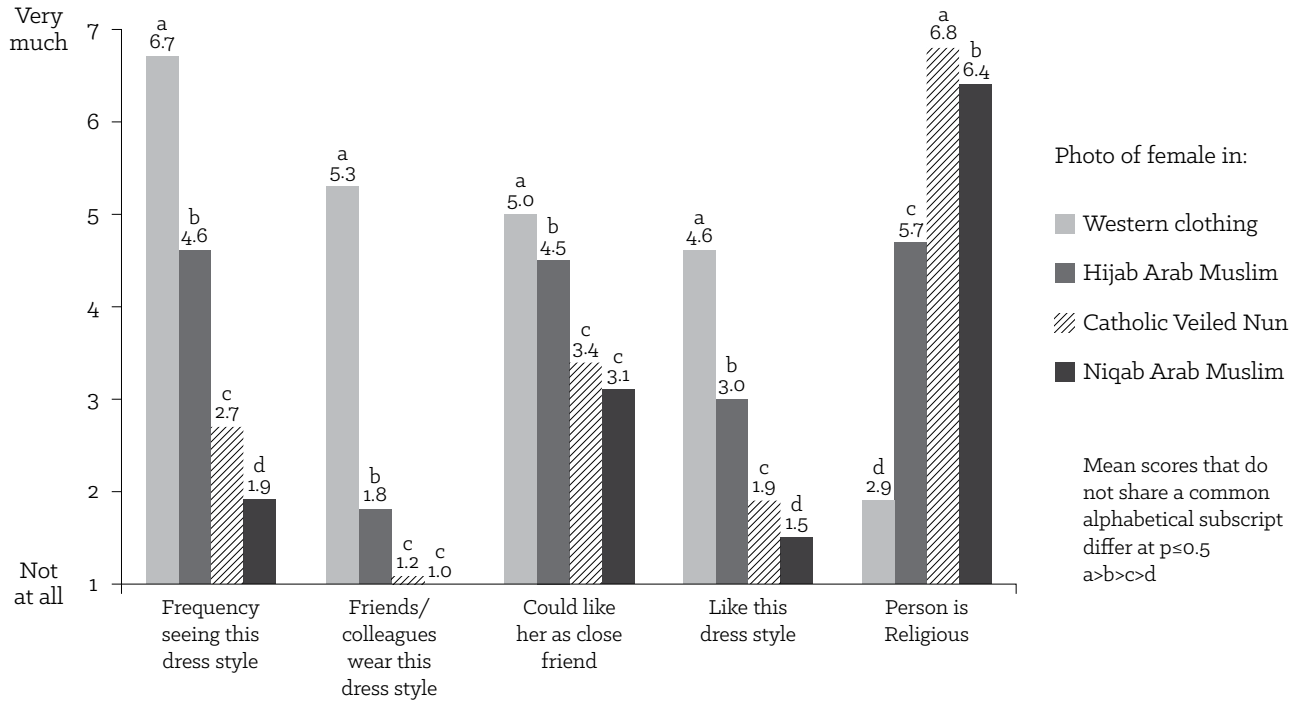


FIGURE 3: EVALUATIVE RATINGS WOMEN WEARING WESTERN CLOTHING, MUSLIM HIJAB, THE CATHOLIC EVIL AND THE MUSLIM NIQAB. QUÉBÉCOIS FRANCOPHONES AT UQAM

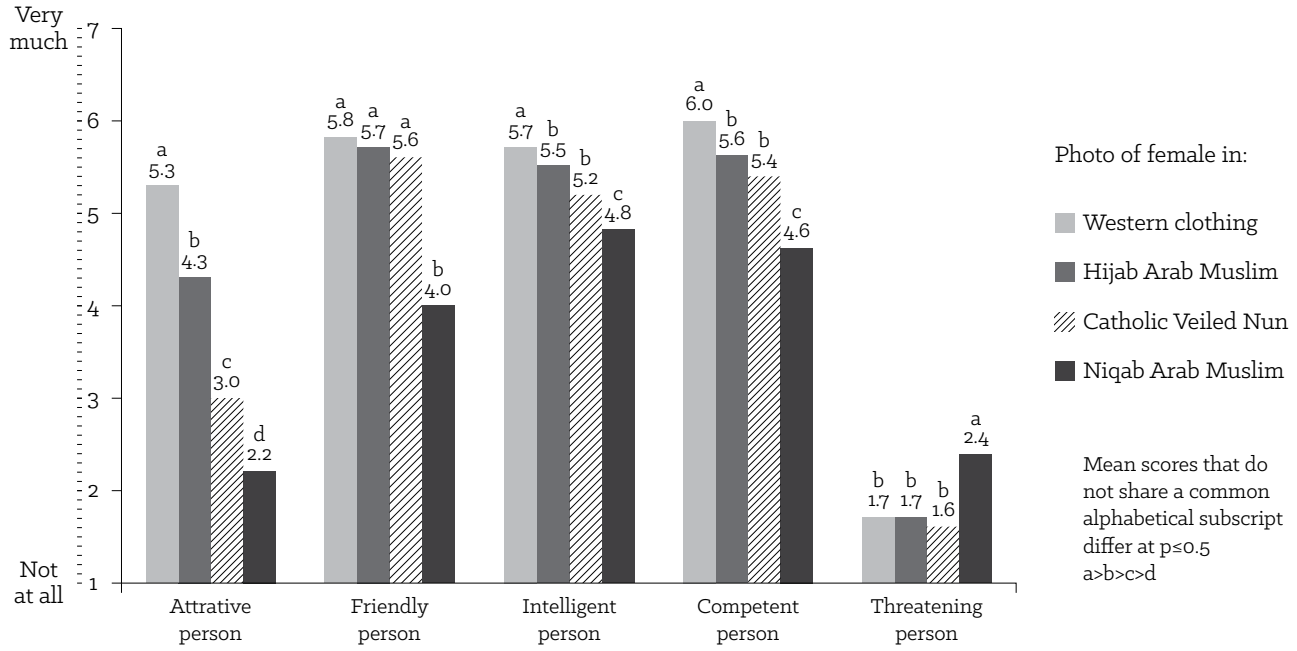


Figure 3 reveals some of the perceptions Québécois Francophones had regarding women dressed in religious dress styles compared to a woman like them wearing western clothing. In terms of attractiveness, they rated the woman wearing the niqab as the least attractive followed by the woman dressed as a nun. The woman wearing the hijab was rated moderately attractive while the woman dressed in western clothing was perceived as most attractive. Figure 3 also shows that Québécois Francophones rated the woman wearing the niqab as less friendly, less intelligent, less competent than all the other women depicted in the photos. The woman dressed in western clothing was rated more intelligent and competent than the Muslim woman wearing the hijab and the woman wearing the Catholic veil. Québec Francophones did not feel any of the women depicted in the photos were particularly threatening except for the one wearing the niqab which was slightly threatening.

Ethnic attitudes, measured with the Thermometer scale and calculated as difference scores, showed the classic ingroup favouritism effect. Québécois Francophones expressed strong ingroup favouritism as is evident of their highly favourable rating of Québec Francophones (M = 13.96). They reported more favourable attitudes toward immigrants from France (M = 4.31) than toward Haitian immigrants (M = -1.77) and Chinese immigrants (M = -2.62).Despite their ancestral minority status in Québec, Québec Anglophones were rated less favourably (M = -5.33) than immigrants from France and visible minority immigrants such as Haitians and Chinese. As predicted, Québécois Francophones expressed the least favourable attitudes toward Arab Muslim immigrants (M = -8.54).

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to test if attitudes toward the Islamic veil were related to favourability ratings of Arab Muslim immigrants on the Thermometer scale. We collapsed the attitudes items – attractive, friendly, intelligent, and competent – used in the rating of each dress codes (western, nun, hijab, and niqab) to create a "favourable attitude" score. Results showed no significant correlation between favourable attitudes toward the woman wearing western clothing and the Catholic veil in the photos and attitudes toward Arab Muslim immigrants on the thermometer scale. However, results revealed a significant positive correlation between unfavourable ratings of the women wearing the hijab ($r(74) = .42$, $p < .001$) and the niqab ($r(74) = .32$, $p < .001$) and unfavourable ratings of Arab Muslim immigrants. Clearly, negative ratings of Arab Muslims in general were related to the rejection of women wearing the hijab and especially the niqab.

DISCUSSION

In line with the classic ingroup favouritism effect, Québécois Francophones had more favourable attitudes toward the secular ingroup woman dressed in western clothing than toward outgroup women dressed in the hijab and niqab. Participants expressed the least favourable attitudes toward the Muslim woman wearing the niqab: she was seen as least intelligent and competent, least attractive and friendly and

more threatening than all the other stimulus women depicted in the photos. These results are concordant with the wider debate against wearing the niqab and public opinion against the full-face veil across Québec. In a September 2013 national poll dealing with opinions towards the Charter of Québec values, results showed that 90% of Québec respondents were against the full-face veil worn not only by Government public servants but also by individual citizens seeking services from government institutions (Léger, 2013). The same poll showed that 49% of Québécois Francophones were in favour of the Charter of Québec values, while 72% of Québec Anglophones were against it along with 66% of Allophones. By February 2014, a CROP polls showed that Québécois Francophone support for the Charter increased to 68%, while rejection of the Charter remained strong amongst Anglophones and Allophones at over 75% (Leduc, 2014). It remains that up to 2014, it is the rejection of full-face veils (niqab) which remains most consensual across the usual linguistic and rural/urban divides in Québec.

As expected, Québécois Francophones perceived the Muslim woman wearing the hijab to be less desirable as a close friend, less attractive, intelligent and competent than the ingroup woman dressed in western clothing. As was found in Belgium, results confirmed that unfavourable attitudes toward Arab Muslim immigrants in general were correlated with negative attitudes toward the hijab and niqab. Such results were obtained with well-educated Québécois Francophones attending university in downtown Montreal where there is plenty of opportunity to see and meet Muslim women wearing the hijab. This banal prejudice against veiled women may help account for some of the indifference towards the plight of Muslim women who, under the Charter, may have to choose between expressing their religious identity through wearing the hijab and keeping their job in Québec government institutions.

Contrary to our hypothesis, Québec Francophones did not rate the woman dressed as a Catholic nun more favourably than the woman wearing the hijab: both types of veiled women were devalued on intelligence and competence while the nun was rated less attractive and desirable as a close friend than the Muslim woman wearing the hijab. These results may reflect Québec's secularization following decades of control by the Catholic Church until the late 1950s. Ambivalent attitudes toward the woman wearing the Catholic veil may be linked with this memory of Catholic supremacy opposing the emancipation of women in Québec society. While the virtual disappearance of veiled Catholic nuns from Québec society has drawn little public attention, it is the arrival of Muslim veiled women that has aroused the most concern in the media and in public discourse. That Québécois Francophones were unfavourably disposed towards both the veiled Catholic nun and the Muslim woman wearing the hijab reflect the secular concerns of these respondents. It is such concerns along with unfavourable perceptions of Arab Muslims that may help account for Québécois Francophone support for the Charter of Québec values which nevertheless maintains key symbols of Catholicism in public settings justified as historical icons of Québécois Francophone mainstream culture. Adoption of the Charter (Bill 60) is decried not only by Muslim, Jewish and Sikh minorities, but also by civil rights advocates who see the law as stigmatizing and segregationist, undermining the integration of vulnerable religious minorities in Québec. Such an analysis of the Charter was given by a McGill University health professional who noted that:

> *"Excluding personal expressions of culture, religion and spirituality by employees working in public institutions will prevent people from learning about each other and will lead to more stereotyping, discrimination and social exclusion. The charter will thus undermine efforts to build a tolerant and inclusive society, and will increase ethnic conflict both at home and abroad. It is a major step backward in the effort to build a pluralistic society committed to human rights"*
> L. J. Kirmayer, et al., (2013)

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