

Constructing and contesting threat: Representations of white British Muslims across British national and Muslim newspapers

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Abstract

White British Muslims pose a challenge to racialised representations of British Muslims as non-white, foreign and Other. By drawing on tools from Critical Discourse Analysis to develop Social Representations Theory on a micro-analytic level, and making connections with other relevant social psychological theories on intergroup relations, this article examines the constructions of white British Muslims as a threat in six national and two Muslim British newspapers. It looks at how discourses are used to create, perpetuate and challenge the ‘hegemonisation’ of social representations in majority and minority press. The findings show that white British Muslims are portrayed as a threat not just despite, but because of, their position as part of the ‘white British’ ingroup. Consequently, the threat they pose often leads to their Muslimness being emphasised. This was, at times, contested, however, either through direct challenges, or by making the threat ambivalent by drawing on their whiteness.

Keywords: threat, white British Muslims, social representations, critical discourse analysis, media, power

According to the 2011 Census there were 216 603 ethnically white Muslims in England, Scotland and Wales, 36% of whom identified as ‘white British’ (National Records of Scotland, 2011; Office for National Statistics, 2011). Of this percentage, some were undoubtedly converts to Islam while others were ‘born’ Muslims.¹ It is through the lens of conversion, however, that the media has often understood and contextualised the presence of white British Muslims in British society. While often presented as a relatively new phenomenon, conversion to Islam and the existence of ethnically white British Muslims has in fact a long history in Britain. Some of the earliest recorded cases of conversion date back to the late 16th century (Matar, 1998) and, after a number of high profile conversions by aristocratic and influential individuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Daily Mirror expressed apprehension at “the lure of Eastern religions ... affecting an increasing number of Europeans” (Daily Mirror, 17th November, 1913).

White British Muslims, Converts, and the Media

This study sets out to explore the representation of white British Muslims in both national newspapers as well as Muslim newspapers, offering an original and valuable contribution to existing literature. Very few studies have interrogated the mainstream British press and its portrayal of Muslim converts (Brice, 2011; Poole, 2002, 2011), and there have been no studies on this topic with regard to white converts specifically, and none looking at how converts are portrayed in the Muslim media. The research that does exist shows that Muslim converts are often discussed either in relation to terrorism or as posing a threat demographically, socially, and/or culturally (Brice, 2011; Poole, 2002, 2011). This is not dissimilar to research of media portrayals of Muslims more generally (e.g. Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013; Law, Sayyid, & Sian, 2013; Poole, 2002, 2011). Interestingly, however, Brice (2011) found that 62% of newspaper stories about Muslim converts linked them with terrorism, a substantial rise from 36% when looking at coverage of British

¹ Those ‘born’ Muslims were likely to be descendants of white British individuals who had converted to Islam previously. It is possible that this may also include white Muslims who were descendants of individuals from countries in, for example, the Balkan regions (e.g. Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia). Nevertheless, it is important to note that people from countries such as these often identified as “other white” (Vaos, 2013); therefore it is unlikely that they made up a large proportion of those who categorised themselves as “white British”.

Muslims overall (Moore, Mason, & Lewis, 2008). Thus, he argues that British newspapers present converts as a greater threat to security in comparison to other British Muslims. However, he does not attempt to explore why and whether specific ethnic convert groups are portrayed as more dangerous than others. In fact, these studies, while including white British converts in their analysis, do not necessarily consider the ways in which different ethnic convert groups were depicted, nor whether there is a difference in their depiction. Therefore, questions can be posed on whether, in the case of this study, white British Muslims are also always positioned as a threat and/or depicted in a negative light. If so, how and why? How is their white ethnicity understood and positioned? Indeed, does it have an impact on the way they are presented? And to what extent does this depiction change, if at all, when looking at their representation in Muslim media?

Threat and Positioning

The extent to which we perceive individuals as sharing or threatening ‘our’ beliefs, values, and identities effects the ways in which they come to be positioned by us along ingroup–outgroup boundaries. Intergroup threat theory (Stephan & Renfro, 2002), originally integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), emphasises the conditions that result in one group perceiving another as a threat and a source of possible harm. It notes two types of threat, namely, realistic threat and symbolic threat, the former referring to threats to the power, safety, and security of the ingroup, and the latter describing threats to the norms, values, culture, and identity of the ingroup. This is closely connected with Social Identity Theory’s (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) conceptualisation of intergroup dynamics, where the perceived or actual threat posed by an outgroup has a direct effect on the self-esteem of the ingroup. Indeed, Social Identity Theory proposes multiple strategies through which individuals and groups deal with threats to their identity including social mobility (attempting to adjust one’s identification from a negatively perceived group to a more positive one) and social change (creative ways of evaluating one’s identity in a positive way) (Breakwell, 1986). However, the threat described in SIT is assumed to come from ‘outside’, and thus does not take into account that some threats can come from within the ingroup. The black sheep effect (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988) can be used to explain how groups cope with this ingroup threat. Marques and his colleagues note that while ingroup members who enforce and assert the group’s norms are perceived more positively by the group, deviant ingroup members are perceived more negatively than outgroup members. Indeed, Verkuyten (2013)

describes how these individuals are likened to ‘bad apples’ who threaten ingroup norms and status. In the same vein, the subjective group dynamics approach (Abrams, Marques, Bown, & Henson, 2000) states that the “subjective validity and legitimacy of ingroup norms” are integral to maintaining a positive social identity (p. 165). Where these ‘norms’ are not adhered to, it can lead to the derogation and symbolic expulsion of the threatening individual(s) from the ingroup as a means of maintaining a positive and cohesive identity (see Gonsalkorale & von Hippel, 2011).

Thus, individuals who can be simultaneously positioned as both ingroup and outgroup members, as is the case with white British Muslims, present an informative group through which we can further explore and examine notions of threat and how this threat is constructed in order to define the lines between ingroups and outgroups. Being ethnically white in the UK places white British Muslims in the dominant ingroup category, yet being Muslim positions them as part of a minoritised and stigmatised group (Amer & Howarth, 2016), which, as we have examined above, is generally perceived to be a threat to British society (Brice, 2011; Poole, 2002, 2011). In the context of the British Muslim community they are positioned as part of a “minority within a minority” (Brice, 2011, p. 1) albeit with “marginal status” (LePape, 2003, p. 242) within that minority. Thus, white Muslims are at an interesting crossroads of identities (Suleiman, 2013; Zebiri, 2008), the intersection of which influences both how they position and see themselves, and how they are positioned and seen by others. This highlights the complexity of the intersections of being ‘white’ and ‘Muslim’, indicating that a binary approach to exploring identity categorisation through ingroup or outgroup membership (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) can potentially miss the nuanced ways in which we are all positioned to some extent at a crossroads of complex ingroup and outgroup relations.

A fruitful framework through which to explore identity categorisation is Social Representations Theory (SRT; Moscovici, 1972). Duveen (2001) notes that social representations precede identity, shaping identities, which then in turn influence the development of social representations. Thus, for the purpose of this article, we use SRT to explore the social representations of white British Muslims through the ways in which they are used, and shaped by, discourses in the media. In doing so, we take a more fluid approach towards exploring identity, considering more carefully how categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are continuously managed and maintained through processes of social positioning and representing. We particularly focus on how white British Muslims are represented in national and British Muslim newspapers, examining the way in which this is done by drawing on tools

from critical discourse analysis (CDA; van Dijk, 1988, 1996b) to explore the nature of news reporting.

Social Representations and Discourse

Social representations are systems of shared knowledge that exist within our social contexts and help us make sense of the world around us (Moscovici, 1972). They are constructed and ratified through processes of negotiation and renegotiation between individuals and groups who are in constant interaction with their environments (Jovchelovitch, 2007). There are different forms of social representations: hegemonic (generally consensually shared and often supporting the dominant social order, similar to ideologies), emancipated (not yet in opposition to hegemonic representations; constructed from new or different information that only a portion of society has been exposed to) and polemic (not shared by society as a whole and often generated as a result of social conflict or controversy) (Moscovici, 1988).

Moscovici described two communicative processes as crucial in the generation of a representation: anchoring and objectification (Moscovici, 1988). Anchoring is the process by which meaning is attributed to a new phenomenon (e.g. objects, relations, experiences, practices, etc.) by comparing it with, and interpreting it based on, existing knowledge, in an attempt to eradicate the threat of the strange and unfamiliar. Objectification is the process of turning an abstract notion or construct into something more concrete that exists in the physical world, which in turn assists in understanding it. Furthermore, as Höijer (2010) notes, the processes of both anchoring and objectification can also be affixed to familiar emotions, whether negative or positive. As such, “the unknown becomes recognizable as, for example, a threat, a danger, or as something nice and pleasurable” (ibid., p. 719).

Looking at the process of anchoring and objectification in creating and affirming social representations of white British Muslims in media discourses provides us with insight into the ways in which this group is described, positioned and, as a result, represented on dominant discourses. It is widely recognised that the media is a significant medium of communication through which the dissemination and reproduction of social representations of groups can be studied (Wagner et al., 1999; see Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010 for an example of this). Research has illustrated how institutions such as mainstream media construct specific hegemonic narratives that influence and have power over socially shared knowledge,

attitudes, and ideologies (Elcheroth, Doise, & Reicher, 2011; van Dijk, 1996a, 1996b). This is done by imposing identities onto groups as well as disseminating negative representations of those who have limited social power to challenge such depictions (Howarth, 2002; Moloney, 2007).

Importantly, the ways in which groups are represented and positioned can at times contradict one another. Inconsistencies and points of opposition are an essential part of everyday representational knowledge and can often coincide harmoniously, a concept Moscovici (2008) referred to as cognitive polyphasia. Nevertheless, where these diverse and often oppositional discourses and representations exist, they can frequently be a reflection of the unequal distribution of power in our societies where 'tensions' lead to opportunities for resistance, innovation, and transformation (Duveen, 2000). Studies on media production by minority groups have highlighted the importance of alternative channels for counter-representations and challenging the hegemony of mainstream media over discourse production. These channels become sites that are not only valuable for the construction and dissemination of more positive or emancipatory representations for minoritised groups, but also essential for building community identities and for their opinions and voices to potentially be heard and understood by wider society (Budarick & Han, 2013; Couldry & Dreher, 2007; Husband, 1998).

A more critical approach to SRT specifically acknowledges the need to take note of the role of power in the creation, negotiation, re-presentation, and resistance of social representations, turning it into a theory that explicitly incorporates how unequal societies are produced and maintained through the production of ideas (Howarth, 2006b; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Phoenix, Howarth, & Philogène, in press). Indeed, Jovchelovitch (1997) notes that a key element in understanding the role of power in the creation of knowledge is through noting its reliance on systems of recognition within our contexts. As she states, "some groups simply lack enough recognition when proposing their representations and ways of life" (Jovchelovitch, 1997, p.21), and, as a result, representations held by certain groups take more precedence than others and become embedded within the social context. While acts of resistance do take place, the lack of power to enforce recognition by more marginalised groups make this difficult, as others hold the legitimacy to enforce their own knowledges and world-views. Thus, SRT is able to examine how hegemonic representations, on a macro level, are negotiated and contested. However, on the whole, SRT research does not explore how this is done on a micro level and it is here where CDA can provide the tools for a microlevel analysis. Thus, by drawing on aspects of CDA, social representations,

as a theory and as a method, can be sharpened and enriched. In this article, we predominately use CDA as a methodological tool but note that it comes with some key theoretical underpinnings such as power and resistance that resonate with SRT.

SRT and CDA: A More Integrated Approach

Gibson (2015) notes in his analysis of the connections between social representations and discourse that discursive approaches can provide us with insight into how social representations are used. This in turn enables us to look beyond their content and structural nature, and instead further understand their broader implications, particularly in terms of the operation of power, within different contexts (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). Previous studies have gone some way in complementing SRT with discursive approaches (Gibson, 2015; Howarth, 2011; Jaspal, Nerlich, & Koteyko, 2013; Moloney, Holtz, & Wagner, 2013; Tileagă, 2006, 2013). For example, Jaspal et al. (2013) examined the discursive strategies used by Daily Mail readers when commenting on articles about climate change and explored the ways in which they affirm and contest hegemonic and polemic social representations.

CDA is not only the intricate study of talk and text (known as discourse analysis); rather it often goes further by exploring the connections between “discourse, power, dominance, social inequality and the position of the discourse analyst in such social relationships” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). Like critical approaches to SRT, it acknowledges the role of communication, power, and context in shaping our understanding of the world. It does so by systematically exploring:

“often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony”. (Fairclough, 1995a, p. 135).

CDA is also particularly suitable for examining the media of mass communication such as newspapers, which directly disseminate particular images, discourses and representations to the public and are often controlled by elite power structures in our societies (Fairclough, 1993; van Dijk, 1996a). In emphasising difference, often in favour of the ingroup, the mass

media ensures the maintenance of existing power structures in favour of majority group interests (Reicher, 2004). These discourses can therefore influence (directly and indirectly) the ongoing production of socially shared knowledge. Hence CDA allows us to examine the way in which “specific discourse structures determine specific mental processes, or facilitate the formation of specific social representations” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 259). Nevertheless, it also acknowledges the boundaries of power and therefore is able to take note of the discursive ways in which these social realities can be, and are, resisted, through processes of social change and social creativity (for examples, see Howarth, 2002; Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, 2012).

The Present Study

The aim of the present study is to explore how national and Muslim² newspapers in the UK socially represent, and thereby position, white British Muslims. Indeed, as white Muslims represent ‘a minority within a minority’ in Britain, their positioning and representation by not only mainstream media but also Muslim media becomes crucial to explore, allowing this study to make a valuable and original contribution to existing literature on the topic. It does so by drawing on tools from CDA to further develop our understanding of processes through which social representations are used and constructed in discourse. Together they are a powerful force in creating a more holistic understanding of the role that power and positioning play in the creation, use, perpetuation, and contestation of social representations.

Research Design

Sample

In order to conduct a comprehensive account of national and Muslim news coverage of white British Muslims and to note any possible changes in the coverage over the years we analysed a 25-year period, from January 1990 to December 2014.³ Six national newspapers,

² The terms ‘national’ and ‘Muslim’ will be used to describe the two groups of newspapers analysed in this article. While recognising that these terms are problematic in that they perpetuate and echo notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and of inclusion and exclusion there needs to be a meaningful way to distinguish them. These labels refer to the accessibility and indeed the readership of these newspapers. The Muslim newspapers included in this article are explicitly targeting a Muslim audience and readership through, for example, their names, and where the newspapers are distributed (in mosque, shops in areas of high Muslim populations, community centres, and so forth). On the other hand, ‘national’ newspapers, while perhaps targeting individuals of particular political orientations, can, and are, accessed by all members of the population.

³ One newspaper, The Muslim Weekly, has only been in circulation since 2003 and therefore its coverage of white British Muslims was analysed from its establishment up until December 2014.

both tabloid and broadsheet, were analysed. These were selected based on circulation rates⁴ and political orientation, ensuring that papers from across the political spectrum were included. Two newspapers catering to the Muslim communities in Britain were also analysed and were selected based on circulation rates. Information on the political orientation of these newspapers could not be obtained (see Table 1 for details regarding circulation rates and political orientation).

Table 1. Circulation rates of newspapers

Newspaper	Circulation	Political leaning
<i>The Independent</i>	60 438	Centre-left
<i>The Guardian</i>	178 758	Left-leaning
<i>The Daily Telegraph (and Sunday Telegraph)</i>	486 262 (380 922)	Centre-right
<i>The Times (and Sunday Times)</i>	397 171 (and 793 517)	Centre-right
<i>The Daily Mail (and Mail on Sunday)</i>	1 657 867 (and 1 497 855)	Right leaning
<i>The Mirror</i>	868 992 (833 379)	Centre-left
<i>The Muslim News</i>	140 000 ^a	-
<i>The Muslim Weekly</i>	40 000 ^b	-

^aFigure obtained from Gilliat-Ray (2011).

^bFigure obtained from Werbner (2011).

National newspapers

National newspaper articles were accessed using the LexisNexis online database, which includes articles appearing both online and in print. Ten search terms were used (see Table 2) covering the various ways in which white British Muslims may be referred to in the articles.⁵ A total number of 1631 relevant articles were found.

⁴ Figures obtained from Turvill (2015).

⁵ The term 'revert' was initially included in the search term list to reflect the, sometimes preferred, use of this term by Muslims. It is based on a particular Islamic religious interpretation that all humans are born Muslim and only as a result of the environment in which they are brought up in become affiliated with another or no religion. Thus, those who become Muslim later in life are seen as 'reverting' to their religion of birth (Köse, 1996; Roald, 2004). However, no relevant articles were brought up by the database and thus it was subsequently removed from the list. 'Scottish', 'Welsh' and 'Northern Irish' were also included in the search term glossary; again, no relevant articles emerged.

Table 2. Search terms and the number of article hits displayed on the LexisNexis online database in descending order

Search terms	No. of articles
Muslim/Islam <i>and</i> British <i>and</i> white/convert	959
English <i>and</i> convert <i>and</i> Islam <i>or</i> Muslim	254
‘white Muslim’	208
‘white convert’ <i>and</i> Islam <i>or</i> Muslim	100
‘English convert’ <i>and</i> Islam <i>or</i> Muslim	33
‘white British convert’ <i>and</i> Islam <i>or</i> Muslim	30
‘white British Muslim’	20
‘white Briton’ <i>and</i> Islam <i>or</i> Muslim	17
‘English Muslim’	10
Total	1631

SRT and CDA both require a modest number of articles for an in-depth analysis, thus the researchers developed a process of selection to reduce the total number of articles to be analysed from 1631 to a more manageable dataset (161 articles). This process is outlined below:

1. By noting the ‘peaks’ (years where there were a greater number of articles on white British Muslims) and ‘troughs’ (years with relatively few articles about white British Muslims) it was decided that the analysis would focus on articles published in the peak years of 1990, 1995, 2001, 2006, 2008, 2010, and 2013, as well as 1992, 1994, 2000, 2007, 2009, and 2011 when there were very few articles published (see Figure 1). The latter were incorporated into the analysis to make note of what stories about white British Muslims were deemed newsworthy in a time of ‘relative quiet’ or disinterest.
2. The dataset was then filtered to include news articles and editorials only (removing comment/opinion pieces and any items not categorised in news sections). This was because the study focuses on understanding representations of white British Muslims through the language of news reporting. Editorials were included in the data set as they reflect a news outlet’s political orientation and ideological stance, an important

aspect in understanding the source of a news text when conducting CDA. An analysis of images accompanying articles was not conducted as the LexisNexis database does not store any images, photographs, or videos imbedded in or printed with the articles.

3. An additional process was implemented on the articles published in 2013 due to their significantly higher number compared with other years (451 articles published in 2013 out of a total number of 1631).⁶ These articles were listed chronologically with every fifth article being included for analysis.

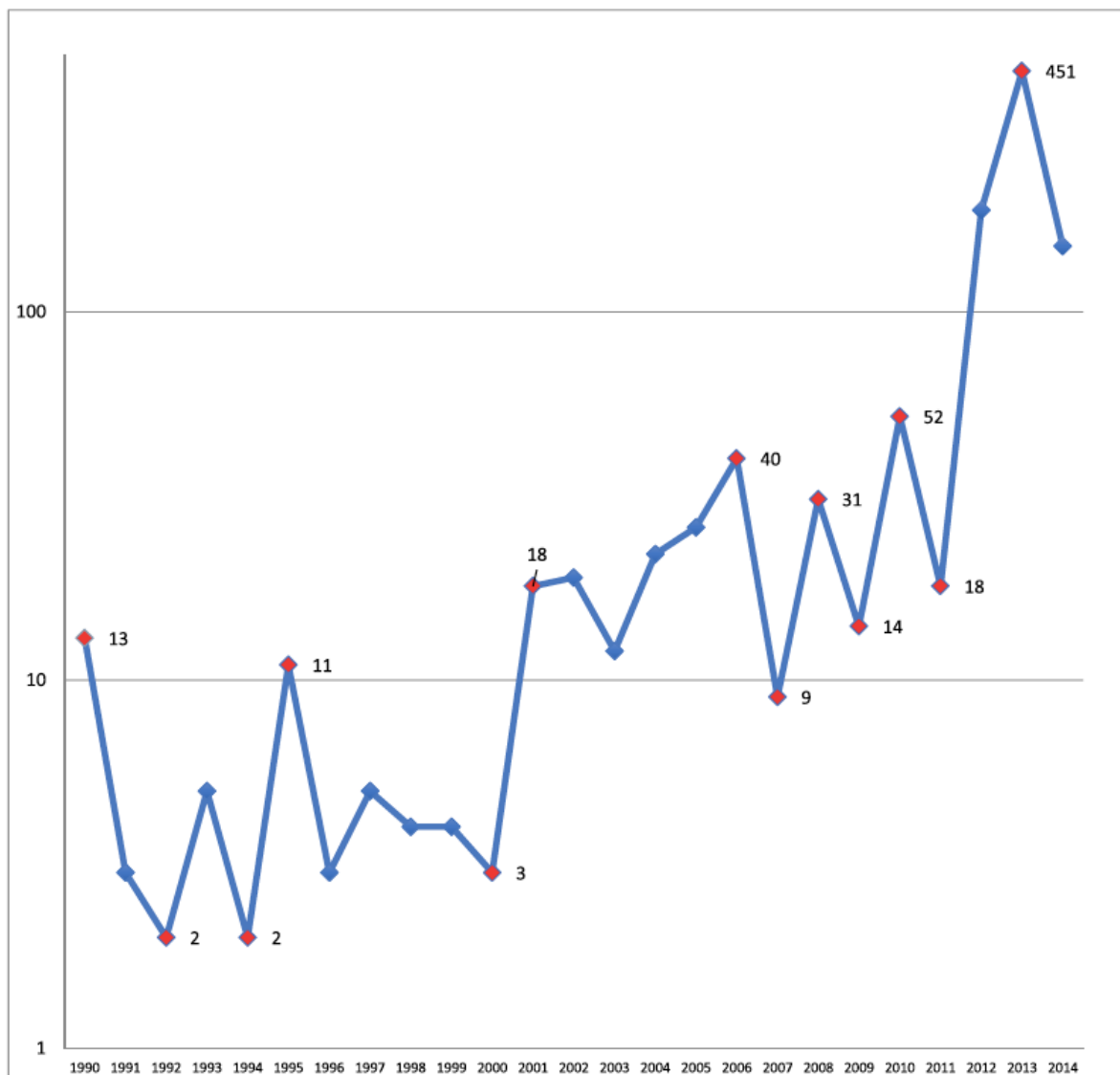


Fig. 1: Graph of number of articles about white Muslims using a logarithmic scale.

⁶ The significantly higher number of articles in 2013 was due to a media frenzy regarding the whereabouts of Samantha Lewthwaite, wife of 7/7 bomber Jermaine Lindsey and her alleged involvement in the Nairobi terror attack. There was also increased focus on 'foreign' fighters, some of whom were converts, joining wars and conflicts taking place in Muslim majority countries such as Syria.

Muslim newspapers

Past copies of *The Muslim News* and *The Muslim Weekly* were accessed via the British Library Archives as they were not available on LexisNexis. All articles about white British Muslims were collected manually and were scanned for the same ten search terms previously used for the national newspapers and tabloids.

A total of 34 articles were collected (11 articles from *The Muslim News* and 23 from *The Muslim Weekly*) and made up the Muslim newspaper dataset for the critical discourse analysis.

Analytical Procedure

A method of analysis was developed by both researchers based on the integration of elements of CDA into SRT. Both researchers were aware of the influence of their identities on the interpretations of the data. Indeed, as CDA theorist Norman Fairclough (2003) notes, “There is no such thing as an ‘objective’ analysis of a text, if by that we mean an analysis which simply describes what is ‘there’ in the text without being ‘biased’ by the ‘subjectivity’ of the analyst” (p. 14–15). Nevertheless, in order to go some way in increasing the validity of the analytical findings, all the articles were first analysed by the first author, after which a random selection of articles was also analysed independently by the second author. Points of difference and overlap were discussed in depth and the analytical framework was then developed from these discussions.

The articles were analysed using several analytical categories proposed by van Dijk (2006) (outlined in Table 3). These analytical categories (while not exhaustive) are what allow “the foundation of the social representations shared by a social group” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 729) to be explored and unpacked as they are some of the key elements that determine the construction of a representation. In this way, a CDA approach was not only able to provide its own insights, but also highlighted the discursive ways in which processes of anchoring and objectification identified in SRT were played out in the text. For example, the ‘number game’ is a method of quantification that can be used to objectify abstract constructs, and authority and evidentiality are used as ways of anchoring representations as ‘truth’ claims, forming hegemonic representations or a seemingly solid social fact.

Table 3. Analytical categories for CDA (van Dijk, 2006)

Analytical categories	Definition
Actor description	The way in which actors are described in discourses and how this reflects ingroup and outgroup membership.
Authority	The role of authority in argumentation to make specific cases and create ‘truths’.
Evidentiality	Linked to authority in that it is a technique that is used to demonstrate ‘truths’ either through authority or other recognised sources.
Comparison	Method through which imposed group membership is attained.
Generalisation	Broad statements about ingroup or outgroup, usually the former being positive and the latter negative.
Number game	The use of numbers and statistics in argumentation

The inclusion of different ‘voices’ within the text was also noted (Fairclough, 1995b), as it enabled the recognition of the different actors used in articles as sources of information to demonstrate perspectives and interpretations of the subject matter. Furthermore, the researchers took into account the type of newspaper (Muslim newspapers/national newspaper/national tabloid), political orientation of the newspaper, and the title given and byline of the articles.

A number of different discursive themes emerged across all the newspapers when conducting the analysis, namely, white British Muslims as a threat/not a threat, their conversion as rational/irrational, and identity compatibility/incompatibility. However, in order to develop a more in-depth analysis for this article, we focus on only one of the themes found in the data: the depiction of white British Muslims as a threat/not a threat. This enables us to explore the way in which white Muslims were positioned in both national and Muslim newspapers in relation to the notion of threat and how this positioning is manipulated in order to further a specific agenda. More broadly, this allows us to examine the complexities of identity threat and its implications for our understanding of identity processes in general.

Analysis and Discussion

Discourses of white British Muslims as a *threat*—be this hypothetical, potential, or real—were found in articles in all national newspapers analysed. This was constructed through narratives of white Muslims as a threat to (1) Britain’s national security through potential or actual connections with terrorism and extremism, (2) British society, demographically, religiously, and culturally. Both these narratives reflect the widespread negative coverage of Muslims in Britain more generally (Brice, 2011; Moore et al., 2008; Poole, 2002, 2011; Richardson, 2004; Saeed, 2004). Furthermore, although seemingly separate, these narratives sometimes overlapped as we explore in more detail below.

Articles in British Muslim newspapers, unsurprisingly, challenged this narrative of white Muslims as a threat, demonstrating the importance of alternative media controlled by marginalised groups to disseminate counter-representations and discourses (Budarick & Han, 2013; Couldry & Dreher, 2007; Husband, 1998). However, there were also instances where even within national newspapers the notion of white British Muslims as a threat was disrupted, challenged, or made ambiguous through a recognition of their connection or membership to the majority white ingroup.

Security Threat

White British Muslims in national media were represented as realistic threats with the potential of physically harming the ingroup (Stephan & Renfro, 2002) through the hegemonic representation of Muslims as a threat to security. This threat was often constructed as a direct result of their conversion to Islam, and highlighted skin colour/ethnicity.

In an article from June 2006, *The Times* (07/06/2006) ran a story on Al Qaeda recruiting “*white-skinned militants*” from Europe and the US who were “*harder for authorities to detect as they cross the world on their missions, including suicide attacks*”. In another article later that year, *The Daily Mail* (21/12/2006) stated that “*fair-skinned converts who display no outward sign of their faith can be terrorists*” and thus can easily ‘slip through the net’. Both these examples not only suggest that white Muslims disrupt the ‘social sorting’ (Lyon, 2003) of surveillance strategies and challenge the dominant racialised representations of Muslims as non-white (Meer, 2008), but also highlights their ability to ‘pass’ (Lahiri, 2003; Schlossberg, 2001) as non-Muslim and therefore ‘pass’ as non-threatening. Thus, in these instances white Muslims were deemed potentially *more* of a threat on account of their

visible ‘whiteness’ and/or invisible ‘Otherness’. They unsettle the assumed connections between terrorism and brown bodies (Patel, 2012) and disrupt the very notion of whiteness as an indicator of belonging to the unthreatening ingroup. Thus, they are constructed as an ‘enemy within’. Indeed, various researchers discussed above have explored the different strategies sought when groups are faced with a threat from ‘within’, one of which is deeming these individuals as more threatening than outgroup members (Abrams et al., 2000; Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988; Verkuyten, 2013), as is the case here. However, it is their Muslimness that comes to be emphasised (an example of actor description; van Dijk, 2006), as a means of explaining and contextualising the source of the threat. Our analysis found that in cases where individuals had ‘English-sounding’ names, their names were either prefixed or suffixed with descriptions, positioning them as ‘Other’. Examples of this were found in both *The Independent* (11/08/06), which described suspect terrorist Don Stewart-Whyte as “*a white convert to Islam*”, and in *The Daily Telegraph* (23/05/08), which described nail bomber Nicky Reilly as a “*white Muslim convert*”. Devoid of these descriptions, their names could be processed by the reader as ‘invisible’ and ‘normal’ (Wykes, 2013) and may not lead to the conclusion that these individuals are in fact Muslims. However, the inclusion of the words ‘convert Muslim/to Islam’ provided the context into which the presence of their ‘invisible’, ‘normal’ names as well as their whiteness can be understood. Kilby (2016) notes that terrorism and terrorists, both abstract constructs, readily come to be objectified and understood in connection with Muslims and Islam. As previous research has shown, the media specifically connects the Muslim identity with the terrorist identity (for examples see Lazar & Lazar, 2004; Erjavec & Volcic, 2006; Dwyer & Uberoi, 2009; Kilby & Horowitz, 2011), resulting in the representation that ‘terrorists’ are “‘certain kinds of people’” and that “‘certain kinds of people’ can be known as ‘terrorists’” (Kilby, 2016, p. 242). Thus, the emphasis on the Muslimness of white Muslims is essential to them being positioned in a way that minimises the disruption to social power structures related to group categorisation.

The threat of white Muslims to Britain’s security was not solely contextualised in articles to do with terrorism and extremism, but also emerged in articles regarding the rate of conversion to Islam. In January 2011, a report claiming that the number of converts to Islam in the UK was estimated to have reached 100 000 was published by the think-tank Faith Matters. It garnered a substantial amount of media attention with both tabloids and broadsheet newspapers covering its findings. Interestingly, some national newspapers used the report’s findings to create a causal link between converts, the rise in conversion, and the

increased threat of terrorism, providing evidence of this through referencing past atrocities committed by Muslim converts, concretising the connection (an example of evidentiality; van Dijk, 2006).

Extract 1. *The Daily Mail*, 05/01/2011

In 2001, there were an estimated 60 000 Muslim converts in Britain. Since then, the country has seen the spread of violent Islamist extremism and terror plots, including the July 7 bombings. Converts who have turned to terror include Nicky Reilly, who tried to blow up a restaurant in Bristol with a nail bomb, shoe bomber Richard Reid and July 7 bomber Germaine Lindsey. But the report said the number of converts sucked into extremism represented a ‘very small minority’.

The Daily Mail article (Extract 1) made this causal link through the use of three convert examples (one being a white convert—Nicky Reilly). It further created a connection with the number of converts in Britain in 2001 with subsequent terror atrocities, namely, the July 7 bombings, returning to the 7/7 attacks by including Germaine Lindsey as an example of “converts who have turned to terror”. This link with an atrocity, that much like 9/11 objectifies the abstract notion of terrorism and allows it to become an easily understandable notion of what terrorism is (Kilby, 2016), renders conversion a serious threat. Unlike the 9/11 terrorists, the perpetrators of the London bombings were not only ‘home grown’, but included a convert, thus amplifying the anxieties of the threat to security. While the association of converts with extremism was countered by a direct quote from the report (see end of Extract 1), its inclusion was heavily outweighed by the language and preceding sentences dedicated to affirming the association through the factual listing of events that have involved converts, an example of the use of evidentiality (van Dijk, 2006) as a technique in establishing ‘truths’. Indeed, as terrorism comes to be further objectified and understood through the association with Islam and Muslims, the inclusion of statistics about the rise in the Muslim population (numbers game; van Dijk, 2006), be that through conversion or otherwise, fuels the notion of the threat of this group to Britain’s national security.

The Muslim newspapers also covered the Faith Matters report, but contrary to national newspaper coverage, foregrounded the report’s findings that challenged the causal link between conversion and extremism made by national newspapers. *The Muslim Weekly* article ran with the headline: “Majority 100,000 Muslim converts white females”

(07/01/2011) and the byline: ““Converts... involved with terrorism... very small minority”—*Faith Matters*”. From the outset, the article stresses that connections with terrorism were limited and situated extremists at the fringes of British Muslim communities. By directly quoting the report and describing them as “a ‘very small minority’ among an otherwise law abiding majority”, converts involved in terrorism, some of whom may have been white, were dismissed as illegitimate examples of the Muslim community. In this way, the article attempts to reduce the perceived threat of both Muslim converts specifically, and Muslims more generally. This demonstrates the importance of alternative channels through which marginalised groups can challenge power structures and disseminate alternative discourses and representations, countering dominant depictions of them as a group (Budarick & Han, 2013; Couldry & Dreher, 2007; Husband, 1998). Such discourse can be consequential, developing positive identities in the face of stigma.

The contestation of discourses constructing white Muslims as a threat did not only occur in British Muslim newspapers, however. There were instances, in fact, when this took place in national newspapers too. Coverage of Samantha Lewthwaite, the widow of 7/7 bomber Germaine Lindsay, was an interesting example of this.

The Guardian covered a story on Lewthwaite and her connection with the Nairobi Shopping Mall attack with the headline, “*Interpol’s most wanted woman: is she a terrorist leader, Scarlet Pimpernel or mother on the run?*” and the by-line “*Don’t jump to conclusions over Briton, say experts. Role in mall ‘overblown’ to cover Kenyan mistakes*” (28/09/2013). Here *The Guardian’s* coverage of the story was much more guarded when compared with the coverage of other papers, e.g. “*Woman who looked like White Widow sprayed machine gun bullets at me*” (headline, *The Daily Mail*, 25/09/2013) or “*White Widow Lewthwaite is a danger to the world, says Interpol; THE NAIROBI MALL MASSACRE*” (headline, *The Daily Telegraph*, 27/09/2013). This could perhaps be explained through it being more of a left-leaning newspaper. *The Guardian* avoided accusatory language, instead developing what could be seen as a more balanced approach. While acknowledging she was “*Interpol’s most wanted woman*” the headline posed three potential identity labels that could be attributed to her, thus questioning the extent to which she can be depicted as an explicit threat. Furthermore, the presence of “*experts*” throughout the article (an academic, authorities in Kenya, and British anti-terrorist officers) provided *evidentiality* (van Dijk, 2006) in the form of an authority (ibid.) where the level of threat posed by Lewthwaite was at once challenged and confirmed. What is more significant, however, is that the identities and involvement of the other alleged attackers was never questioned. Instead the focus of the

article attempted to ascertain the identity of the “*white woman among the terrorists*” and Lewthwaite’s level of involvement, as we see here:

Extract 2. *The Guardian*, 28/09/2013

When a number of witnesses described a white woman among the terrorists, was it Samantha Lewthwaite they had seen, the youngest daughter of a British soldier from Aylesbury, the shy, gawky schoolgirl who “all the teachers loved”?

By specifically referring to her father’s occupation —“*a British soldier*”—attributions of loyalty, patriotism, and nationalism were injected into the narrative and become anchored in the identity of Lewthwaite. On the one hand, her father’s connection with the British military could challenge the potentiality of her being connected to acts of terrorism. On the other, however, this positioning of Lewthwaite could be a method of depicting her alleged involvement in the Nairobi attack as even more shocking by questioning her loyalties by comparing them with those of her father. This demonstrates the way in which discourses can play a significant part in creating representations that are complex and, on occasion, contradictory (Billig, 1996; Markova, 2000).

Furthermore, by describing Lewthwaite as “*the shy, gawky schoolgirl who ‘all the teachers loved’*” it drew on characteristics that allude to a positive and innocent image. Indeed, in another example *The Mirror* (22/10/ 2013) described Lewthwaite as a “*doting mum*”, gendering her humanisation by attributing to her the stereotypical characteristics of motherhood. Whether this more balanced coverage had any connection to her ethnicity is difficult to say for sure. However, it is important to interpret this in light of the fact that generalisations, accusations, and suspicion are often placed upon brown bodies, in this case individuals of Middle Eastern or South Asian appearance and of the Muslim faith, even where little evidence is found, a strategy Norris and Armstrong (1999) term ‘colour-coded suspicion’. In fact, this highlights the power relations at play (Hall, 1997), where due to their ingroup membership the status of white Muslims as a threat to security can be negotiated and sometimes challenged.

Social and Cultural Threat

The representation of white British Muslims as a threat to British society and culture appeared predominantly in articles about conversion to Islam. This is an example of a

symbolic threat, where a group is represented as threatening the values, identities, and culture of the ingroup (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Indeed, while we previously saw how statistics were linked with representing white Muslim converts as a threat to security, here we see the use of quantification (van Dijk, 2006) as a strategy in objectifying and explaining the notion of the ‘loss of Britishness’. The extract above is from an article in *The Independent* with the headline “*Islamification of Britain: record numbers embrace Muslim faith*”, which included short case studies of individuals who are white and Muslim:

Extract 3. *The Independent*, 04/01/2011

Previous estimates have placed the number of Muslim converts in the UK at between 14 000 and 25 000. But a new study by the inter-faith thinktank Faith Matters suggests the real figure could be as high as 100 000, with as many as 5000 new conversions nationwide each year. [...] In all they estimated that there were 60 699 converts living in Britain in 2001. With no new census planned until next year, researchers polled mosques in London to try to calculate how many conversions take place a year. The results gave a figure of 1400 conversions in the capital in the past 12 months which, when extrapolated nationwide, would mean approximately 5200 people adopting Islam every year. The figures are comparable with studies in Germany and France which found that there were around 4000 conversions a year.

In using words and phrases such as “*Islamification*”, “*record numbers*” “*doubled in 10 years*”, “*the real figure could be as high as 100,000*” the article created the image of Muslims as a group that, at best, are growing in numbers and, at worst, are attempting to Islamify Britain. The language used anchored Islam as the threat to British society and mirrors that of media coverage of minoritised and marginalised groups where they are represented as a growing ‘problem’ (Lynch, 2008). By drawing on comparisons to the rate of conversion in other European countries (see Extract 3) it magnifies the perceived threat of “*Islamification*” as a phenomenon not limited to the UK. Indeed, here the use of the ‘*numbers game*’ in combination with emotive language factualises, legitimises, and objectifies the notion of the threat posed by converts in general, including white Muslims. This strategy is by no means new to the media, and has been used in the past and undoubtedly will continue to be used in the future to ‘stir up’ and legitimise fear towards certain groups (e.g. refugees (van Dijk, 1997).

The article in Extract 3 above was published in *The Independent*, a broadsheet newspaper often seen as politically centre-left. However, its coverage of the Faith Matters report differed little from that of *The Daily Mail*, a tabloid often regarded as right-leaning. *The Daily Mail* article also placed significant emphasis on numbers, the use of negative descriptors to magnify the extent of conversion, and dedicated over half the article to statistics (an example of the use of *numbers game*; van Dijk, 2006). However, the references to white Muslims in *The Daily Mail* article were much more explicit, with the rise in conversion specifically being attributed to young white women accepting Islam (Extract 4 below).

Extract 4. *The Daily Mail*, 05/01/2011

THE number of Muslim converts in Britain has passed 100 000, fuelled by a surge in young white women adopting the Islamic faith. The figure has almost doubled in ten years with the average convert now a 27-year-old white woman fed up with British consumerism and immorality. The numbers, revealed in a study by multi-faith group Faith Matters, have led to claims that the country is undergoing a process of 'Islamification'. [...] The report estimated around 5200 men and women have adopted Islam over the past 12 months, including 1400 in London. Nearly two thirds were women, more than 70 per cent were white and the average age at conversion was 27.

What is interesting is that the article began by positioning these female converts as almost complicit in the growing threat of Islam, and fuelling the “surge” in the number of converts to Islam in Britain. The constant emphasis on women draws on notions that a group’s culture and identity is preserved and maintained by women (Mayer, 2002). Thus, the article could be seen as drawing on narratives emphasising the role of white converts (particularly white women) in the gradual dilution of British society and culture and creating an alarmist politics based on threatened identities. Indeed, it facilitates a sense of ‘moral panic’ as Islam and its adherents come to be regarded “as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen, 1972, p. 9).

The notion of white Muslims and Islam as a symbolic threat is closely tied with, and reflected in, narratives about the incompatibility of Islam or being Muslim with being British (Pickel, 2013). This issue is related to the concepts of loyalty and belonging. While white Muslims can be positioned simultaneously as part of the majority (white) ingroup as well as

the minority (Muslim) outgroup (Neumuller, 2013; Zebiri, 2008), they were in fact often positioned by national newspapers firmly in the outgroup by virtue of their having supposedly rejected their old 'Western' or 'British lifestyle' as a result of their conversion.

Interestingly, across the time-frame analysed, the portrayal of conversion in national newspapers has remained consistent. As Howarth (2011) notes, hegemonic representations change little over time. Indeed, the extract *from The Independent* article below is from 1990 and yet it differs little from recent narratives on conversion, positioning Islam as incompatible with being British.

Extract 5. *The Independent*, 06/01/1990

Brian Hewitt had decided in 1981 to become one of Britain's 4000 converts to Islam. He left behind his life as a trombone and tuba player in a Territorial Army band [...] and abandoned his drinking sessions. But life was not easy [...] [and] changing cultures has not been easy either.

The extract above suggests that Hewitt's allegiances have shifted on account of his conversion. This notion is cemented in the fact that he not only "*abandoned*" activities considered part and parcel of British culture (e.g. consuming alcohol) but also left the Territorial Army. In fact, the article goes as far as to propose that Islam and British culture are two separate entities that cannot converge on account of Hewitt "*changing cultures*". Indeed, the subjective group dynamics approach (Abrams et al., 2000) notes that in order for an ingroup to maintain a positive identity, adhesion to certain ways of behaving and thinking is necessary. Here, however, Hewitt has deviated from normative behaviours associated with being British and thus is expelled from the group (Marques & Yzerbyt, 1988). In this way the article perpetuates the narrative of Islam as ultimately 'foreign' and 'Other' and reinforces notions of incompatibility through this method of actor description (van Dijk, 2006), reflecting and perpetuating representations that by adopting Islam a person cannot fully retain British culture or remain truly British (Moosavi, 2002, 2015).

Muslim newspapers countered this narrative by supporting the fact that "*One can be a confident Muslim and at the same time be a British or Egyptian, Anglo-Saxon or Malay. Geographic nationality, race and language have never proved divisive in Islam*" (*The Muslim Weekly*, 24/10/2003). This is perhaps not particularly an unexpected finding. The majority of British Muslims do not see being British and Muslim as mutually exclusive

(Amer & Howarth, 2015; Dwyer, 2000; Hopkins, 2011; Modood, 1994). Rather, it is negative representations of Islam and Muslims prevalent within British mainstream media and society that have led Muslim communities in Britain to face scrutiny and pressure to prove their allegiance to the nation (Hopkins, 2011; Nandi & Platt, 2013). What is interesting, however, is the inclusion of the term ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in the article. This can be understood as a direct challenge to the ways in which the term has become objectified by far-right organisations and groups to denote the native white race (Goodwin, 2011). It is specific, more so than the term ‘British’ that has come to encompass people of all different ethnicities, religions, and cultures (Mustafa, 2015). Furthermore, it emphatically counters the commonly constructed notion of Muslims being the antithesis of the white ethno-national group.

There were some occasions however when even national newspapers acknowledged the ability to be white, Muslim and British and that being Muslim was not seen as a threat. This was often the case when white British Muslims espoused views critical of other British Muslim communities and talked or alluded to their threat to the maintenance of British culture and the upholding of certain values. An example of this can be seen in *The Daily Telegraph* (31/03/2010), which positioned Gai Eaton, a prominent white British convert, in opposition to other British Muslims.

Extract 6. *The Daily Telegraph*, 31/03/2010

Eaton spent 22 years at the centre [Islamic Cultural Centre, London], surviving the radicalisation of many younger members of the congregation. This was all the more remarkable given the intellectual honesty that led him to disagree with mainstream British Muslim opinion on many issues [...] Eaton decried the despots and human rights abuses in the Muslim world, and, closer to home, held a hard line on Muslim immigrants: “It is time for the Muslims in Britain to settle down, to find their own way, to form a real community and to discover a specifically British way of living Islam,” he noted. “The constant arrival of uneducated, non- English-speaking immigrants from the subcontinent makes that more difficult. This is no curry island.”

In noting his ‘*intellectual honesty*’ he is positioned as someone who is not afraid to speak the ‘truth’ even if this sets him against the majority of his fellow British Muslims. By criticising non-white, ‘immigrant’, predominantly South Asian Muslim communities in Britain, Eaton simultaneously positions himself, through strategies of positive self-presentation (Engel & Wodak, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; van Dijk, 1993), and is

positioned in this article, as closer to the non-Muslim ingroup. Nevertheless, in this instance, his Muslimness also plays a significant role. Whereas elsewhere in the analysis we have seen how Muslimness is used as a means of contextualising the threat white British Muslims pose, here it is what gives Eaton authority and credibility to perpetuate the notion of *other* Muslims posing a threat to society and its cohesion. In turn, this distances him from this threat and subsequently positions him as more closely aligned with the views of the majority population. This demonstrates the complex ways in which social representations, ways of positioning and notions of threat, serve as managing functions of identity categorisation. Indeed, different voices are rarely given equal claim to space (Elcheroth et al., 2011; Hall, 1992). Here, Eaton is given a platform because he is able to position himself and be positioned in alignment with those who hold power and who are in control of the dominant representations that are circulated.

National newspapers were not alone in positioning white British Muslims in a more positive light, and less of a threat, in comparison to non-white Muslims. In fact, Muslim newspapers often portrayed white Muslims as the ultimate bridge-makers between Muslims and wider British society and as individuals who have the potential to counter notions of Muslims and Islam as a threat.

Extract 7. *The Muslim Weekly*, 11/11/2011

There is growing recognition among community leaders that the latest generation of female converts has a vital role to play in fostering dialogue between an increasingly secular British majority and a minority religion, as misunderstood as it is vilified.

Extract 7, from an article covering the Faith Matters report on converts to Islam, shows how the article posited female converts (75% of whom, it notes, were white) as straddling both British and Muslim communities and thus presented them as potential negotiators and eventual ‘saviours’ in changing dominant perceptions of Islam and the Muslim communities as a threat. In doing so, however, the article reinforces the notion of non-white British Muslims as outsiders, as the ‘real Other’, set apart from British society. It also implies that white converts by virtue of their true ‘Britishness’ and real understanding of British society (having truly been a part of it), are required to assist as intermediaries so that non-white Muslims can be understood by British society. Thus, inadvertently perhaps, it perpetuates the very notions Muslim newspapers often try to counter in their articles.

The focus on female, as opposed to male, converts for the “*vital role to play in fostering dialogue*” is particularly interesting. Earlier in the article it stated that “*despite Western portraits of Islam casting it as oppressive to women, a quarter of female converts were attracted to the religion precisely because of the status it affords them*”. Thus, it attempts to counter and falsify the specific negative representation of Islam as repressive and threatening to women by suggesting that the very reason these women adopted Islam was as a means of elevating and empowering themselves.

Conclusion

This article has contributed to existing research on media portrayal of British Muslims by exploring the ways in which national and British Muslim newspapers create, use, reinforce, and challenge representations of white British Muslims as a threat to wider society. While a comparison with the coverage of other ethnic groups within wider Muslim communities would have proved an interesting and no doubt informative comparison, it was outside the scope of this current research. Nevertheless, this article has made some important inroads into understanding the fluid ways in which white British Muslims are positioned within media discourses, and the various functions these positionings serve.

We have shown how social representations of white British Muslims in national newspapers were predominantly negative, often positioning them as both a realistic and symbolic threat; not unrelated to the way in which Muslims are generally portrayed and discussed in the media (Brice, 2011; Moore et al., 2008; Poole, 2002, 2011; Richardson, 2004; Saeed, 2004). However, white Muslims were at times seen as more of a threat than other Muslims because of their white ethnicity, which positioned them as a threat from ‘within’. This demonstrates that notions of threat and outgroup do not necessarily go hand in hand, as is often assumed or implied, and white Muslims serve as a fascinating example through which we are able to explore the complexities and nuanced strategies that are undertaken when positioning groups as a threat. Indeed, as we have shown in this article, where white Muslims posed a realistic or symbolic threat, their Muslimness came to be heavily emphasised, explaining and contextualising the threat they presented. As existing intergroup theories have stated (e.g. black sheep effect and subjective group dynamics approach), such an approach enables a certain amount of distancing of the threatened ingroup from its ‘deviants’, and in this specific case allows the white ingroup to maintain its position as unthreatening.

Unsurprisingly, challenges to these notions of threat were predominantly found in British Muslim newspapers, which systematically countered negative representations of Muslims found in national media. However, such polemic or contestatory representations were also found, if to a lesser extent, in national newspaper articles. This reveals the complexity of the narratives produced around white British Muslims and how they were positioned and made sense of within the articles analysed. As Billig (1996) notes, contradiction is a central component of social thought, communication, argumentation, representation, and even ideology. This reflects the intricate way in which language and communication are used to create, negotiate, challenge and ratify dominant, hegemonic, representations, to maintain, as well as unsettle, relations of power. Thus, we demonstrate that binary approaches to understanding identity and positioning through ingroup-outgroup dichotomies, notions of 'us' and 'them', and understandings of threat and non-threats, ignores the complex and intricate ways in which identities are constructed and understood. However, these counter representations in the national press were often formed in relation to a very specific agenda. In some of these cases the whiteness of white British Muslims was used to alleviate the potential threat they posed. In other instances, however, their whiteness paired with their Muslimness was used to legitimise the further Othering of non-white Muslims, reinforcing dominant negative representations of them as a clear threat to society. Once again this demonstrates how positioning can be used and identity categorisation can be manipulated by dominant groups to further specific narratives and maintain narratives of threat and difference.

This study has implications for today's world in exploring constructed systems of fear through *what* and *who* is understood as a threat. Bridging a micro-level exploration of how social representations are constructed and used in text with macro constructs such as the dynamics of power allowed us to go some way in showing how discourses of threat construct, perpetuate, and challenge hegemonic representations. While the article does not explore how hegemonic representations, discourses of threat and their contestations are received across society explicitly (there is already some research on this, e.g. Velasco González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008; Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007), or the effects of these on the identities of white British Muslims (Amer, 2017), it does reveal the ways in which constructions of threat are created and maintained in majority and minority-led media. This highlights how the media's hegemony on information and knowledge perpetuates and legitimises what comes to be known as 'truth' within wider society. Indeed, dominant

representations of marginalised groups are enforced by those with access and power in the social construction of knowledge (Hall, 1992; Howarth, 2006a, 2006b; van Dijk, 1996a, 1996b), maintaining the existing power structures that impose divisions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, perpetuating prejudice and discrimination, hostility and conflict.

Thus, it is vital to examine the ways in which the majority-run press as well as alternative/minority media channels can go some way in challenging dominant negative representations and constructing and disseminating alternative narratives. Yet even here, we see how, at times and perhaps inadvertently, white British Muslims are positioned on the periphery of Muslim communities, and are depicted as a group who have more in common with the dominant ingroup than the often-stigmatised outgroup, perpetuating the notion of non-white Muslims as on the margins of British society. Thus, we must consider the broader implications this could have on the future of our societies, where the lines of difference, of ‘us’ and ‘them’, of ingroup or outgroup positioning and belonging, have the capacity to expand and shrink, exclude and include at will.

Acknowledgements

This research received no grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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