

# Note: Picking Sides: The influencer-driven #HijabBan discourse on Twitter

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## ABSTRACT

Social Media is increasingly central to culture wars, and in recent years has been at the center of debates around the weaponization of peoples' opinions in polarized situations. We examine one such issue, an attempt to allow schools and junior colleges to ban girls from wearing Hijab in India in the southern state of Karnataka, India, by studying Twitter messaging related to the issue in early 2022, when it was in the news. We find that the narrative supporting the ban of the Hijab on Twitter is primarily driven by a minority of highly-influential individuals who are predominantly male and polarised in favour of the ruling party, while the discourse against the ban relies largely on influencers from within the Muslim community. Our findings show that social media can be a useful tool to craft the contours of politically-motivated escalation in the Global South.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Social media**; *Social networks*; Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing.

## KEYWORDS

Social Media Influencers, Global South, Twitter

### ACM Reference Format:

Soham De, Anmol Panda, and Joyojeet Pal. 2022. Note: Picking Sides: The influencer-driven #HijabBan discourse on Twitter. In *ACM SIGCAS/SIGCHI Conference on Computing and Sustainable Societies (COMPASS) (COMPASS '22)*, June 29–July 1, 2022, Seattle, WA, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 4 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3530190.3534841>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In early February, schools in the Indian state of Karnataka barred admission to students wearing hijab, a headscarf worn by Muslim women, in stated adherence to a state government order on school uniforms. The state, which houses India's technology capital of Bangalore, had traditionally had girls go to school and junior college wearing headscarf, and the sudden provocation by the government, under the Right Wing Hindu Nationalist party the Bharatiya Janata

Party (BJP) led to an escalation of tensions. A number of girl students started to protest by declining to enter classes, and legal cases were filed to contest the regulation of dress in schools. The issue took seed in the district of Udupi, an electoral stronghold of the ruling party, during the run up to divisive state elections in various parts of the country. Localised protests were aggravated when mobs of men in Hindu garb started showing up in schools, and Hindu girls started wearing saffron-colored dress to schools in apparent protest to Muslim women being allowed to wear Hijab. After the first court ruling in favour of allowing schools and junior colleges to ban Hijab, the state shut down educational institutions to avoid further escalation [7, 12, 13].

Consequently protests began in different parts of the country fuelled by a parallel campaign on Social Media. The #HijabBan discourse on Twitter rapidly attracted international attention including social media messages from Noble-laureate, Malala Yousafzai, footballer Paul Pogba, as well as the United States ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, criticizing the move or calling on Indian leaders to *stop the marginalization of Muslim women*.

Our work examines the #HijabBan debate on Twitter and the effect of Indian Twitter influencers in shaping either sides of the discourse. Our key research questions are (i) What are the core arguments on either side of the debate? (ii) Who are the key players (influencers) from India on either side of the #HijabBan debate? and (iii) How have these Twitter influencers shaped public opinion and narrative? We note that our study focuses primarily on the role on Indian influencers in the debate and a larger study on global influencers is reserved for future work.

## 2 RELATED WORK

Twitter has been frequently studied as a playground for protest such as during the #OccupyWallStreet movement of 2011 [16], the #MyNYPD movement of 2017 [5] and more recently, the #BlackLivesMatter outrage of 2020 [11] among numerous other instances. In India, the recent protests around CAA and NRC on Twitter have also attracted scholarly attention [4]. Prior work [2] has also established a relationship between activity on Social Media and one's participation in civic and political life.

The role of influencers in shaping the global political discourse on Twitter has been well established in previous work [14]. Influencers are known to impact election outcomes [15] and amplify political polarisation [3] among many other cascading effects. There is also sufficient literature [4, 9] that points to a similar use of social media for furthering political narratives by Indian politicians.

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*COMPASS '22, June 29–July 1, 2022, Seattle, WA, USA*

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ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-9347-8/22/06...\$15.00  
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3530190.3534841>

### 3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

We borrow lists of Twitter politicians and influencers from 2 main existing datasets - [10] and [1] respectively. These were the most extensive databases on influencers in the Global South that the authors were aware of, during the period of study. Both of these datasets are curated by snowballing a manually selected set of representative accounts to the third degree, followed by a human-in-the-loop classification pipeline to remove false-hits. We collect all tweets containing the term 'Hijab' using the Twitter API v2 from January 31, 2021 to February 2022. Then, we manually inspect the top-20 most frequently used hashtags and categorise them as either pro-ban (#HijabNahiKitaabDo, #saffronshawls, #YesToUniform\_NoToHijab etc) or anti-ban (#HijabisOurRight, #HijabIsFundamentalRight, #HijabIsIndividualRight).

## 4 ANALYSIS

### 4.1 Dominant narratives

We observe that the highest tweeting activity on the #HijabBan topic was concentrated on 3 days (7th – 9th February). Each of these days has a time-interval of a few hours (typically, around 7:30 PM IST) which attracts the largest volumes of tweets on the issue. Tweets on each of these three days also seem to focus on a new argument to support their respective side on the debate. To extract these narratives, we encode tweets using mUSE [17] and use a hierarchical clustering algorithm (HDBSCAN) [8] to generate clusters of semantically-similar tweets. On inspecting the tweets contained within the clusters on either sides of the argument, we observe that the core arguments against the #HijabBan are (a) Hijab being an individual right, and (b) Education being a fundamental right. On the other hand core pro-ban arguments stress on (a) the importance of uniform over Hijab and (b) almost always have a religious undertone. We infer these themes by a subjective evaluation of clusters of similar tweets; therefore these themes are subject to individual interpretation.

In Fig 1 we annotated 5 major points when Twitter activity increased.

- (1) **5th February:** Protests at the BB Hegde College and Bhandarkar College, Rahul Gandhi (from the opposition party INC) tweets about issue
- (2) **7th February:** #HijabIsIndividualRight starts trending, counter protests increase, #YesToUniform\_NoToHijab starts trending on pro-ban side
- (3) **8th February:** Muskan Khan incident trends, major global accounts including Malala Yousafzai and John Cusack tweet on the issue. #JaiShriRam starts trending on the pro-ban side. Tweets about court proceedings start trending.
- (4) **9th February:** #EducationIsMyRight starts trending alongside #HijabNahiKitaabDo on the pro-ban side, several pro-ban influencers tweet in succession, presenting Niqab as equivalent to Hijab
- (5) **11th February:** US International Religious Freedom Ambassador tweets in opposition to Hijab ban, triggers pro-ban activity, mostly focused on cases of Muslim women who chose not to wear Hijab and were attacked or trolled

### 4.2 Key players

We find that while the number of anti-Hijab ban are far more numerous, the pro-Hijab ban tweets come from a smaller number of highly engaged accounts. This suggests that the overall sentiment is opposed to a ban, but that a vocal minority with a significant online reach is able to build a significant online footprint.

In Fig 2, we observe that there are more highly-followed influencers who are in favour of the ban, than there opposed to it. Here, we see explicit political connection, one of the most engaged accounts is that of BJP politician Kapil Mishra, and two of the party followers' most engaged influencers – Anshul Saxena and Surendra Poonia. We also see that right-leaning anchors Rahul Shivashankar and Suresh Chavankhe feature significantly with messaging critical of wearing Hijab in schools. The overwhelming majority of high-influence Twitter accounts with an opinion on whether or not women should wear Hijab are male.

On the side opposed to the Hijab ban, we find that the most engaged influencer was academic Ashok Swain, followed by factchecker Mohammed Zubair. Journalists Ashraf Hussain and Imran Khan were among the most engaged from among commentators. When we look at the scale of the engagements, a few other interesting patterns appear. We also see a pattern comparable to elsewhere in the world, where highly polarized news sources that do not operate on traditional media – such as @MeghUpdates @JantaKaReporter become a key source of partisan information during a highly volatile event. We acknowledge that the datasets [10], [1] used in this study have a higher concentration of influencers from the Global South, which may have an affect on the key players that have arisen in our analyses.

### 4.3 The discursive role of influencers

A statistical analysis of the top-200 most retweeted messages on the topic reveals that:

- (1) Almost 70% of the top 200 RTed tweets that took a position (58 out of 86) are pro-ban. This suggests a high degree of mobilization was done through a smaller number of tweets. This is a typical pattern seen in cases of astroturfing [6].
- (2) This is confirmed by the fact that from the total number of tweets that took a position, anti-ban tweets are about 500% more in volume than pro-ban tweets (#63582 vs #12649). Even further evidence is seen in the fact that anti-ban tweets have a 360% retweet rate of the pro-ban tweets. The Pro-ban tweets had a mean retweet rate of 1.445, Std Dev: 98.46 (#12649), whereas the anti-ban tweets had a mean RT: 5.327, Std Dev: 61.39 (#63582)
- (3) In summary, these suggest that a far higher proportion of people engaging content on Twitter oppose the Hijab Ban, but that a small number of highly-networked influencers are driving the counter side of the debate.

In Fig 3, we plot the last three accounts retweeted (endorsed) by accounts (within our corpus) that adopted an unambiguous stance on the #HijabBan and observe two clear patterns

- (1) On the anti-Hijab ban side, the majority of voices are from accounts that retweet leading Indian Muslim voices on Twitter (such as Asad Owaisi and factchecker Mohammed Zubair), as well as organizations (such as Popular Front of India and the

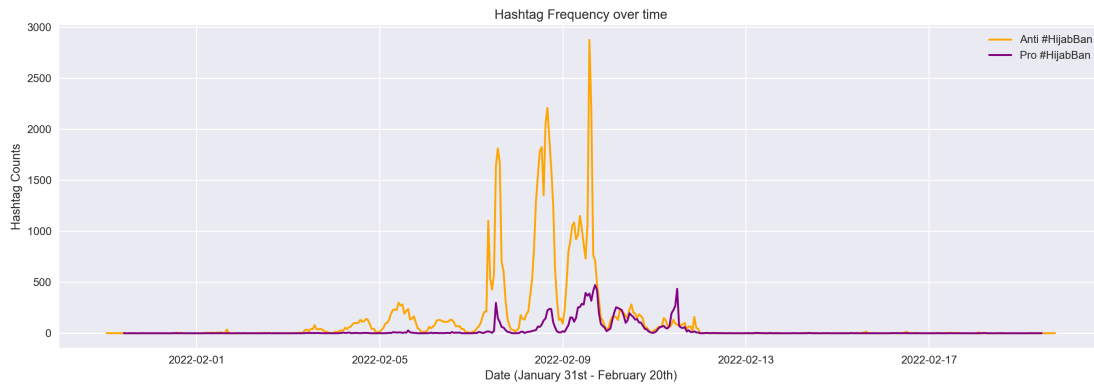


Figure 1: Timeline of Hashtag frequencies from Jan 31st to Feb 20th (plotted hourly)

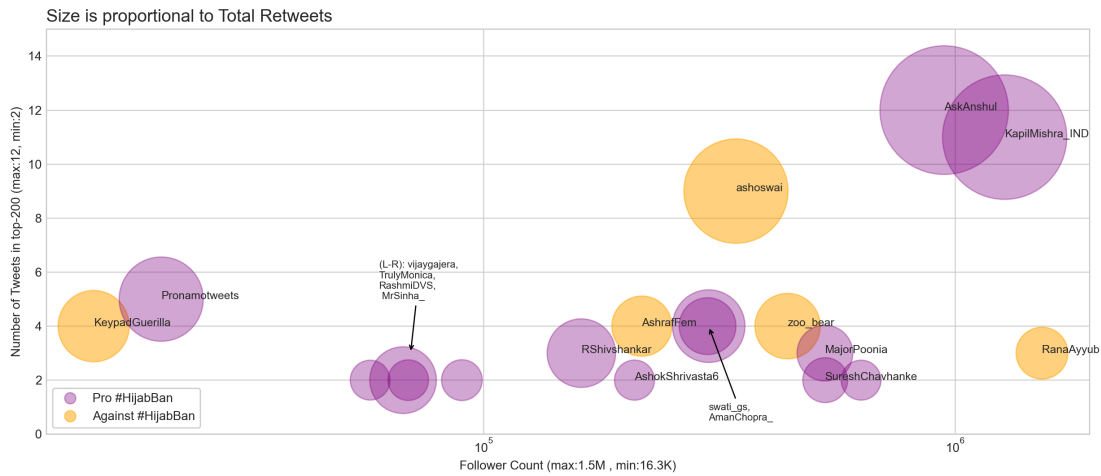


Figure 2: Visualizing Users with the top-200 most RTed Tweets on #HijabBan: Size of each bubble is proportional to the total number of RTs the user has accumulated on their tweets about Hijab in the top-200. Key observation here is the majority of pro #HijabBan users at the highest end of the most-RTed content. We only visualize highly influential accounts (followers > 100) with at least 2 tweets in the top-200 RTed tweets

Students Islamic Organization of India) that have mobilized around the ban. The issue has also brought to the forefront a number of new faces – these include influencers who shed light on Muslim issues – including Mohd Abdul Sattar, Raza Khan, organizations like Roshan Mustaqbil. The spread of journalists whose work gains attention also highlights people who have focused on, or done ground coverage of the Hijab ban issue including Ashraf Hussain and Rushda Khan.

- (2) The most co-retweeted on the pro-Ban side has some a mix of popular BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Modi, Yogi Adityanath, Amit Shah and JP Nadda. But we also see a key account – HinduJagrutiOrg, which is frequently retweeted by the same accounts that post a lot of pro-ban material. We see influencers who are typically popular with the right,

including Anshul Saxena and Surendra Poonia, but also includes some accounts that consistently post hateful visual content including @alphatoonist and @incognito\_qfs, underlining the radicalization of the pro-ban side.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND FUTURE WORK

We see here that a systematic analysis of social media messaging gives us a unique look into the contours of bias through a network. Any study on Indian communities must take into account the fragmented nature of Indian society, fractured along axes of religion, caste and linguistics. Through our findings, we establish a clear political bias favouring the ruling party influencing arguments in favour of the ban. Furthermore, we establish that the side that rallies online against the ban largely relies on influencers from



**Figure 3: Word clouds sized by frequency of Twitter Accounts most retweeted by accounts opposed to the ban (L) and those in favour of the ban (R): The accounts were arrived at based on the three accounts most frequently retweeted by any account in the last 6 months, from those also tweeting positively or negatively about the Hijab ban issue**

within the Muslim community. Unlike in previous events like the CAA/NRC protests, in which the spread of social media activity included a number of influencers engaging on behalf of Muslims being targeted, and in turn, being engaged by Muslims on Twitter, we see a much greater concentration within the community of Muslims in case of the Hijab ban. This has deep implications for our understanding of the evolving religious dynamics of the Indian community on Twitter. These implications are also a call to further work analysing discourse and debates in Indian Twitter and a more nuanced approach to understanding the role of influencers in social media.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We thank the reviewers for their valuable feedback which has helped in improving the focus and articulation of our study.

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