

# GENDER BLINDNESS IN MEDIASCAPE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE BURKINI-BANS' REPRESENTATION IN THE NEWS MEDIA AND READERS' COMMENTS

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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC PAPER / DOI: 10.20901/ms.14.27.3 / SUBMITTED: 12.07.2022.

**ABSTRACT** *Media representations have always been seen as a site of power struggles. Often, media imbalances embody layers of meaning embedded in an ethnocentric notion of history of societies and depicting non-Western as subaltern identities. This research paper starts from a feminist constructionist and intersectional perspective to understand the values, beliefs and ideologies beneath narratives of journalistic texts and readers' comments. We use as a case study the Portuguese mainstream media coverage of the burkini-bans in France and the readers' comments, which were examined through critical thematic analysis. Not surprisingly, while the Portuguese news media seek neutrality, readers' comments are overall highly fuelled by a variety of orientalist stereotypes against Muslim women. As equally significant, there is a lack of gender-based discussion in public conversations on this issue. Thus, the results reveal that the media landscape is far beyond challenging the status quo of the West's hegemonic position towards women who are perceived as Others.*

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## KEYWORDS

BURKINI, ORIENTALISM, FEMINISM, MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS, PORTUGAL

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2016, several French municipalities approved the burkini-bans, prohibiting women from wearing burkinis on beaches. The burkini-bans are not an entirely new phenomenon. They are connected to a history of other bans and public opposition in France against clothes identified as Muslim, like the burka – a banned item since 2010/2011. Aheda Zanetti, the creator of the burkini, designed it to be a swimsuit fulfilling the covering wills of Muslim women who want to enjoy public places such as beaches and swimming pools (Fitzpatrick, 2014). After the bans, a far-reaching public conversation on cultural boundaries was triggered, and it crossed the boundaries of France's society, thus reaching Portugal. In spite of the absence of the country's collective memory concerning Muslims, the burkini-bans case was highly discussed in the Portuguese media landscape. The media are key institutions in the public construction of signifying practices. Therefore, their representations of the issue, as well as readers' comments, became the *loci* where to find gender identity at play in the intersection with other social constructs somewhat devalued in Western culture.

Mainstream media representations have always been seen as a site of power struggles. From the Frankfurt School's view of Western mainstream media as supporting capitalism ideology (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972) to the critique of the media as symbolically annihilating women by means of underrepresentation (Byerly & Ross, 2008; Ross & Carter, 2011; Tuchman, 1978) or by the more recent hyper-visibility dynamics (Simões & Amaral, 2020; Simões & Silveirinha, 2019), the media have been made accountable for inaccurate social image, prejudice and bias. Since representations can produce bounded shared cultural meanings and limited representations, media scholarship and feminist media scholarship in particular, are interested in the role the media play in sustaining social and political inequalities (Gill, 2007; Harp, Loke & Bachmann, 2018; van Zoonen, 1994).

When framed by the theory of Orientalism (Said, 2003), media imbalances embody layers of meaning depicting non-Western identities as subaltern identities: the Others in modern Western societies (Spivak, 1988). These Others are mainly seen as less capable, less relevant and inferior, resulting from a narrative embedded in an ethnocentric notion of history of societies but also linked with traditional work routines of national media outlets, mainly focused on national audiences (Alam, 2020; Fürsich, 2010; Näre & Nordberg, 2016; Shohat & Stam, 2014). The burkini-bans case thus offered the opportunity to analyse to what extent the mainstream Portuguese media and the readers' conversations operate as normalising spaces for the social construction of the female foreigner.

The collective narrative is fed by symbols, images and events of shared experiences and results in cornerstone sources of cultural meaning such as gender, race, ethnicity and religion, which are actively reified or transformed. As Hall (2006) long ago suggested, these constructs are representations with ideological effects, inviting us to understand identity and difference as continually produced and re-shaped concepts. Giddens's (2008) notion of identity as a process, marked by the interplay between several sources of meaning, is also insightful. Through social interactions, individuals conceive and play social

roles, developing understandings and acknowledgements about how they distinguish themselves. Even though people are not born with identities, no one can develop theirs without rooted sources of meaning, changing through time, which may perpetuate ideological narratives. If we focus on gender, there are marks of the extent of patriarchal nature of societies, implicating the social and personal identities of each woman/individual. These two types of identity are intrinsically related. Grounding this research in feminist critical thinking allowed us to highlight this in tandem with taking into consideration the women's perspective on the world as the basis from which to proceed.

Even more significantly, though, from a social constructivist approach, we must also recognise that social identities are dynamic, as they intersect in several dimensions, socially and culturally constructed, often triggering processes of oppression and discrimination (Nogueira, 2011). Thus, to better catch the sources of meaning shaping the burkini-bans media case, we embrace specifically a feminist constructivist approach informed by the work of scholars such as Scott (1986) and Howe (1994), which acknowledges not only gender as a social construction but also power as an integral element of all processes of social construction. We consider power a social construct and gender a code for power which intersects with other codes embedded in a larger structure of subordination. The concept of intersectionality, which encompasses a multidimensional theory that questions the interrelations of power in social identities and structures (Crenshaw, 1990), was insightful in that it offers an alternative to power analysis based on a single social splitting axis. From it, we can analyse both the hegemonic/privileged as well as the oppressed (Assimakopoulos, Baider & Millar, 2017). Through this framework, we consider social identities as enmeshed in culturally significant mediatic discursive practices, without denying that events, relations and structures have effects outside the sphere of discourse (Maynard, 1994).

Based on research conducted initially under the frame of an academic dissertation (Author, 2020), this article thus addresses Portuguese mainstream media coverage of the burkini-bans. It thus draws on Fitzpatrick's (2014) work analysing media representations of the burkini, which also has identified themes. However, such research took place before the mediatised burkini-bans in France, the central events to this paper.

Even though Portugal is included in a Eurocentric/ethnocentric pattern of thought, its media landscape is rarely studied for patterns of representations beyond a post-colonial imagination. Departing from a feminist constructionist and intersectional approach and recurring to critical thematic analysis, we examine online news media texts to uncover the ideological values underlying the burkini-bans public discourse and the Muslim women depictions. We also examine readers' comments. Although these spaces' abusive nature is being highlighted (Gardiner, 2018; Hille & Bakker, 2014), user-generated content has at least the potential to defy the mainstream media as sources of, in Fürsich's (2010, p. 119) words, "integration and assimilation". In what follows, we explore the framework in play to address the mainstream media texts and the readers' comments, present the materials and methods and discuss the main results.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Orientalism and Media Representations

Orientalism starts from a critical view of the world's division into two imaginary parts: the West and the East, corresponding to an "us and them" dichotomy. An ethnocentric narrative that simplifies the complex history of the world by constructing the identity of the East as the cultural opponent (Said, 2003), modelled by power and colonialist relationships, which builds itself on justifications of a multitude of superiorities over the East. The West never lost the hegemonic position settled by centuries of colonialism. The worldwide spread of capitalism also demonstrates how the West maintains a permanent and complex position of power and hegemony (Said, 2003), with consequent legitimised processes of otherness (Bishop & Jaworski, 2003), universalising Eastern people and cultures, continuously minimising them.

Orientalist media representations are continuously growing (Özvatan et al., 2022; Rodríguez Maeso, 2018), with a special presence of Arab and Muslim figures in American popular culture (Said, 2003), stereotypically represented by Western ideas of what an Arab and a Muslim are, how they live and interact with others. A perpetuated cycle of media representations built upon an imagined Arabic/Muslim way of life, based on human constructions and not on objective reality. This does not necessarily mean that it is a deliberate strategy since stereotyping is, to some extent, a subconsciously rooted process. Nonetheless, stereotyping plays a big part in constructing and maintaining unbalanced hegemonic relationships, which are never stale (Dyer, 2006).

Western media represent the dominant class ideology (Mora, 2009), integrating the dynamics of hegemony productions. That is also the case of news media outlets, which traditionally portray themselves as impartial and unbiased. Beyond the Orientalism scope, this aspect also applies to a profit-based way of reporting information. If money is the most important value for conveying information, that alone demonstrates that Western media cannot achieve that impartial dream on how they create news. For example, there is a tendency to depict "negative" topics in news outlets since it has a commercial value. This profit-oriented side of news is critical for understanding orientalist news media representations, implementing a uniform process with cultural clichés reminiscent of the dream of the mysterious yet primitive East (Mora, 2009).

For long centuries, and for the Western eye, the concept of the Middle East corresponded to the full definition of the East. To some extent, this explains how still today that concept of the Middle East has considerable importance when it comes to the picture of the concept of the East. The Middle East is typically associated with the Islamic religion. The main exception is Israel, a country with which the USA has been closely linked since the aftermath of the Second World War (Said, 2003). Since the 9/11 attacks, terrorism has been a highly mediated topic in Western media, contributing to the negative representations of Muslims. Subsequently, the "politics of fear" increased, based on the propagated notion that action was necessary to avoid the death of USA citizens, of the Western people (and

ultimately, the death of the West), favouring the re-election of George W. Bush in 2004 and the maintenance of the Iraq War (Altheide, 2006).

When discussing terrorism, Hollywood focuses on Arabs/Muslims, relying on caricatures of jihadist terrorism as deformed human beings, forgetting that political terrorism is a centuries-old phenomenon spanning a multitude of groups (Boggs & Pollard, 2007). Such concerted USA representations signified the oppression of Arab/Muslim women as proof of Islamic terror, taking validity and political advantage of the opposition to burqas and other Muslim women symbols (Nayak, 2006).

Changes in media representations also happened in the news media. Using religion as a hook and intensifying cultural differences and stereotyped ways of thinking, Western news media reproduce biased representations of Muslims (Kothari, 2018). If, in the USA, the terrorism imaginary remembers the 9/11 attacks, in Europe, more recent events are put at the fore: Charlie Hebdo's attacks in January 2015, or the Bataclan attack in November of the same year, both in France. These events increased representation of Muslim as terrorists, encouraging more negative judgements of the audiences' stories (West & Lloyd, 2017) in geographical contexts "where ideals of multiculturalism have existed alongside realities of cultural conflict, segregation, suspicion, and racist nativism" (Fitzpatrick, 2014, p. 2). Regarding the specific Portuguese context, there was a detention of an 18-year-old student suspected of planning terrorist attacks at the Faculty of Science of the University of Lisbon in 2022. The case had no parallel in Portugal, leading to a relevant media coverage. The suspect in question, non-Arab, non-Muslim, was not represented in the media under that Western tradition that contributes to the Islamic religious association with terrorism, and even public discussions were generated regarding the fairness of a terrorist categorization of such a case (Antunes, 2022). New concerns with the journalist role in social justice have thus arisen (King, 2018).

## Feminism and Otherness

Said's work on Orientalism allowed others to deepen the study of hegemony relations upon Others / the East exploring the aspects of gender and sexuality in the orientalist discourse (Abu-Lughod, 2001). Feminist scholarship, in particular, has been focusing on various dimensions of subaltern identity. Gender is understood as a key aspect of identity and hegemony relationships, even though not being the only axis of oppression. Indeed, traditional white women based feminist movements are seen as failing to be aware of other biases towards subaltern women, like race and class (hooks, 1984).

A pivotal moment in the Middle East's recent history is the Arab Spring, to which women and feminist movements contributed significantly. Such movements are simplistically portrayed in Western narratives as completely new, even though Arab feminist theory developed alongside national Arab theories, at least since the beginning of the 19th century (Golley, 2004). Western media representations of Arab women tend to present them as domestic, isolated, totally covered or attached to a sexually driven imaginary of harems. Conceiving a strict division between a public space – for men and politics – and a private space – for women and the duties they carry (Golley, 2004). This

division disregards that the scope of what is public and private changes depending on society. In Arabic societies, families influence several dynamics, to which women highly contribute, affecting and changing public life (Mohanty, 2006). Also, Arab women played essential roles in national liberation struggles (Golley, 2004). In fact, and although this is a simplistic way of narrating a collective event, one can point that it was an Arab woman who sparked the Arab Spring (Olimat, 2013).

Arab feminism has an exciting role in challenging ethnocentric and Eurocentric views. Offering different perspectives about identity objects and symbols of Arab culture associated with Islam's critical religion axis, Arab feminism acknowledges the history of the *hijab*, often loosely called the veil – a practice sustained on modesty motives, a cultural idea embedded not only in Islam, but in religions like Judaism and Christianity (Akou, 2018). There were historical supports of anti-veil protests, believing that fighting against it would free Muslim women (Chan-Malik, 2011). However, this critique may carry out the notion of cultural superiority against Arabic societies because Arab feminists can also defend the veil and *hijab*, for example, as an identity symbol of empowerment (Golley, 2004).

The burkini is also a gender identity symbol in feminist politics, embodying layers of meaning. This article presents two different and interconnected analyses of the Portuguese public conversation on the burkini-bans in France. The question that guided these analyses is: What type of values and ideologies are represented in the journalistic texts and user comments? The burkini is a central piece that guided these studies, focusing on mainstream media texts and on readers' comments.

## METHODOLOGY

To answer the above question, we first gathered journalistic texts of mainstream news media online platforms published between 1 August and 31 December 2016, in order to include even the texts on the topic that have not been published at the peak of the media coverage, but which still fall within this broader thematic and temporal context. We gathered content of user-generated comments published in the reader's comment sections of the news media websites and on the official pages of the news media outlets Facebook and Twitter. Facebook and Twitter were chosen because they are social media platforms that, particularly in 2016, presented strong dynamics of interaction with news media outlets, including comments in official publications, as is the case of the work of Gearhart and Kang (2015), which does not occur with such significance in the news media outlets own websites.

We used six Portuguese news media outlets: *Jornal de Notícias*, *Diário de Notícias*, *Correio da Manhã*, *Público*, *Jornal i* and *Observador*. All the selected newspapers are published on a daily basis. *Jornal de Notícias* and *Diário de Notícias* were selected as historical daily newspapers of significant status, both founded in the second half of the 19th century. *Correio da Manhã* and *Público* are also important newspapers in the Portuguese news media panorama, yet with a less historical background, founded in

the period following the 25 April 1974 revolution, with *Correio da Manhã* standing out especially in its high circulation levels. Two daily newspapers founded in the 21st century were also selected: *Jornal i* being a Portuguese daily printed newspaper founded in 2009, while *Observador*, founded in 2004, is an online native of significance in the Portuguese journalistic panorama.

The news media outlets in Portugal, in general, do not tend to assume major editorial positions, since they are part of a more traditional vision which seeks neutrality in journalism. However, within the nuances in regard to the six news media outlets chosen, some reveal nuances with certain ethnocentric and even orientalist connotations. *Correio da Manhã* points out that it “seeks a Portuguese look on the continuous pulse of the Country and the World” (Rodríguez Maeso, 2018) and *Público* assumes the intention to contribute in the “perspective of the construction of the European space” (Da Silva, 2005). In turn, *Observador* assumes a vision “about the country and the world”, assuming “the founding principles of Western Civilization, derived from Greco-Roman antiquity, Christianity and the Enlightenment” (*Observador*, undated), which makes *Observador* stand out as more distant from the principles pointed out by King (2018) for representations of Arabs/Muslims closer to reality.

We searched by the keywords “burkini” and “burquini” on the search engines of the news media websites to gather the journalistic texts. Every text mentioning one of these words was initially included in the *sample*. After a first reading, the texts not focused on the burkini and texts with only slight mentions to it were withdrawn. Furthermore, the sample included the texts that, while not focusing on the burkini, in some way narrated aspects of Muslim women’s lives from a Western perspective, which means texts that broaden the discussion to the prohibition of other clothes associated with Islam.

Regarding the reader’s comments sample, we gathered first-level comments. All the comments produced and shared across different social media were collected, no matter how many times they were shared.

We ended up with a sample of 147 journalistic texts and 3443 comments divided as follows, in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of journalistic texts and comments by each news media outlet

News media outlet	(N) Journalistic texts	(N) Comments
Correio da Manhã	32	861
Público	28	928
Observador	28	880
Diário de Notícias	26	315
Jornal de Notícias	19	430
Jornal i	14	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>3443</b>

We used critical thematic analysis to study the media texts and their comments (Lawless & Chen, 2019). Thematic analysis is an important tool for the qualitative analysis of empirical data (Shaheen, 2001). We combined a thematic analysis with a feminist perspective, here also critical of orientalism, for the study of media representations, replicating the methodological procedures of Silveirinha, Simões and Santos (2020). After a first reading and familiarisation with the sample, we produced a short description summarising each journalistic text. A first reading obeyed the criteria developed by Owen (1984) to identify themes: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. A second reading allowed us to identify the texts' predominant themes by the process of induction and deduction. As Silveirinha, Simões and Santos (2020, p. 214), we intended to deconstruct the texts to uncover what they convey and what they omit, "based on the research questions and the existing literature and embracing feminist research principles". Based on the above principles, after several readings, the descriptions of the texts were summarised and reduced to short sentences. After several attempts to stabilise the thematic grid, these sentences were transformed into themes, allowing the identification of 19 themes. Such 19 identified themes were aggregated afterwards into four critical themes, which catch the different ideological dynamics at play, and were compared to the themes identified in Fitzpatrick's (2014) burkini media representations study. Due to the length of the news texts, we coded the news texts in the 19 themes, while the comments, due to the fact that they were often rather short, were coded in only four critical themes.

From the 3443 readers' comments of the sample, 2996 were collected from official shares of news texts in the analysed Facebook/Twitter media accounts, and 461 comments were gathered from the news media websites. Comments were analysed altogether because they comply with the same function, only differ concerning the platform where they were published, according to the news media outlet strategy of dealing with user-generated content (Simões & Camponez, 2020).

Table 2 shows our final matrix of themes and critical themes according to their prevalence in the news texts sample, and Table 3 shows the final matrix of critical themes and their prevalence in the comments, which supports the comprehension of the importance of such qualitatively identified themes and critical themes concerning burkini-bans in the Portuguese mediascape covered by the sample.

Table 2. Prevalence of themes and critical themes in the news texts

Critical theme	N=147	%	Theme	N=147	%
<i>Burkini, law and order</i>	55	37.42%	<i>Focus on law</i>	30	20.41%
			<i>Police enforcement of the law</i>	11	7.48%
			<i>Partisan/political struggle</i>	9	6.12%
			<i>Burkini and incidents</i>	5	3.40%
<i>Burkini, otherness and ethnocentrism</i>	41	27.89%	<i>Burkini as anti-Western values</i>	18	12.25%
			<i>Connection to terrorism and fundamentalism</i>	11	7.48%





Critical theme	N=147	%	Theme	N=147	%
			<i>Burkini as harmful to Muslims/women</i>	4	2.72%
			<i>Islam as negative</i>	3	2.04%
			<i>Ban of religious expressions in public</i>	3	2.04%
			<i>Against the burkini, claiming safety</i>	2	1.36%
<i>Burkini, diversity and inclusion</i>	34	23.13%	<i>Story, example or symbol of inclusion of minorities</i>	12	8.16%
			<i>Against controlling how women dress</i>	6	4.08%
			<i>Against an apocalyptic vision of others</i>	6	4.08%
			<i>Comparing the burkini with traditions and garments</i>	4	2.72%
			<i>Institutional anti-ban position</i>	3	2.04%
			<i>Against the Muslim veil, but anti-burkini ban</i>	3	2.04%
<i>Burkini, fashion and neoliberalism</i>	17	11.57%	<i>Commercial/entrepreneurial character</i>	12	8.16%
			<i>Fashion context</i>	4	2.72%
			<i>Burkini as beautiful and erotic</i>	1	0.68%

Table 3. Prevalence of critical themes in the reader's comments

Critical theme	N=3443	%
<i>Burkini, otherness and ethnocentrism</i>	2414	70.11%
<i>Burkini, diversity and inclusion</i>	729	21.17%
<i>Burkini, law and order</i>	174	5.05%
<i>Burkini, fashion and neoliberalism</i>	126	3.66%

## RESULTS

### Journalistic Texts

As shown by Table 2, the most prominent critical theme in the news sample is "*Burkini, law and order*", framing the burkini as the object of new laws and focusing on how the political system relates to it until the point of implementation by police forces. This critical theme fails to discuss the burkini as an identity-making object, either positively or negatively. It is oblivious to the social issue. Ideologically, this choice is aligned with the traditional values of Western news media. Such values seek neutrality, not questioning the news they are transmitting. Typically, Western news offer answers to the questions "who, what, when and how?" but rarely decide to acknowledge "why?" (Parisi, 1999, p. 45). Within this framework, media texts reflect simplistic journalism, lacking proactive and investigative attitudes towards journalistic representations of Arabs and Muslims (King, 2018).

More than three in every ten texts discuss the burkini-bans within this law-and-order perspective, finding no correspondence when comparing such results to the ones found by Fitzpatrick (2014). However, Fitzpatrick's study of journalistic media representations of the burkini was developed prior to such bans.

The major contributor to the higher frequency of this critical theme was the theme "Focus on law". At first glance, it seems to show that the burkini is not represented according to orientalist stereotypes. However, it does not challenge bias and prejudice nor the *status quo* of power imbalances. This theme fits the traditional positioning of Portuguese (and Western) news media as neutral. Nevertheless, choosing to create news about the developments and primary consequences of the burkini-bans is always a choice, more or less conscious, preventing such impartiality and neutrality. As Rodríguez Maeso (2018) contends, there may not be impartiality on Portuguese media outlets, especially when it comes to representations of Muslims and Arabs.

We can see this theme in play in the following excerpt of a journalistic text of *Correio da Manhã*:

"French Interior Minister, Bernard Cazeneuve, assured on Sunday that the government would refuse to legislate on the *burkini* because a law against the usage of that bathing suit for Muslim women would be 'unconstitutional and 'ineffective'" (*Correio da Manhã*, 28 August 2016).

"*Burkini, otherness and ethnocentrism*" is the second most frequent critical theme. Mainly, it implies either a view of the world as divided by West and East, with a correct/heroic side and an incorrect/villainous side, respectively, or implies an Islamophobic ideology. Both carry orientalist and ethnocentric stereotypes about subaltern identities that homogenise the non-Western. The critical theme is present in 27.89% of the sample, mainly due to the high frequencies of "*Burkini as anti-Western values*" and "*Connection to terrorism and fundamentalism*" themes. These two themes have a structural role in the above-mentioned ideologies. Such think of the burkini and any other public symbol of otherness as not appropriate for Western societies. An ethnocentric ideology, implying that the Western society model is the "right one", and anything opposing or clashing such a strict model is perceived as "wrong", and sometimes needs to be "corrected" and fought. Especially when Muslims are on the other side (Rodríguez Maeso, 2018), in which there is a common link between Islam and terrorism and fear (Altheide, 2006).

This critical theme finds, in some way, a correspondence with a theme of Fitzpatrick's study (2014). Her fourth theme talks about a markedly negative ridicule vision of the burkini and the ones using it.

One example of such critical theme, and also of the theme "*Burkini as anti-Western values*" is the following journalistic text of *Observador*, whose title translated into English reads "*Burkini and our values*" – is an important marker of a narrative dichotomising the

burkini as an object outside the West imaginary, almost stating that whoever wears it needs to bow down to the West:

“It cannot be required of Muslims to cease to be, in order to integrate in European societies. They must be required to respect other cultures and identities, like they intend to be respected” (*Observador*, 26 August 2016).

Another example of the critical theme “*Burkini, otherness and ethnocentrism*”, which was coded as the theme “*Against the burkini, claiming safety*” is the following journalistic text of *Diário de Notícias*, which serves as example for either the excerpt as well as the title – in English “*Veil ban: Germans want female drivers and schoolgirls with their faces in sight*”:

“To be able to see the face. Whether it’s the woman behind the wheel, the student in the classroom, the person who is getting her ID papers, the judge, the witness in court or the participant in a protest. This is the argument used by German conservatives from the CDU and its Bavarian counterpart CSU to defend the ban on the Islamic veil covering women’s faces.” (*Diário de Notícias*, 20 August 2016).

Simplifying, “*Burkini, diversity and inclusion*” serves as the antithesis of the previously discussed critical theme, gathering 23.13%. This critical theme is the only one opening the possibility to have more positive narratives about the burkini, creating a space to discuss it as a symbol of inclusion, of bigger freedom to the intersectionality subaltern others. It creates a path ideologically aligned with theories about intersectionality and the oppressed subaltern (Spivak, 1988), sustained on third world (and Arab) feminist theory (hooks, 1984).

“*Story, example or symbol of inclusion of minorities*” is the most frequent theme of this critical theme. Therefore, we may say that the narrative of the burkini as a symbol of inclusion, freedom and diversity appears to need concrete examples to enable such public discussion (going beyond the scope of the burkini alone). Even though having a general positive focus, such texts do not clearly represent the burkini as a means of empowering women. It is still important to remember that such “positive” cases of journalistic representations are less frequent than the ones with a negative marked view.

When comparing this theme to Fitzpatrick’s study, parallels are found to the most frequent theme of hers: “assimilation, integration, and crossing cultural divides” (Fitzpatrick, 2014, p. 2). However, that theme gathers both positive and negative representations of the burkini since the inclusion/integration discussions were found in either way. Therefore, we found similarities between our critical theme and another theme of Fitzpatrick’s study: “freedom” (2014, p. 6), even though the journalistic texts of our sample are more focused on the discussion of the burkini as a pro-minority integration item rather than a symbol itself of freedom and power.

We can see this critical theme in play, as well as the theme “*Comparing the burkini with traditions and garments*” in the following excerpt of a journalistic text of *Público*:

“Portuguese beaches are full of foreign children wearing suits just like burkinis without any harm coming to the world.” (*Público*, 26 August 2016).

“*Burkini, fashion and neoliberalism*” is the less frequent critical theme, with 11.56%. It sets aside the bans and the discussion of the burkini as a symbol of freedom or inclusion in order to privilege the mathematical vision of modern life: how much profit was made? In this critical theme, fashion is introduced as a capitalist industry, in which sales metrics are the central gimmick to represent the burkini. From a feminist critical standpoint, we also highlight that neoliberal ideology generally puts full responsibility on individuals (Simões & Silveirinha, 2019) in a range of social issues. It implies a view of society focused on individualism and not on a sense of community. That journalistic choice reduces questions and debates on the integration of minorities, on the rights of such subaltern minorities, enhancing entrepreneurship towards profit as the most respected value of Western capitalist societies.

The theme most present within the critical theme “*Burkini, fashion and neoliberalism*” is “*Commercial/entrepreneurial character*”, supporting the idea that there is an ideological media perspective that transforms society’s issues into light questions guided by capitalist mathematics. In comparison to Fitzpatrick’s study (2014), we find connections to her second theme, representing the burkini as an innovation, a symbol of progress from the fashion industry. Unlike Fitzpatrick’s study, our critical theme does not focus on a matter of progress. Nonetheless, the ideological approach beneath this critical theme’s media representations mostly reflects Western capitalist thought. Therefore, we must remember that mainstream media are a part of capitalist power structures. In this way, Benjamin (2010) mainstream media criticism is insightful to analyse this critical theme by pointing out the proliferation of favourable aspects to maintain power and hegemony structures in societies. Capitalism must be remembered as a fundamental factor perpetuating the prevailing patriarchy in Western societies – guided by those two power axes (Golley, 2004).

One example of such critical theme, and of the theme “*Fashion context*” is the following journalistic text of *Observador*, titled in English “*Islam and fashion are in a relationship*”:

“Western eyes only see religion in Islamic clothing but the Young Museum wants to see fashion in 2018. The Islamic market is growing and with it the women who choose the freedom to cover their bodies.” (*Observador*, 31 December 2016).

### Readers’ Comments

As Table 3 shows, “*Burkini, otherness and ethnocentrism*” is the most frequent critical theme observed, far above others. Seven out of every ten comments have an inherent ideology based on the orientalist tradition, displaying a pessimistic and apocalyptic view of others.

Most of the comments framed with this critical view are solid attacks to those in favour of the free usage of the burkini or to *hijab*, in an opposition strategy that downplays those identified as “Other”. While downplaying such a group, they reproduce and legitimise

Western hegemonic power. Therefore, these comments perpetuate the privileged Western's hegemonic relation over subaltern and lessened intersectional identities behind the Muslim non-Western woman's identity that wears the burkini.

The frequency of this critical theme in the comments' sample is highly superior in comparison to the journalistic texts. The growing online hate speech phenomenon, in which social media provide a sense of anonymity, may be a reason for social media comment spaces being open fields for cyber-hate, increased attacks to subaltern identities (Amaral & Simões, 2021; Assimakopoulos et al., 2017). This shows how Orientalism is still highly relevant and present in modern-day media representations through processes of social categorisation (Said, 2003). In the case of this sample, the prejudiced based hate speech is reinforced by an idea of perceived national/transnational threat. In this sense, we find comments intending to contradict the collective identity crises of a West debilitated by a sense of other identities taking their place in Western societies (a threat from an ethnocentric and orientalist standpoint). These comments position the burkini as a symbol of collective threat, marginalising burkini users as the Others through ideologically inherent negative associations like terrorism.

This critical theme can be exemplified by the following cases, which centre on that idea of perceived national threat:

"They are slowly conquering Europe" (*Correio da Manhã's* Facebook post reader comment, 26 August 2016).

Or:

"Does anyone doubt that it is another provocation. These pieces of sh... what they want is to destroy Western society and implant sharia. For that they take advantage of their 'liberability'. Try to go to Saudi Arabia with a miniskirt and you will see what happens." (*Observador's* reader comment, 15 August 2016).

Or:

"In their land, for me, very good!!!! However in the Western world, no way, is ridiculous!" (*Correio da Manhã's* Facebook post reader comment, 4 August 2016)

"*Burkini, diversity and inclusion*" is the second most frequent critical theme, although with much less expression when compared to the most frequent critical theme. It emerges as the narrative contradicting the ethnocentric/orientalist mainstream narrative. One in every five comments stand for the idea of protecting a plurality of identities in society and is mainly against identities' subalternation. This does not mean that these comments imagine societies as totally free and open spaces to non-Western identity symbols. Some of these comments are indeed against the burkini-bans but in favour of some regulation towards Islamic veils. Indeed, they emerged as the other side of the polarised discourse, trying to counter the more frequent hate-speech and Orientalism fuelled comments.

From an Arab feminist standpoint, the burkini is a means of empowerment and not of oppression. Nonetheless, this critical theme does not frontally approach the limits of gender questions.

This critical theme is exemplified by the following cases, in which the burkini is compared to other Western traditions:

"I do not agree at all. You cannot begin to confuse terrorism and Islamic extremism with being Muslim or with the freedom to be! I am not Muslim and if I want to go to the beach with a dress or a diving suit what is the problem. Will we end water dives? That equipment also only lets you see the face, feet and hands!!!! This world is getting ridiculous." (*Diário de Notícias's* Facebook post reader comment, 16 August 2016).

Or:

"Please help me solve a little problem with the interpretation of this French law. I have an aunt who is 80 years old, from Mirandela, she always wore the Portuguese Catholic veil. She never wore a bikini or a swimming costume. If I invite her for a holiday in Cannes and take her to the beach with me and my family, will she be forbidden to enter the beach? Will she pay a fine? Or is this law exclusive to Muslim women or the Islamic veil? Because I see no difference between one and the other." (*Jornal de Notícias's* Facebook post reader comment, 24 August 2016).

The remaining two critical themes are less expressed. One in every 20 comments echoes the "*Burkini, law and order*" critical theme. These are comments ignoring the orientalist representations as problematic, contributing to subaltern the women who want to wear the burkini. Such comments demonstrate an ideology to which the bureaucracy of laws and the political/partisan game are the central aspects of the discussion. This means a lack of questioning about how laws come to exist, neglecting that all laws arise from constructed cultural values and beliefs in a society.

The least frequent critical theme, "*Burkini, fashion and neoliberalism*", also minimises burkini's social issues. One out of every 30 comments focus on the mathematics of profit through an object of fashion entrepreneurship, aligning in a capitalist view of life itself, to which money dictates social and cultural exchanges. Such comments erase the visibility of subalterns, forgetting the challenges the burkini carries when it comes to integrating those identities.

This critical theme also includes sexist comments that ridicule the burkini, focused on a sexual and erotic imaginary about Muslim women, contributing to maintaining and strengthening the patriarchy hegemonic position, especially hurting subaltern weakened women.

## DISCUSSION

This research used critical thematic analysis of Portuguese news media texts and readers' comments on the burkini-bans in France in 2016, to identify their ideological dynamics from a feminist perspective – which departs from the work of scholars that acknowledge gender as a social construction embedded in power dynamics (Crenshaw, 1990; Howe, 1994; Scott, 1986). We found some differences regarding these two types of

content and their contribution to public conversations. Possibly, such differences depend on the fact that news texts evidence a commitment to a more neutral posture, a traditional journalistic approach. At the same time, the comments correspond to personal and individual views on topics. In this sense, it is partly justified that the most frequent critical theme in the journalistic texts is connected to the search for impartiality regarding the burkini bans topic - "*Burkini, law and order*". Differently, the most frequent critical theme in the comments - "*Burkini, otherness and ethnocentrism*" - carries a marked negative position about the burkini, helping to perpetuate processes of othering of Muslim/Arab women. The personalisation within the comments is also viewed in the second most frequent critical theme, which answers the first one's orientalist attacks.

Notably, "*Burkini, otherness and ethnocentrism*" is the most frequent critical theme overall (being the first in the comments, second in the journalistic texts). When it comes to the comments, such results can be justified by the growing phenomenon of online hate speech that attacks identities perceived as outside the norm (Assimakopoulos, Baider & Millar, 2017). On the other hand, in the news texts, such results reinforce the idea that journalistic texts may carry orientalist notions, allowing the supposed sense of impartiality to be questioned. In fact, such media are part of hegemonic structures that continuously oppress the subaltern Others (King, 2018). In addition, hegemony and power are connected to capitalist constructions that sexualise and objectify items (Golley, 2004), such as the burkini. Both types of the analysed content construct the burkini as a symbol and opportunity to ridicule and ostracise Islam and Arab cultures, meeting the conclusions of Fitzpatrick's study (2014). Thus, the Portuguese online media landscape seems to be a factor in maintaining the West's *status quo* of a layered hegemony over the subaltern others (Mora, 2009; Said, 2003), repressing the non-Western, but not only, burkini defenders and perpetuating a limited version of cultural diversity.

The themes and critical themes identified also reveal a lack of discussions on gender issues, which only slightly appears within the critical theme "*Burkini, diversity and inclusion*". Issues of gender as connected with the intersectional cultural sources of meaning, such as ethnicity and religion, thought by theorists like hooks (1984) and Spivak (1988), do not have a strong presence in the analysed media representations. Media representations sometimes arise relying on loose values of "freedom", connected to neoliberalist principles, reinforcing a political system in the roots of the unbalanced hegemonic situation that perpetuates orientalist representations. We would expect that the burkini media representations could open meaningful public discussions on gender problems, particularly in the scope of a feminist constructionist and intersectional approach. The burkini is an identity-making object socially identified with Islamic and Arab cultures, and its bans gave no opportunity to enhance feminist politics. If anything, women resulted as less free at the end of this public discussion. On the contrary, the critical theme "*Burkini, otherness and ethnocentrism*" gives space for sexist comments that ridicule the burkini, focusing on a sexual and erotic imaginary of Muslim women, contributing to maintaining or even strengthening patriarchal hegemonic values.

Future studies would be recommended to further develop the scientific knowledge regarding media representations of most recent events concerning non-Western practices, but especially regarding burkini-bans or even other cultural/religious practices of veiling - inserted in the notion of *hijab*, sustained in the idea of modesty that transcends Islam (Akou, 2018). We encourage future analyses that may be structured in theoretical frameworks similar to this article, or else contribute to the multifaceted understanding of this type of problematic, drawing from the deepening of other theoretical roots such as intercultural communication or religious studies, although always in combination with a critical view of media, cultural and social processes that may reinforce the status quo of the West's hegemonic position facing women perceived as Others.

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# RODNO SLJEPILO U MEDIJSKOM OKRUŽENJU: ANALIZA PRIKAZA ZABRANA BURKINIJA U MEDIJSKIM IZVJEŠTAJIMA I KOMENTARIMA ČITATELJA

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**SAŽETAK** *Na medijske prikaze oduvijek se gleda kao na mjesto borbe za moć. Medijske neravnoteže često utjelovljuju slojeve značenja ugrađene u etnocentrični pojam povijesti društava i prikazuju nezapadne identitete kao podređene. Ovaj istraživački rad polazi od feminističke konstrukcionističke i intersekcionalne perspektive kako bi se razumjele vrijednosti, uvjerenja i ideologije ispod narativa novinarskih tekstova i komentara čitatelja. Kao studiju slučaja koristimo izvještavanje portugalskih mainstream medija o zabrani burkinija u Francuskoj i komentare čitatelja, koji su ispitani kroz kritičku tematsku analizu. Nije iznenađujuće što su, za razliku od portugalskih medija koji teže neutralnosti, komentari čitatelja općenito snažno potaknuti raznim orijentalističkim stereotipima vezanima za muslimanke. Jednako je značajan i nedostatak rodno utemeljenih rasprava u javnom razgovoru o tom pitanju. Dakle, rezultati otkrivaju da je medijski krajolik daleko od mogućnosti utjecanja na promjenu statusa quo hegemonističke pozicije Zapada s kojom se suočavaju žene koje se percipiraju kao Druge.*

## KLJUČNE RIJEČI

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