

**Comments on Covering Up:
International Discourse on the Burkini Ban**

by

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Abstract

Following the Bastille Day terrorist attack in Nice, France, the Riviera town of Cannes banned Muslim full-coverage swimwear known as the burkini in July 2016. Similar to a wetsuit, a burkini is a conservative swimsuit designed for Muslim women that covers all skin except for the face, hands, and feet. This study analyzed article content and comment sections of five news media outlets, Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post*, for frames about the burkini ban. The news articles framed the burkini ban using colonialism, consumerist, feminist, and French Nationalist frames. Different frames emerged among the comment sections. These frames were cultural conflict, Islamophobia, sexist, and satire. There were limited similarities among the article and commenter frames, which is contrary to previous research that suggests media influence audience frames.

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Introduction

On July 28, 2016, the city of Cannes, situated on the French Riviera, banned full-body swimwear, known as burkinis, at public beaches (Hjelmgaard, 2016). Traditionally worn by Muslim women, the burkini is a swimming garment that covers most of the body, hands, feet, and head. Such bans were implemented in Cannes and other cities throughout France in reaction to recent acts of terrorism by Muslim extremists (Hjelmgaard, 2016). Due to photos on social media and increasing news coverage, the burkini ban gained international news coverage and was prominent in the news cycle from mid to late August 2016. Journalists, government officials, and citizens reacted to the ban on a global scale. Although these bans were not upheld in France's courts, local government officials and police patrolled public beaches and enforced the bans. The burkini ban raised questions about women's and religious rights, as well as discrimination and Islamophobia (Hjelmgaard, 2016). While some demonstrated against the action taken by the French government, others supported the ban and denounced the Muslim religion and extremist groups.

Coverage of the burkini ban not only started international conversation, but it also helped to illustrate the role of media in creating frames and shaping opinions. Framing explains how individuals, groups, and societies perceive and communicate their surroundings (Entman, 1993). Furthermore, framing involves social construction by a mass media source and can actively influence an audience's feelings on issues, current events, or other people (Entman, 1993). Understanding how the burkini ban is framed is relevant and important because of the current political climate, the conversation surrounding Muslims, and the fear of terrorism and Islamic extremism. Terrorist attacks in recent years have heightened Islamophobia, allowing for easy implementation of the burkini ban (Hjelmgaard, 2016). The issues raised by the burkini ban are

twofold. The ban targets both a specific religion and gender. Coverage of the ban assists in creating and perpetuating frames and shaping public opinion on the threat of Muslim women and how they dress.

This study addressed the discourse around the burkini ban by analyzing coverage of the ban and the online comment sections of five international news outlets. These news outlets are Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post*. Using framing theory and textual analysis, this study determined the frames international media attached to the burkini ban. It also discusses and analyzes the language use of online commenters in their own posts and in relationship with article content. Importantly, this study examined diverse perspectives, by including news media information from countries that have distinct cultures and values.

The Networks and Publications

Media outlets and news publications covered the burkini ban internationally after the initial ban in late July 2016. This coverage continued throughout August, as beach towns in France defied court rulings and continued to enforce the ban. This study examined five of the international news outlets that reported on the burkini ban: Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post*.

Al Jazeera

Al Jazeera is an independent, Arab television news network based in Qatar that was established in 1996 (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003). Following the bloodless overthrow of his father, Sheik Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani became the Emir of Qatar in 1995. His openness to previously oppressed issues such as freedom of the press and women proved Sheik Thani to be a more progressive leader. Shortly after assuming power, Sheik Thani abolished the Information

Ministry and its systematic censorship. He then founded Al Jazeera, hiring 20 BBC reporters with Arab backgrounds (Burns, 1999).

According to El-Nawawy and Iskandar (2003), Al Jazeera became instrumental in reporting the Middle Eastern perspective following the September 11th attacks, the War in Afghanistan, and Iraq War. The network aired videos received from Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, which critics argued gave the terrorists an international platform. In 2001, Al Jazeera opened a bureau in Kabul, giving the news outlet better access to the events of the war. The office was bombed and destroyed by the United States months later (El-Nawawy & Iskandar, 2003). The focus of much research, Al Jazeera has had a controversial past, and has been subjected to attacks both at home and abroad (Al Jenaibi, 2010; Lynch, 2006; Miladi, 2006). More recently, Al Jazeera is known for its promotion of new Arab media, and for providing valuable background on Islam and democracy (Al Jenaibi, 2010).

Although Al Jazeera is seen as comparable to most Western news outlets, the news network has been criticized in many Western nations for taking anti-Western and pro-terrorist stances (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2004). Such assumptions are made because of presumed ties to Al Qaeda and Al Jazeera's release of terrorist videos. Following the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan by the United States, Al Jazeera was the first network to show video footage of Osama Bin Laden in hiding (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2004). However, research shows conflicting reports of the reliability and perspective of Al Jazeera. According to Johnson and Fahmy (2008), Al Jazeera is the CNN of the Arab world, and the most trusted news outlet to accurately portray the Muslim perspective. The contrasting viewpoints surrounding Al Jazeera lead to questions of credibility of the outlet, which may be attributed to political and demographic factors (Johnson & Fahmy, 2008).

The Guardian

Originally known as the *Manchester Guardian*, *The Guardian* was founded in Manchester England in 1821 as a weekly newspaper. The publication became daily in 1855 when the British government lifted the Stamp Tax (“The Guardian,” 2011). Historically, *The Guardian* is known for its investigative pieces, foreign correspondence, and artistic criticisms. Among other British publications, *The Guardian*’s stance is considered less conservative in comparison to *The Daily Telegraph* or *The Times*. *The Guardian* is well known for its independence and the independence of its journalists, once referred to as Britain’s non-conformist conscience (“The Guardian,” 2011).

In the early 1990s, *The Guardian* began developing its online platform, which was launched at the close of 1995. This online platform was developed in coming years to include sports coverage, news events, and sites for jobs. By 2001, the website was the most popular in the United Kingdom with 2.4 million unique users each month. In accordance with its investigative roots, *The Guardian* was named Newspaper of the Year in 2011 for its partnership with WikiLeaks (“History,” 2012).

According to Moore, Mason, and Lewis (2008), British press coverage of Muslims has drastically increased since 2000. While this rise was partially attributed to coverage of terrorist activities in the United Kingdom and United States, there was also an increasing importance in the coverage of Islamic cultural and religious differences (Moore et al., 2008). Although all coverage was not negative, the researchers found that adjectives such as radical, fanatical, extremist, and militant were often used to describe British Muslims, and around half of the comparisons between Islam and other religions made extreme value judgments.

Russia Today (RT)

Russia Today (RT) was launched in 2005 as a state funded program to promote Russia abroad. Initially known as the mouthpiece of the Kremlin, the organization rebranded to gain acceptance as a global news outlet (Yablokov, 2015). To distance itself from its affiliation with Russian culture and draw in a more diverse audience, the organization transitioned to the abbreviated logo *RT*. This deviation led to a new style of reporting that allowed the news outlet to act in accordance with its Russian roots (Yablokov, 2015).

According to Simonyan (2013), the increasing popularity of RT is due to its journalists and reporters who deviate from the Western, Anglo-Saxon perspective and report on issues ignored by mainstream media. Today, RT is known as a government sponsored international news channel and outlet, that is often dismissed by critics and respected less than other global media outlets such as BBC and CNN (Yablokov, 2015). RT's style of news reporting is known to cover conspiracy and propaganda, which has become a distinctive characteristic of the outlet (Simonyan, 2013). Critics argue such strategies are effective ways to grab attention, but they can also hinder credibility as an instrument of public diplomacy (Yablokov, 2015).

The Times of India

The Times of India is a large English-language newspaper published in Mumbai, Ahmadabad, and Delhi. British residents of western India founded the paper in 1838 and originally called it *The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce*. The name was changed to *The Times of India* in 1861, ten years after the publication became a daily paper ("The Times," 2011).

After India gained its independence, *The Times of India* earned its reputation as an intellectual newspaper due to its more serious tone, language of publication, and coverage of

international news issues (“The Times,” 2011). Today, *The Times of India* has bureaus in all the nation’s major cities and is published by the same media group that handles India’s other large papers such as *Mumbai Mirror* and *The Economic Times*.

According to Narayana and Kapur (2011), images of race, religion, caste and community play large roles in media coverage, especially when looking at Muslims, the largest minority group in India. An analysis of frames among the largest English publications in India found that *The Times of India* published the lowest percentage of political news about Muslims, but the second highest crime percentage (Narayana & Kapur, 2011). The study found that not all English Indian news presented Muslims in an unfavorable manner, and while *The Times of India* at times presented Muslim news with a negative slant, other publications such as the *Hindustan Times* were more likely to exhibit more unfavorable slant of Muslims.

The Washington Post

The Washington Post was founded in 1877 by Stilson Hutchins in Washington, D.C. Due to its location in the capital of the United States, the newspaper tends to emphasize national politics. Originally established as a four-page publication of the Democratic Party, *The Washington Post* is now printed daily in Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia (“The Washington Post,” 2014). Originally known as the *Washington Times-Herald*, the publication was bought and sold throughout the early 1900s, before being acquired in 1954 and renamed *The Washington Post* (“The Washington Post”, 2014).

Covering issues such as the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate Scandal gained worldwide attention for the publication (Farhi, 2013). In 1996, washingtonpost.com was launched online, and in 1999, the paper began printing in color. In 2013, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos bought *The Washington Post* for \$250 million (Farhi, 2013).

Following the September 11th attacks, research found the coverage of Muslims in American media shifted (Byng, 2008; Douai & Lauricella, 2014). According to Douai and Laricella (2014), many U.S. news publications, such as *The Washington Post*, covered Muslim centered issues and conflict with a negative tone. The authors argued this was due to the dominance of terrorism frames among stories about Muslims.

A History of Islamic Relations in France

On the evening of July 14, 2016, in the midst of Bastille Day celebrations in Nice, France, 86 people died and 434 were injured when a truck plowed through the crowd. Police identified the driver as Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, a Tunisian born Muslim residing in France. Fewer than six hours after the attack, President François Hollande declared a three-month state of emergency and vowed France would intensify its efforts to combat ISIS in Syria and Iraq (Ellis & Almasy, 2016). In the aftermath of the attack, Europe heightened security, and Western fears of Muslims were reignited. These fears reignited the long-standing discrimination against Muslims in France.

Following the deadly attacks in Nice on Bastille Day, many Riviera towns in southern France banned the conservative swimwear known as the burkini (Baitz, 2016). Designed by Aheda Zanetti, she created the burkini as an alternative to modern swimwear for women who preferred to dress more modestly. In August 2016, the bans hit the international news circuit, receiving public support and backlash. Images of women being questioned and undressed by police officers on public beaches circulated on social media, while multiple government officials condemned the burkini. Prime Minister Manuel Valls deemed the swimwear “a symbol of the enslavement of women,” while other officials argued that the burkini did not align with France’s secular views (Baitz, 2016). Leading into September, some French courts suspended the ban,

calling it a breach of fundamental and individual freedoms, but local officials continued to enforce it. The burkini ban is also not the first time that the French government has targeted and regulated conservative religious dress (The Islamic Veil, 2014). Although it made the international headlines, the burkini is merely one incident in a long history of Muslim tensions in France.

Historical Context

The clash of Islamic and French cultures is often viewed as a twentieth century phenomenon, but can be traced as far back as the 1700s (Coller, 2010). According to Coller (2010), the relationship between France and Islam dates back to the Ottoman Empire, the times of Napoleon, and the colonization of Africa. To narrow the scope of such information, this study focused on more recent examples of contention between French and Muslim culture.

The colonial past of Islam and its association with violence greatly influenced Western stereotypes and fears of the religion (Cesari, 2002). Throughout the 1980s, a growing Muslim visibility in France heightened fears of Islam. These fears manifested in the form of racially motivated murders and religiously motivated legislation (Cesari, 2002). Green (2015) argued that the Western fear of Islam is due to many reasons, mainly that the religion is monolithic, static, separate, and inferior. In some cases, Western values are fundamentally unable to align with Muslim ways because of the idea that Islam does not share any core values with Christianity or Judaism. Sects of Islam also tend to be viewed as ideologically the same, and classified as other in relation to Christianity and Judaism (Green, 2015).

Islam is also viewed as inferior, or the enemy. Those who are closed off to Islam tend to view the religion's practices as barbaric, uncivilized, sexist, and in direct violation of the enlightened ways of Western culture (Green, 2015). Bias against Muslims and Islamophobic

attitudes existed prior to the September 11th attacks, but those events and other acts of terrorism by Muslims have perpetuated a climate of anti-Muslim sentiment in many countries (Ogan et al., 2014). For this reason, this study focuses on attitudes following September 11, 2011.

Immigration

To understand the current tensions dealing with Islam in France, it is important to understand the current cultural climate of Europe and France. Recent ISIS affiliated terrorist attacks across Europe, as well as an influx of hundreds of thousands of mostly Muslim refugees, have reignited debates about immigration, religion, and culture across many nations (Hackett, 2016). With 4.7 million Muslims residing in the country, France has the second highest Muslim population among member countries of the European Union. However, roughly half of these Muslims are French citizens. Over the years, France has also integrated many immigrants from former colonies in Northern and sub-Saharan Africa (Laurence & Vaisse, 2007). Islam is considered the nation's "second religion," with the second largest following to Catholicism, the most popular branch of Christianity in France (Laurence & Vaisse, 2007). Although France is seen as a melting pot, many critics argue that the values of Islam do not align with the secular traditions of France. From housing and job issues, to troubles with acculturation and violence, the latest wave of Muslim immigrants has seen limited progress and faced greater hardships than those that came previously (Laurence & Vaisse, 2007).

France prides itself on being democratic, while still abiding by its fundamental traditions. *Citoyenneté* and *laïcité*, the French principles of citizenship and separation of church and state, contribute heavily to many of the tensions surrounding Islam. While some believe French culture is too permissive of Muslim ways, others believe it is restrictive (Laurence & Vaisse, 2007). Muslims are often depicted as entering France frequently and at high volume. In reality, more

people of Portuguese descent entered the country than of any other nationality in 2014. Furthermore, of the fewer than 50,000 Muslim asylum seekers that entered France in 2014, nearly a third were minors (Dunham, 2014). In recent years, these figures have changed due to unrest in Syria and the Middle East, leading some French citizens to argue for a complete ban on Muslims (Dunham, 2014).

The rise of terrorist groups such as ISIS, recent attacks, and the country's close geographic proximity to the Middle East all contribute to fears and prejudices in France. Today, many second and third generation Muslims face discrimination, even though they were born in the country and speak fluent French. In many cases, Muslim immigrants and nationals alike are discriminated against when it comes to housing, healthcare, jobs, and education (Bulos, 2016). France promotes assimilation and unity rather than embracing diversity. Government officials in France have seen religion as an impediment to Muslims becoming fully integrated citizens and have gone as far as discouraging and banning forms of religious expression to encourage unity and togetherness (Bulos, 2016). Such bans garnered support in order to combat terrorism and unite as one France.

Recent Acts of Terror

Following the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, Islamophobic outlooks towards people of Middle Eastern or Muslim descent increased in many Western nations. Islamophobia is defined as a hostile attitude or behavior towards people of Muslim descent and is considered a form of "cultural racism," in which discriminatory practices target followers of a specific religion (Ciftci, 2012, p. 294). In the early to mid 2000s Islamic issues were at the forefront as the United States invaded Iraq in search of weapons of mass destruction.

Coverage of the War on Terror and the heightened sense of nationalism in the United States greatly influenced feelings towards Islam and Muslim culture internationally.

In some situations, the war in Iraq was an excuse to racially profile and monitor certain religious groups and organizations within France. From December 2003 to the first half of 2005, the Direction du Surveillance du Territoire, or the Directorate of Territorial made more than 150 arrests, and of those 150, about 103 of them were imprisoned on charges related to Islamic terrorism (Laurence & Vaisse, 2007). French officials also monitored and deported imams that espoused anti-Western and hate speech. While France was not seen as a hotbed for radical Islam, male Muslim youth within France drawn to terrorism and jihad were known to do so because they felt isolated and victimized by French culture. These men redefined their lives based on their status as victims and ability to identify with marginalized Muslims around the world (Laurence & Vaisse, 2007). The treatment of Muslims has been covered internationally, from relations between Israel and Palestine, to Bosnia, Morocco and Algeria.

Ciftci (2012) examined the reasons behind the swift rise of Islamophobia in the Western world and predicted that individuals with a strong sense of nationalism and religious ties were more likely to possess negative feelings towards Muslims. In a survey of non-Muslim residents in France, Ciftci (2012) presented participants with a series of questions about al-Qadea and the threat of terrorism depicted in news media. Results showed that most participants had generally unfavorable feelings about Muslims and viewed people of Islamic descent as a threat to their physical well-being and cultural values. However, Muslim populations are sparsely distributed across the hometowns of the respondents, and most admitted that they did not come into contact with Muslim people on a daily basis. The author concluded Islamophobic statements expelled by the media contribute to the fear and discrimination against Muslims in France.

Recent attacks in France such as Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 and the November 2015 attacks in Paris led to heightened security across Europe (Plucinska, 2015). Following the attacks on November 13, 2015, the French president and Parisian police forces declared a state of emergency and vowed to do whatever necessary to capture those responsible for the 129 deaths. In the days following the state of emergency, more than 2,000 raids were carried out with more than 200 arrests (Plucinska, 2015). While many of the raids led to credible arrests and weapons seizures, some were carried out on a hearsay basis and rooted in discrimination and racial profiling. For example, one woman called the police after hearing two men speaking a language that sounded like Arabic in a coffee shop. They had not threatened her or any of the shop's patrons, but according to her, their vernacular and foreign appearance deemed them threatening to the public (Plucinska, 2015).

Typically, terrorist attacks affect a small number of individuals and organizations within a nation's population. The larger the scale of the attack, the more people are affected by it. The coordinated attacks in Paris and its northern suburbs in November 2015 were the first on France's soil that aimed to maximize victims in the population rather than target a selected group (Coupe, 2016). These actions impacted not only the lives of many French citizens, but also the economy, by influencing the mood, expectations, and trust of France. In a survey dealing with public political orientation, life satisfaction, and opinion on the country's direction, Coupe (2016) found that the swift response by the French increased trust in the national government in the wake of the attacks. Although the attacks did not affect current life satisfaction and political orientation, they did reduce optimism among the French people.

Society and the Economy

In 2005, a predominantly immigrant community known as Clichy-sous-Bois made

international headlines due to a series of race riots. The teenage children of two African immigrants were electrocuted in a power station while hiding from police, inciting a multitude of reactions from the surrounding community (Bulos, 2016). These riots lasted for almost the entire month of November. The focus of these riots was black and Arab youth who were stereotypically regarded as radical Muslims, children of African polygamists, and not motivated to find employment (Schneider, 2008). Many of these marginalized groups felt they had no value within France's society. Following the boys' deaths, then-Minister of Interior Nicholas Sarkozy responded by condemning the victims rather than the officers that killed them. His short statement reinforced the helpless feeling of the minority communities, and further proved that their lives were valued less in French society (Bulos, 2016).

The language used by politicians? during the uprising in 2005 helped to further the opinion that the lives of ethnic people in France are valued less. Sarakozy was quoted in a poor Parisian neighborhood threatening to "power hose the scum from the neighborhood," (Schneider, 2008). At the end of the three-week rioting period, countless cars, homes, and personal properties were burned or destroyed. Once the uprising was over, the French government continued to espouse divisive language when explaining what they perceived to be the reasoning behind the unrest. Gérard Larcher, the Acting Minister of Employment, argued that African polygamy was the root of violence in low-income urban communities and job discrimination (Schneider, 2008). Another French historian spoke out to Russian media saying that angry polygamist African Muslims caused the riots. Others holding powerful positions shifted the blame to radical Islam, stating that the riots came about because France no longer partakes in colonialism, bringing education to savages (Schneider, 2008). The French government could push these assertions on African and Muslim residents of Paris because these groups did not hold any power in society.

Another contributing factor to the unrest in Paris in 2005 was the unusually high unemployment rate among black and Muslim youth aged 15 to 24 (Schneider, 2008). For those with non-European parents, the unemployment rate at the time was as high as 47 percent, which was more than double the rate of French-born counterparts in the same age group (Schneider, 2008). Again, Sarkozy explained these statistics by blaming the victims, stating that despair and extreme violence in the poor suburbs were the main contributing factors to minority youth unemployment. Rather than highlighting the country's discriminatory practices, failing schools, and high minority poverty rate, Sarkozy acted in accordance with long held prejudices that are still enforced today (Schneider, 2008).

In the ten years since Clichy-sous-Bois, many of the impoverished African and Arab communities have struggled to move on. Not only have the youth continued to fight to overcome hardships and find their place in French society, but the government has also been unable to bridge the divide between themselves and the Muslim community. A recent French survey showed that many poor, minority youth cannot land job interviews because they have Muslim or African names, or because their addresses have zip codes indicating that they reside in the poor outskirts of Paris (Walt & Bajekal, 2015). This anti-Muslim sentiment was also echoed in the response to the 2005 riots. Many current residents of Clichy-sous-Bois and the surrounding suburbs attest that the government did nothing to help the area recover following the weeks of unrest. The declining standard of living, coupled with high rates of unemployment and low motivation have impacted the youth of the neighborhoods, but have also France in ways that many did not see coming.

Unemployment among Muslims in the poor Parisian suburbs has declined since 2005. But as of 2015, the youth unemployment rate was holding steady at around 25 percent. The lack of

opportunity in France's poorest communities has caused some Muslims to feel disconnected from society. The lack of opportunity, support, and resources within their neighborhood left the brothers feeling like failures, and therefore they turned to radical Islam (Walt & Bajekal, 2015). Many French born Muslims feel frustrated by their quality of life and prejudices held against them, and turn to extremist groups to cope. Thus, a seemingly never ending cycle of marginalization and retaliation is created, causing the French government to react and leaving many Muslim citizens and residents to suffer the consequences.

The Relationship Between Islam and Gender

In Islam, religious texts establish rules and parameters to define the relationship between gender and religion (Lansing, 2001). The *Koran*, Islam's Book of God, established much of the gender experience within the religion, deeming it perfect, eternal, and unchangeable. Different chapters of the *Koran* contain different rules of gender. For example, there are verses that establish rules of marriage, dowry giving, divorce, inheritance that specifically address women (Lansing, 2001). Religious texts help establish gender based order and behavior in Muslim centered societies (Lansing, 2001). According to the pre-Islamic tribes of Arabia, customs and ways of life were to be handed down generationally by word of mouth and example. These ideals and norms were then to be contained and preserved by Muslim social practices (Esposito, 1988). In simpler terms, the goals of the earliest practicing Muslims were to carry on tradition and heritage by word of mouth of their own people. Islam translates literally to submission to the will of God, leading most Muslims to incorporate the teachings of the *Koran* in their everyday lives (Lansing, 2001).

Recent research on Islam focused on Middle Eastern, Asian, and African cultural societies and the status of women (Lansing, 2001; Mernissi 1987; Smerecnik et al., 2010;

Winchester, 2008). According to Winchester (2008), the ritualistic aspects of religion help to solidify religious morals and values. These include modesty, religious morality and humility. Expanding upon these values, the author asserted that morality greatly affects gender and family structures. Central to morality, gender, and Islam is the headscarf. The choice to embrace modesty and morality in the everyday life of a Muslim woman is often communicated by her mode of dress and choice to cover up. To further the relationship between gender, modesty, and dress, Rao (2015) examined gendered fashions within a mosque and found that both men and women displayed responsible gender roles through their clothing. This meant men and women wore more conservative fashions to convey morality. For women, the meaning behind the veil differs. It can signify anything from religious devotion, to purity and morality (Rao, 2015).

Similarly, Shirazi (2001) argues that in the Islamic faith, a way to express devotion to religion is through dress. For women, the methods of dress, including veils such as the hijab and burqa, cover much of the head and body. In many cases, mode of dress is related to power. For example, a woman's ability to cover herself expresses her power while also displaying dedication and loyalty to Islam (Mernissi, 1987). Fundamentally, female loyalty to Islam is expressed by way of dutifulness. In other words, a woman's ability to follow the laws of Islam while remaining devoted to her family and submissive to her husband expresses the utmost loyalty to Muslim culture (Mernissi, 1987). From a Western perspective, many of these laws seem oppressive, but to a devout Muslim, they are empowering. However, many of these values do not align with French cultural norms, leading the government to step in and regulate expressions of Muslim faith in public.

Female Clothing and Muslim Based Bans

A woman's right to choose her own clothing, namely her own bathing suit, has long been

cause for controversy around the world (Garratt, 2016). The evolution of women's clothing and swimwear from modest 1900s era coverings to the freedom to show skin has not been reached without judgment in criticism. In the early 1900s, women could be arrested in the United States for wearing sleeveless swimsuits in public. In 1950, the bikini was created and then deemed a mistake for allowing women to show too much skin (Garratt, 2016). According to Garratt (2016), fashion has always been a reliable barometer of social change, which could explain why many take issue with the burkini. Modern feminists fight for women's abilities to dress how they please, and most interpret such as a woman's ability to wear as little as she wants, not her right to cover up.

The recent ban on the burkini may be controversial, but is not surprising to those familiar with French policy. In 1989, France saw the beginnings of regulation on Muslim dress. Three high school aged girls were banned from school by the principal when they refused to remove their hijabs in class. When a parent of one of the girls brought forth a lawsuit, teachers and administrators at the school went on strike, protesting against the headscarf (Bulos, 2016). This was not an isolated incident. Between 1994 and 2003, approximately 100 female Muslim students were either suspended or kicked out of school for wearing a hijab to class. Although French courts overturned nearly half of these cases, the initial passage of such rules set a standard of treatment for Muslim women and girls in France (Bulos, 2016).

There are many different styles and manners in which women practicing Islam choose to cover themselves. The hijab is also known as a headscarf and covers a woman's head only. The burqa, however, covers the entire face and body and uses a mesh casing over the eyes. Similar to the burqa, the niqab covers the entire face and body but leaves the space covering the eyes open. Other Islamic veils include the abaya, chador, and khamir, which are worn throughout the

Middle East and Northern Africa (Goldman, 2016). The ways in which Muslim women dress is often one of physical modesty, a concept addressed in Islamic teachings (Boulanouar, 2006). This concept of modesty, known as *awra*, aims to eliminate vulnerability by covering the entire body aside from the face and hands. By covering the parts of her body, a woman maintains her personal and familial honor, and preserves her concealed body parts for her husband (Boulanouar, 2006).

In 2004, France was the first European country to ban the burqa in public. Initially aligned with the hijab argument to remove religious symbols in school, the burqa ban only applied to women in state run schools. However, the government took the ban a step further when they completely banned all full-face veils in public in 2011 (Sanghani, 2016). According to Sarkozy, who had since become president, burqas were not welcome in France, and any woman caught wearing a burqa could be subject to a 150 Euro fine. Any male or outside party who was caught forcing a woman to wear a burqa or veil her face could be subject to a 30,000 Euro fine (Sanghani, 2016). The ban on full veil coverage is enforced on Muslim residents and citizens of France as well as those traveling from other countries. Less than a year after the burqa was formally banned in 2011, more than 400 women had been fined for violating the ban and an additional 66 had been warned (The Islamic Veil, 2014).

Despite the numerous critics of the burkini ban, bans on full facial coverage still receive support. On July 2, 2014, The European Court of Human Rights upheld the ban and stated that it did not violate freedom of religion or expression. Most of the population of France, including many Muslims, agree with the government stance that face-covering veils do not act in accordance with French societal values (The Islamic Veil, 2014). Many of the ban's adversaries come from outside of France and call it a violation of personal liberties. Despite the international

backlash, the bans on fully-veiled clothing are still intact and enforced in France today.

Although much of the fervor surrounding the burkini has calmed, the fight concerning the burkini in France is far from over. The highest administrative court in the country ruled that no governing bodies in France have the right to ban the burkini. But, despite these rulings, several mayors of French beach towns have reportedly upheld and maintained bans (McKenzie, 2016). One of the plaintiffs in the court case against the ban is The Collective Against Islamophobia in France. The group argues that pressure from extreme-right voters caused mayors to uphold bans, and also plans to sue each municipality that is still enforcing the ban on burkinis. As of September 2016, there were still as many as 30 beach towns banning burkinis in southern France.

Literature Review

Islam and the Media

The way Muslims are represented in media has the power to influence public opinion. According to Said (1981), in the United States and Europe, Muslims and Arabic culture are frequently discussed and depicted as oil suppliers or terroristic threats. Furthermore, Said (1981) argued that the Western understanding of Muslim culture is limited and attempts to understand Arab-Muslim life are most frequently made in situations of aggression, such as terrorist activities or military instances. Muslim culture is also typically viewed as third world. This allows the political elites of the United States and Europe to portray Muslim societies as destitute and in need of modernization and Western assistance (Said, 1981). Ultimately, the lack of democracy in Middle Eastern nations combined with the more traditional sects of the Muslim religion affect Western views of Muslims, leading to feelings of hatred and fear towards all Muslims (Said,

1981). Such sentiments are more frequently seen in the treatment of Muslims across Europe following the September 11th attacks.

The effects of the September 11th attacks were directly felt by most of Europe even though they occurred thousands of miles away. According to Poole (2011), Muslims became the focus of anxieties and threats in the United Kingdom following September 11th. Poole (2002) argued that people in the United Kingdom worried Muslim involvement in deviant activities threatened security as well as British values. These threatened feelings were frequently and freely expressed in the British press. The press' answer to this problem was to work to cover Muslim immigrant's issues, therefore attempting to assimilate them into British society and conversation. However, in many cases, this integration was countered with Islamic activism, interpreted by many as an additional threat to British Culture (Poole, 2011).

As Muslims countered issues of race discrimination in Britain, the narrative began to shift. Poole (2011) found much of the coverage of Muslims in British press dealt with Islamic terrorism and nationalism. Through an analysis of two major media outlets, *The Guardian* and *The Times*, the study found that Muslims were predominantly characterized as the foreign other, i.e. "Muslims in Britain" and not "British Muslims." Most of this coverage surrounded concerns of domestic terrorism and the threat of Islam (Poole, 2001).

Although there are numerous examples of discrimination in British media, reports show that the UK has been more accommodating to its Muslim residents when compared to other nations such as France and the United States (Fetzer & Soper, 2005). In an analysis of the association of Islam, Islamophobia, and threats of terrorism, Ciftci (2012) found that fewer than one third of British respondents believed there was a correlation between Islam and terrorism and that more than 60 percent of participants held favorable opinions about Muslims in general.

Among a data set of five Western nations, British respondents were the least likely to associate Muslims with violence (Ciftci, 2012). Next, was Germany, with 45 percent of Germans associating terrorism with Islam (Ciftci, 2012). According to Al-Hamarneh and Thielmann (2008), many of the problems with Muslims in Germany are not rooted in religion, but rather are a product of language and educational barriers, as well as the degrees of xenophobia present in German culture. Overall, anti-Islamic attitudes exist throughout Europe but tensions seem to be highest in France (Ciftci, 2012).

Due to its increasing Muslim population and secular governmental policies, the relationship between French culture and Islam is contentious. Referred to as “Islamism,” the influence of social mixing and the growth of communalism among French-Muslims was deemed threatening to many French citizens in the media (Bowen, 2007). Many of these concerns were linked to the presence of headscarves and Muslim garb in public, allowing for the 2004 ban of the hijab in public schools. According to Byng (2010), media portrayals linking Islam to terrorism gave legitimacy to the manufactured relationship between the hijab and terrorism. While government officials reasoned the law’s purpose was to remove symbols and clothing of religious identification, many perceived the ban as Muslim based (Bowen, 2007).

According to Thomas (2006), France has reacted like no other country in regard to immigration and banning headscarves in public schools. This is largely attributed to the country’s republican values, and the traditional relationship between citizenship, religion, and membership of social groups. Among many French-born people, citizenship and fraternity are regarded as realizations of individuality (Thomas, 2006). Supporters of the headscarf law frequently state that Islamic attire is restrictive, and evidence of sexual bias and gender oppression based on traditional religious values. Feminist groups in France argued that many

veiled Muslim women do not willingly engage with the religion and are forced into religious identities because of cultural tradition, not because they desire personal modesty. Whilst the law is meant to deal with all religious symbols, detractors argue it increased xenophobia towards Muslims in France, and affected other non-Muslims wishing to wear traditional garb such as Sikhs who wear turbans (Lyon & Spini, 2004).

Byng (2010) argued that many of the legal reactions to veiled Muslim women in France and Europe were influenced by representations of Muslims in United States and European media following the September 11th attacks. In an analysis of 72 news stories from the United States and Europe, some of which related to the hijab ban in France, the author found that all the included publications framed issues of religious freedom of Muslims ideologically alike. Because they were presented from a Western perspective, these publications valued the safety of Western culture over the freedom of Muslim expression. Such opinions and depictions legitimized the global linkage of Islam with terrorism (Byng, 2010).

Similarly, Jackson (2010) posited that the ways in which Muslims are portrayed in United States media greatly impacts educators that are trying to teach students about Muslim culture. Since September 11th, multicultural education in the United States has faced a multitude of challenges due to biases towards Muslim culture and those of Islamic descent perpetuated by media outlets. Students are susceptible to these biases because they often view media outlets as reliable and educational (Jackson, 2010). Consumers see news media and popular entertainment sources as matter-of-fact, or models of normal behavior. Whether scripted or non-scripted, Jackson (2010) argued the information disseminated by televised programming is highly influential, especially for those without a strict understanding between what is fantasy and what is reality.

These influencing factors have the ability to reach many age groups, influencing opinions on race, gender, and culture. One study found political cartoons as extremely influential and damaging to the reputation of Muslims and Muslim Americans following the September 11th attacks (Christensen, 2006). Political cartoons allow for artists to express themselves with some maintaining stereotypes and negative feelings felt towards Muslims. Christensen (2006) argued that representations of Muslims in political cartoons not only normalized violence and stereotypes, but also promoted ill will towards Muslims, and associated an entire culture with the bad acts of few. Not exclusive to the United States, many European nations, such as France, Germany, and Denmark, have also published cartoons that contributed to the spread of Islamophobia and endangered many Muslim residents of the respective countries (Christensen, 2006). Although seen as expressive or artistic, political cartoons play into many of the negative narratives that are maintained throughout Western societies.

Online Comments

The international conversation about the burkini ban combines Western sentiments about Islam with the freedom of expression frequently seen in online commentary. Newspaper editorials and accompanying comment sections are public, mass communicated platforms that allow the expression of opinions, promote discourse which assists in the manipulation of public opinion, encourage mediated social interactions among a wide range of audiences and influence social debate among readers, journalists, and other consumers (Belmonte, 2007). The number and types of articles listed under online publications provide new, unique resources of analysis, providing new lenses and insights to realms of thought (Collins & Nerlich, 2015). According to Collins and Nerlich (2015), the amount of data generated in online comments poses challenges for researchers who often find themselves collecting more extensive datasets that span wider

timeframes. Manually, or through computer programming, the collection and analysis of online user comments provides deeper insight to a multitude of textual.

The ways in which online users respond via article comment sections encourages mediated response, and establishes frames and patterns of discourse (Holton et al., 2014). From a health perspective, Holton, Lee, and Coleman (2014) analyzed the interplay between frames of news coverage pertaining to health along with the online comment environment. The analyzed comments included factual, health-based content as well as personal anecdotes and more emotional messages. The ways in which these messages were framed was also accounted for. Through a content analysis the study found that within online health stories, thematic frames led to gain-oriented responses, while episodic frames resulted in comments containing more personal and emotional stories. These findings helped to measure shifts in public opinion, and how discourse was influenced by the health facts presented in the articles. In most cases, the frame of the article was not the same frame associated with used comments, which suggested that people were not lemmings, and did more than merely regurgitated biased information in the comments section (Holton et al., 2014). The method and findings of this study help set a framework for analysis when looking at comments and discourse among users in regard to the burkini ban.

While online user comments establish and maintain frames, comments can also influence conversation and perpetuate biases (Houston et al., 2011). Because online platforms are more readily available due to newer technologies, people have constant access to news and news commentary. When a user accesses online news platforms, he or she also accesses the electronic space where consumer and producer intersect. Many comment sections are not mediated, allowing crass, radical, and informal language to be presented as fact, with no moderator to refute the information (Houston et al., 2011). Comment sections represent the intersection of

interpersonal and traditional media information, and can greatly influence how the consumer processes online information. Thurman (2008) posited that comment sections represent best and worst case scenarios in terms of discourse. In some instances, online users engage in insightful discourse, leading to an exchange of information and new understanding. Conversely, some users engage in jarring computer-mediated arguments. As a result, news organizations continue to debate with methods to monitor and regulate online users and comment sections (Houston et al., 2011).

Another way to analyze comment sections is as opinion spaces. According to Faridani, Bitton, Ryokai, and Goldberg (2010), the nature of online comment sections under news articles, videos, and product reviews makes consumers more inclined to respond, reflect, and participate in open ended conversation. The researchers argued that comment sections promote a participatory culture in which users feel comfortable to provide feedback and express viewpoints due to the anonymity of most sites and the freedom of the Internet. However, conversation through online comments can also lead to what the researchers refer to as flame wars. A flame war occurs when diverse opinions are presented, and the more thoughtful and objective moderator(s) become overshadowed by an onslaught of aggressive or extreme comments (Faridani et al., 2010). Such exchanges are more likely to happen on websites that attract people with more diverse viewpoints.

From an international perspective, online discourse in comments sections can have widespread effects on conversations surrounding global issues. Rodriguez (2007) asserted that understanding language and linguistic measures within sociocultural settings is critical to analyze the contributions of intercultural rhetoric in discourse studies. Through an analysis of British publications, Rodriguez (2007) explored the relationship between the extent of language use and

different social contexts within comment articles. Newspaper opinion discourse influences the formation of political and social opinions, which often leads to heated exchanges in comment sections. Rodriguez (2007) explored a multitude of language and register variables within British articles covering news stories about terrorism and the September 11th attacks. This integrated perspective allowed for a cross-cultural analysis. The author found that the linguistic methods used across articles in British national press determined ideational meanings and greatly influenced language choice among conversation and discourse about the articles. Such information is important when analyzing discourse among international commenters on articles about the burkini ban.

Framing

To better conceptualize media messages, scholars developed framing theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Levin et al., 1998; Rothman & Salovey, 1997; Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993). Communication is guided and shaped by frames. According to Entman (1993), frames, also referred to as schema, allow communicators to make conscious or unconscious decisions when figuring out what to say. Framing utilizes a communication source to present and define an issue (de Vreese, 2005). Each day, viewers consume news media messages, giving media the power to shape public opinion by highlighting certain issues within a story. Frames exist within texts and are greatly influenced by culture. For example, stock phrases, keywords, stereotyped images, and sources are all ways in which media frame a story.

All these components together influence the thinking of the receiver of the message (Entman, 1993).

Entman (1993) stated that frames typically diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe, and involve selection and salience. Frames help to define problems and determine the cost and benefit of a situation based on cultural values (Scheufele, 1999). According to de Vreese (2005), different cultures focus on different frames. Semetko and Valkenberg (2000) identified five news frames: morality, economic consequences, human interest, conflict, and attribution of responsibility. These five frames are recognized differently across cultures. For example, while some European countries may focus more on economic consequences, U.S. frames tend to be more focused on conflict (de Vreese, 2005). Frames also suggest remedies, meaning a frame will ultimately justify a problem and its effects, or offer a solution (Entman, 1993).

Framing contributes to the analysis of media effects. Within media effects, there are two types of frames: media and individual (Scheufele, 1999). Media frames categorize the series of events that contribute to a story line, suggesting what the story is about and what are its central issues. Media frames can also help to present and classify a story effectively in order to reach the intended audience. Entman (1993) explained media frames as selecting certain aspects of a story to make them more salient when communicating information to an audience. Individual frames are defined as “mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals’ processing of information” (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Individual frames are used to process information. Long-term political views, short-term views, issue-related frames of reference and global political views are all examples of individual frames. Individual frames are cognitive and serve as a mechanism to categorize or place value upon future concepts (Scheufele, 1999). The use of

framing, especially in news media, applies to this study due to the influence of news media frames on the conversation surrounding the burkini ban.

When looking at news and political discourse, framing plays a large role in the crafting of messages. In the political process of the United States, news media tend to set the frame in regard to what citizens absorb and discuss (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Politicians and special interest groups utilize the framing power of the media as well. Pan and Kosicki (1993) explained the framing abilities of news discourse as a sociocognitive process. This means journalists, sources, and audience members all participate in the communication of the message based on shared culture and roles that are defined within society. The overall message is established and communicated based on political communication of the media, in combination with salience of issues and one's internal frames. Together, these ideals shape political discourse throughout the United States (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Similar means are associated with the framing of European politics as well.

Through a content analysis of 2,601 newspaper stories and 1,522 television news stories, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) explored the prevalence of five news frames in relation the Amsterdam meetings of European heads of state in 1997. Although the meetings were conducted by diverse people from many different nations, the frames utilized within the country's respective publications were largely similar. The frames were influenced by the news outlet and the topic being covered. However, the results of the study showed that regardless of the differences between media, there was not a large significance in the difference of the frame of the message. While sensationalist outlets framed stories differently than more serious programs, most stories focused on human interest, morality, conflict, economic consequences and responsibility frames (Sametko & Valkenburg, 2000). The findings shown by Sametko and

Valkenberg (2000) and Pan and Kosicki (1993) assist in the construction of this study which examined news articles and comments from a variety of nations.

Episodic Framing

News media outlets contribute to framing in different ways. According to London (1993), television news depicts specific events, cases, and situations, therefor participating in episodic framing. Contrary to thematic framing, episodic framing shows concrete events that illustrate issues. Through such depictions, episodic frames are more likely to portray individuals as responsible for an event rather than society. For example, people who viewed issues such as homelessness and poverty through episodic frames were more likely to blame these individuals for their circumstance rather than the government (London, 1993). According to Iyengar (1996), episodic frames are pervasive in television news coverage and programming. Episodic frames allow people to shift blame off of societal norms and what is acceptable, and on to individuals they believe are contributing to the problem at hand. Such actions are extremely prevalent in political activity and coverage. The author argued that such actions quell debates about who truly holds responsibility and allow viewers to punish individuals rather than society as a whole.

Episodic news frames present issues in terms of specific instances, with episodic reports merely illustrating an issue. For example, an episodic depiction of a terrorist bombing would be framed as an issue pertaining to that person or terrorist organization, without considering society as a whole as potential contributing factor (Iyengar, 1996). Politics in the United States are typically covered using episodic frames. For example, the term “talking heads” is frequently used reference to politicians. This term itself is an episodic frame (Iyengar, 2005). Episodic news coverage tends to be more engaging and entertaining for the viewer, and therefore is the predominant way that news stories are presented in the United States. However, there are

consequences to the overwhelming use of episodic frames. According to Iyengar (2005), the use of episodic frames alleviates much of the pressure and responsibility that should be placed on the government and places it on individuals instead. Responsibilities that should be placed on societal-governmental agencies are instead placed on individual perpetrators or politicians. Such information is applicable to this study due to the international, political coverage and criminalization of the burkini ban.

Many effects of episodic frames can be seen within the messages of the Republican Party (Iyengar, 2005). The norms of society maintain and perpetuate many issues and problems faced by residents. For example, through an episodic frame, rising crime can be attributed to the issues within inner city areas. These issues range from fatherless homes, to high youth unemployment. Both of these examples place the blame upon the individual, rather than looking at the issues within the area as a whole, such as governmental neglect of the inner cities, the high incarceration rates of African American males, and the failed criminal justice system (Iyengar, 2005).

Coverage of Muslims may also be affected by episodic framing. The framing of Muslims was more salient following the September 11th attacks. According to Powell (2011), government communication connecting Islam with terrorism greatly influenced how the religion was framed in US news media. By analyzing international coverage of terrorism, the author discovered a pattern connecting fear and Christian America with terrorism and Islam. The rhetoric of George W. Bush and the framing of the invasion of Iraq contributed to these fears and attributed violent acts to Muslims (Powell, 2011). Sobolweska and Ali (2015) argued that media rarely uses direct evidence of Muslim public opinion, allowing for biases in reporting, and frames centered on Muslim issues. Although this study did not analyze television news coverage of the burkini ban,

it did analyze the effects of episodic frames and how international news coverage in combination with online comments has framed perceptions of and blame placed upon Muslim women in France.

Audience Frames

Another name for individual frames is audience frames. As previously defined, audience frames are groups mentally stored ideas that influence the way individuals process information (Entman, 1993). According to Scheufele (2000), social movements literature provides a link between audience frames the variables that contribute to individual processing or political action. Generally speaking, the frames that people use to resolve conflict in their own lives will often translate to the way in which they view social change and political action. In some cases, the frames created within social movements can be influential, motivating factors for an individual to modify their behavior or become conscious to an issue that they were previously unaware of (Scheufele, 2000). These types of effects can be seen in a variety of topics, especially in the political and social sciences.

An audience frame is a schema of interpretations that enables individuals to perceive, organize, and make sense of the information they are given (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Research about audience frames tends to investigate the extent to which specific media frames influence individuals' perceptions of issues. Valkenberg, Semetko, and de Vresse (1999) studied how news frames affected readers' thoughts as well as their ability to recall the presented issues. Using conflict, human interest, attribution of responsibility, and economic consequences as framing conditions, the researchers analyzed the responses of 187 participants presented with two newspaper articles about political and social issues in Europe. The titles, opening, and closing paragraphs of the articles were altered and reflected the aforementioned frames. After reading the

articles, the participants participated in a thought-listing listing activity. The results found that the presented frames significantly influenced the participants' responses, and the way that readers communicated information and their opinions about the information presented in the articles (Valkenberg et al, 1999). The influences of media presentations and audience frames affect individuals' interpretations of information and apply to many areas of politics and war in both the United States and European media.

Audience frames can greatly affect public support for policy and political action (Edy & Merick, 2007). Audience frames are also greatly impacted by media frames, and what media outlets present as important topics. Following the September 11th attacks, news media pushed the pro-American, anti-terrorist agenda in order to garner support for a war. According to Edy and Meirick (2007), media in the United States adopted war and crime frames after the attacks on September 11th to rationalize and encourage the war in Afghanistan. Along with news media outlets, President George W. Bush, the FBI, the Justice Department, and a multitude of law enforcement agencies participated in message communication that framed the invasion of Afghanistan as a way to stop the Taliban and respond to the attacks committed against the United States (Edy & Meirick, 2007). Through a survey of 328 residents of Tennessee, Edy and Meirick (2007) found that the implementation of these frames heavily influenced the participants' understanding of the issues and greatly impacted their support and positive views of the war in Afghanistan. The results of this research shows how the salience of issues in the media combined with the frame through which issues are presented can heavily influence the audience, what they believe to be true, and what they value. The use and explanation of audience frames helped this study reach an understanding of how readers interpret media texts dealing with the burkini, and how these interpretations influence the comments left on online articles.

Research Questions

This study analyzed international news coverage of the burkini ban and how the ban was framed within news articles and user comments. The research questions are as follows:

- RQ1: How did Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post* frame the burkini ban?
- RQ2: How did the frames differ among Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post*?
- RQ3: How did readers frame the burkini ban in their comments?
- RQ4: How did the frames differ among commenters on Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post*?
- RQ5: How did the frames differ between the news articles and the commenters?

Method

This study examined how five international news outlets framed the burkini ban in France and the discourse about the ban in reader comments. To meet the criteria for analysis, the articles had to meet specific standards. First, chosen articles had to have online comment sections and be published in English. Second, the articles had to fall within a specific range of dates. The full-body swimwear ban went into effect in France on July 28, 2016. Within weeks, the story was popular around the world (Hjelmgaard, 2016). Because the ban was most highly publicized in the last two weeks of August, articles published between August 15 and 30 were pulled for analysis. To provide adequate data, articles needed more than 100 comments. Articles that did not meet this requirement were eliminated. Finally, the comment sections were checked for spam. Those with large of spam content were removed from the dataset.

Initially, 22 articles were chosen via Google search and pulled for analysis. This number narrowed to 14 and then to five based on the date of publication, the content of the articles, the number of comments and presence of user engagement, and the prevalence of low-spam user comments. Articles from news outlets located in areas of China, Germany, France, and sub-Saharan Africa were eliminated due to low comment numbers. Ultimately, Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post* were selected because of the news outlets' geographic diversity as well as the diversity of opinion represented in the content and comment sections of each article. All these media outlets engage with high volumes of monthly users and cover international issues. In total, 1,876 comments were analyzed, with 202 comments from Al Jazeera, 694 from *The Guardian*, 563, from Russia Today, 222 from *The Times of India*, and 196 from *The Washington Post*. In order to interact on one of the five comment sections, users must create user names which remain linked to their comments. Users on *The Guardian* also have the option to link their comments to a Facebook account. All the outlets have moderated comment sections, meaning comments deemed offensive or threatening may be flagged for removal. These final numbers account for the removal of 61 spam comments, as well as 123 comments that were removed by website moderators for violating comment standards.

The five chosen news outlets are popular platforms that reach large audiences. Al Jazeera provides insight from both Western and Eastern perspectives and is defined as the new face of a formerly parochial Arab media (Zayani, 2005). Across their websites, Russia Today and the *The Times of India* are both the largest English news outlets in their respective countries and offer multiple language translations as well as links to related content on other news sites to maximize their reach ("About Us," 2016; "More," 2016). *The Guardian*, a large British publication,

registers approximately 120 million unique users each month while *The Washington Post* is one of the largest publications in the United States, reaching 16 million people nationwide each month (“Audience Research”, 2016). These outlets provide information online and in print, covering everything from politics and business to pop culture and current events.

Before analyzing the comments sections, each article was analyzed using textual analysis to determine how each news outlet framed the burkini ban. Textual analysis allows researchers to gather information and understand how other human beings interpret and make sense of their surroundings (Fairclough, 2003). This includes the interpretation of written and printed texts as well as television programs and webpages. Previous research using textual analysis sought to analyze dialectic differences between social and personal identity, which allowed the researcher to analyze styles and semantics from a social identity perspective (Fairclough, 2003; Loughran & McDonald, 2011; McKee, 2003).

The comment section of each article was analyzed using textual analysis (Holton et al., 2014; Santana, 2011). The study of online comments is relatively new, with much previous research relating to frames throughout comment sections (Holton et al., 2014). Each individual user comment was treated as a unit of analysis and further understood through a two-step process. Textual analysis provided a method of interpretation when looking at the user comments themselves and the discourse among commenters. Textual analysis was also used in this study to understand the relevance of the content of the articles and to establish connections between articles and the user comments. Following this in-depth analysis of user comments, frames were established.

Frames refer to the cultural roots and societal norms, values, and pressures that influence the presentation of information (Entman, 1993). By establishing frames, researchers often

describe online comments as influencers (Faridani et al., 2010; Santana, 2011; Walther et al., 2010). The articles used in this study covered the same issue from varying international perspectives. The burkini ban is frequently covered from a religious and gendered perspective, which may assist in establishing frames. Potential frames could include gender and Muslim women, conservatism, the oppressive nature of Muslim culture, Muslim culture as a threat, and Islamophobia. The prevalence of such frames as well as the use of textual analysis was developed using previous comment studies and by analyzing the content of the articles and their comments sections.

Results and Discussion

This study analyzed five articles and comment sections from five international news organizations published during a two-week period in August 2016. These articles met specific criteria, such as publication date, article content, and number of comments to be fit for analysis. Each article was analyzed using textual analysis to determine how the different news outlets framed the burkini ban. The comment sections beneath each article were also analyzed for frames using the same method.

In response to the first research question, how did Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, RT, *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post* frame the burkini ban, each article had either a single dominant frame or multiple distinct frames. Among these frames were French nationalist, consumerist, cultural conflict, feminist, and colonialist.

In Al Jazeera, the dominant frame was colonialism. Colonialist frames focus on past conflict and power struggles among colonial nations and their colonies to explain current issues. The author explained the burkini ban through examples of colonialism and Western power. France was the colonial power, maintaining its superiority over French Muslims by way of the

burkini ban. In accordance with Coller's (2010) statements about the Ottoman Empire and the influence of the colonization of Northern Africa on Muslim relations in France, the author maintained that France's colonial history greatly affected legislation pertaining to Muslims. In reference to the burkini ban and France's colonial stigma, the author wrote, "such demands carry a built-in assumption of superiority: You would only dictate such terms if you felt that the obvious, sensible preference would be for French values over a communitarian Muslim identity," (Shabi, 2016). Throughout the article published in *The Guardian*, the dominant frame was feminism. Feminist frames focus on female issues and empowerment. The author discussed the burkini ban as feminist issue, more specifically a Muslim feminist issue in which the ban was an act of oppression targeting Muslim women. This frame was illustrated throughout the explanation of the irony and hypocrisy surrounding the burkini, and the history of male control over women's freedom to dress themselves.

The two main frames within Russia Today (RT) were consumerist and French nationalist. Consumerist frames explain issues from an economic standpoint while a French nationalist frame is centered on the idea that French culture and policy reigns superior to religious and personal choice. Within the article, the author referenced the creator of the swimwear and the virtual support she received, as well as its profitability and surge in popularity. The author provided worldwide profit margins, highlighting the fact that many non-Muslim internationals were buying the swimwear in solidarity, therefore framing the ban as consumerist. The ban was also explained using French nationalist Frames through its explanation of France's secularist culture as a reason for the ban. The dominant frame in *The Times of India* was French nationalist. Citing secularism and freedom from religion justification for the burkini ban, the author framed the burkini ban as a symbol of French nationalism and a non-hindrance for religious freedom. In *The*

Washington Post, the dominant frames were feminist and cultural conflict. The author firmly took the side of Muslim women when describing the impact of and rationale behind the ban. Rather than allowing the ban to be depicted as a singular incidence, cultural conflict was asserted by highlighting previous policies targeting Muslim clothing in France. For example, the author maintained that “there are indeed more women wearing [full coverage veils] in 2016 than in 2011,” (Taylor, 2016). This perspective from a United States news organization is notable, considering that most of the population of France, including many Muslims, agree with the government stance that face-covering veils go against French values, and that most adversaries of such policies come from outside of France (The Islamic Veil, 2014). The struggle between conservative female Muslim dress and secular French policies framed the ban both a feminist and cultural issue.

Regarding research question two, there were both similarities and differences among the frames used by Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, RT, *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post*. Frames among these articles are important because frames presented in news publications affect readers’ thoughts and the ways in which they recall and process presented issues (Valkenberg et al., 1999). Such information would suggest that these frames would influence commenter frames. Notably, news outlets such as *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* that mentioned Aheda Zanetti, the creator of the burkini, used feminist frames, and focused on the ban’s impact on Muslim women. Outlets such as Russia Today (RT) and *The Times of India* that mentioned French and Islamic cultural issues used French nationalist frames and explained the ban as rational due to France’s secular policies. This frame asserted France’s secular policy and framed the ban as French nationalist, preserving French culture and combatting the oppression of women

by Islam. Al Jazeera was an outlier as the only news outlet to frame the burkini ban as colonialist.

As the only outlet to frame the ban as an issue of colonialism, Al Jazeera aligned with previous research suggesting the network is known by many Western nations for taking anti-Western stances (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2004). Within the article, Al Jazeera used France's past colonial presence in North Africa to frame the ban as a colonial struggle. This was done by asserting that French politicians and feminists see veiled Muslim women as oppressed and in need of saving, just as colonialism was rationalized by depicting North Africans as disadvantaged by their uncivilized way of life. This historical context was then used further the relationship between far-right thinking and the rise of terrorism. Trusted to accurately portray the Muslim perspective, Al Jazeera explained the burkini ban as a "continuum of measures taken in the name of French-style secularity, underpinning the country's political and social identity," (Shabi, 2016). This, combined with France's built-in assumption of superiority, contributed to recent terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists, which were described as the catalyst to the burkini ban.

Coverage by *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* framed the burkini ban similarly, with both publications using feminist frames. This could possibly be due to the cultural and democratic similarities that exist between the United States and the United Kingdom. *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* took a more sympathetic approach to the plight faced by Muslims in France, with *The Washington Post* also using a cultural conflict frame. By using this frame, *The Washington Post* addressed not only the struggle between French and Muslim culture, but also the contrasting values between Muslim and Western cultures as a whole. This was done by explaining the French value *laïcité*, which declares the country as officially secular,

and furthering that other Western nations such as Germany were considering bans on full-coverage veils. While *The Guardian* took more of a historical approach when explaining the issue of regulating female dress, both news outlets used feminist frames to describe the burkini ban as unjust and prejudicial towards Muslim women specifically.

Contrary to previous research which maintains that Western news outlets are more likely to frame issues pertaining to Muslims and Muslim culture unfavorably, *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* used similar frames to sympathize with those affected by the burkini ban (Douai & Larucella, 2014; Moore et al., 2008). Although both news outlets used feminist frames, slight differences existed. *The Guardian* took a historical approach to feminism, analyzing longstanding regulations and judgments placed upon women at the beach and explaining the losing battle faced by women who are judged whether they cover up or expose skin. *The Washington Post* focused more on the religious aspect of the ban, framing it as a feminist issue specifically impacting Muslim women. While *The Washington Post* spoke of France's secular policies, it highlighted disparities among enforcement against other religious women, such as conservative Jews. This maintained the feminist frame, but maintained that the burkini ban was a Muslim feminist issue.

The French nationalist frame expressed by Russia Today and *The Times of India* is could be reflective of RT's government-funded status and the stance most Indian news media takes regarding Muslims (Narayana & Kapur, 2011). According to Narayana and Kapur (2011), *The Times of India*, among other Indian publications, oftentimes negatively covered Muslim centered issues, or paid less attention to such issues. As neither an ally nor adversary of France, RT's coverage of the burkini ban maintained the importance of France's secular values which will not waver for Muslim freedoms, as addressed by Laurence and Vaisse (2007). While a French

nationalism frame is not explicitly Islamophobic, it allows the news outlets to rationalize the burkini ban as necessary and acceptable due to France's history of secular policies, and desire to remove religious intrusion from daily life. RT did so by quoting hate mail and backlash to the ban. Attention to hate mail and written criticism contradicted previous research which stated letters to the editor and other forms of written correspondence are often overlooked, with most response left to online commenting systems (Conlin & Rogers, 2016). This asserted the French nationalist frame by promoting the French cultural narrative as a rationale while also sympathizing with the narrative surrounding France's policies.

In response to the third research question, which addressed how commenters framed the burkini ban across Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post*, many frames emerged among the comment sections of the five news outlets. These frames include Islamophobia, sexist, cultural conflict, terrorism, and satire frames. Commenters across the five news outlets often used their own personal opinions to make value statements and judgments to frame the burkini ban. This is important, because rather than simply regurgitating the frames communicated by the articles, which is supported by previous research on comment sections, commenters offered their own thoughts on the burkini ban (Holton et al., 2014).

The emergent frames among commenters on Al Jazeera were Islamophobic and sexist frames. An Islamophobic frame maintains negative, prejudicial feelings towards Muslims because of their religion. Similarly, a sexist frame reinforces derogatory ideas and sentiments towards women. The presence of Islamophobic language among Al Jazeera's commenters is notable, as Al Jazeera is only news organization in this study located in a Muslim majority country. Commenters spoke negatively about Muslim women, traditionally Muslim styles of

clothing and Muslim people in general. One commenter referred to modesty in dress as a “compulsion due to Islam,” while another wrote, “forget about barring the bizarre costumes, ban Islam itself, deport all insane religious fanatics.” Another example of a combination of sexist and Islamophobic frames was one commenter stating that “Muslim women at the beach never look happy,” and “Islam creates sociopaths.”

Initially, the use of such language by a Muslim majority news outlet may be unexpected. However, this language use may be rationalized by the existence of flame wars. Detailed by Faridani, Bitton, Ryokai, and Goldberg (2010), flame wars occur when comment discourse is interrupted or redirected by aggressive or extreme commenting. For example, Islamophobic and sexist comments within Al Jazeera’s comment section may have influenced the perspectives of commenters or invited trolls to participate. Al Jazeera is also published in English, which allows it to reach a broader audience, and a larger troll population. Because Al Jazeera is seen as the CNN of the Arab world, it is possible that international or non-Muslim commenters influenced the tone of comments (Johnson & Fahmy, 2008).

Users commenting on *The Guardian* had the longest comments of the data set, with a majority commenting more than seven sentences per post. However, a single dominant frame did not emerge among these comments. In fact, two different and contrasting frames existed within comments on *The Guardian*. Some users framed the ban from an Islamophobic perspective, justifying the legislation due to the fear of “what may lurk beneath the swimwear.” This fear can be explained by what Byng (2010) referred to as reactions to representations of Muslims in United States and European media. Byng argued that following September 11, 2001, issues related to bans of Muslim clothing were often overlooked or rationalized due to the linkage between Muslim dress and terrorism.

Reinforcing the concept of Muslim culture as antiquated, one commenter stated, “the Burkini doesn't fit into the modern West. Just like western women being forced to wear the veil in Saudi, why is it not okay for the West to put its foot down on outdated, sexist customs?” Most users framed the ban using cultural conflict frames, specifically dealing with democratic struggle and liberal values. There are many facets to issues of cultural conflict and cultural conflict frames. On one side, cultural conflict addresses the clash of Muslim and French values and the ability of the two cultures to coexist. Another facet of cultural conflict addresses the notion of conformation, and whether or not Muslims should abide by French cultural norms. For example, in response to the ban one user commented, “we are not chaining them. Their men are chaining them, [pressuring] them. Liberal values should not be tolerating this type of oppression.” Some commenters argued that liberal values should not dignify the oppressiveness of Muslim swimwear and clothing, while others wrote that true liberalism means freedom of choice, and that women have the right to feel empowered by any clothing they choose. This discord is exemplified in comments such as, “two wrongs don't make a right. Demanding that women remove their clothing is no better than demanding that they put more clothing on. It's intrusive, patronizing, barbaric and small-minded,” and “however the French government try to dress this up, it will always amount to unacceptable totalitarianism.”

Frames such as Islamophobia and cultural conflict are plausible in a publication like *The Guardian*, which is known for foreign correspondence and criticism. The Islamophobia frame may be attributed to what previous research documented as the tendency of the Western media to frame Muslims negatively or as a threat to Western culture (Byng 2010; Douai & Larucella, 2014; Jackson, 2010). However, the prevalence of an Islamophobic frame goes against Ciftci's (2012) findings that many British citizens held favorable opinions about Muslims and did not

associate Islamic culture with terrorism. In accordance with threatening sentiments, the cultural conflict frame could be the result of the current cultural climate in Europe regarding Muslim immigrants, refugees, and Islamic extremism. Explained by Poole (2011), Muslims are often characterized by British media as “other” regarding religion and culture. This may further the emergence of the cultural conflict frame, allowing for commenters who value religious freedom to assert their position.

An outlier in this data set, the frames communicated by Russia Today and its commenters introduced an interesting perspective to this study. Russia Today is known for its journalistic tactics, which include reporting styles that pushing specific agendas and propaganda (Simonyan, 2013). Comments on RT reflected such styles, as they were the most inflammatory of the data set. Three dominant frames emerged in the RT comment section: sexist, Islamophobia, and satire. Satire frames find amusement in and poke fun at situations that may not be seen as humorous. The combination of sexist and satire frames aligned with the sensationalist practices of the outlet. Stated by Houston et al. (2011), the freedom and anonymity of comment spaces often allows for the expression of crass and vulgar language. This can be seen among many of the Russia Today commenters who use crude language to describe burkinis, women, and Muslims. It is important to acknowledge that the negative language expressed on RT did not specifically target Muslim women, but more often took aim at women in general. For example, one commenter stated, “maybe the Muslims have the right idea about women...the need to be slapped around to get sense in their heads.” Other comments did specifically target Muslim women, such as, “Arabic women faces are so ugly that they should be permanently covered and even better pack them on ships and send them all to Saudi Arabia where they can enjoy their own religious freedom.” The burkini was frequently referred to as a “body condom” or simply a

“condom” while women who wore them were called “baby seals,” “walking colorful garbage bags,” and “human garbage.”

While the Russia Today (RT) article focused mainly on French nationalism and the contentious relationship between France and Islam, the comments framed the burkini ban differently. Many of RT’s commenters expressed pro-Western values, meaning they saw France’s Western culture as superior to Islam, but they conveyed this sentiment in a hateful way. This alignment with Western values by RT is unexpected, because as stated by Simonyan (2013), a mission of RT is to deviate from popular coverage and Western news practices. Western support seemingly continued when RT users used Islamophobic frames to support France as a secular nation and maintained that the ban was a justifiable response to the antiquated values of Islam. The ban was also framed as a cultural conflict, a result of religious conflict between Islam and Christianity. However, while Islam was the focus of some comments, satire and sexist frames were overpowering. Comments were more likely to combine sexist and satire frames to make gender charged jokes that targeted Muslim women. Rather than focusing on the burkini ban as a Muslim women’s issue, many users responded satirically, using derogatory language to speak of the way women dress at the beach. The burkini itself was not framed negatively, but rather the women wearing them. This is seen in comments such as “I’m happy for muslim women to wear the burkini. Most of them are hairy beasts anyway,” and “a pair of lead shoes and gloves would make the contraption perfect.” Most comments did not reference the burkini by name. Furthermore, one commenter referred to burkini wearers as “idiots dressed as condoms,” while another wrote, “all overweight and ugly women should be forced to wear a burkini.”

In line with *The Guardian* and *The Times of India*, the dominant frame among *The Washington Post* commenters was cultural conflict. However, the cultural conflict frame was

used to both rationalize and negate the motives behind the burkini ban. While some users focused on liberal struggle and the willingness of democracy to accept all, others delved into issues of Christian acceptance in Muslim regions as justification for the ban. For example, one user wrote, “when in Muslim countries, everyone must do as Muslims tell us to do. So what is the problem with the French making their own rules for how they want people to behave in France? If you don't like their rules, don't live there.” Referencing cultural conflict as it pertains to government, another commenter argued, “If Muslims hate the west so much, what are they doing in France? If they love Muhammad and Sharia law so much, why go live in a country where there will never ever be Sharia law?” A common assumption among comments was that a majority of French Muslims agree with laws that restrict Muslim culture and are willing to accept laws that restrict them. While it is possible that not all Muslims are opposed to the ban, the immediate backlash to the ban does not support such a claim.

Although many users rationalized the burkini ban using cultural conflict frames, arguing against Muslims who do not conform to secular French policies, others argued that the customs of all religions should be respected, regardless of national origin. Through such assertions, a second cultural conflict viewpoint emerged. Many comments on *The Washington Post* were centered on cultural understanding and coexistence among French citizens and Muslims. Many comments framed the ban as a cultural conflict with two sides, a French perspective and a Muslim perspective. For example, one user wrote, “As far as I am concerned the French are allowed to ban the burkini, burqas, hijabs etc... After suffering numerous Islamic terrorist attacks this past year they can ban whatever else they think is necessary to keep their country safe.” Another user responded, “Banning a modest beach garment is ‘keeping their country safe’ how exactly? I have yet to hear of anyone concealing a bomb in a burkini and I'm not sure it's

possible.” Some commenters saw the ban as necessary to liberate France, stating that when in Muslim countries, Westerners abide by Muslim rules.

Similar to both *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*, the dominant frame in comments on *The Times of India* was cultural conflict. A common theme throughout *The Times of India* was “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” Many commenters believed that it was the duty of Muslims to conform French values if they lived there. For example, one user stated, “Muslims have left their homeland to emigrate to [the] west for more personal freedoms. Yet, when it is enforced, they cry foul. If [you] don't like western social norms, then go back to [your] own country and live peacefully.” Another commenter wrote, “Wow Muslims are really comical... demand secularism when in minority and then ram down Islam down the throats for non-Muslims when in majority.”

Within some comments on *The Times of India*, an Islamophobic frame emerged, highlighting contention between Hindu and Muslim culture. Speaking of Muslims, one commenter wrote “Savages at a very low level of civilization and no culture worth the name, from Arabia and west Asia, began entering India from the early century onwards. Islamic invaders demolished countless Hindu temples, shattered uncountable sculpture and idols, plundered innumerable palaces and forts of Hindu kings, killed vast numbers of Hindu men and carried off Hindu women...” Commenters also frequently referred to Islam as “Pisslam.”

In response to the fourth research question, many similar frames emerged in the comment sections of the five news media outlets. These common frames include Islamophobia, cultural conflict, and sexist. All five outlets had commenters use Islamophobic frames when discussing the burkini ban, however users on *The Times of India* most frequently used an Islamophobic frame. Three of the five outlets, *The Guardian*, *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post*

had cultural conflict as a dominant frame, although there were contextual differences. *The Guardian*'s cultural conflict frame related the burkini ban to the struggle of Muslims to fit in and be accepted in France. Commenters on *The Times of India* stressed the need for complete cultural assimilation by Muslims, while *The Washington Post* commenters focused more on governmental acceptance in France and abroad.

Al Jazeera commenters were most likely to use sexist frames, with sexism emerging more frequently than Islamophobia. Russia Today was an outlier, with the only commenters consistently using satire to frame the ban. This use of satire could possibly be attributed to RT's reputation as a sensationalist outlet likely to push propaganda. Overall, there was no relationship between the length of comments and the number of frames within each comment. While some comments were lengthy and contained multiple frames, there were short comments containing multiple frames as well as long comments with only one frame. A potential hindrance to reliability of these results is the inability to track the geographic location of commenters. While some users disclose their locations within their comments, users are not required to state their location when registering to comment on articles.

Finally, the fifth research question addressed the differences between the frames of the news articles and the commenters. The dominant frames among the news articles were colonialism, consumerist, feminist, and French nationalism, while cultural conflict, Islamophobia, sexist, and satire frames emerged within the comment sections. Previous research asserted that oftentimes, news media outlets set the frame in regard to what citizens absorb and discuss (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). However, the results of this study do not support such findings. The frames that emerged among comment sections consistently deviated from the frames established by the news outlets. The dominant frame on Al Jazeera was colonialism, while the

commenter frames were Islamophobic and sexist. *The Guardian* framed the burkini ban as a feminist issue, but Islamophobia and cultural conflict dominated the comment section. Similarly, RT used consumerist and French nationalist to frame the burkini ban, but commenters used sexist, Islamophobia, and satire frames. French nationalism was also the dominant frame on *The Times of India*, while a cultural conflict emerged among the commenters. *The Washington Post* was the only news outlet with overlapping frames, as the publication used feminist and cultural conflict, and cultural conflict was the dominant frame among commenters.

Episodic and audience frames are relevant when discussing how individuals place value on information. Episodic frames focus on specific events and situations and how they are presented, while audience frames deal with stored ideas that influence how individuals process information (Entman, 1993; London, 1993). In accordance with the results of this study, one may argue that audience frames, also known as individual frames, influenced the frames that emerged among the five comment sections. Stated by Edy and Merick (2007), audience frames are greatly impacted by media frames, and what media outlets present as important topics. This assertion was not supported by the findings of this study, as commenter frames did not consistently align with news outlet frames. Such findings call commenter influences and motivations into question. The lack of influence of article content on commenter frames may suggest that commenters are not fully reading articles before commenting. Because comment sections represent the intersection of media information and interpersonal thought, it is possible that rather than responding to information in the articles, commenters are using comment sections as spaces to present their own opinions and introduce new ideas. The controversial nature of the burkini ban and its focus on Muslim issues also invites Internet trolls and commenters that are not familiar with the issue, but are looking for a space to espouse negative opinions about Islam.

To understand the espousal of negative opinion in an online forum, it is important to note that conversation through online comments can result in what the researchers refer to as flame wars. Flame wars occur when diverse or controversial opinions are presented, and the objectivity of the moderator(s) is outweighed by a thread of aggressive or extreme comments (Faridani et al., 2010). These exchanges are likely to occur on websites that attract a larger audience, or websites with users that possess more diverse viewpoints. The idea of flame wars again calls into question the motivations of those commenting on the burkini ban. While some users may be genuinely concerned with cultural issues in France and the stance of Muslims, others may be trolls looking to start fights and raise eyebrows with controversial or offensive comments.

Limitations and Future Research

Although there seems to be a pattern in the results of this study, there are some limitations. A notable flaw in the display of user comments across all five news outlets is the inability to identify specific information about the commenters. Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of India*, and *The Washington Post* are all international news outlets produced in specific regions of the world. However, due to the nature of the Internet, one does not need to be located in the region of the outlet to have access to its published information. Among the comment section regulations, users do not need to disclose their geographic locations. Because of this, there is no way to identify where exactly the commenters are located. Users also are not required to disclose verified personal information such as name and age. This allows users to comment under multiple aliases or to troll other commenters without being detected. There is also no way to distinguish between users that are frequent consumers of the outlet's published information, and Internet trolls who merely comment on popular issues and events. Such discrepancies could be corrected by what Conlin and Rogers (2016) identify as

native and non-native commenting systems. Both of these commenting systems require users to disclose personal information, with native systems requiring users to register on the site and non-native systems linking to social media such as Facebook.

Overall, the emergent frames and information produced in this study may call for future research on the subject. Since comment research is relatively new, there are many areas of analysis to expand upon. These areas for future research include gathering more specific information about commenters, such as cultural and geographic specific information. This could be achieved by enforcing stricter commenter regulations or completing a controlled study. In a controlled study, participants would be required to disclose more personal information, thus providing greater insight as to the motivations behind frames in comments. Such information would also be helpful to further understand the types of frames expressed by commenters. This study analyzed episodic and audience frames by assumption. With more information on the background of commenters and their motivations, one could potentially come to a more complete conclusion as to the types of frames that emerge among comments.

Conclusion

The ways in which online users respond to article content via comment sections encourages open ended conversation as well as free and mediated response, and establishes frames and patterns for analysis. The issue, the burkini ban, was enacted throughout French coastal towns following a terrorist attack in Nice in July 2016. Similar to previous legislation that regulated public religious expression in France, the burkini ban outlawed the full coverage swimwear. This study analyzed frames asserted in the article content and user comment sections of five international news outlets, Al Jazeera, *The Guardian*, Russia Today (RT), *The Times of*

India, and *The Washington Post*. These outlets were chosen because they met specific criteria, including date of publication and presence of online comments.

The five articles and comment sections were analyzed for frames using textual analysis. French nationalist, consumerist, feminist, and colonialism frames emerged among the article content. Commenters framed the ban differently, using Islamophobic, cultural conflict, sexist, and satire frames. Al Jazeera was an outlier among the article frames, as the only outlet to frame the burkini ban using a colonialism frame. In regard to commenter frames, Russia Today (RT) was the outlier, with satire frames emerging throughout the comments.

While the news outlets and commenters framed the ban differently, there was some overlap across the five outlets. For example, both *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* used feminist frames, which could possibly be due to the cultural similarities between the United States and the United Kingdom. Similarly, Islamophobic frames emerged among the comment sections of all five news outlets, which may be attributed to current cultural climates and the international fear of ISIS. Although patterns surfaced to suggest how the burkini ban was portrayed and discussed, it is essential to acknowledge that there is no definitive answer as to why certain frames were used. These results do, however, provide insight for how the ban was perceived internationally. Such information is important due to the freedom and accessibility of online comment sections and Internet mediated communication.

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