

Veiling as free choice or coercion

Banal religion, gender equality, and Swedish identity on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we analyse implicit connections between gender equality and particular forms of religion in Sweden, as expressed in political discourse and social media debates. Instagram posts responding to the Christian Democrats [Kristdemokraterna] political party's proposal to ban the wearing of veils in Swedish primary schools in 2021 were analysed through methods of co-occurrence analysis and feminist critical discourse analysis. By applying the concept of banal religion from mediatisation of religion theory, the results reveal how implicit connections between veiling as opposed to gender equality in the proposal turn into explicit debates on Instagram regarding what kind of religious practice is compatible with Swedish identity and values. This reveals the ambiguous nature of Instagram as a digital platform that may enhance hegemonic ideas of gender, ethnic, and religious identities, but that may also enable Muslim women to challenge understandings of Islam and gender equality in the public debate.

KEYWORDS: banal religion, veil bans, Instagram, Christian Democrats, Sweden

Introduction

Sweden and the Nordic region have since the 1990s undergone profound changes in the political and public discourse on religion. Almost 50 per cent of the Swedish population are still members of the former national Lutheran Church of Sweden. However, for most of these individuals, this relation is characterised by low-key engagement, a perception of themselves as secular, and the othering of minority religious groups (Thurfjell & Willander, 2021). In addition, approximately 8 per cent of the population (10.5 million) identify as Muslims, which is the highest number in the Nordic region (Pew Research Center, 2017). In 2022, 193,064 persons were registered members of a Muslim faith community (Swedish Agency for Support for Faith Communities, 2022). While religion in Sweden and the Nordic region was considered a non-issue in political and media debate until the 1990s, recent research shows an increasing contestation of religion in the media and parliamentary debates (Lundby et al., 2018; Lövheim et al., 2018; Taira, 2019). Tensions around the rights of women and children as core values for Swedish society and public expressions of, in particular, Islam, are prominent in recent debates, which increasingly take place on various social media platforms (Abdel Fadil & Leibmann, 2018; Jensdotter, 2021; Lövheim, 2019).

As argued by Økland (2021), gender equality is embraced as a central political goal by all political parties, including the right-wing nationalist parties, in the Nordic countries. Since 1994, a gender equality perspective has been implemented into all policy areas, stages, and levels in Swedish public policymaking processes (Freidenvall, 2020). Thus, gender equality plays a crucial role for the discursive construction of Swedishness, including distinctions on which cultural and religious groups, values, and practices should be included in this identity (Norocel & Pettersson, 2022). While previous research on media and gender in the Nordic context has revealed an increase in heated public conversations around gender equality as a core Nordic value, an analysis of the role of religion in upholding and challenging conventions about gender equality is largely missing. With this article, we build on and contribute to previous Nordic research by analysing how connections between religion, gender equality, and Swedish identity are expressed in Instagram posts responding to the Christian Democrats [Kristdemokraterna] political party's proposal to ban veils in Swedish primary schools in 2021 (see also Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2023). Theories of national identity as constructed in a dynamic interplay between “cool” (mundane) and “hot” (more extreme) articulations (Skey, 2009) are combined with the concept of banal religion (Hjarvard, 2012) and feminist critical discourse analysis. Furthermore, we explore whether and how social media debates can enable a larger plurality of interpretations of religion as part of Swedish identity than displayed in current political debate.

Political and media debates on veiling in Sweden

Political policy on restricting various forms of veils connected to Muslim women's religious practice has been debated in Swedish national and municipal parliament and news media since the early 2000s. No general ban against wearing veils exists at present, but guidelines from the Swedish National Agency for Education from 2006 (Skolverket, 2006) stipulates a right to prohibit full face veils in specific situations on the grounds of causing risks to students or obstructing communication. Local political proposals to ban pupils and teachers from wearing veils in Swedish schools have been overturned by legal instances with references to the Swedish Instrument of Government and the European Convention (Administrative Court in Malmö, 2020). Between 2010 and 2022, 105 motions were submitted to the Swedish parliament concerning the Muslim veil, of which 75 concern some kind of ban. The majority (46) refer to veiling in Swedish schools (Jensdotter, forthcoming). Political motions to national and local parliaments depict the veil as foreign to Swedish values, particularly gender equality (Frisk & Gillette, 2019; Jakku, 2018; Nilsson, 2021). Frisk and Gillette (2019: 279) argued that the main reason why wearing a burqa, which only a small minority of Muslims in Sweden do, was constructed as a "problem" was to articulate a vision of Swedishness in which gender equality and secularism are fundamental components (see also Jakku, 2018: 11).

Media representations of women and religion

Research on the mediatisation of religion has a strong tradition in Nordic research (Hjarvard & Lövheim, 2012; Lundby, 2018; Lövheim & Hjarvard, 2019). Mediatisation of religion denotes the processes through which the meaning of religious symbols and practices become detached from religious institutions and reinterpreted through the practices and interests of the media as an institution (Hjarvard, 2016: 8). Previous research on the mediatisation of religion has primarily focused on the form termed by Hjarvard (2012: 31) as "journalism on religion", where news media shape religion in a way that attunes to the political public sphere. An abundance of European and Nordic research has confirmed the dominance of negative and stereotypical representations of Islam and Muslims in news media, largely focusing on controversies, terrorism, and failed integration (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017; Poole & Weng, 2021). Increased contestations of religion in Nordic and European societies often concern gender and sexuality, in the form of debates on women's clothing and bodies but also LGBTQ+ rights (Rupar, 2012). In this coverage, religious women are predominantly portrayed as passive victims of male authorities and traditional conventions, where a common stereotype is the veiled and oppressed Muslim woman. Muslim women speaking about their own understanding of veiling, agency, and stereotypical media and political discourses in Swedish and Nordic media are few (Jakku, 2018; Lövheim, 2021).

In Scandinavian news and public service media, alternative frames have been presented for representing Muslim women (Hjarvard & Rosenfeldt, 2018;

Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2018). However, these frames can contribute to a reversed stereotype where certain forms of religiosity become conceived as desirable, and they can be used to construct an ideal religious minority citizen who is knowledgeable, peaceful, articulate, and compassionate (Abdel Fadil & Liebmann, 2018: 287). Jakku (2018: 10) argued that the understanding of Muslim women shifts when the veil is seen as forced upon them by religious, patriarchal authorities or as an act of their free will. In the first case, they are represented as victims, and in the second as dangerous – while in neither case are they represented as trusted political subjects.

Muslim women and digital media

Mediatisation of religion enhances a shift in secular societies towards individualised expressions of religion rather than theological doctrines and organised rituals. This may open opportunities for marginalised groups to express their voices. Research on religious women's use of digital media has revealed how social media platforms enable women to voice their own religious experiences and connect to a larger public, or to handle tensions between gender-traditional norms in religious communities and ideals of gender equality and women's independence in the wider society (Lövheim, 2022).

Several studies have analysed how Muslim fashion and lifestyle bloggers combine religious ideals of piety and modesty and “fashionable” ideals in ways that challenge traditionally defined Muslim femininity (Kavakci & Kraepplin, 2016; Piela, 2017). This represents a potential to exercise agency and establish dialogue in ways that question dominant discourses about Muslim women in Western society. A more critical approach questions the overemphasis on agency as personal freedom and fulfilment that aligns with certain dispositions of neoliberal society (Lazar, 2007: 154). Petersen (2022) argued that, despite the incentives for commercial circulation and consumption that shape digital media spaces, their hybrid, flexible, and playful nature facilitates feminist and queer activism that challenges the binary structures of gender in religious communities. Her analysis of Evangelical Christian and Muslim women brings out the ambiguity of the socio-technical affordances of digital media that, through the focus on visibility and attention, favour expressions of agency that conform to certain ideals of being light-skinned, “properly modest”, and middle-class. Furthermore, the affective nature of social media enables users to share personal and collective experiences of social injustices, but also to use emotive triggers in ways that enhance harassment and polarisation, for example, in discussions about the veil (Abdel-Fadil, 2023: 367).

Thus, digital media technology that enables user-generated content and interaction can contribute to a larger plurality of voices in public debate than in conventional mass media. However, the heterogeneity and more personalised character of public debate in social media, along with how the technological affordances of such platforms are shaped by commercial interests, may decrease the potential for democratic learning from others and increase polarisation

(Sevignani, 2022: 106). Previous research on the potential of constructive discussions of religion in Swedish hybrid media has confirmed this ambiguous outcome (Jensdotter & Lövheim, 2020).

Banal nationalism and religion

The category of banal religion in the mediatisation of religion theory refers to the ways in which media make religion visible in the cultural public sphere (Hjarvard, 2012: 34). Here, religious symbols appear decontextualised from institutional religious settings. This makes such elements unnoticeable as references to particular religious traditions, but nevertheless able to “provide a backdrop of religiosity in society” (Hjarvard, 2012: 36). Most studies in the Nordic context have explored banal religion in entertainment media such as television drama series and feature films, where primarily spiritual or supernatural beliefs become constructed as a cultural commodity for entertainment and self-development (Lundby et al., 2018; Petersen, 2012).

In this article, we explore the potential of using the concept to analyse how ideas about religion circulating on social media platforms reproduce and challenge conventions about national identity in Sweden (see also Lövheim & Jensdotter, 2023). This application goes back to the origins of the concept in Billig’s (1995) theory of banal nationalism, which focuses on reproductions of national identities in everyday life through elements that gain ideological power by their invisibility and taken-for-grantedness. Banal religion has been used in this way in studies about how the implicit presence of Christianity in Western Europe, for example, through buildings and symbols, became accepted and transmitted as part of asserting nationalist sentiments or political activism precisely because they are perceived as “ordinary practices, discourses, and objects” (Griera et al., 2021: 297). Lundmark (2023: 46) applied the concept in a similar way to an analysis of banal Christian elements in the annual televised Swedish Christmas Calendar. She argued that these elements evoke a sense of nostalgia that underpins a construction of Swedishness inextricably linked to ideas of a “secularised” Christianity. Brubaker (2017) argued that such a selective embracement of Christianity and secular-liberal values is a particular characteristic of Northwestern Europe. This use of Christianity “as a cultural and civilizational identity, characterized by putatively shared values” (Brubaker, 2017: 1199) is possible, and gains emotional and political significance, due to ongoing secularisation.

Our analysis draws on critical developments of Billig’s concept emphasising the dynamic character of national identities. We apply Skey’s (2009: 340) concepts of the “heating” and “cooling” of nationalism, capturing the dynamic between mundane reproductions of national identity in everyday life and more extreme articulations that appear under particular circumstances. A dynamic rather than essentialist understanding of banal nationalism also acknowledges the complexity and competing understandings of national identity, which can be accentuated in contexts of enhanced cultural diversity (Szulc, 2017: 62). Against this background, we propose that the concept of banal religion can

be fruitful for analysing how implicit understandings of religion and secularity are connected to core values of national identity in the context of social media, where users from various backgrounds and with different interests and styles of communication interact.

Data and methods

The debate which is analysed was initiated by the opinion piece, “Ban veil on pupils in elementary school”, published on 22 May 2021 in the tabloid *Expressen* by the Christian Democrats party leader Ebba Busch together with leading party members (Busch et al., 2021). The following analysis focuses on an Instagram post from Ebba Busch about the proposal and the discussion this post generated, from 22 May to 5 June 2023, which amounts to approximately 2,000 comments and almost 19,000 likes. For ethical reasons, usernames of commenters are not revealed in the article. However, we consider the analysed debate to be a public political discussion, due to the character of the commented post as well as the publisher (Ebba Busch) being an established politician who often uses social media for political communication and debate. Therefore, using quotations without consent from the participants in the discussion follows ethical guidelines for research on social media (Townsend & Wallace, 2017: 205). All quotes in the analysis with no other reference are referring to comments to Ebba Busch’s post (2021a) within the timeframe of the study. Quoted material has been translated to English.

The Christian Democrats gained 5.3 per cent of the votes in the 2022 Swedish election and is part of the government coalition formed thereafter along with the Conservative and the Liberal parties, supported by the Sweden Democrats (Government Offices of Sweden, 2022; Valmyndigheten, 2023). Ebba Busch is one of the most prolific social media users among Swedish politicians and has many followers on several platforms (Rogvall, 2018). Her Instagram account (@buschebba) has over 200,000 followers, and she posts a mixture of political messages and personalised content. Instagram is popular in Sweden, especially within the age group born in the 1980s–2000s, where over 60 per cent use it daily (Svenskarna och Internet, 2022). The analysed post (Busch, 2021a; see Figure 1) consists of a picture showing the severe face of Ebba Busch accompanied by the banner “No to veil on young children in school”. In the text, Busch argues why the party proposes a ban against veils in school for girls up to the age of ten. The post also refers to the debate article in *Expressen* (see the Appendix for a full translation of the text in the post).

FIGURE 1 Instagram post by Ebba Busch, 22 March 2021



Comments: See the Appendix for a full translation of the text in the post.

The picture of Ebba Busch, together with a quote of the central message of the political proposal, is typical for Instagram, a platform where images are essential but text optional in communication. As Ekman and Widholm (2017) showed in their study of Swedish politicians on Instagram, self-images generate more likes and comments from followers (see also Peng, 2021), and even when political issues are manifested in Swedish politicians' Instagram posts, they emphasise the persona of the particular individual.

According to previous studies of politicians' use of Instagram, the number of likes often signals a positive stance toward the communicated message, while comments express more mixed sentiments (Peng, 2021: 159). As the result below shows, this pattern characterises the comments to Ebba Busch's post. Furthermore, many comments are addressed directly to "Ebba" but not answered directly by her. As shown in previous research, communication on Instagram by Swedish politicians is dominated by visual branding of themselves rather than interaction with the audience (Ekman & Widholm, 2017: 28–29).

Feminist critical discourse analysis

To analyse the production of gender equality as a core value of Swedish identity and its connection to religion in the Instagram posts, we use feminist critical discourse analysis. This approach aims to "show up the complex, subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, ways in which frequently taken-for-granted gendered assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated, and challenged in different contexts and communities" (Lazar, 2007: 142). Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992) analyses representations of social practice and identity in the linguistic structure of a communicative event, practices of producing and using texts, and hegemonic structures of social and cultural power or orders of discourse in a society.

Feminist critical discourse analysis enables a focus on gender in analysing how different actors in the debate reproduce, negotiate, and contest ideas about the veil and Swedish identity (Lazar, 2007: 150). The focus on gender ideology as expressed through assumptions that are reenacted and circulated as common sensical and natural (Lazar, 2007: 147) connects this approach to the theory of a dynamic between banal or implicit understandings of national identity and "hot" or more radical articulations in a certain situation. Lazar (2007: 156) noted that "banal texts" such as advertisements are no less important for critical scrutiny than "serious" political, professional, and news media texts.

Finally, feminist critical discourse analysis provides an incentive to critically identify feminist strategies for resistance and change – but also to be sensitive to how such strategies, when analysing religion, might challenge established, secularistic ideas of agency. As pointed out by researchers studying women in gender-conservative religious communities, secular feminism has often overlooked how religious women's seemingly "compliant agency" can be a legitimate form of subjectivity (Burke, 2012; Lazar, 2007: 153).

Our analysis particularly focuses on the use of words that reveal presuppositions about the meaning of religious practices and gender equality (Fairclough, 1992: 235). The use of most frequent words and the connection between them has been identified through a co-occurrence analysis (see Figure 2). We use subjective or objective modality to analyse the degree of affinity expressed with propositions by various participants, as a way to identify power relations and categorisations such as "us" and "them". Furthermore, we use transitivity to identify how agency is ascribed to certain individuals and groups and how causality is constructed

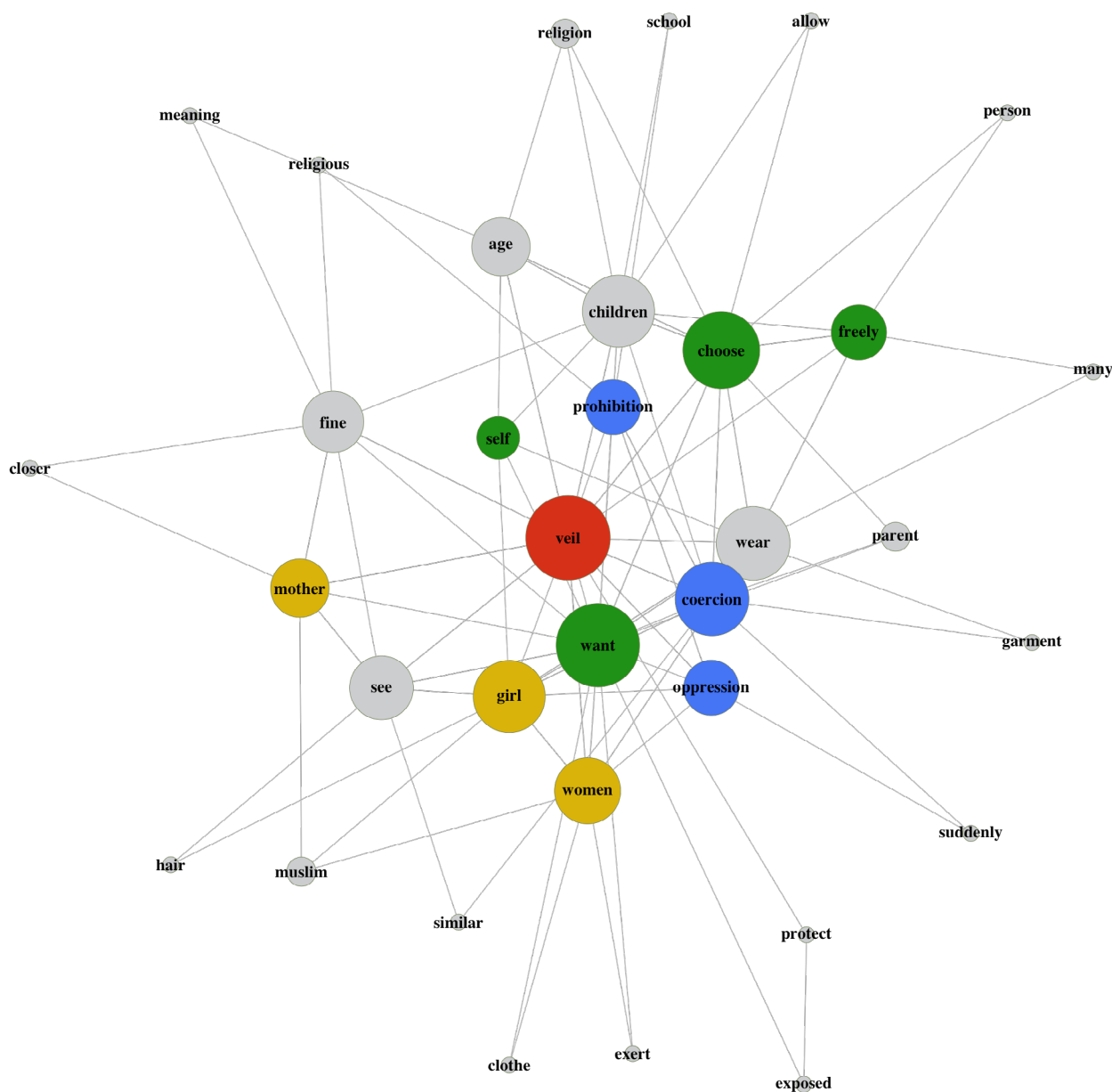
in sentences. An important aspect is whether the affordances of Instagram as a social media forum for public debate provide the possibility to ascribe to or remove agency from participants. In order to analyse the ideological effects with regard to gender relations, and the degree of hegemony or heterogeneity within discourses, we analyse the order of discourse through intertextuality and interdiscursivity in the form of connections to the wider political and public debate in Sweden during the analysed time frame.

Results: The veil as incompatible with Swedish gender equality

Ebba Busch's Instagram post from 22 March 2021 contains several arguments that assert why the veil is problematic from a perspective of gender equality. The arguments are expressed using words such as "control", "freedom", and "choice". The post also contains certain presuppositions about the role of the veil in Islam as a "barrier", which is connected to how "girls are expected to cover themselves so as not to arouse sexual desire in men" and thereby bear the responsibility for the "perceived honor of others" (Busch, 2021a). Furthermore, Busch states that the hijab "for some is a personal choice" but there is no doubt that for others it is a "coercion enforced by close relatives", which restricts the equal treatment of girls and boys in school and the freedom of girls "to be children" (Busch et al., 2021). The post argues, with reference to the longer opinion article in *Expressen*, that veiling represents a gender division which is "far from what Swedish schools should teach concerning the relationship between men and women. It creates by definition a subordination that the Swedish school actively discourages" (Busch et al., 2021). Together, these statements in the opinion piece and the Instagram post express a dominant discourse that claims "the veil is incompatible with Swedish gender equality". The discourse combines presuppositions about the practice of veiling in Islam, along with strong modality of statements about what is accepted and natural in Swedish society, expressed through phrases such as "do not belong", "without hesitation", and "of course". Such statements work to connect assumptions that the veil in Islam oppresses women with a common sensical assertion that this practice is inconsistent with how gender equality is enacted in Swedish society. In the final part of the post, Busch argues that banning veils in primary school should not be interpreted as a limitation to the freedom of religion: "Religions are and should be a welcome part of the Swedish society", she claims, but in order to preserve individual freedom and gender equality, "not all religious expressions are always appropriate everywhere" (Busch, 2021a).

The presuppositions expressed in the dominant discourse of the Instagram post set the terms for the following discussions in the commentary field. Even if some commenters strongly opposed and challenged this discourse, they all departed from the idea of the veil as incompatible with the core values of Swedish society, such as gender equality. The co-occurrence analysis of the comments to Ebba Busch's post reveals the connections between words used in the comments. Figure 2 shows the co-occurrence analysis of the word "veil" in the Instagram comments.

FIGURE 2 Words co-occurring with “veil” on Instagram



Comments: A lemmatisation is a process where different inflected forms of the same word are grouped together. As several synonyms are used alongside “veil” in the analysed debate, these are included in the co-occurrence analysis. Therefore, the word “veil” in this figure includes the following synonyms and their various inflected versions: veil [slöja], hijab [hijab], scarf [sjal], headscarf [huvudduk], and kerchief [sjalett/huckle].

The analysis was performed with R and the quanteda-package, following the instructions of Wiedemann and Niekler (2017). In the analytical process, statistically significant co-occurrences of words were extracted from the analysed material. Word co-occurrences were measured by four statistics (frequency, Dice, mutual information, log-likelihood), and the effects of the statistical measures were compared. A graph network of co-occurring terms was then drawn to visualise the semantic environment of the chosen word (here: veil).

The co-occurrence analysis reveals two clusters of connected words as the heart of the debate. The first cluster consists of the words “want”, “choose”, “freely”, and “self” (marked in green), and the second of the words “coercion”, “oppression”, and “prohibition” (marked in blue). These words also carry certain presuppositions about the meaning of wearing a veil, and the intentions of those who wear them. The frequent references to “woman”, “girl”, and “mother” (marked in yellow) also reveal that the debate is highly gendered. The close connections between the two clusters show how the opposite arguments about wearing a veil as a free choice or coercion, central in the discourse expressed in Ebba Busch’s posting, use similar words but ascribe them different meanings.

The veil as an oppression of women’s freedom

A closer discourse analysis of the comments reveal how different positions are constructed as the debate unfolds. A majority of the comments react positively to the proposed banning of veils among young girls in school, with several including approving emojis such as applauding hands 🙌, hearts ❤️, or the Swedish flag 🇸🇪.

Comments approving of the proposal to a high degree repeat and strengthen the main discourse from Ebba Busch’s initial post. The veil is described as an oppressive and outdated practice “from 100 years back in time”, as a “medieval tradition”, and as a form of unacceptable “sexualisation of children”. These types of comments typically use a strong and objective modality, where statements are given a character of taken-for-granted truths spoken on behalf of a “we” rather than as personal opinions. This is also shown in the use of capital letters and exclamation marks, such as “Small children? All children!!” or “No to veil, for ALL, women as well as children. We shouldn’t have that in our country 🇸🇪 🇸🇪 🇸🇪”. Comparisons are made to the situation of women in theocratic countries such as Iran, and the choice to wear a veil while living in a modern and democratic society such as Sweden is interpreted as a deliberate break with Swedish “gender equality”. The sight of young children wearing veils is described as something “sick”, and an intolerable deviation from common norms of how to “live and learn in our country”, where girls are allowed to “be children”.

An analysis of transitivity shows how agency or the ability to make individual choices is a core feature in the debate. In the comments that support banning veils in primary school, agency is removed from girls and women who wear a veil, by declaring that they make their decision under pressure from their families, by using words such as “indoctrination” and “brainwash”, or by accusations of lying:

This garment limits the child. It put girls on the spot, so they cannot be as free as boys when they are wrapped up like a kebab roll. Can’t imagine that a child by herself would want to wear this. Those who say so lie.

Wearing the veil as an act of free choice

Comments that question or oppose Ebba Busch's proposal are less frequently found in the commentary field but become more prominent as the debate unfolds. Several of these comments come from women who tell their stories about when and why they choose to wear a veil. All of them underline that this is an act of free will done without pressure from parents and other relatives. As in this example, they express the pride and joy they feel when wearing a veil in school:

I started wearing my veil in primary school by will, hear me right, BY WILL!!
🔴 and have been wearing it since then until now, when I am soon 15 and still
wear it with pride, no one can every make me take it off against my will! 🇹🇷❤️
note that I was very happy the day that I for the first time came to school in a veil.

Commenters also express why the veil makes them feel comfort, beauty, and inner peace, and emphasise how their lives are not limited but instead become completed by their choice to wear the veil "as a crown on the head". Several comments highlight the high value placed on women within Islam along with the argument that coercion is not allowed. The subjective modality, expressed through the pronoun "I" and "me", and transivity in the emphasising of one's own choice through using capital letters and emojis, shows the urgency of expressing agency among girls and women wearing a veil.

Comments arguing for the agency of women wearing a veil can be interpreted as an example of how social media platforms for public debate allow Muslim women to question dominant discourses describing them as oppressed. Arguing for the wearing of a veil as an explicit act of agency is one example, but resistance can also be enacted in answering a comment stating "Is there any girl/women that freely wear hijab?! Don't think so 🤔" by answering "Here is one 🧕". Likes and encouraging comments also show the strength of support expressed between girls and women presenting their own (or their sister's, mother's, or friend's) choice to wear a veil.

Modality, through use of the pronoun "we" or "us", also reveals how arguments regarding the veil are connected to a struggle over the meaning of values such as freedom of religion and gender equality in Swedish society. As shown above, "we" is ascribed different attributes depending on the position of the user. Those who argue in line with the main discourse find veils to be problematic because "we in Sweden" or "our culture" is secular and gender-equal. Among commenters who support the wearing of veils, objective modality is used when a personal story is ended with taking the position to speak for a collective "we" of women wearing veils in Sweden.

Users criticising the main discourse also frequently use the pronoun "you-all", as in the statement "you-all have obviously not understood the very purpose of wearing the veil". This use of "you-all" can be interpreted as an expression of frustration and protest among members of a minority that frequently experience being questioned for their religious choices. The connection of personal frustration and the struggle between different and legitimate understandings of values such as freedom of religion and gender equality is expressed in the following comment:

so TIRED of discussing, educating and informing narrow-minded people. You-all refuse to accept the truth. You-all refuse to understand that the majority of the hijab wearers CHOOSE the hijab. And no one has the right to force it off us.

Even if most discussions about the veil become charged with diverging understandings of women's freedom and religious freedom, the following example shows that instances of genuine dialogue become expressed in the commentary field:

@USERA I can understand what you mean about limiting the parent's control but I do not have the same opinion as you, thinking it is too big a step to choose the veil and that you have to read and understand more about what it means. But it was nice to discuss with you and we will have different opinions but it is totally ok there are several nuances of ideas about this topic. You really have wise ideas and I can understand your views ❤️

@USERB thanks to you too for choosing to discuss this instead of attacking others I do not think that any one of us is wrong but as you say it is difficult to solve such a large problem in society ❤️

@USERA really but I believe we can get far by keeping the discussion open and respect each other. Have a nice evening ❤️

Discussion

Feminist critical discourse analysis aims to understand how taken-for-granted and subtle assumptions about gender are reproduced and sustained, but also may be negotiated and challenged, through communicative events. In this article, we have sought to uncover the role of "banal" or implicit, common-sense ideas of religion and secularity in this process. The analysis reveals how modality, using the pronoun "we", and transitivity through depicting the wearing of a veil as an act of agency or coercion, brought out competing understandings of freedom of religion and the rights of women. These different understandings were also attributed to, on the one hand, "we in Sweden", and on the other, "you-all" who do not understand the meaning of the veil.

The analysis shows several presuppositions regarding ethnic and religious identities in the Instagram comments. These are expressed in how arguments shift from the veiling of Swedish school girls to the veil as a symbol of the oppression of women in Islam and the Middle East region in general. This shift from the actual issue in Ebba Busch's Instagram post to a more general debate over the place of religion in Swedish society can be discerned through intertextuality and interdiscursivity, where Instagram postings connect to arguments expressed in the wider public debate on religion and gender equality in Sweden. Such interdiscursive or intertextual practices, we argue, highlight the dynamics between "cool" and "hot" understandings of religion and gender equality for national identity (Skey, 2009).

In the comments, the most obvious examples of "heating" happens when implicit expressions in the identified main discourse about the veil as incompatible

with Swedish gender equality is connected to an anti-Muslim discourse. In some Instagram comments, Busch's critique is pushed further by references to Islam as "undemocratic", "oppressive", and "a fucking crap religion". Muslims who "don't adopt an ounce to how we live in Sweden" by forcing their children to wear a veil are encouraged to "go home" or move to "Muslim countries".

As stated above, Ebba Busch as an actor matters in several ways for this process. Her activity on social media, together with her political communication in other forums, creates a discursive web in which the analysed Instagram post is an interdiscursive practice communicating with her frequent activity on various other social media platforms. A recurring theme in her political message in the period before and after the analysed Instagram post, is what she labels as a "struggle between values", where specific values are described as an obstacle for the integration of immigrants into Swedish society. Here, religion has a role to play, both in a positive and negative sense. In her Instagram post, Busch described how "not all religious expressions are appropriate everywhere", and in other social media posts, she has stressed the necessity to "divide between good and bad religious practices" (Busch, 2022a) and a "good and bad way to practice Islam" (Busch, 2022b). In a speech at the annual political conference Almedalen, she – in front of a huge image of the Swedish flag – argued for the need of a "common mother tongue of ethics" based on "Christian ethics" as a prioritised political goal to counter a growing "value relativism" enhanced by migration (Almedalsveckan, 2023). When addressing gender equality in other social media postings, Ebba Busch implicitly connects an increase in sexual crimes against women to migration, and honor-related oppression as an "imported problem" that has made gender equality in Sweden a more complex issue (Busch, 2021b). The Christian Democrats' policy programme emphasises gender equality as a core value based on "the Christian understanding of humanity". In this programme, adopted the same month as the analysed Instagram post was made, the party highlights work against honor-related oppression as a focus area for increasing gender equality in Sweden (Kristdemokraterna, 2021).

Connections between Sweden as a gender-equal and Christian country can be further traced in the Instagram comments, where the veil is by some users described as problematic in a "democratic and Christian country like Sweden", where "we stand up for everyone's rights" and "gender equality". Comments to Ebba Busch's post show how this dynamic between "cool" and "hot" connections of religion, gender equality, and Swedish identity are recognised by some of her Instagram audience, who compliment her for the "courage" to address "hot" issues:

Well done @buschebba 🙌🙌🙌 am so proud of you. You are the only one who has the courage to say that, so unfair for these kids to grow up with such mentality. I don't understand how someone can expect any integration in the society, having the burden of Hegab [phonetic spelling of hijab in the Egyptian dialect]....🙌❤️

The discursive web constructed in Ebba Busch's political communication inside and outside social media also connects to a broader order of discourse developing in contemporary Sweden. A polarisation between the values of Swedish culture, with references to a Christian tradition, and the values of migrant and minority ethnic and religious groups is, as previous research has shown, increasingly voiced in other parts of the Swedish public and political debate. Frisk and Gillette (2019: 279) have shown how a discourse in which the need to defend gender equality and secularism as core values of Swedish identity, rather than protecting individual women from oppression, was strengthened from 2002 to 2018 in political policy proposals on veiling. In more recent proposals to the parliament, arguments about restrictions of, in particular, Muslim religious practices in order to preserve Swedish democracy, are voiced by representatives from several political parties (Jensdotter, forthcoming). These arguments also connect with the rhetoric of more extreme right-wing populist actors, who have gained a growing influence over the political debate in Sweden in recent years. Norocel and Pettersson (2022: 436) showed in their analysis of the nationalist-populist party Sweden Democrats leader's speeches how arguments about "safeguarding gender equality and Christian traditions" are intrinsically connected to an "immediate stop to migration". References to Islam as a religion threatening both Swedish identity and the freedom of young girls "to be children" in Busch's post and the comments further connect to the "politics of fear" used by radical-right actors, where women are depicted as victims threatened by patriarchal Muslim immigrant men (Norocel & Pettersson, 2022: 440; Wodak, 2015).

Conclusions

A core argument in feminist critical discourse analysis as well as theories of banal nationalism is that hegemonic power lies in the invisibility and taken-for-grantedness of elements circulating in mundane interactions. Using the dynamic of "cool" and "hot" articulations of national identity, this article has shown how a proposal to ban veils in primary school in order to safeguard the freedom of young girls brings out taken-for-granted ideas and tensions about gender equality in Sweden, and how these are connected to religion. Ebba Busch as a political communicator plays a key role in this process by arguing for secular-liberal values on gender equality and religious freedom as core Swedish values. Her references to a struggle over these values are implicitly connected to Christianity as a "common mother tongue" while other, notably Islamic, practices are not "suitable". As the analysis shows, Instagram postings become part of a discursive web where a "cool" message that all girls in Sweden are to be treated equally to boys is used to fuel a "heated" political message calling for the restriction of certain religions and practices in order to protect Swedish identity.

Using the theoretical lens of banal religion reveals how religion becomes a potent element in the process of heating banal nationalism in social media debates, also in highly secularised countries such as Sweden. As the analysis shows, the meaning of wearing the veil for women and within Islam is discussed based on

common-sensical and generalised ideas about Islam as well as Christianity, which seldom differentiate between the teachings of religious authorities, scriptures, or different practices in various traditions or countries. Among the users criticising Islam, random references to the Quran are used to support arguments. Among users who argue for wearing the veil, personal experience and interpretation of the practice of veiling dominate, as well as references to parts of the Quran that enhance women's rights and individual agency. Banal religion captures how religious symbols that appear decontextualised from institutional religious settings still provide a commonsensical "backdrop" for understanding religion in secular societies, and this character makes them powerful in struggles and negotiations over the meaning of abstract and contested values such as freedom or equality. In this way, banal religion as a concept can further develop findings in previous research on the seemingly ambiguous rhetoric of political actors, where Christianity as a foundation of "traditional family values" along with secular-liberal gender equality become embraced as core features of national identity. Norocel and Pettersson (2022: 432) noticed that this strategy of using religion connects with a similar strategy regarding gender, where traditional values are connected to a partial acceptance of women's aspirations in public life, mainly as a means to position the gender-equal native majority against a patriarchal migrant Muslim Other.

The characteristics of social media platforms such as Instagram enhance this process, and Ebba Busch as an active and influential social media actor with many followers increases the likelihood of the post reaching a wide audience from various backgrounds and with different interests and styles of communication. In this case, this expands the post's visibility to persons approving of Ebba Busch's re-occurring message about the "struggle of values", gender equality, and honor-related oppression, but also to Muslim women and girls challenging the dominant presupposition of the veil as a constraint. As described above, the character of the analysed commentary field changes as the debate unfolds from a dominance of comments applauding the proposed ban of veils in primary schools to an increase of comments challenging both the proposal and the main discourse presented in Ebba Busch's post.

The analysis shows how the focus on personal experiences and opinions in social media does enable women who wear a veil as part of their religious faith to express their intentions and values in a way that challenges the stereotype of passive and victimised Muslim women. The fact that many comments give witness about the personal choice to wear a veil as empowering – and the supportive community that is formed by sharing, liking, and encouraging other women's stories – connects to previous research findings about digital media as enabling a broader range of voices from religious minority groups. Furthermore, the discussion among women, and the instances – if few – of dialogue and mutual learning in the analysed debate, show how social media platforms may also become spaces for negotiating tensions between secular ideas of gender equality and religious values and practices. Nevertheless, the centrality of the notion of freedom to choose to wear a veil, among both users who support the ban on veils in primary school and those who oppose it, testifies to the strong

influence of a discourse drawing on neoliberal ideas of personal choice as the ideal model for constructing religious identities, gender, as well as citizenship in contemporary society. The emphasis among the users who wear a veil on this being “my personal choice” does, on the one hand, confirm the argument that wearing a veil can be accepted as an individual act if connected to support of common values such as women’s freedom, while remaining contested in other cases (Abdel Fadel & Liebmann, 2018: 287; Jakku, 2018: 10). On the other hand, the arguments strongly voiced by the users wearing a veil that religious faith does not equate coercion challenge secular ideals of gender equality and introduce an alternative interpretation of the relationship between freedom of religion and gender equality. Thus, the affordances of the Instagram platform simultaneously reinforce and challenge the hegemonic understanding of gender equality as a core value of Swedish society, supported by secularity and a selective embracing of Christianity.

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Appendix

Translation of Instagram post by Ebba Busch, 22 March 2021

The school should be a sanctuary for all children

Children in primary school and the first years of elementary school should not wear veils. The function of the veil as a “barrier” (which is the meaning of the Arabic word hijab) and a means of control makes it not suitable for small children cared for by primary and elementary school. Too many girls are expected to cover themselves in order not to arouse sexual desire among men. This is an order which places the responsibility for the desire of men on those that might be in his vicinity. This is not appropriate for small children – they should be free to be children. They should not have to carry the responsibility for other people’s sexuality or perceived honor. And most importantly, they should not have to carry the blame of the choice not to wear a veil.

The Christian Democrats will therefore work towards not allowing veils in primary and elementary school. This will of course also be applicable to other types of similar garments, if such exists.

This is not a matter of reducing freedom of religion. This is not a matter of ethnicity. It is about ensuring that boys and girls are perceived in the same way and treated equally in the Swedish school. While the veil undoubtedly for some is a matter of a personal choice, it is still for others a coercion upheld by close relatives.

Religion is and should be a welcomed part of Swedish society. But this does not mean that all religious expressions are always equally appropriate everywhere. Let all children just be children.