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Unveiling the Veil: Examining the Stereotyping of Hijab in Internet Memes and GIFs

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This study uses a quantitative content analysis of memes and GIFs to contribute to the visual communication literature on digital user-generated visuals. To explore whether these digital user-generated artifacts reinforce or challenge common stereotypes of Muslim women and hijab compared with nonuser-generated media, the researchers analyzed 1,000 Internet memes and GIFs shared using the hashtag #Hijab following the 2019 Christchurch mosques attacks in New Zealand. The analysis reveals significant differences between memes and GIFs, both demonstrating general support for the hijab. Memes often employ humor and sarcasm, whereas GIFs focus on conveying positive emotions and direct engagement with viewers. In contrast to nonuser-generated media, which frequently presents Muslim women as oppressed, exotic, or radical, user-generated content predominantly depicts hijabis in more progressive, empowering ways. The findings suggest that user-generated visuals on digital media could significantly influence public perceptions of Muslim women by providing more nuanced portrayals. The study underscores the importance of examining memes and GIFs separately because of their distinctive content and communicative approaches, advocating for further exploration of their impact on societal discourse.

Keywords: visual communication, memes, GIFs, veil, hijab, Muslims, Muslim women, social media, stereotyping, terrorism, content analysis

On March 15, 2019, New Zealand witnessed the first ever real-time broadcasted terror attack when a White supremacist gunman opened fire, targeting Muslims in two mosques during the Friday prayer, killing 50 and injuring another 50, all while live-streaming footage of his rampage on Facebook ("*Christchurch Shootings*," 2019). Being broadcasted on one of the most popular social media platforms, the attack caused

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worldwide shock waves and spurred social media discussions of Islamophobia as a global phenomenon. Online discussions also centered on Muslim women and the hijab after New Zealand's prime minister wore it as a sign of empathy toward Muslims and solidarity with victims and their families. Soon after, women across New Zealand, including TV anchors and newsreaders, donned the hijab as well to support the Muslim community (Baynes, 2019). Following these events, hijab emerged as a topic of online discussion, with memes and GIFs frequently accompanied by the hashtag #hijab.

Memes and GIFs are heavily used digital communication tools. Internet memes refer to photos including a unit of information, idea, or belief that replicates via the Internet; GIFs are bitmap image-formats, or low-quality no-sound video clips. These user-generated tools that are known for their "viralability" are now central components of online communication, displacing textual-formats for sharing or discussing ideas (Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

However, studies analyzing memes and GIFs are not proportional with the tools' widespread popularity on digital spaces. A review of available literature suggests that researchers have discussed their role in marketing campaigns, civic participation, digital persuasion, and political events (i.e., Beskow, Kumar, & Carley, 2020; Kao, Hong, Perusse, & Sheng, 2020). However, most of these studies tackled their rapid spread online, with limited work analyzing their textual/visual content or discussing their representation of different societal groups. Given the Internet's accessibility as a platform for hate speech and extremism-related activities (Udupa & Pohjonen, 2019), and the impact of online hate speech on modern societies, this study analyzes the memes and GIFs circulating online in the hijab debate to uncover whether these visuals reinforce common cultural and religious stereotypes of veiled Muslim women who are usually found in nonuser-generated visuals.

The veil, headscarf, or hijab—the term used for the veil in Muslim women wear—has long been the focus of fierce international media discourse. Muslim women's body coverage has recently symbolized the clash of civilizations associated with Islamic extremism and global terrorism (Bowe, Gosen, & Fahmy, 2019). However, despite that association and the global rise of Islamophobia, the hijab's online visual representation is still a topic that has not been sufficiently investigated.

We investigate the portrayal of veiled women in user-generated memes and GIFs that were uploaded following New Zealand's attacks, by employing a quantitative content analysis that examines both textual and visual representations of hijab in 1,000 Internet memes and GIFs. Although significant differences between memes and GIFs were noted, both user-generated tools displayed support for hijab. Moreover, unlike the often biased and racism-spreading representation of Muslim women in nonuser-generated visuals, where they are regarded as either oppressed and subservient, evil and terrorizing, or sexy and exotic (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Khan & Zahra, 2015; Shaheen, 2001), memes and GIFs mostly did not exhibit similar negative stereotypical representations of Muslim women.

What are Memes?

The earliest definition of "meme" was given by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976. The term was coined to describe units of cultural transformation that are analogous to genes, to explain cultural

evolution (Shifman, 2014). Memes are regarded as anything with the ability to be transferred among people, such as songs, catchphrases, or images (Piata, 2016). With the advent of digital technology, the term "Internet meme" was coined. Internet memes are defined as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by internet-users, creating shared cultural experiences" (Shifman, 2013, p. 67). The most common idea of an Internet meme is a viral picture with a text message (Gil, 2019). Internet memes, which are seen as patterned combinations of image and text, have become an established subgenre of visual communication through widespread online reproduction (Segev, Nissenbaum, Stolero, & Shifman, 2015).

Memes are seen as an online "genre of humor and creativity" (Dainas, 2015, p. 59). They were quickly adopted for being infectious, appealing, satirical, humorous, or universal, and are referred to as "satirical humor for public commentary" (Milner, 2013, p. 2359). This humorous side of memes is why researchers suggest they may engender a norm of tolerance for offensiveness or discrimination to certain societal groups (Merritt, O'Brien, & Ruscher, 2020). The interest in meme research has grown exponentially, with scholars highlighting their use for political/cultural communication, marketing/branding communication, and digital activism (Beskow et al., 2020; Kao et al., 2020; Williams, 2020). Most current meme literature, however, consists of qualitative studies (Hakoköngäs, Halmesvaara, & Sakki, 2020), with fewer studies focusing on quantitative analyses of memes and their online use (Makhortykh & Aguilar, 2020).

What are GIFs?

GIFs were first created in 1987 by CompuServe engineer Steve Wilhite as an image file format that uses lossless data compression, with no maximum resolution that can display up to 256 colors out of a palette of millions. During early Internet stages, GIFs were ideal to add visual content/movement to a website at a time of limited bandwidth and less advanced video- and image-editing software (Eppink, 2014).

Because of presenting more visual imagery compared with images, while simultaneously taking less time to produce compared with videos, GIFs became a popular visual tool on mobile apps and websites (Li, Li, Lin, & Qiu, 2023). Research suggests that GIFs became means for online users to reproduce nonlinguistic cues, such as bodily actions and facial expressions in their online written interaction, making it possible for social media users to express emotion and affect, by translating nonlinguistic cues that people have in face-to-face conversations into the digital world (Schneebeli, 2019).

GIFs are snippets put on loop to be shared on social media or added to repositories, such as Giphy or Imgur. The most agreed upon GIF format is a low-quality soundless video, repeated on loop and specifically created for social media sharing. The unique combination of GIFs' features, constraints, and affordances led it to be among the most current dominant and engaging communication tools. GIFs' high storytelling and meaning-making capabilities, animation, lack of sound, consumption immediacy, low bandwidth, minimal time demands, and utility for expressing emotions, as well as making use of preexisting media items and applying them in new and unrelated contexts to invoke a reaction/emotion, all contributed to their online popularity (Bakhshi et al., 2016; Highfield & Leaver, 2016).

GIFs are ideal for enhancing the performance of affect and demonstration of cultural knowledge (Miltner & Highfield, 2017); they allow communicating reactions and/or feelings that would otherwise be

prohibited using only written text (Aharoni, 2019), and they create new meanings in the process of exchange, as their layers accumulate, bearing traces of where they have been (McCarthy, 2017).

Although GIFs are independently employed for political purposes (Dean, 2019), in advertising and marketing campaigns and in digital activism (Ge, 2019; Li et al., 2023; Mufson, 2017), and despite their uniqueness as quickly loaded visual storytelling tools that offer short, concise, specific messages to invoke emotions or underline humor (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), some scholars still consider them to be a subset of Internet memes (Heiskanen, 2017). Additionally, most studies discussing GIFs tend to apply one of two disciplinary lenses: computer science or linguistics with fewer studies examining the content of the visuals (Li et al., 2023). Based on this, we examine GIFs independently from memes in the present study to highlight any differences between both user-generated visuals, if any.

Theoretical Framework: Stereotyping

In the absence of a corpus of literature tackling hijab representation, especially in digital media, this study finds theoretical grounding in the framework of stereotyping, to analyze the portrayal of veiled women in user-generated visuals.

Walter Lippmann (2007) first studied stereotyping, noting that pictures or ideas people hold in their minds are not shaped solely by personal experiences but also by what we learn from others. Fifty years later, Goffman (1976) coined the frame analysis theory, providing a theoretical basis for the stereotyping process (Rodgers & Thorson, 2000). According to Hamilton, Sherman, and Ruvolo (1990), a stereotype is an oversimplified opinion that can be identified by examining the way a certain group of people is portrayed; it is a cognitive structure that forms the beliefs/attitudes about a particular group. There are different types of stereotypes that usually target minority groups based on different characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and social class (Pratto & Pitpitan, 2008; Quinn, 2020). Visual stereotypes emphasize cultural traits rather than individual characteristics, overshadowing individuals' unique qualities to depict them as "social categories" (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001). These visual stereotypes can be subtle and unnoticed at first, but they gain strength through consistent repetition in different contexts (Özcan, 2015).

Muslim Women Representation: Between Gender, Religious, and Cultural Stereotypes

Gender Stereotyping of Women

Goffman (1976) argued that women have been portrayed as sexy, dependent, uncompetitive, passive, and shy in media. "The content of the media distorts women's status in the social world," explained Tuchman (1979, p. 531). From depicting them as sex objects, submissive humans, to victims, females have long suffered from negative media stereotypes. Stereotyping research has concluded that women, just as elderly and minorities, are either absent from media or depicted in inferior stereotypical roles in which their achievements are deemphasized (Ali & Batool, 2015). Nevertheless, recent research shows that new digital media tools have been used in online movements for women empowerment purposes (Fahmy & Ibrahim, 2021).

Religious Stereotyping of Muslims

Both Islam as a religion and Muslims as individuals are often portrayed as violent in media (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Using visual representations and language in news, movies, cartoons, and magazine stories, media and popular culture participated in the construction of an evil Arab Muslim stereotype that encompasses various people, ideas, beliefs, religions, and assumptions. Researchers have long argued that Muslim Arabs are regularly stereotyped negatively in the media. Shaheen (2001) suggested a tendency within the U.S. media to portray Muslim Arabs as uncivilized others. Moore, Mason, and Lewis (2008) reported that 36% of news stories about British Muslims were about terrorism. Wigger (2019) found them represented as criminals and sexual perpetrators. Merskin (2009) also adds that after the 9/11 attacks, different types of U.S. media characterized Muslims as monolithic evil terrorists and often referred to them using words like "demons" and "wanted: dead or alive."

As for Muslim women, they are marginalized in media. Research shows that they are usually visually represented in overgeneralized ways: either as oppressed, subordinate, and submissive others, or as liberated progressives who refuse to adhere to Western hegemony (Khan & Zahra, 2015). They are portrayed as weak, uneducated passives who hold no real authority over their own lives (Bindi, 2014). Muslim women suffered through various negative stereotypes, from being portrayed in submissive roles (Fahmy, 2004) or stereotyped as backward, illiterate, oppressed victims of barbaric societies, and/or closely aligned to terrorism (Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, 2012).

Cultural Stereotyping of Eastern Women

Throughout history, dating back to the European colonization of the East, Western visual narratives have consistently portrayed individuals from the East as exotic and antiquated Orients, a concept that Edward Said (1978) refers to as Orientalism. Orientalism acted as a means to assert the Western superiority over the East, therefore, justifying Western colonialism and imperialism, as Arabs, Asians, and Middle Eastern people were culturally stereotyped and shown to be inferior, subservient, and in need of saving by Westerners (Said, 1978).

Although such representations initiated at the time of European colonization, research shows that throughout the centuries, the cultural stereotyping and othering of Eastern people continued; a recent survey study found that nearly half of Middle Eastern characters on entertainment television are portrayed as terrorism supporters (Hawkins, Coles, Saleem, Moorman, & Aqel, 2022).

As for Eastern women, historically, their representations mainly consisted of being depicted as submissive sexual objects of desire, as shown in the harem paintings from the Western gaze (Zeiny & Yusof, 2016), a view that stayed largely the same in modern popular western media, such as movies and television, where they were shown as passive victims of male dominance who satisfy male sexual fantasies (Haddad, Smith, & Moore, 2006).

Visualizing the Veil/Hijab

Most representations of Muslim women involve them wearing traditional Islamic clothing such as the veil, and their role in the media is generally limited to commentary on issues such as the hijab (Posetti, 2007). Veiled Muslim women are often stereotyped as passive, incompetent, and in desperate need of saving (Bindi, 2014). The heavy representation of Muslim women as oppressed reached a point in the 20th century that unveiling became a symbol of modernity, gender equality, and progression in the West (Ahmed, 2011). Lorber (2002) added a new media stereotype of the veiled woman as a terrorist, which first appeared on screens after the first Palestinian woman suicide-bombing occurred, and it portrayed veiled women as aggressive and fundamental. Veiled women are not always linked to terrorism, but as the veil itself gets portrayed in media as a symbol of fundamentalism and terrorism, it is quite possible that veiled women can be seen in the future as terrorists or fundamentalists (Schønemann, 2013).

Todd (1998) suggests that media coverage of veiling has gone far beyond a piece of clothing, going as far as questioning what it indicates and whether it ought to be tolerated within Western societies. She states that media coverage of Muslim women is sometimes racist and only portrays certain forms of stereotypes, explaining how these stereotypes affect people's attitudes and creates a sense of "us" versus "them." Though Muslim women make a rather heterogeneous group, they are still seen through a very narrow media focus, becoming the target of uncomplimentary stereotypes and caricatures (Ajrouch, 2007). More recent evidence, however, suggests the debut of a shift. Research tackling the image of the burkini, a modest swimsuit worn by Muslim women, found it to subvert traditional stereotypes of submissive Muslim women (Bowe et al., 2019). Despite the available literature on the image of hijab and stereotyping Muslim women in media, there is very limited research on Muslim women representation in user-generated visuals, such as memes and GIFs.

Research Questions

Based on Muslim women's media representation and stereotyping literature, the researchers pose four exploratory research questions to examine the representation of veiled Muslim women in memes and GIFs, if any.

Memes often employ both text and visuals to communicate messages (Gil, 2024), while GIFs can make use of added text or use only visuals (Newman, 2016). Tackling the visual/textual elements used in memes and GIFs, we start by investigating:

RQ1: How are visual versus textual elements used in both memes and GIFs of hijab?

Visual media, namely TV and movies, have been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes. Entman (2007) argued that TV images can misinform audiences about minorities in real life and provide evidence for misperceptions. Studies about Hollywood entertainment found that three-fourths of Muslim Americans considered media images to be unfair to them and their religion (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007).

Muslim women, in particular, have often been represented in a certain way in media and suffered from different types of stereotyping, whether based on gender, religion, or culture. A review of past literature on gender, religious, and cultural stereotyping of Muslim women yielded some of the most recurrent stereotypes of them in media to be *victimhood* and *oppression* stereotypes, where Muslim women are seen as submissive victims of oppressive cultures and religion who lack agency and the ability to make their own decisions; *exoticization* and *orientalism* stereotypes, where Muslim women are objectified and seen as exotic and sometimes sexy "others"; and *terrorism* and *radicalism* stereotypes, where Muslim women, particularly those wearing the hijab, are stereotyped as radical terrorists (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Bindi, 2014; Fahmy, 2004; Haddad et al., 2006; Lorber, 2002; Macdonald, 2006; Said, 1978; Zeiny & Yusof, 2016).

A review of current literature suggests that the same stereotypical ideas portrayed in traditional media have also served to create discriminatory discourse on social media platforms (Knezevic, Pasho, & Dobson, 2018), which is why we set out to examine the visual representation of hijab and Muslim women in memes and GIFs, while simultaneously investigating whether these user-generated visuals perpetuate similar stereotypes.

RQ2: How do memes/GIFs represent the hijab and Muslim women?

RQ3: Do memes/GIFs visually reinforce any of the abovementioned negative stereotypes of hijabi women?

Memes and GIFs are digital tools that could be perceived as similar; scholars often group them together (Dean, 2019), and some even consider GIFs as a subset of memes (Heiskanen, 2017). Therefore, we aim to investigate the overall tone of portraying hijab in both user-generated visuals and highlight the differences (if any) that might exist between them.

RQ4: What is the overall tone of memes/GIFs in hijab portrayal (pro- vs. anti-hijab)?

Method

Data Collection

Addressing these questions, we content analyzed memes and GIFs using a purposive sample selected from these circulated user-generated visuals during the second half of March 2019. The choice for this data-collection period was influenced by the ongoing online discussions involving Muslims and hijabis after the incident, especially when New Zealand's prime minister and the country's TV anchors appeared in media donning the headscarf as a sign of solidarity with the Muslim community.

The Christchurch massacre closely relates to the study's underlying concept of digital accessibility on social media platforms and its subsequent impact on daily lives, including exposure to terrorism and propaganda (see Fahmy, 2019), as it was the first ever terrorist act to be live-streamed in real time on a social media platform. This caused the attacks against Muslims to instantly become a worldwide topic of discussion, especially when Facebook announced restricting its Live feature in the aftermath of the incident,

tightened the rules for its future usage, and introduced a "one-strike" policy, which ended up temporarily restricting access for people who have faced disciplinary action for breaking Facebook's most serious rules anywhere, affecting individuals all around the world ("*Facebook Restricts Live Feature*," 2019). For these reasons, we used the option of sorting by newest to oldest when collecting our sample and only collected visuals uploaded after the attack.

Because memes and GIFs are considered open sources for audiences to use, no official databases of them exist. However, based on previous literature, we identified two websites that were most used in previous meme studies: "knowyourmeme.com" and "memebase.com" (Börzsei, 2013). For GIFs, the most used website was "Giphy" (Mufson, 2017). We then collected all visuals from these three websites that were uploaded after the attacks, using the keyword "Hijab." To ensure external validity and a representative sample of memes and GIFs, we sorted the visuals by the time of upload, from newest to oldest. We then selected the top 1,000 most recent visuals uploaded for our study, balancing out the number of memes and GIFs by choosing 500 of each. This approach allowed us to include the most recent and relevant visuals in our analysis and followed the procedures used in previous research (see Fahmy & Ibrahim, 2021; Kim, Jang, Kim, & Wan, 2018). After identifying the sample, the entire data set was carefully manually coded based on a set of variables to address our research questions.

Coding

A detailed set of variables based on the theoretical framework of stereotyping was developed for coding. These variables and their categories were adapted from previous studies examining Muslim women, their body coverage types, and their most recurrent media stereotypes (Bowe et al., 2019; Fahmy, 2004, 2019). Two Middle Eastern researchers, with comprehensive understanding of Muslim culture, conducted the coding process. One of them wears hijab.

To answer RQ1, visuals were coded as including textual elements only, visual elements only, or both elements, in the *visual/textual elements availability* variable.

To answer both RQ2 & RQ3 about Muslim women's visual representation in memes and GIFs, as well as whether these visuals reinforce stereotypes of victimhood and oppression, exoticization and orientalism, or terrorism and radicalism, researchers adopted variables from previous Muslim women's stereotyping studies and coded each visual accordingly. These variables include:

Visual Subordination

Visuals were coded according to the *body coverage type* (hijab/niqab or unveiled), and the *depicted hijab type* (stylish/modern hijab or traditional, all-black hijab).

Imaginary Relation Established With the Viewer

Visuals were coded according to *women's eye contact* (smiling or starring at the camera), and the *emotion portrayed* (happy, sad, humorous/sarcastic, challenging, inspiring, or neutral). Image subjects' eye

contact can factor in subjects' representation (Fahmy, 2004); when a subject in a photograph is looking directly at the viewer, it conveys honesty (Coleman, 2010). Also, emotions conveyed through images, through smiling, or through frowning play an important role in humanizing image subjects (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001).

Point of View

Visuals were coded according to *camera angle* (high, low, eye level), and *level of subject engagement* (front, profile, or back). When a subject is photographed at eye level, it is often perceived by audiences as neutral, whereas shots from above eye level are negative and from below are positive (Coleman, 2010).

Social Distance

Visuals were coded according to *shot type* (close-up, medium, or long), and *focus* (foreground or background). Medium shots are considered neutral, whereas close-ups are perceived as positive, and long shots are seen as negative (Berger, 1981). Close-up shots make subjects seem more liked than someone photographed from a distance (Coleman, 2010). Frontal angles create stronger engagement from viewers than "oblique" angles (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006). When subjects appear larger or in the foreground, viewers often assume power relationships (Lester, 2005).

General Women Portrayal

Visuals were coded according to whether women were depicted *alone* or *with others*, to underline the digital identity or persona of hijabis.

Behavior

Visuals were coded as *candid versus staged* (posing, addressing photographer, or going about their activities), and *physical activity* (the level of subjects' activity).

Tone

Where visuals were coded as *pro-hijab, anti-hijab,* or *neutral*. It is worth mentioning that coding took into consideration both visual and textual elements, as applicable. For instance, in the *overall tone* variable, visuals and textual elements were sometimes found to be contradicting (as a humorous/sarcasm technique), so coders took into account both elements before coding as pro- or anti-hijab. This approach ensured that our analysis was comprehensive and accurate.

After coding 10% of the data, we conducted intercoder reliability tests using Scott's Pi, achieving agreement levels above 0.74 across all variables (Neuendorf, 2003; Scott, 1955). Agreement rates were 1 for textual versus visual elements, body coverage type, type of hijab, camera angle, engagement/detachment, shot, and focus. Eye contact had an agreement of 0.85, emotions 0.75, candid versus staged, and activity level 0.95, general portrayal of women 0.90, and hijab support/opposition 0.85.

Results

RQ1 explored the textual/visual elements in visuals depicting the veil. Given the importance of both, it is unsurprising that meme/GIF creators combine them. More than two-thirds (71.0%) of visuals combined text and visuals. As shown in Table 1, no memes relied solely on text, and only two GIFs excluded visuals. Significant differences emerged between memes and GIFs in using textual and visual information ($\chi = 123.02$, $p < .001$). Nearly all memes (97.4%) included both elements, compared with 44.6% of GIFs. Most GIFs (55.0%) relied solely on visuals, whereas only 2.6% of memes did. Coders noted the textual elements, ensuring they were examined for contradictions or complements to visuals, which later informed coding for the overall pro- versus anti-hijab tone.

Table 1. Visual/Textual Elements in Hijab Memes/GIFs.

Visual/Textual Elements	Memes	GIFs	Total
Visual elements only	13 (2.6%)	275 (55.0%)	288 (28.8%)
Textual elements only	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.4%)	2 (0.2%)
Both elements	487 (97.4%)	223 (44.6%)	710 (71.0%)
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)

Note. Chi-square = 336.50, $p < .001$.

RQ2 and RQ3 examined the representation and stereotypes of Muslim women in memes and GIFs using variables based on prior literature on Muslim women stereotyping (Bowe et al., 2019; Fahmy, 2004, 2019).

In *body coverage types*, although the visuals used the hashtag #hijab, not all depicted it. Most women covered their hair (82.4%), whereas a small percentage (3.4%) wore the Niqab (covering only the eyes). Three-fourths of hijabis wore a modern, colorful hijab, and 20% wore a traditional, all-black hijab. For the *imaginary relationship with viewers* variable, which included *contact* and *emotion* (Fahmy, 2004), most hijabis were shown communicating an emotional state (88%) or establishing imaginary contact with the viewer (55%). As Table 2 indicates, most women in memes avoided eye contact, whereas 54.4% of GIFs showed smiling women (53.8%). These variables aimed to assess whether memes and GIFs reinforced stereotypes of victimhood, oppression, othering, orientalism, conservatism, or radicalism.

Significant differences between memes and GIFs in hijab representation were identified. As shown in Table 2, our analysis showed significant differences across all *visual subordination* and *imaginary-relationship* variables. Ninety-three percent of GIFs depicted women wearing hijab compared with 71.8% of memes, whereas memes showed more women in Niqab. Chi-square results confirmed significant differences in body coverage ($\chi^2 = 23.61$, $p < .001$). For *modern* versus *traditional* veil styles, GIFs were significantly more likely to show modern styles than memes (88.0% vs. 58.6%), whereas memes more often depicted traditional black veils ($\chi^2 = 123.59$, $p < .001$). Together, these results indicate that GIFs tend to portray a more progressive image of hijabis than memes.

Statistically significant differences were found between memes and GIFs in establishing imaginary *contact* with viewers ($\chi^2 = 44.12$, $p < .001$) and in *emotions* portrayed ($\chi^2 = 44.12$, $p < .001$). GIFs

primarily conveyed happiness and inspiration (54%), whereas memes emphasized sarcasm and humor (70.2%). The use of sarcasm/humor in memes aligns with existing literature, which highlights their use of satire to create striking effects (Milner, 2013).

Table 2. Visual Subordination and Imaginary Relationship With Viewer in Hijab Memes/GIFs.

Framing Variables	Memes	GIFs	Total	Chi-Square
Visual Subordination				
Body Coverage				#23.61***
Hijab	359 (71.8%)	465 (93.0%)	824 (82.4%)	
Niqab	31 (6.2%)	17 (3.4%)	48 (4.8%)	
Unveiled	42(8.4%)	17 (3.4%)	59 (5.9%)	
Not Applicable	68 (13.6%)	1 (.2%)	69 (6.9%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	
Modern vs. Traditional Hijab				123.59***
Modern	293 (58.6%)	440 (88.0%)	733 (73.3%)	
Traditional	100 (20.0%)	48 (9.6%)	148 (14.8%)	
Not Applicable	107 (21.4%)	12 (2.4%)	119 (11.9%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	
Imaginary Relationship with Viewer				
Contact				44.12***
Smiling	168 (33.6%)	272 (54.4%)	440 (44.0%)	
None	269 (53.8%)	181 (36.2%)	450 (45.0%)	
Penetrating stare	63 (12.6%)	47 (9.4%)	110 (11.0%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	
Emotion				389.89***
Humorous/Sarcastic	351 (70.2%)	60 (12.0%)	411 (41.1%)	
Happy	40 (8.0%)	170 (34.0%)	210 (21.0%)	
Inspiring	23 (4.6%)	100 (20.0%)	123 (12.3%)	
Challenging	33 (6.6%)	85 (17.0%)	118 (11.8%)	
Neutral	10 (2.0%)	56 (11.2%)	66 (6.6%)	
Sad/Disbelief	32 (6.4%)	28 (5.6%)	60 (6.0%)	
Not Applicable	11 (2.2%)	1 (0.2%)	12 (1.2%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	

***$p < .001$.

As for the *point of view* and *social distance* variables, our data indicate that GIFs were more likely than memes to increase audience identification and involvement with veiled women, (deducted from variables such as *eye contact* and *focus*). *Point of view*, measured by *camera angle* and *level of engagement*, showed significant differences ($\chi^2 = 8.12$, $p < .05$). High-angle shots, which give viewers dominance over the subject (Bowe et al., 2019; Moriarty & Popovich, 1991), were scarce (2.5%), whereas 90% of visuals used eye-level shots, encouraging a neutral view. When comparing the camera angle used in both memes and GIFs, significant differences emerged ($\chi2 = 8.12$, $p < .05$). GIFs showed significantly more eye-level and low-angle shots, the latter suggesting empowerment (Fahmy, 2004).

For *level of engagement*, depictions of hijabis from the back were rare (0.3%), with 87.4% shown frontally, creating an imaginary connection with viewers. Again, significant differences between both visuals emerged ($\chi^2 = 64.51$, $p < .001$): Memes depicted more women from the profile, whereas GIFs favored frontal positions, enhancing viewer involvement.

Social distance combined two variables: *shot type* and *focus*. As Table 3 indicates, 62.8% of visuals were close-up shots, and 24.0% were medium. For *focus*, 83.8% of visuals portrayed hijabi women in the foreground. Data showed no significant differences in the *shot type* ($\chi2= 5.44$, $p > .05$), though differences were noted on the *focus* variable ($\chi2 = 389.89$, $p < .001$), with GIFs showing more women in the foreground than memes. Overall, the prominent use of close-ups and foreground positioning created closeness with viewers, suggesting hijabis were not depicted as *others*. Both visuals fostered intimate, engaging relationships with viewers, avoiding negative stereotypes like victimhood, oppression, othering, or radicalism often seen in nonuser-generated visuals.

Table 3. Stereotyping Variables in Hijab Memes/GIFs.

Stereotyping Variables	Memes	GIFs	Total	Chi-Square
Point of View				
Camera angle				8.12*
Low	32 (6.4%)	42 (8.4%)	74 (7.4%)	
Eye level	449 (89.8%)	452 (90.4%)	901 (90.1%)	
High	19 (3.8%)	6 (1.2%)	25 (2.5%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	
Level of Engagement				64.51***
Front	380 (76.0%)	494 (98.8%)	874 (87.4%)	
Profile	66 (13.2%)	2 (0.4%)	68 (6.8%)	
Back	0 (0.0%)	3 (0.6%)	3 (0.3%)	
Not Applicable	54 (10.8%)	1 (0.2%)	55 (5.5%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	
Social Distance				
Shot				5.44
Close-up	320 (64.0%)	308 (61.6%)	628 (62.8%)	
Medium	106 (21.2%)	134 (26.8%)	240 (24.0%)	
Long	74 (14.8%)	58 (11.6%)	132 (13.2%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	
Focus				389.89***
Foreground	396 (79.2%)	442 (88.4%)	838 (83.8%)	
Background	45 (9.0%)	55 (11.0%)	100 (10.0%)	
Not Applicable	59 (11.8%)	3 (0.6%)	62 (6.2%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	

*$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.

Researchers included variables such as the *portrayal of Muslim women as individuals or in groups*, their behavior, and *level/type of activity* to compare memes and GIFs' representations with stereotypes of othering, radicalization, and oppression often seen in nonuser-generated media. For instance, depictions of women playing sports or music counter negative stereotypes of radicalization. On these variables, findings suggest a mixed bag, but GIFs appeared less likely than memes to proliferate the image of the traditionally submissive oppressed *other* Muslim woman.

As shown in Table 4, about three-fourths of women were depicted alone, whereas 22.8% appeared in groups. Most visuals (56.1%) were staged, with subjects aware of being recorded, 25.1% acted on

camera, and 17% were candid shots. About *physical activity*, 64.6% of women were not physically active, whereas about 20% were shown playing sports, running, walking, or protesting.

Comparing memes and GIFs, significantly more women appeared alone or in groups in GIFs than in memes ($\chi^2 = 6.77$, $p < .05$). This is because nearly all GIFs featured women, which was not the case for memes. Because of their mostly humorous tendencies, 5.6% of memes portrayed only men with humorous text. About behavior, memes showed more women posing, whereas GIFs depicted more candid shots and women acting on camera ($\chi^2 = 51.04$, $p < .001$). GIFs also showed significantly more women engaged in physical activity than memes ($\chi^2 = 80.31$, $p < .001$).

Table 4. Submissive Traditional Roles in Hijab Memes/GIFs.

Submissive Variables	Memes	GIFs	Total	Chi-Square
General Portrayal				
Digital Identity				6.77*
Alone	362 (72.4%)	370 (74.0%)	732 (73.2%)	
With others	110 (22.0%)	118 (23.6%)	228 (22.8%)	
Not Applicable	28 (5.6%)	12 (2.4%)	40 (4.0%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	
Behavior				
Candid/Staged				51.04***
Posing for the camera	324 (64.8%)	237 (47.4%)	561 (56.1%)	
Acting out on camera	77 (15.4%)	174 (34.8%)	251 (25.1%)	
Candid	81 (16.2%)	89 (17.8%)	170 (17.0%)	
Not Applicable	18 (3.6%)	0 (0.0%)	18(1.8%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	
Physical Activity				80.31***
Physically active	355 (71.0%)	291 (58.2%)	646 (64.6%)	
Playing sports/ Running	14 (2.8%)	85 (17.0%)	99 (9.9%)	
Protesting	8 (1.6%)	44 (8.8%)	52 (5.2%)	
Walking	24 (4.8%)	23 (4.6%)	47 (4.7%)	
Not Applicable	99 (19.8%)	57 (11.4%)	156 (15.6%)	
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)	

*$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$.

RQ4 examined the overall *tone* of visuals (pro- or anti-hijab), considering both textual and visual elements of memes and GIFs. For a visual to be coded as pro-hijab, it had to avoid common stereotypes of Muslim women found in nonuser-generated media (the victimhood and oppression stereotype, the othering and orientalism stereotype, and the terrorism and radicalism stereotype).

Most visuals analyzed (58.7%) were pro-hijab, only one quarter (25.7%) were anti-hijab, and 17.6 percent were neutral or not applicable. These findings of memes/GIFs supporting rather than opposing hijab align with recent literature on Muslim women's body coverage in still photography (Bowe et al., 2019), which, when viewed in context of earlier literature on negative hijab representation in media, suggests a potential shift in how Muslim women are portrayed in modern visuals, namely user-generated ones.

Nonetheless, combining the overall tone of memes and GIFs may overlook the subtle and complex ways the veil was represented. A chi-square test revealed significant differences ($\chi^2 = 135.08$, $p < .001$): There were more pro-hijab GIFs (70.0%) than pro-hijab memes (47.4%). And although both portrayed hijab positively, our findings, as seen in Table 5, revealed significantly more memes (41.6%) opposing the hijab than GIFs (9.8%).

Table 5. Tone in Hijab Memes/GIFs.

Pro-/Anti-Hijab	Memes	GIFs	Total
Pro-hijab	237 (47.4%)	350 (70.0%)	587 (58.7%)
Anti-hijab	208 (41.6%)	49 (9.8%)	257 (25.7%)
Neutral	53 (10.6%)	101 (20.2%)	154 (15.4%)
Not Applicable	2 (0.4%)	0 (0%)	2 (.2%)
TOTAL	500 (100%)	500 (100%)	1,000 (100%)

Note. Chi-square = 135.08, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The hijab has come to symbolize the clash of cultures, one that is fueled by links to Islamic extremism and 21st century terrorism (Al-Mahadin, 2013). Our findings revealed that, overall, veiled Muslim women were not depicted as others (Said, 1978) in memes and GIFs. Contrary to nonuser-generated media portraying hijabis as, shy, sad, or submissive and reinforcing the victimhood and oppression stereotype (Posetti, 2007), user-generated memes/GIFs paint different pictures. Visuals analyzed portrayed hijabis positively, dressed in stylish wear, being physically active, showing emotions, and mostly displayed prominently in the foreground and at eye level, creating a close and progressive imaginary relationship with viewers, which is a migration from the victimized oppressed, the Oriental other, and the terrorist radical persona of Muslim women in media (Bindi, 2014; Lorber, 2002; Said, 1978; Zeiny & Yusof, 2016).

Showing overall support for hijabis, these findings come as a contradiction not only to the veil image in media but also to the overall negative coverage of Arabs and Muslims (Manning, 2004). Findings also add to literature suggesting the use of digital media tools, especially user-generated ones, for various societal issues from women empowerment to changing the narrative and image of vulnerable and marginalized groups (Fahmy & Ibrahim, 2021).

Historically, negative stereotypes have been associated with Islam and Muslims in media, and hijabis have been almost invariably portrayed as oppressed (Posetti, 2007) exotic others (Said, 1978; Zeiny & Yusof, 2016) or terrorists (Lorber, 2002). Therefore, our most important revelation is that the visual representation of hijab in memes/GIFs challenges these stereotypes. Most visuals analyzed showed hijabis

in the foreground, communicating importance (Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001), in close-up shots, from the front, and using an eye-level angle, suggesting a level of respect (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006). A relatively higher percentage of GIFs showed women physically active (playing sports, running, playing an instrument), and no women were seen with any type of weapons or guns in either visuals. That level of physical activity, coupled with the inclusion of various activities from sports to playing musical instruments—and the absence of weapons—shown in memes and GIFs, convey the impression of independence and strength of Muslim women, therefore, contradicting both the oppressed victim stereotype and the radical terrorist stereotype.

This difference in memes and GIFs' representation of Muslim women, when compared with the negative stereotypes of the same group in nonuser-generated visuals, might be traced to two reasons. First, memes and GIFs are modern Internet communication tools. Therefore, it is unsurprising for them to generate and disseminate depictions that comply with current images of modern hijabis as more modernized/fashionable, especially with the rise of several hijabi models on magazine covers, or on social media platforms like Instagram. Studies found that contemporary Muslim women are more aware of creating their own identities on platforms like Instagram, regardless of the social interpretation attached to them (Waninger, 2015). The second reason might be because memes and GIFs are user-generated content; they differ from nonuser-generated media in terms of their creators, disseminators, and production process. Not only does being user-generated allow any individual to create and upload these visuals online but it also means a complete removal of the traditional media gatekeeping process.

Recent research suggests a shift in the image of hijabis in visual media. Examining the visual coverage of the burkini Muslim swimsuit, a recent study highlighted the presence of a progressive modern woman frame as compared with the victim submissive frame of Muslim women in traditional media (Bowe et al., 2019). Our findings support this, suggesting the possibility of a new trend of hijabis' visual portrayals, especially with their current modern styling of the garment that is seen as simultaneously pious and liberal (Pahwa, 2021).

Despite that all the visuals analyzed challenge the traditional portrayal and negative stereotypes of Muslim women and cast a positive light on hijab, still one of our most significant findings is that memes and GIFs are different from one another. Although some scholars consider GIFs to be a subset of memes (Heiskanen, 2017), we propose that both visuals are different in depicting hijab on many variables. For instance, memes use visual and textual elements together in communicating messages, whereas GIFs rely heavily on visuals only. This supports previous literature explaining that memes are digital visuals that are both image- and intertextual-based (Waninger, 2015), whereas GIFs' heavy usage of only visuals is because of their video-format and ability to communicate messages and emotions without added text (Newman, 2016).

In displaying emotions, further differences were noted. Most memes were sarcastic/humorous, aligning with previous meme literature about their employment of humor/sarcasm (Shifman, 2013). But humor was not the dominant theme in GIFs; instead, GIFs focused on conveying happiness followed by inspiration-related emotions. In addition, GIFs depicted hijabis at an eye level and showed them from frontal positions; they also included more eye contact and smiles than memes, conveying a high level of honesty to viewers (Coleman, 2010). Also, most GIFs supported hijabis, as opposed to only half of memes, which

also relates to the humorous nature of memes. All this suggests that memes and GIFs, despite their similarities, differ in content and representation, especially in the context of controversial debates such as the hijab's. Therefore, based on our findings, we argue that they should not be regarded as one, but ought to be evaluated and examined independently. Our research does not attempt to equate user-generated with nonuser-generated media, as each type has unique, dissimilar purposes. We acknowledge that user-generated visuals are not the same as traditional visual coverage like news images (whether printed or online), or professionally made content like movies. However, recent research highlighted that although memes/GIFs are often considered funny/humorous, they have a significant role in conveying information, values, sensibilities, and opinions to audiences (Dean, 2019), warranting our choice to visually analyze them from similar perspectives used to analyze other media visuals, to examine whether they replicate similar negative stereotypes of Muslim women.

Conclusion

This study, through a quantitative analysis of memes and GIFs, significantly contributes to the literature on visual communication and stereotyping within user-generated content. The comparison of user-generated and traditional media portrayals of hijab emphasizes a departure from conventional negative stereotypes, presenting more progressive and empowering representations of minorities and hijabis. The distinct nature of memes and GIFs as visual mediums is underscored, emphasizing the need for independent evaluation rather than interchangeable assessment and calling for further exploration of their influence on societal discourse. By showcasing the absence of prevalent negative portrayals and the promotion of progressive imagery, this research offers valuable insights into the visual representation of Muslim women in the digital landscape.

Limitations and Future Research

Future visual communication research may build on this study to further understand media representation and stereotyping across new technologies and different cultures, as well as address its limitations. Memes and GIFs combined were largely pro-hijab in our study. However, it should be noted that social media posts focus on emotions (Nave, Shifman, & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2018), and the timing of our study might have warranted empathetic responses toward hijab. Future studies could replicate our research, while either gathering samples from different time periods or languages, or extracting visuals circulating only within a certain country (New Zealand's, for instance) to explore whether they yield similar results. It is also worth noting that our study is one point in time that included user-generated visuals from a specific short timespan after a major event; future researchers might gather visuals (both user-generated and nonuser-generated) around the same time for more accurate comparative analyses.

Additionally, we acquired our sample using the hashtag #hijab; it is not clear whether findings would be similar had the sample been drawn using different hashtags. Finally, based on the similarities of our findings with the very recent literature about Muslim women's body-coverage representation, we urge more scholars to explore whether there is indeed a gradual shift in current hijab's visual portrayals.

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