

**Racialised representations of Muslims and Islam in the social media:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Pakistani Muslim HE
students' perceptions and experiences**

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**Racialised representations of Muslims and Islam in the social media:
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Abstract

Background: Research specific to Muslim minority perspectives on social media representations of Islam remains limited and literature pertaining to Pakistani Muslim students' experiences of the phenomenon almost non-existent. This study makes an original contribution by examining social media depictions of Muslims and Islam from the perspective of Pakistani Muslim HE students. Given its commitment to issues of difference and diversity (in the context of wellbeing), it is important for counselling psychology to examine this subject. **Methodology:** A qualitative design was adopted to explore the perceptions and experiences of six Pakistani Muslim students attending university education in Britain. Semi structured interviews were conducted and an IPA approach was used to analyse the transcripts. **Findings:** Four key super-ordinate themes were identified: 'The self and the (perceived) other', 'Understanding exposure and influence', 'Making sense of intersecting identities' and 'Processing and coping'. **Conclusions:** Negative social media constructions of Pakistani Muslims (and Muslims in general) were found to be relevant to participants' experiences of perceived discrimination, microaggressions and racist abuse (in both online and offline contexts). Participants' subjective processes of rationalisation and normalisation allowed them to make sense of and cope with hateful expressions towards their ethnic and religious identities. Also imperative to their processes of coping, were participants' positive experiences within British HE institutions. These findings taken together are aimed at offering an understanding of the discursive power of the social media particularly in forming perceptions pertaining to racialised identities. The potential implications, limitations and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, I start by presenting a background for the study and highlight my aims and rationale for pursuing it. Subsequently, I provide an overview of key terms, of particular relevance to the subjects presented and investigated. Given my positioning as a minority ethnic researcher and practitioner of counselling psychology, a case is made for taking an intersectional approach to social justice in counselling psychology research and practice. Finally, I summarise the reflexive aspects of the study and provide a brief outline of this thesis.

1.1 Aims and Background

In the last few decades, there has been an influx of scholarly research focusing on media representations of ethnic minorities in relation to issues centred on race, ethnicity, religion, identity politics and multicultural perspectives (Hall, 1990; Poole, 2002; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). These discourses highlight the challenges experienced by minoritised communities in relation to the interconnected nature of their social identities. Recent occurrences such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the tragic death of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests are beginning to expose the depths of social and racial disparities that are entrenched within societies. It appears that such disparities and inequalities have existed for long but are now receiving widespread media attention. This in turn seems to bring social inequities and institutional bias (experienced by minoritised communities) to the fore of public awareness.

In the UK, the existence of such disparities across health and social systems are well-documented (Balakumar et al., 2020). Recently, a Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) was set up by the UK government amid rising concerns activated by the Black Lives Movement (BLM). The report has generated much discussion and invited

widespread criticism (The Independent, 2021) . On the one hand, it promotes ideas of mutual commitment to equal opportunities whilst on the other appears to trivialise the difficulties and challenges experienced by ethnic minorities in the U.K. Furthermore, the report criticises theories of race and racism as being ‘bleak’ serving only to create differences within individuals and communities (BBC, 2021). This could be considered problematic, particularly given the contribution of such theories to understanding and contextualising the difficulties experienced by minoritised individuals and groups in a variety of contexts.

Amongst minority ethnic and religious groups, Muslims have received widespread negative attention across western societies (including Britain). Arguably, this has led to an exponential rise in discrimination, racism and hate crimes towards Muslims especially following terrorist events (where perpetrators are identified as Muslims). The recent socio-political climate with its wave of western nationalism (including unfavourable immigration policies) and negativity towards ethnic minorities has further amplified the anti-Islamic rhetoric (Akbarzadeh, 2016). Western mass media has played a significant role in the creation and maintenance of negative stereotypes of Muslims (as a violent outgroup) and dispersing a widespread fear of Islam as a religion of violence and extremism (e.g. Karim, 2000; Poole, 2011; Silva, 2017). Research pertaining to this phenomenon in social media, however, remains limited.

This research aims to contribute to an understanding of how social media representations of Muslims and Islam are perceived by Pakistani Muslim HE students (in Britain) and how these may be relevant to their lived experience. Another primary aim of the study is to examine the role of social media in forming perceptions and in turn attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. In addition, the study also aims to encourage and facilitate practitioners and researchers in the

fields of counselling and psychology to widen their understanding of multiple intersecting identities and associated oppression and marginalization.

1.2 Operationalisation of key terms

Social Media: Traditionally, people's use of the internet involved accessing information, products and/or services. In recent years, this usage has evolved significantly and now includes networking and content sharing platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube etc.; accessed through websites, smart phone applications or other web based software (Obar & Wildman, 2018). The types of content viewed, shared and/or discussed includes (but is not limited to) photos, videos, personal information, news articles etc. This, according to Kietzmann et al. (2011) characterises the social media phenomenon. Just as the nature of social media evolves, so does its definition. In a broader sense, the social media can be defined as "activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media" (Safko & Brake, 2009, p.6). According to the Pew Research Center (2021), approximately 90 percent of the users of social media tend to be from the younger age groups, most falling within the 18-29 years age bracket.

Difference and Diversity: 'Diversity' pertains to observable categories of difference that have legal protection against discrimination (including gender, age, ethnicity etc.), however the definition of diversity has evolved over recent years to include a range of characteristics (visible and/or invisible) such as culture, religion, class, sexual orientation, physical and/or cognitive ability etc. (Kochan et al., 2003; Roberson, 2004). There are various terms utilised across difference and diversity literature, to describe related concepts. Some of the most

common ones include race, ethnicity and culture. Race is commonly understood as being largely focused on physical characteristics, culture related to sociological aspects and ethnicity as an amalgamation of both race and culture including skin colour, family history, religion, language etc. (Fernando, 2010; Rehman, 2020). A critical discussion focusing on the construct of race is detailed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Racialisation: Racialisation can be understood as the processes through which racial meaning is attached to something previously viewed as largely unracial or devoid of racial meaning (Gonzalez-Sobrinio & Goss, 2019). This is aligned with Omi and Winant's (1986) ideas of racialisation as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (p.111). Racialisation can also be seen as an exercise of power through which something adverse is applied to or directed towards others within unequal power relations Garner (2017).

Racism: Definitions of racism appear to be constructed around three key aspects: societal attention to observable differences amongst people from diverse racial groups; beliefs based on inferiority or superiority linked to group membership and ways of behaving resulting from such belief systems that affect the self-esteem, socio-economic opportunities and life chances of those from diverse racial groups (Rollock & Gordon, 2000). In considering some of the wider social implications, Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) described racism as “a web of economic, political, social and cultural structures, actions and beliefs that systemize and ensure an unequal distribution of privilege, resources, and power in favour of the dominant racial group and at the expense of all other racial groups” (p. 9). Many authors have also highlighted the importance of recognising a variety of social categorisations within definitions of racism. According to Paradies (2006) racism can be understood as: “one of

many types of oppression which, along with its dialectical opposite privilege can be based on a range of social characteristics including gender (sexism), sexuality (heterosexism), physical and mental able-ness (ableism), age (ageism), class (classism), nationality, body size/shape, criminality, religion and language/ accent among others”. (p. 2)

Muslims and Islam: Islam is the second largest religion of the world with its followers constituting a significant proportion of the world’s population (Lipka, 2017). It began in Arabia in the 7th century CE through revelations upon Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Followers of Islam identify themselves as Muslims and believe in the oneness of God - ‘Allah’ viewed as the creator, sustainer and restorer of the world. According to Islamic teachings, humanity must submit to the will of ‘Allah’. This is made known through the ‘Quran’ - the sacred scripture, which Allah revealed to his messenger, Muhammad (PBUH) (Rahman et al., 2019).

Islamophobia: Islamophobia is thought to be “an unfounded hostility towards Islam and a fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (Conway, 1997, p.5). A report by the Runnymede Trust categorised it into four broad themes: “Prejudice expressed in everyday conversation and reflected in media representations, exclusion from employment, from management and responsibility, from politics and government, discrimination in employment practices, in the provision of services such as health and education, violence involving verbal abuse, vandalizing property and physical abuse” (Inayat, 2007, p. 288).

1.3 Drawing upon an Intersectional Approach to Social Justice in Counselling

Psychology

Counselling psychology, a discipline that is essentially humanistic, reflexive and pluralistic (BPS, 2015) has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to pluralism and social justice in psychological research and practice. Social justice can be described as “a goal of action and the process of action itself, which involves an emphasis on equity or equality for individuals in society in terms of access to a number of different resources and opportunities, the right to self-determination or autonomy and participation in decision-making, freedom from oppression, and a balancing of power across society” (Cutts, 2013, p. 9-10). To promote social justice agendas, it is important to acknowledge, assess and ameliorate unequal power relations that appear to sustain social inequities and oppressive practices. It is also important to involve individuals, groups and communities particularly in decisions that concern them and their welfare. To achieve this, it is imperative that processes are democratic and respect important differences amongst diverse groups (Bell & Griffin, 2016).

Arguably, the notion of ‘difference’ to this day remains a source of tension in western societies. In describing the notion of minoritisation, Burman (2003) argues how “difference embodies a deviation from what is assumed to be the norm” and how “difference is not about all differences but about those that within dominant discourses, are marked with other kinds of d's, as deviant or deficient” (p.4). Therefore, efforts in the past have been directed towards achieving sameness in human experience that epitomise the development of a universal bond (Chin et al., 1993). Arguable is this idea of a melting pot, which appears to ignore important differences amongst people and obscure the mechanisms of power and oppression that maintain social inequalities. Within the professions of counselling and psychotherapy, social

justice work recognises the importance of reducing power imbalances, challenging discrimination and working towards equality (Winter, 2019).

With rising globalisation, societies worldwide are becoming increasingly diverse. This has resulted in a convergence of cultures and ideas from various parts of the world (Helman, 2007) and therefore a greater need for multicultural and social justice perspectives (Ratts & Pedersen, 2014). Several notable authors have emphasised a need for practitioners and researchers in the fields of counselling and psychology to develop greater sensitivity to issues of difference and diversity (Sue et al., 2019). The notion of Intersectionality is widely used across academic literature to conceptualise such issues. It suggests how multiple identities intersect to create and maintain complex inequalities across social systems (Crenshaw & Harris, 2009). In different domains of psychological research and practice (including counselling psychology) the challenges in the implementation of this construct are well documented (Cole, 2009; Parent et al., 2013; Grzanka et al., 2017).

Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent critical race theorist describes intersectionality as an analytical tool that exposes interconnected mechanisms of power and oppression such as sexism, racism, classism and other such 'isms' (Roland, 2018). In counselling psychology research, the concept of intersectionality is being increasingly utilised to explore multiple intersecting identities in relation to social inequalities (e.g. Sarno et al., 2015; Grzanka et al., 2017). However, its precise implementation both conceptually and methodologically remains to be fully understood (Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016).

Experiences of discrimination and racism across a variety of contexts appear to be central to the lived experience of several Muslims worldwide. This seems to be in contradiction to the mainstream narratives that portray Muslims as perpetrators of violence and extremism (Britton, 2015). Of particular relevance to this study is the examination of such experiences within the higher education context. Many authors have found educational settings to serve as places where social injustices and inequities can be created and recreated, for example by favouring some social identities and marginalizing others (Santamaría, 2014; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Roland, 2018). This appears to suggest an unconscious bias that may be reflected in educational policies and procedures favouring certain racial categories over others.

Given, the recent developments in counselling psychology (research and training) aimed at challenging oppression, the field has much to offer towards an anti-racist framework that explicitly challenges unequal power relations embedded within social systems in relation to the socially constructed categories of difference (Bonnett, 1993; Dalal, 2008 ; Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). A widening interest in concepts such as intersectionality provide practitioners and researchers of counselling psychology with an opportunity to examine processes of racialisation that appear to contribute to homogenisation and stigmatisation of diverse groups (including Muslims). This in turn may allow practitioners and researchers in the field to raise awareness on systemic issues and make social justice agendas more central to their work (Rosenthal, 2016). With this in mind, I view the application of an intersectional framework imperative to challenge oppression and promote social justice for minoritised ethnic and religious communities (including Muslims).

1.4 The Reflexive aspects

Reflexivity is an important aspect of all qualitative studies (Parker, 2004). In keeping with its philosophical underpinnings, the notion of ‘reflexivity’ is of particular relevance to counselling psychology research and practice. It can be understood as the ability to gain awareness into one’s responses towards other individuals, events or surrounding environments (Etherington, 2004). It also involves critical reflection on aspects of one’s identity (including culture/religion) and positionality (both personal and professional) with a particular emphasis on pre-conceptions, bias and/or contextual factors that may have the potential to influence the research process and outcomes (Etherington, 2007; Willis & Stiltanen, 2009). With this in mind, I have considered the following questions Etherington (2004) poses to the reflexive researcher:

“How has my personal history led to my interest in this topic?

What are my presuppositions about knowledge in this field?

How am I positioned in relation to this knowledge?

How does my gender/social class/ethnicity/culture influence my positioning in relation to this topic/my informants?” (p.11).

1.4.1 Researcher identity and positionality

My interest in this topic of study arose from my own cultural background and how it interacts with my professional training in counselling psychology. Arriving as a Pakistani Muslim migrant (nine years ago) to the U.K., a country profoundly different from my own presented a unique set of challenges; particularly a requirement to integrate into my pre-established identity, the newfound norms and values of my host culture. In doing so, I transitioned from being ‘the’ majority to ‘a’ minority and with that a felt sense to acculturate to be accepted. It

was through my professional training in counselling psychology that I began to see the value of preserving my unique identity. In addition, it also provided me with a platform to raise awareness on issues of difference and diversity and with that an opportunity to promote the needs of the marginalised.

As a reflexive researcher, it is important to reflect on one's preconceptions and their influence on the research process. This process of reflection contributes to the trustworthiness of the material presented and discussed (Rennie, 2004). As I reflected on my own presuppositions on the subject matter, I was reminded of my experiences both past and present that have shaped my views and understandings of the world. I was born and raised in Pakistan (in a middle-class family) where from an early age I was exposed to an environment of political instability marked by widespread social and economic inequities and their impact on people's physical and psychological wellbeing. This exposure led to my interest in promoting the needs of the disadvantaged. It also informed my decision to pursue higher education in Applied Psychology, which I viewed as a means to support people's wellbeing needs. In my mid 20's I immigrated to the U.K. (with my family) and 6 years later began my doctoral training in counselling psychology.

My inception of this topic of study was informed by my exposure to media coverage of terrorist events (such as the Manchester Arena bombings) and subsequent hate crimes against Muslims. My engagement with post-colonial literatures (including critical race theory) allowed me to conceptualise and contextualise my own perceptions and experiences pertaining to the issue. The practice-based aspects of my training in counselling psychology allowed me to recognise the complex intersections of client identities and experiences and

how these impacted their psychosocial wellbeing. In terms of my research interests, these centre around concepts pertaining to race, racialisation, intersectionality and social justice. This process of reflection on my own identity and positionality allowed me an insight into my personal assumptions and fore understandings of the phenomenon under study; from topic selection and data collection to analysis, reporting and discussion of findings.

Here, it is also important to note that my personal proximity with participant characteristics (particularly cultural and religious) and subsequent interaction with their narratives aroused certain emotions for me during the various stages of the research process. I have remained cautious and endeavoured to bracket these in order to maintain the integrity of participant stories without becoming too preoccupied with my own. In depth qualitative interviews, similar to the ones conducted as part of this study “engender a level of emotional strain in the researcher that may have quite specific consequences for the analysis and presentation of the results” (Rizq, 2008, p. 42). Using an IPA approach, with a phenomenological and idiographic commitment, I was able to acknowledge and utilise my subjective understandings with the intersubjective understandings gained through my interaction with participant experiences. An interaction of these subjective and intersubjective mechanisms guided the interpretative process.

1.4.2 Beyond personal reflexivity

In describing the importance of reflexivity in doctoral research, Kasket (2012) alluded to three key aspects: personal, epistemological and methodological. ‘Personal reflexivity’ in this context refers to the researcher's own subjectivities pertaining to the topic and their potential to implicate the study (discussed earlier). Another key aspect of reflexivity, namely,

‘Epistemological reflexivity’ involves an exploration into how selected methods led to the construction of knowledge. In addition, it also considers critically the sort of knowledge that could be created using alternate methods of research inquiry. I approached this study from a critical realist positioning, which has been discussed in detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

‘Methodological reflexivity’ involves gaining insight into the methodological decisions taken; what informed these, any challenges encountered and how these were managed. In keeping with the aim of an in depth phenomenological inquiry into participants subjective experiences of the phenomenon, an IPA approach (Smith et al., 2009) was adopted. All three of these key aspects of reflexivity are discussed at varying points in this thesis.

In order to enhance the overall transparency and trustworthiness of the study, I have explained in a clear and coherent manner, all stages of the research process. It is also important to state that I utilised research supervision throughout the research process, with a particular emphasis on discussing aspects concerning my own positioning on the subject matter. I am also acutely aware of how another researcher examining the topic may have produced alternative interpretations to the ones generated in this study.

1.5 Outline of the thesis

As highlighted earlier in the chapter, this thesis aims explore Pakistani Muslim HE students’ perceptions and experiences of social media representations regarding Muslims and Islam. In this thesis, various elements of this exploration are presented across a total of five chapters.

In the introductory chapter, I provided an overview of the study undertaken, including its background, aims and rationale whilst also considering aspects of my own identity and positionality on the topic. In the second chapter, I present a detailed review of extant

literature focusing on various aspects of relevance to the topic of study. I begin by examining literature relevant to the dominant portrayals of Islam in both mainstream and social media. I then draw upon an intersectional lens to examine constructions of Muslims as the ‘other’. Literature pertaining to discrimination, racism and Islamophobia in relation to mental health is also reviewed. In the latter sections of the chapter, I outline identified gaps in the literature reviewed and propose a rationale for the current study. Following which, the research questions and a brief reflexive statement are presented.

In the third chapter, I detail aspects pertaining to my philosophical positioning and highlight key aspects of the methodology employed. I also provide a detailed description of the research process including the various stages involved in data collection and analysis. The chapter ends in a discussion on elements involved in ensuring trustworthy and ethical research. In the fourth chapter, I present the key study findings. I begin by highlighting the four key super-ordinate themes and their associated sub-themes. These are discussed using illustrative quotes from participant interviews. In chapter five, I provide a critical discussion of the key findings, aimed at answering the research questions. I also highlight the implications and limitations of the study based on which I propose recommendations for future research. I also revisit the reflexive aspects highlighted in Chapter 1. The chapter ends in a summary of the main conclusions and intended contributions to literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides a review of relevant literature aimed at understanding the perceptions and experiences of Pakistani Muslim HE students in Britain with regards to the social media representations of Muslims and Islam. Conducting this detailed review, allowed the identification of possible gaps in literature, which in turn facilitated refinement of the rationale in line with the research aims and questions. As part of this review, I have summarised existing literature that reflects on the portrayal of Muslims and Islam in the media with a particular focus on such representations within the social media. Literature pertaining to processes of ‘othering’ that appear to be associated with some of the dominant media portrayals of Muslims and Islam are also explored. An intersectional lens has therefore been adopted to examine literature on racialisation and social construction of the Muslim ‘other’. Muslims’ experiences of discrimination, racism and Islamophobia in relation to psychosocial wellbeing are also highlighted. Following the review of relevant literature, the research questions and study rationale are presented.

2.1 Race, religion and the mass media

Representations of ethnic minorities in the media is now a well-studied area in academic literature. In recent decades, there has been a significant uptake of research examining media representations of ethnic minorities regarding issues focusing on race, religion and multiculturalism (Hall, 1990; Poole, 2002; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Literature on handling of issues pertaining to race and religion has found media platforms to be largely centred on negative themes and content with limited coverage of varying viewpoints (Saeed, 2007). Hall (1978) described mass media as a “machinery of representation that determines what and who gets represented and what and who routinely gets left out (and) how things, people, events, relationships get represented ... the structure of access to the media is systematically

skewed towards certain social categories” (p.95-97). With this in mind, it can be argued that the media wields significant influence particularly in the development, maintenance and transmission of dominant discourses that promote negative representations of certain social groups and thereby (perhaps inadvertently) facilitates processes of marginalisation and oppression.

Arguably, another important factor is how journalism is positioned particularly in relation to the coverage of issues pertaining to ethnic minorities. According to Cottle (2000) journalists often produce and disseminate stories in a manner aligned with their own positioning of worldviews, which may include attitudes reflecting prejudice. Reporting on issues concerning ethnic minorities also appears to focus heavily on aspects that associate ethnic diversity with negativity or peculiarity (Wilson & Gutierrez, 1985). Thereby appearing to promote a category of difference that signifies deviance, controversy, violence and conflict.

Additionally, there appears to be a serious lack of positive representations of ethnic minorities in the western media. Journalists often lack in training on culture, religion and other diversities that leads to mono-dimensional understandings of minoritised individuals and groups and what exacerbates this further is the serious lack of minority journalists within the western media industry (Ter Wal et al., 2005). Other factors such as lack of adequate means or time constraints in consulting a range of sources (pertaining to minority ethnic perspectives) prior to producing news stories can also be attributed to the sparsity of positive representations of minority groups (Jackson, 2010).

2.1.1 Western media images of Islam

Significant events that occur periodically, involving minority ethnic individuals and/or groups world over but more so in western countries gain significant media attention and coverage. Importantly, as these often highlight the key cultural and religious differences that prevail within and across societies (Spalek, 2011). Amongst ethnic minorities, Muslims and their religious teachings/practices have often featured at the centre of much debate (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Experiences of widespread discrimination and disadvantage across social, economic and political contexts is not uncommon to the followers of Islam (Kabir, 2006). Several authors have examined media representation of Muslims and Islam by utilising a range of conceptual and analytical frameworks across varying contexts, including social, cultural as well as geo-political. Most research in the area, however, has originated in Western countries particularly from regions where Muslims constitute minority groups i.e. North America (e.g. Said, 1981; Ibrahim, 2010; Silva, 2017), Europe (e.g. Poole, 2002; Alghamdi, 2015; Hanzelka & Schmidt, 2017; Evolvi, 2018) and Australasia (Kabir, 2006; Dunn, 2001; Roose, 2013; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

In 'Covering Islam' accepted by many as the first systematic examination of Muslim representations in Western media, Said (1981) asserts how Islam is portrayed as a hallmark of backwardness, extremism, terrorism, barbarism and destruction. In his view, with this single-sided coverage of Muslims and Islam without engaging with its true teachings, Western media has facilitated creation of the categories 'Us' and 'Them'. Through perpetuation of such categories of difference that identify the Muslim 'other' as aggressive and inferior, western media has also facilitated the acceptance amongst audiences that extremism and terrorism is embedded in Islamic ethos (Said, 1981; Ghauri et al., 2017). It has been suggested that media reporting of incidents involving Muslims as perpetrators of violence and

extremism contribute to their negative stereotyping and in turn promulgation of racist attitudes against them and their religion (Dunn, 2001). A widespread lack of awareness on true Islamic beliefs and values has been identified as an important factor in the maintenance of stereotypes that are damaging for the reputation of Islam and its followers (Hashmi et al., 2020).

Mass media (including news and entertainment sources) is widely viewed as educational, particularly in informing people's attitudes, thinking and behaviour. This view appears to be most compelling when examining media influence on young minds who may have limited capacity to distinguish fully 'reality' from 'fantasy' (Jackson, 2010). Rather than seeing media as directly instructional, Hall (1990) positioned the media as an indirect source of popular beliefs, ideas and attitudes guided by the needs and expectations of the target audience, that people may respond to more or less critically (Morey, 2010). Cortes (2005) provides a more critical viewpoint and suggests that "Media teaching does not guarantee media-derived learning, just as classroom teaching does not guarantee classroom learning" (p. 58-59). Nevertheless it is argued, that media coverage of events such as 9/11 and 7/7 have generated political debates on issues regarding Muslims and Islam and in turn re-interpreted the relationship between Western countries and Muslims as a divide between Western ideologies and the teachings of Islam (Saeed, 2007; Ibrahim, 2010; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

In the last few decades, dominant representations of Muslims and Islam in the media have increasingly focused on the assumption that Islamic teachings are aligned with terrorist and extremist ideologies (Haque et al., 2019). A study conducted by Jackson (2010) found through participant accounts, that even though the media was not an exclusive means for

people to develop anti-Islamic views or negative perceptions of Muslims, it was still popular and acceptable in the American media to link followers of Islam with terrorism and extremism. Similarly, Abdalla and Rane (2007) in a survey with 500 residents of Queensland Australia, found that a significant majority of Australians consider mass media to be a key source of information regarding Islam and its followers. The survey also highlighted that instead of increasing understanding about Islam and its followers, a new “mass media version” (p.1) of Islam was emerging, that focused on extremes of Islam instead of the more moderate and traditional understandings. This version of Islam created by the media was also seen to facilitate the construction of an Islam that was deviant from its essential ideological principles. It is also important to note that a significant proportion of those surveyed in this study viewed the dominant media representations of Muslims and Islam to be biased and unfair. Hence, it was concluded that despite media being a key information source in transmitting negative representations of Muslims, its ability to generate widespread negative public opinion against the religion and its followers is limited (Rane & Abdalla, 2008).

In Britain, over the past couple of decades, multiple studies have examined representations of Muslims and Islam in the print media. The social media, however, continues to remain a blind spot within British literature. Poole (2002) analysed articles on representation of British Muslims in newspapers such as ‘The Times’ and ‘The Guardian’ (From 1993 to 1997). The analysis found Muslims (on several occasions) being portrayed as irrational, backward, extremist and a threat to the ideals of freedom and liberty of the West. Similarly, Moore et al. (2008) in a content analysis of 974 news articles on Islam (published in Britain) identified a significant number of articles associating Islam with extremist ideologies that appeared to promote a separation between Islam and the West. Furthermore, a lack of emphasis on issues of racism and discrimination experienced by Muslim minorities was noted across the British

news articles analysed. It is argued that much of these discriminatory and racist attitudes fuelled by the negative portrayals and commentary in the media and politics identifies Muslims as being close-minded, unaccepting of British culture, and aligned with anti-British views and sentiments (Maxwell, 2006; Poole, 2011). Such messages are often expressed implicitly in the media, under an umbrella of discriminatory immigration laws and policies. Relatedly, Baker et al. (2013) analysed Muslim depictions in British news articles from years 1998 to 2009 and found the prevalence of both subtle and overt negative framing of Muslims and Islam, which was identified as a key factor in the (direct and indirect) creation and transmission of anti-Muslim stereotypes.

2.1.2 Social media representations of Muslims and Islam

Islam is a major religion of the world and its followers comprise over a billion people from wide ranging cultural and ethnic groups spread across six continents (Courbage & Todd, 2014; Lipka, 2017). Hence, it is becoming increasingly important to understand the prevailing representations and at times misrepresentations regarding Muslims and Islam particularly as these may have geo-political implications of a global nature (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Research on representation of Muslims and Islam, predominantly over the last few decades has focused on mainstream media (including newspapers and television; Baker et al., 2013). The advent of social media with its increasing popularity and usage has changed the nature of communication and transmission world over. It allows its users to share and receive information on a global level via internet networks. Despite its ever-increasing discursive power in societies across the world, social media discourse, remains under-researched across academic disciplines. This could be attributed to the methodological difficulties that are often experienced in relation to collecting, managing and examining the

vast unstructured/loosely structured data that defines the social media (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016).

Similar to traditional media, much of the research on social media representations of Muslims and Islam has also emerged in western countries, where Muslims often constitute minority groups (e.g. Awan, 2016; Hanzelka & Schmidt, 2017; Ittefaq, 2018; Evolvi, 2018). These studies have found social media representations of Muslims and Islam to be predominantly negative in nature. Literature pertaining to positive media representations of Muslims and Islam has emerged mostly from East Asia particularly Indonesia and Malaysia (e.g. Mohamad, 2017; Slama, 2018; Husein & Slama, 2018; Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018). A study conducted by Abu Hatab (2016) found social media to have a positive influence on Muslims by providing easy access to information on Islamic teachings and promoting a positive image of Islam. Similarly, Slama (2018) suggested that sharing and posting verses from the Quran or Hadith (Islamic scriptures) emphasising the basic values and ethics of Islam helped to mitigate against the impact of the widespread misinformation regarding Islam and its followers. According to Kadir et al. (2018) social media users from the younger generations are promoting a more individual version of Islam that may facilitate in addressing some of the misconceptions associated with the stigmatised collective Muslim identities (Hashmi et al., 2020).

In the world today, social media is a key source of information sharing that provides its users with a global platform to express their ideas and opinions on wide ranging topics, including those that add to socio-political, economic and/or religious debates (Ittefaq, 2018). However, one of the major challenges commonly associated with the social media is the proliferation of

unauthentic and unreliable information that may lead to misperception and misrepresentation of certain individuals and groups. Recent discourses in the area recognise social media as an online amplifier that strengthens offline social structures and dialogues that have existed across traditional mass media (Lilleker et al., 2011; Farkas et al., 2018). Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) through a critical discourse analysis examined how Muslims and Islam were portrayed in a Swedish Internet forum and compared these to their depictions in mainstream media. Despite the increasing significance of social media in people's lives particularly in terms of informing public opinion and attitudes, this research was the first of its kind. The findings of this important study suggested Muslims being represented as a homogeneous outgroup involved in conflict, violence, extremism and terrorism. It further revealed widespread assumptions regarding these traits emerging from people's affiliation to Islam. These attitudes and associated negative commentaries (on the social media platform) were seen to reinforce and exaggerate prevailing negative stereotypes and discourses regarding Muslims and Islam that existed across traditional media.

Hanzelka and Schmidt (2017) extended research on social media platforms in relation to anti Muslim sentiments. In their study, they highlighted the problem of cyber hate across two social movements originating from Europe called 'Pegida' from Germany and 'Initiatives against Islam' from Czech Republic. They utilised an intergroup contact theoretical framework to examine samples of user comments that were shared on the Facebook pages of both movements. The extent/frequency of negative commentary including their triggers and targets were analysed using qualitative coding. The findings indicated that the Czech 'Initiative against Islam' recorded a higher percentage of hate comments. However, the trigger events were found to be linked across the two countries, amongst which, the key instigators of cyber hate were incidents that presented refugees and immigrants as

perpetrators of violent extremism. The targets of these hate comments were also similar across the Facebook pages of both movements. These included refugees and immigrants as well those who favoured them (e.g. charities/NGO's), Muslims (more generally), pro-immigration political leaders (in the US and EU) as well as left wing government officials of both countries (Germany and the Czech Republic; Hanzelka & Schmidt, 2017).

Whilst anti-Muslim attitudes have been researched from various lenses across a variety of contexts and disciplines, Islamophobia on social media platforms remains largely understudied (Evolvi, 2018). Ittefaq (2018) using discourse analysis examined social media conversations (on Facebook) regarding Muslims and Islam. The study found that users liked, commented and shared content based on their personal beliefs and attitudes. Interestingly, a shift in user attitudes and views was noted as a result of exposure to negative depictions of Muslims and Islam. The study found Islam to be the only religion being portrayed negatively on Facebook. Similarly, to understand if there existed differences between online and offline anti-Muslim sentiments, Evolvi (2018) conducted a qualitative examination of tweets following the 2016 U.K. referendum on membership of the European Union (EU). The analysis revealed that exposure to anti-Islamic views expressed online appeared to increase Islamophobic discourses that represented Muslims as backward, extremist, violent and unable to conform to Western norms and ideals. The study went on to suggest that in order to tackle online hate directed towards Muslims and Islam, it was imperative to recognise the inter-connections between the news media, social media and offline spaces (Evolvi, 2018).

Most research on Muslim representations in the social media, however limited, has centred on negative commentaries and hate speech on Facebook and Twitter (as highlighted above).

There is a dearth of academic literature that examines these variables on Instagram, a social media platform increasing in its popularity and influence world over. Civila et al. (2020) was the first study to examine Instagram's role in facilitating processes of othering and demonization of Muslims. The study involved a quantitative analysis of Instagram posts (including images and content) with #StopIslam (from January - July 2020). The findings of the study revealed how anti-Muslim commentary on social media networking apps (such as Instagram) can lead to transmission of inaccurate narratives regarding the religion and in turn stigmatisation of its followers.

Although the social media (and the internet, more generally) have played a key role in creating a virtual community for spreading hate towards Muslims and Islam, radical views of Islamist organisations that are also commonly transmitted through media platforms have aggravated the issue (Post et al., 2014). Islamist organizations also appear to exploit modern means of communication such as the social media to broadcast their extremist views and expressions (Post, 2010). The internet and social media can therefore be seen as powerful media where radical, extremist views from individuals and groups (who claim to be Muslims) are transmitted in a manner that may suggest these as the views held by Muslims in general.

2.2 Race, racism and racialisation

Several studies have utilised different lenses to examine the constructs of race and racism in order to understand the development and maintenance of racial inequalities and oppression. Over time, the notion of 'race' has been used within systems and across contexts to 'naturalise' differences amongst individuals and groups to then 'normalize' and legitimise practices that lead to exclusion and marginalisation (Goldberg, 1993). Some authors argue

that terms such as ‘race’ (understood as invalid in scientific terms) should be substituted for ‘racialisation’(Banton, 1977). This argument aims to shift the construction of ‘race’ from largely biological categories to the idea of ‘race’ as a construction that is socially determined. In socio-political and economic contexts creation of racial categories have embedded the concept of 'race' more deeply in everyday language and thought. The use of racial categorisations has been seen to inform policies governing the selection, admission and citizenship of western nations (Rehman, 2020).

In describing the historical fore-conceptions of race and racialisation, it is worth drawing upon Frantz Fanon’s ideas. Fanon (1986) suggested that the development of binary notions of European thought ran parallel to colonization whereby ‘black’ was seen to symbolise ‘bad and evil’ and ‘white’, ‘good and virtuous’. These ideas and associated mechanisms of psychological, social and material domination in Fanon's view, facilitated the development of the categories: ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’. He further suggested how creation of these binary categories could lead to authorisation of oppression and dehumanisation of those found to be ‘different’, ‘divergent’ or even ‘othered’.

‘Racism’ has remained in use, as an umbrella term to signify the negative experiences of racialised individuals and groups. Banton (1992) defined racism as “a philosophical concept used to construct and negotiate social relations” (p.29). Wieviorka (1995) furthered this understanding in describing different aspects of racism: prejudices, opinions and attitudes held by individuals or groups, subjection to violence and exclusionary practices, governed by political philosophies and social systems. Several authors in the field have also alluded to the

shifting nature of racism in accordance with changing contexts asserting how it interacts with and responds to other social phenomena (Miles & Brown, 2003; Rehman, 2020).

The media (including social media) appears to be a key transmitter of racisms often in the form of racialised representations and misrepresentations of individuals and groups. In mainstream media, racisms appear to be communicated in a more implicit manner often as stereotypical images, generalisations and also as an under representation of ethnic minority individuals and perspectives (Ter Wal et al., 2005; Ghauri et al., 2017). It can be argued that stereotypical portrayals and negative categorisations may in turn lead to legitimisation of discrimination and exclusion of ethnic minorities. In problematizing racially defined categorisations, Carter et al. (1996) asserted that their use reinforces pre-existing race-based assumptions and normalises anti-immigration policies and negative political commentaries regarding ethnic minorities. It can be argued that the media and western governments hold a particularly influential position in perpetuation of such assumptions and ideas, that may inform public attitudes and in turn lead to ‘othering’ of racialised communities. Prejudiced attitudes towards Islam are also reflected in the choice of vocabulary; with violence perpetrated by those claiming to be Muslims more likely to be labelled as terrorism, than instances where perpetrators are White and/or non-Muslims (West & Lloyd, 2017).

2.2.1 The Muslim ‘other’

The notion of ‘othering’ has been popular within media studies, particularly in regards to representations of religious minorities. Many authors (e.g. Carter et al., 1996; Karim, 2000; Dunn, 2001; Creutz, 2008; Nurullah, 2010; Aydin & Hammer, 2010; Colic-Peisker et al., 2016; Silva, 2017) have utilised this framework to understand media’s role in fuelling anti-

Islamic discourse that situates Muslims as ‘them’. Karim (2000) defines ‘them’ as “a composite entity, with little distinction between its diverse followers and their respective beliefs, cultures, and actions” (p.176). The construction of such an entity, positions Muslims as the ‘other’; a backward, sexist, violent group that needs to be managed and tolerated (Dunn, 2001). Despite decades of prominent literary works on Muslim representations in the media, Muslims’ experiences of othering particularly within the newer forms of media have introduced new complexities and therefore require novel insights from multidisciplinary perspectives (Aydin & Hammer, 2010).

Rane and Abdalla (2008) highlighted the discursive power of the mass media particularly in relation to homogenisation of the Muslim identity. They suggest that with the media being “a society’s primary source of information about Islam and Muslims, it will be unable to distinguish between Islam, the way of life embraced by one-fifth of humanity residing across the globe and mass media Islam, the version of Islam constructed by the media on the basis of repeated slogans and images of violence, terrorism, backwardness, and barbarity in the name of Islam” (Rane and Abdalla, 2008, p.13). Media framing of Muslims as the ‘other’ also appears to generalise stand-alone incidents of violence and terrorism to all Muslims, which has the potential to influence public opinion and in turn encourage negative labelling of Islam and its followers.

Terrorist incidents such as the 9/11 attacks and subsequent wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria have strengthened a single-dimensional association between extremist ideologies and Islam (Roose, 2013). Relatedly, dominant media representations and stereotypical portrayals have exacerbated the issue by homogenising Muslim men as violent extremists and Muslim

women as suppressed hijab wearers, in need of liberation from patriarchal oppression and violence (Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005). Such constructions and their maintenance vilify Muslims, lead to hate practices and embolden people to respond with prejudice and judgement (El-Farra, 1996). As highlighted previously, several studies (e.g. Saeed, 2007; Creutz, 2008; Poole, 2011; Colic-Peisker et al., 2016) have examined such processes of othering facilitated by the western media. A study conducted by Colic-Peisker et al. (2016) revealed how homogenisation of Muslims in Australia by the mainstream Australian public (following media coverage of the Sydney Siege; a lone terrorist taking hostage customers and employees at a Sydney café) created perceptions of Muslims as the ‘other’ (associated with violence and terrorism). Similar representations of Islam were presented in the Finnish media that drew connections with extremist events in different parts of the world to identify Islam as a violent religion (Creutz, 2008). Such media representations based on a homogenisation of racialised groups (such as Muslims) appear to undermine efforts towards multiculturalism and inclusion of minoritised communities (Hage, 1998).

Multiple studies in the last couple of decades have examined the representation of Muslims and associated processes of othering in the British print media (e.g. Poole, 2002; Saeed, 2007). Poole (2002) argued how the coverage of global issues featuring Muslims and Islam (involving conflict, extremism, terrorism) in the British media dominate the narratives that focus on the difficulties and challenges experienced by Muslims. Saeed (2007) suggested how the media portrays British Muslims as the ‘alien other’ by drawing references to ‘deviance’ and ‘un-Britishness’. Such a mechanism of othering appears to, on the one hand, individualise and criminalise the perpetrator (by separating them from the larger Muslim community) but on the other hand assumes them to be responsible for brainwashing other

Muslims with extremist and murderous ideas (O'Neill & Bird, 2008). Hence, constructing a connection between radicalism and Islamic ideology (Poole, 2011).

Prejudice, bias, negative representation and propaganda against Islam and its followers by Western media is unfortunately, not a new phenomenon. Several prominent scholars (e.g. Said, 1981; Poole, 2002; Saeed 2007) recognise mass media as powerful source of information that contributes to a distortion of the image of Islam in the minds of Westerners. Research in the field of media and political studies have found Western media to (by and large) represent Muslims in a critical, stereotypical and often discriminatory manner. According to Alghamdi (2015) the tone of media assertions on Muslims and Islam range from a simple suspicion to an explicit accusation. It is therefore becoming increasingly important to understand media's role in categorising Islam as a violent religion and Muslims as violent terrorists.

2.2.2 Racialisation from an intersectional lens

Whilst conceptualising the notion of othering, it is vital to consider the role of multiple and intersecting identities. Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been utilised extensively across academic literature to consider multiple dimensions of identity and their role in construction of racialised categories and associated inequalities. The notion of 'Intersectionality' initially conceptualised within the CRT framework, is widely used to explain this notion. Its increasing popularity has made it a 'buzzword' extensively used and at times misused in a manner that appears to be ambiguous and lacking in specificity (Davis, 2008). Essentially, it can be viewed as a construct that aims to recognise how different aspects of identity and inequality (including gender, disability, race, social class, etc.) are inter-related over time and across contexts (Gillborn, 2015).

The concept of intersectionality “enables us to recognize how perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias” (Crenshaw & Harris, 2009, p.3). In regards to Pakistani Muslims particularly those that constitute minority groups in western countries, the complex interaction of identity (racial and religious), ethnicity and skin colour appears to construct a category of ‘difference’. It can be argued that such a category of ‘difference’ may in turn lead to the construction of the ‘other’; a brown skinned, ethnically diverse, Muslim. Such processes may (inadvertently) cause the ‘othered’ individual and/or group to be misperceived as being morally inferior or as someone capable of causing more harm than good. “Racism is never simply racism but always exists in complex imbrication with nation, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality” (Rattansi, 2005, p.296). To address racisms effectively there needs to be an understanding of how various intersecting identities and mechanisms of racialisation allow the construction of racial classifications, which may in turn legitimise discrimination and social injustice.

Racialisation, as a concept has also been utilised extensively in CRT literature to explore and understand the mechanisms through which, racial meaning is linked to something that is/was perceived as being largely unracial or devoid of racial meaning (Gonzalez-Sobrinio & Goss, 2019). The term, ‘racialisation’ dates back to late 19th century (Barot & Bird, 2001). It has since engendered a range of descriptions and understandings; From Fanon's (1986) conceptualisation of ‘racialisation’ as ‘dehumanization’ of the ‘different’ and Banton's (1977) ideas of racialisation as Europeans describing their engagement with individuals originating

from the less developed or developing parts of the world to Omi and Winant's (1986) description of racialisation as the attachment of racial meaning or attributes to a previously racially uncategorised social group or practice. In understanding the mechanisms of racialisation, it is also important to consider issues of power and privilege that appear to sustain discrimination and oppression (Rehman, 2020). Garner (2017) described racialisation as a use of power whereby something adversative is directed towards others from minoritised social groups.

As discussed previously, Muslims' experiences of othering are widespread and well documented. However, there is limited research on such experiences in regards to Pakistani Muslims. It has been noted that particularly since the 9/11 attacks, Pakistani Muslims have featured negatively in western media for widespread concerns of extremism and terrorism (Abbas, 2007). In the UK, similar concerns have been experienced and expressed after it became known that three of the people amongst the perpetrators of the 7/7 London underground attacks identified as British Pakistanis (Werbner, 2011). A 2013 qualitative examination of experiences of British Pakistanis (from West Yorkshire) following the 7/7 London underground attacks revealed that despite being strongly opposed to terrorism and immense pride in their British identity, participants described concerns related to an anti-Muslim backlash from both the UK media and the general public (Hussain & Bagguley, 2013). Similarly, the 2013 Woolwich incident and more recently the 2017 Manchester Arena and London Bridge attacks appear to legitimise anti-Islamic sentiments and hate speech/crime towards British Muslims both online and offline. Awan (2016) found exposure to online hate to have an adverse impact on the wellbeing of those affected; often resulting in negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, anger and also a marked fear of future verbal threats translating into physical abuse.

2.3 The influence of discrimination and racism on wellbeing

Many people's experiences of stress are found to result from a number of factors, which may include interpersonal conflict, adverse life experiences or even subjective misfortune (Harrell, 2000; Priest et al., 2013). Understandings of stress resulting from discriminatory experiencing and other aspects pertaining to membership of stigmatized groups has received minimal attention in previous academic research (Fernando, 1984; Thompson & Neville, 1999; Harrell, 2000). In some of the later literature, however, discriminatory and racist experiencing has been associated to poor psychological outcomes (Brown, 2008, Rippy & Newman, 2008). Alongside mental distress, individual experiences of discrimination and racism have also been linked with physical ill health (Samari, 2016). More recently, several authors have also suggested how racism can place a significant strain on the psychological health of the individuals targeted with evidence increasingly suggesting a strong relationship of racism and ethnic discrimination to a range of mental health problems (Paradies, 2006; Priest et al., 2013; Brondolo et al., 2016).

Racisms emerging from ethnic discrimination can be viewed as "the processes, norms, ideologies, and behaviours that perpetuate racial inequality" (Gee et al., 2009, p. 130). Brown (2008) describes racism as an epiphenomenon, which makes it difficult to determine its actual impact on the wellbeing of targeted individuals. The term 'microaggression' is increasingly being used to describe some of the more covert forms of racist and discriminatory attitudes. Microaggressions more generally refer to brief day to day exchanges that convey demeaning attitudes towards particular individuals based on their group membership; whether intentional or unintentional, these exchanges are seen to communicate negativity and hostility towards the targeted group (Sue, 2010). Sue et al. (2007) described 'racial microaggressions'

as being similar to unconscious forms of racism but with a focus on the interaction between the perpetrator and the victim in an everyday context.

Nadal et al. (2010) extended the notion of ‘microaggressions’ to include religious factors and conceptualised ‘religious microaggressions’ as “subtle behavioural and verbal exchanges (both conscious and unconscious) that send denigrating messages to individuals of various religious groups” (p. 297). Nadal et al. (2012) explored experiences of such microaggressions amongst Muslim Americans. Their analysis found Muslims to be repeated subjects of several forms of religious microaggressions, which included having their religion pathologised by others, being stereotyped as terrorists based on their religious affiliation and being subjected to mocking representations of their religion and its followers. In the context of media (news and fictional) Muslims are often seen to endure negative messages and portrayals of their religious beliefs and practices. It can be argued that being subjected to such implicit forms of discrimination and racial biases on a regular basis can have a negative influence on the mental health and wellbeing of those targeted.

Despite a growing body of literature in this area, the precise pathways that relate racist experiencing (both implicit and explicit) to mental health difficulties still remain to be understood (Joormann & Michael-Vanderlind, 2014). Brondolo et al. (2016) describe racism as a significant and deleterious stressor with the extent of its effects varying; depending on the biopsychosocial mechanisms in the lives of those affected. A key concern in the study of mental health is how structured inequality impacts upon psychological wellbeing (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989; Wheaton, 2001; Cockerham, 2006). Racial categorisations often appear to facilitate such inequalities by serving those in power and reproducing racial bias within and

across social institutions (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Stefancic & Delgado, 2010). It can be argued that the creation and maintenance of such categories of difference and associated bias, can result in unfavourable outcomes for minoritised communities. It is therefore imperative to further the understanding of the mechanisms involved in discrimination and racism and of their role in relation to the psychosocial wellbeing of minoritised individuals and groups.

2.3.1 Ethnic and religious minority perspectives

There has been much debate around the use of collective categorisations (e.g. BAME) to identify ethnic minorities (Aspinall, 2002). Some argue that the use of such terms helps to recognise and address health and social inequities and discrimination experienced by western minorities (Sandhu, 2018). Whereas others consider the use of such unifying terms to result in the construction of homogenised identities that fail to recognise how discrimination faced by different ethnic groups is unequal (Gabriel, 2021).

It has also been suggested that the term ‘minority’ could be understood as ‘less important’ and therefore in some contexts be viewed as insulting (Uberoi, 2015). However, it can also be argued that use of the term ‘minority’ helps raise awareness on the difficulties and challenges experienced by minoritised communities. Selvarajah et al. (2020) define the term ‘minoritised’ to include individuals and groups “whose collective cultural, economic, political and social power has been eroded through the targeting of (social) identity” (p.3).

As suggested earlier, subtle and overt forms of racism and discrimination are central to the lived experience of individuals from minoritised communities. In a research with African American participants, Kessler et al. (1999) found acute discrimination to be associated with high levels of mental distress (including major depression) and chronic discrimination to be

related to generalized anxiety, depression and other types of psychological distress. Another study conducted by Sellers and Shelton (2003) indicated frequent and intense exposure to discrimination and racism to be associated with higher levels of anxiety and stress which in turn had an adverse impact on the mental health and wellbeing of targeted individuals. Previously, a U.K. based national survey indicated widespread experiences of racism and racial discrimination amongst minority groups (Virdee, 1997). Further qualitative research examining racial discrimination in the U.K. also highlighted how several minority ethnic individuals experience racism and discrimination on an interpersonal level, in their everyday lives. Such experiences have been found to result in increased levels of self-consciousness stemming from beliefs about being the ‘different one’ and in turn greater fears of being subjects of racial abuse (Chahal & Julienne, 1999; Nazroo, 2003; Straiton et al., 2019).

The early 21st century (particularly following the 9/11 attacks) saw an exponential increase in discriminatory and racist attitudes towards Muslims especially those residing in western countries (Ibrahim, 2010). Additionally, the socio-political climate (in recent years) with an upsurge of western nationalism seems to have reinforced and exaggerated the anti-Muslim rhetoric. The media has (arguably) been influential in this regard particularly through perpetuation of negative images of Muslims and spreading fear of Islam as a religion of violence (Rehman & Hanley, 2021).

‘Discrimination’ more broadly encompasses unfair treatment of an individual or group based on characteristics that include: gender, ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation etc. (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). A related concept termed ‘perceived discrimination’ involves ones perceptions or experiences of discrimination which may be in response to occurrences that are not considered discriminatory by law (Andriessen et al., 2014). Perceived

discrimination is often viewed as a social stressor that can be personal or institutional, manifested through implicit and/or explicit means that may or may not be deliberate (Straiton et al., 2019). It appears to result in suspicion and mistrust amongst concerned individuals and therefore has the potential to implicate the psychological wellbeing of those targeted.

The term 'racial trauma' is increasingly being used to conceptualise events involving "danger related to real or perceived experience of racial discrimination, threats of harm and injury, and humiliating and shaming events, in addition to witnessing harm to other ethno-racial individuals because of real or perceived racism" (Comaz Diaz, 2016, p.1). The psychological impact of discrimination, racism and associated traumas amongst minority ethnic groups is now well documented. However, research examining such experiences within Muslim minorities remains to be fully understood.

Rippy and Newman (2008) explored perceived religious discrimination in relation to anxiety and subclinical paranoia amongst 152 Muslim Americans. Their study revealed a significant correlation between perceived discrimination and subclinical paranoia, however no significant association was found between perceived discrimination and anxiety. A later study conducted by Jasperse et al. (2012) with 153 Muslim Women in New Zealand found wearing of the Muslim veil or 'hijab' to be associated with higher levels of perceived discrimination but interestingly leading to positive mental health outcomes. It was highlighted that the psychological aspects (related to in-group affiliation/pride) and behavioural elements associated with appearing 'visibly Muslim' were seen to balance out the negative implications of perceived religious discrimination. It can be argued that such in-group affiliation that appears to be helpful in coping with the consequences of discriminatory

perceptions and experiences may lead to negative feelings towards the perceived non-Muslim outgroup which may in-turn widen the gap between the presumed 'Them' and 'Us'.

2.3.2 Islamophobia and Hate

The term Islamophobia, first came to the fore, in the late 20th century to recognise and understand the experiences of minoritised Muslims across the UK and Europe (Samari, 2016). A report by the Runnymede Trust defines Islamophobia as an unsubstantiated resentment towards Muslims stemming from a fear or dislike of Islam (Conway, 1997). The report (as explained earlier) further explained the construct of Islamophobia as a single dimensioned mind-set and separated it into four main categories. These included: prejudiced attitudes expressed in day to day conversations or in the media, expressions of violence and abuse, exclusion from socio-political involvement, discriminatory attitudes in employment as well as in provision of health and education (Inayat, 2007). Islamophobia in its varied forms appears to result in adverse consequences for Muslims across the world particularly those that form minority groups.

Recent literature on Islamophobia has found it to be associated with poor psychological and social wellbeing amongst those affected (Abdulrahim et al., 2012). Samari et al. (2018) in a systematic review of literature found Muslims' experiences of ethnic discrimination to be associated with unfavourable psychological outcomes. The review also indicated how Islamophobic experiencing was not limited to Muslims alone. Those mistakenly perceived as Muslims based on stereotypical characteristics (such as skin colour/beard etc.) regardless of their race, religion or country of origin were also seen to experience Islamophobia (both implicitly and explicitly). Appearance and attire are important aspects of one's individual (and in some cases) collective identities. Hence, being stigmatised based on these

characteristics may interfere with the self-perception of targeted individuals and in turn their views of others and the world (Rehman & Hanley, 2021).

Islam is one of the major religions in the world (Lipka, 2017) and its followers spread worldwide yet Muslims continue to be subjected to various subtle and overt forms of Islamophobia (Conway, 1997). It appears to be reflected not just on an individual level but also across social, structural and political contexts (Nadal et al., 2012). Many studies and reports have discoursed the rise in discrimination and hate crimes towards Muslims predominantly since the 9/11 attacks and the wars on terror (Rippy & Newman, 2008). Some of the more implicit forms of Islamophobia can be seen in the form of racist immigration policies, banning of religious practices, increased surveillance and ethnic profiling of Muslims (Naderi, 2018). Given the widespread anti-Islamic sentiments, Muslims often report feeling fearful and apprehensive for their own safety and the safety of their loved ones especially following media reports of violence perpetrated by those identified as Muslims (Haque et al., 2019).

The mass media is also being increasingly recognised as a prominent source for promoting Islamophobic hate (Hashmi et al., 2020). It appears that misrepresentations that categorise Muslim men as extremists and terrorists and Muslim women as backward and oppressed (Aydin & Hammer, 2010) contribute to Islamophobic attitudes. More recently there have also been some alternate representations in the popular media that identify Muslims as victims rather than perpetrators (only) of violence and hate. Alsultany (2012) highlighted how such simplistic and sympathetic media depictions of Muslims and Islam are unproductive in

challenging negative stereotypes as they appear to reinforce biases that can be disempowering (Rehman & Hanley, 2021).

The internet and the social media are an infinite source of valuable information but unfortunately also provide a fast and cost effective route for disseminating hatred and violence (Guiora & Park, 2017). Despite its increasing influence in people's lives, literature on Muslim experiences of Islamophobia and hate (both implicit and explicit) on social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in the last two decades has been limited (Copsey et al., 2013; Hashmi et al., 2020). Some of the recent literature (however still limited in its scope) suggests the existence of negative biases across the social media similar to the ones found in mainstream media (Evolvi, 2018). Several themes in a qualitative examination of 349 Facebook posts conducted by Oboler (2016) found Muslims being represented as terrorists and rapists, posing a significant threat to western values and lifestyle. Relatedly, Awan (2016) in collecting and categorising messages representing online hate and abuse found that a large proportion of hate messages were directed towards Islam and its followers. As part of the study, 500 Twitter messages also known as 'tweets' (between January 2013 and April 2014) were analysed. The findings revealed a recurrence of terms such as: 'terrorist, pig, scum, pedo and yusrats' to identify Muslims.

Similar to Twitter, Facebook also continues to host a significant amount of discriminatory and hateful comments towards Muslims and Islam. Ben-David and Fernández (2016) in a multimodal (longitudinal) content and network analysis of data from Facebook pages belonging to seven Spanish far-right political parties (from 2009 and 2013) indicated that far-right political parties in Spain used social media platforms such as Facebook to spread

discrimination and hate amongst their followers. The study also concluded how hateful and often racist social media commentary appeared to be internalised in the form of racist beliefs, which manifested as hateful comments and abuse (both online and offline).

When understanding Islamophobia and hate, it is important to consider how Muslims appear to be identified as a homogenous group with little distinction between the beliefs, practices and experiences of individual followers. Nadal et al. (2012) described this notion as an “assumption of religious homogeneity” (p.24) which, in their view varies from stereotyping. It means that people may have knowledge of others’ beliefs and practices but assume these to be static and true for all members of the group. In a review of public health literature, Haque et al. (2019) found how public health services were guilty of homogenising the Muslim Identity (Al Wazni, 2015). Relatedly, a study carried out by Abu-Ras and Abu-Bader (2008) revealed that Muslim families were being increasingly questioned and reported to local authorities over suspicions of child abuse. Therefore, it becomes apparent how homogenised identities of Muslims are generated, maintained and experienced across a range of settings. Arguably, such processes of homogenisation often have wide-ranging psychosocial and political implications for the wellbeing of Muslims, particularly those constituting minority groups in the West (Rehman & Hanley, 2021).

Appearance and attire are other (at times visible) aspects of Muslim identity that seem to feature negatively in the media and in the minds of the general public. They are often viewed as a source of not just curiosity but also concern amongst Non-Muslim Western populations (Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Muslims continually report experiences of discriminatory and racial remarks in regards to their appearance and attire particularly when it identifies them as ‘visibly Muslim’ (e.g. the presence of a veil, beard etc.). Nadal et al. (2010) suggested how

people commonly believe (consciously and subconsciously) that there is something strange or inherently ‘wrong’ about the way people from different cultural and religious groups appear and dress. This might be linked to an expectation to acculturate from people who perceive themselves to be the host culture. In a study conducted by Haque et al. (2019) several female participants alluded to their experiences of receiving stares from people when they wore their Muslim veils or ‘hijabs’ in public. Participants further described how they felt people’s stares were intended to communicate expressions of apprehension with the way they appeared (Rehman & Hanley, 2021).

2.4 Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Higher Education (HE)

Religion, a key characteristic that defines an individual’s identity has received widespread interest and attention in the context of higher education (Astin et al., 2005). In the last few decades several authors in the field have argued its importance for recent generations of university students (Garza & Herringer, 1987; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Brown & Jones, 2013) Brown and Jones (2013) conducted a survey with 153 students (from varying ethnic backgrounds) at a higher education institution in the South of England. The survey findings revealed that 49 of the students had experienced some form of verbal and/or physical abuse. Such experiences appeared to invoke feelings of anger, sadness, disappointment for targeted individuals (Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006).

Despite vast academic research focusing on the various complexities within social systems and structures, there is a dearth of literature on religious minority students’ experiences of spatial and interpersonal relations within universities (Hopkins, 2011). The recent socio-political climate and foreign policies across western countries have aroused significant

national and international interest in specific religious communities (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Within social and academic contexts, several theories and frameworks, have explored student attributes in relation to retention and integration, however even some of the prominent ones including Tinto's (1993) theory have received widespread criticism for failing to recognize important ethnic and cultural variables (Kuh & Love, 2000; Rendón et al., 2000). Tinto (1993) argued that in order for students to become integrated into their educational systems they must move beyond their prior attributes including early schooling, family background and cultural traditions. Later authors (e.g. Guiffrida, 2006; Seggie & Sanford, 2010) found this approach to be problematic. They asserted how such a separation from culture and traditional values emerging from euro-centrist, predominantly white institutions could potentially be harmful to the interests of minority ethnic and religious students (Seggie & Sanford, 2010).

Many parents world over are of the view that university education is essential particularly to increasing their children's social mobility (Reay et al., 2005; Bathmaker et al., 2016). Recent literature from western countries such as the U.K. and Australia have found students from diverse ethnic and economic backgrounds to be under-represented at several of their prestigious universities (Modood, 2012; Boliver, 2016; Mirza & Meeto, 2018). In addition, these research findings also suggest minority ethnic students' employment prospects and outcomes to be representative of similar disadvantage when compared to their white counterparts. Some authors have stressed the importance of class in this equation. They argue that middle-class families with adequate finances are often better placed to provide their children with adequate resources that enable them to maximise the educational opportunities afforded to them (Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Reay et al., 2005). Contrarily, working-class

families with access to limited resources often struggle to provide their children with the relevant support (financial and/or other), required to pursue higher education (Al-deen, 2019).

2.4.1 Muslim Students on Western University Campuses

Several studies, most of which have been conducted in the US, have focused on the effects of campus climate on students (e.g. Cabrera et al., 1999; Morrow et al., 2000; Edirisooriya & Mclean, 2003). Such studies have facilitated an increased awareness of the common issues and challenges experienced by ethnic minority students particularly with regards to integration on western campuses. They also highlight student experiences of discrimination and racial harassment in classrooms as well as student residences, racial harassment as well as prejudice from faculty members and more broadly campus administrations (Johnson, 2003). Research in the area has found similar experiences for international students, with many reporting feelings of exclusion and loneliness (Ho et al., 2004; Sawir et al., 2008; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). However, there remains a need for an in depth understanding of religious students' experiences within western higher education settings.

Religion in research has mostly been discussed in relation to discourses that view religiosity as problematic and extreme particularly with regards to the religion of Islam (Stevenson, 2013). In recent times, interest in Islam and its followers has increased across western university campuses and Muslim students as a result appear more visible. Nevertheless, within higher education research little attention has been given to understanding the unique needs and experiences of Muslim students on university campuses (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). This is quite puzzling particularly given the rise in terrorists attacks (following the 9/11

incident) and the subsequent increase in Islamophobic and xenophobic sentiments across western democracies (Haddad, 2001; Rockenbach et al., 2017).

A study conducted by Hopkins (2011) examined narratives of 29 students (self-identified as Muslims) attending higher education in Britain. The findings revealed the “multiple and contradictory discourses that students utilise, which simultaneously construct the university campus as tolerant and diverse and as discriminatory and exclusionary” (p.1). The narratives of Muslim students also highlighted concerns regarding the global political climate, their role in policy making, both nationally and internationally and the resultant impact on campus life. Major events such as 9/11, 7/7 were also perceived by many Muslim students as having negative implications for their life on campus (Hopkins, 2011).

Past literature pertaining to ethnic minorities (particularly South Asians) in Britain has continually indicated that obtaining higher education and acquiring academic qualifications is greatly valued (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). The percentage of Muslim students (from South Asian and other ethnicities) within UK higher education institutions is gradually increasing which is reflective of patterns of inward migration over the past sixty years, with approximately sixty percent of all Muslim students tracing their ethnic roots to South Asia (Guest et al., 2018). When comparing the experiences of male and female students, female students have been found to be more susceptible to verbal abuse, discrimination and harassment, which in turn makes campus life more challenging for them (Morris, 2003; Al-deen, 2019). Tyrer and Ahmad (2006) in their study with Muslim women in Britain found how a lack of support from professors made it difficult for them to settle into life as a university student (Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Muslim women, particularly from Pakistani and

Bangladeshi backgrounds are also relatively under-represented as compared to those from other South Asian backgrounds. This has led some authors to believe that factors such as culture and religion (including the wearing of veils) alongside constraints stemming from patriarchy may restrict or limit the academic and economic participation of Muslim women (Tyrer & Ahmad, 2006; Hussain & Bagguley, 2013).

Existing research on western higher education campuses asserts the importance of friendships across diverse ethnic and religious groups in challenging negative pre-understandings associated with certain ethnic and religious identities. A study conducted by Putnam and Campbell (2010) on US campuses suggests religious diversity amongst friendship groups to result in an improvement of attitudes regarding religious groups in general (Rockenbach et al., 2017). Past research also suggests that friendships and/or interaction with students of one minority group (seen as an out-group) may even lead to positive changes in attitudes towards other minoritised ethnic and religious groups (Eller & Abrams, 2004; Bowman & Griffin, 2012). Such meaningful exchanges may also facilitate greater understanding of diverse cultures and religions and in turn allow the creation and perpetuation of more positive perceptions of those from wide ranging ethnic and religious groups (Rockenbach & Mayhew, 2013; Rockenbach et al., 2017).

Similarly, authors in the field have stressed the importance of interfaith exchanges between Muslim and non-Muslim students to demystify unhelpful preconceptions regarding Muslims and Islam (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Muslim students, however, are often less comfortable in discussing their religion as compared to their non-Muslim counterparts (Astin et al., 2005; Rockenbach et al., 2017). This appears to limit opportunities for interfaith exchanges that

could deconstruct some of the common misperceptions regarding Islam. Such a resistance may be linked to prevailing discourses that view religiosity on campus, as problematic.

2.5 Rationale and Research Questions

The literature reviewed above has consistently indicated a dominance of negative media representations associated with Muslims and Islam. Despite an abundance of literature on western media representations of Muslims and Islam, research focusing on such representations within the social media (in specific) remains limited. Some recent studies (reviewed earlier) have examined representations of Muslims and Islam across social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and more recently Instagram. However, social media as a whole has received little attention. This could be due to methodological constraints in handling the vast and unstructured nature of content available on the social media.

Several studies included in the current review of literature, have found negative portrayals of Muslims in the media to facilitate the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes that position Muslims as an outgroup to be feared and tolerated. Many studies reviewed have utilised understandings of racialisation and othering in stigmatisation and marginalisation of Muslim minorities. The implications of such processes of othering for the health and wellbeing (physical and psychosocial), however, remain to be fully understood. As indicated in this review, Muslims' experiences of racism and Islamophobia have received widespread attention within academic literature. However, literature pertaining to the more implicit and insidious forms of racisms often identified as 'microaggressions' (racial and religious) within

the context of social media and their associated psychosocial implications remain largely unexplored.

As highlighted, widespread experiences of discrimination and racism amongst ethnic and religious minorities are also well documented within academic literature. A variety of contexts have been considered across a range of disciplines to examine Muslims experiences of racism, Islamophobia and hate (both implicit and explicit). Such experiences have also received some attention in the context of western higher education. Much of this literature, however, focuses on the negative experiences of Muslim students often associated with difficulties in integration and inclusion. Despite the existence of literature on experiences of Muslim HE students on western university campuses, experiences of Pakistani Muslim students (focusing on their multiple intersecting identities) remain largely understudied.

This study therefore aims to bridge the gaps highlighted above through an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and experiences of Pakistani Muslim higher education students with regards to the dominant social media depictions of Muslims and Islam. It aims to examine the role such representations may have in creating racialised categories that receive negative attention across western societies. It further seeks to explore how these representations may be relevant to the lived experience of Pakistani Muslim HE students in Britain. The study also hopes to make a useful contribution to existing literature by analysing the role social media may have in forming perceptions and in turn attitudes towards Muslims. Another key aim of the study is to encourage practitioners and researchers in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy to widen their understanding of diverse cultural and/or religious identities. This understanding may in turn contribute towards raising awareness

(through social justice efforts) and providing support for minoritised ethnic and religious communities.

The aims and rationale highlighted above guided the development of the following research questions and informed other methodological decisions (including epistemological positioning and choice of analysis).

1. How do Pakistani Muslim higher education students in Britain view the dominant social media representations of Muslims and Islam?
2. How may the social media portrayals of Muslims and Islam be relevant to the lived experience of Pakistani Muslim higher education students in Britain?

A detailed discussion of the research questions is presented in Chapter 5 of this thesis.

Reflections: Throughout this review process, I have been acutely aware of my personal proximity with the topic of study and similarities with the participant group (ethnicity/religion) and its potential to influence the selection of presented studies. To address this, I have continually utilised Heidegger's (2010) conceptualisation of fore understandings of phenomena to reflexively consider my own personal subjectivities particularly those related to aspects of my identity and positionality on the issues presented. I have also attempted to bracket (through reflexive journaling) my own responses to the material reviewed in this chapter and its potential to influence the interpretive process.

2.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have reviewed existing literature on various aspects pertaining to racialised representations of Muslims and Islam in the media and their implications across a variety of contexts. I have aimed to present extant research in a coherent, critical and reflexive manner. Firstly, race and religion in the media were considered more broadly. The influence of the media in the perpetuation of problematic discourses pertaining to issues of race and religion were highlighted. Several studies examining the largely negative western media constructions of Muslims and Islam across traditional media and social media were critically examined. An intersectional lens was used to conceptualise the constructions that position Muslims as the ‘other’. Research literature examining the relevance of various forms of othering leading to discrimination, racism and Islamophobia in relation to the wellbeing of targeted groups was presented. This debate was then contextualised within western higher education. A range of discourses pertaining to Muslim students’ experiences of western university campuses were highlighted. Following this detailed review of relevant literature certain gaps were identified, which in turn led to the refinement of the study aims and rationale. Finally, the research questions were presented with a concluding reflexive statement considering aspects of my personal identity and positionality.

Chapter 3: Methodology

‘Methodology’ can be described as the key set of principles and processes employed by researchers to approach a topic of study (Bowker et al., 1978). In keeping with the aims and objectives of this study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was selected as the methodological approach. IPA is a qualitative methodology introduced towards the end of the 20th century (Smith, 1996). Contrary to quantitative methodologies with their objective view of reality, qualitative methodologies aim to represent reality as being socially constructed and reliant on subjective/inter-subjective processes that inform the experiences of human beings (Patton, 2002).

The initial sections of this chapter present a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of the IPA approach. The epistemological influences informing the study are explored and the research design introduced. The methodological rationale for selecting IPA is also explained. Subsequently, the process of recruitment and detailed introduction to the research participants is presented. Latter sections focus on aspects of data generation, data analysis, trustworthiness and reflexivity. Lastly, the ethical considerations for undertaking the study are considered.

3.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA, the research methodology adopted for this study focuses on disentangling the relationship between what people think, do and say (Smith & Eatough, 2007). It draws on philosophical concepts derived from Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Schleiermacher, Sartre and Gadamer (Smith et al., 2009). Its protagonists describe it as a study of human lived experience underpinned by principles of phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Larkin et al., 2006; Shinebourne, 2011). Within the discipline of psychology, unlike

quantitative approaches IPA offers an in-depth understanding of human lived experience “by looking in detail at how individuals talk about the stressful situations they face, how they deal with them and by close consideration of the meanings they attach to them” (Smith, 1996, p.270).

IPA is particularly interested in this process of meaning making, which it views as a shared endeavour between researchers and participants; with the aim of arriving at a co-constructed understanding of phenomena experienced by the participants. These ideas informed the conceptualisation and process of the study and allowed myself (as the researcher) and the participants to develop a co-constructed understanding of how they experience social media representations of Muslims and Islam. This was achieved through a collaborative process of sense making facilitated by open communication and interpretation, between myself and the participants.

3.1.1 Phenomenology

The first major underpinning of IPA theory is phenomenology. Phenomenology can be described as the study of phenomena as experienced by people (von Eckartsberg, 1998). It relies on how people make sense of the world; their perceptions and experiences of the phenomena around them (Langdrige, 2007). IPA theory borrows ideas and perspectives of influential phenomenologists; Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer and Schleiermacher who emphasise the understanding of people as being embedded in the world by their unique ways of relating within their broader historical and socio-cultural contexts (Shinebourne, 2011).

IPA, and hence this study draws from these different perspectives in an endeavour to explore people's lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to these experiences. With that in mind, it focuses on Pakistani Muslim HE students' perceptions and experiences of the world with regards to their religious affiliation and its representation. It draws on Heidegger's understandings of phenomenology to understand the lived experience of the participant group in relation to others and the world. 'Lived experience' can be understood as a representation of one's choices and experiences and the knowledge one gains from these (Chandler & Munday, 2011). According to Heidegger, we make sense of our 'lived experience' through processes of inter-relatedness with others (Heidegger, 2010). Similarly, Larkin et al. (2006) view relatedness of the self to the world as a central part of human lived experience.

Heidegger's concept of the individual as forever embedded within worldly contexts and the notion of inter-subjectivity (Smith et al., 2009) are also of great relevance to this study. Inter-subjectivity can be understood as being inseparable from 'experience' and is particularly relevant to understanding individual experience in relation to others and others' experiences which are not directly visible to the individual (Gallagher, 2019). This was evident in my interviews with Pakistani Muslim HE students who all made references to other Muslims' experiences to make sense of their own. These are presented and discussed in latter sections of this thesis (see Chapters 4 and 5).

3.1.2 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, the theory and methodology of interpretation is another key underpinning of IPA philosophy. It originated in 17th century as a means for interpreting biblical and classical texts; to uncover the hidden meanings within them (Eberhart & Pieper, 1994). Heidegger (2010) purported hermeneutics and phenomenology to be linked within a philosophical

methodology, which he referred to as 'hermeneutic phenomenology'. He viewed this philosophical approach as a means to bring forth the meaning of being a 'human being' that he proclaimed previous reductionist philosophical approaches had discounted (Plager, 1994). Heidegger's view here suggests the importance of meaning-making in developing a holistic understanding of human lived experience.

IPA methodology combines elements pertaining to psychology and language, which enable one to understand the text itself and the authors propositions based on the text (Eberhart & Pieper, 1994). IPA researchers are therefore encouraged to gain an awareness of their prior knowledge and assumptions and how these may influence their interpretations of what is presented to them. To describe this phenomenon, Heidegger in 'Being and Time' puts forth the concept of 'fore-conception' (i.e. past experiences, pre-held beliefs, assumptions and pre-suppositions) and its significance in the processes of interpretation and meaning-making (Heidegger, 2010). This understanding of fore conception was also of particular importance to this study. It allowed me to engage in a process of self-reflection in an effort to bracket my pre-conceived notions and prior understandings of the phenomena under study. Smith et al. (2009), however, argued how such a process of 'bracketing' could only be partially attained.

IPA further proposes a 'double hermeneutic', a process that involves participants making sense of their perceptions and experiences of/with others and their world whilst the researcher is involved in making sense of the participant's process of sense-making (Smith, 2004). Employing a 'double-hermeneutic' allowed me to engage in a reflexive, interpretative process which facilitated the discovery of the meanings and associations hidden within the text. Heidegger (2010) believed that engaging with the text in this manner allowed the

researcher to facilitate the appearing of phenomena and their meanings, which may otherwise be unknown.

Another related concept of hermeneutic theory is the ‘hermeneutic circle’, “a cyclical process involving continual sense-making until the events themselves and their interpretation are fully in agreement” (Gabriel, 1980, p.52). The hermeneutic circle is therefore concerned with the relationship between the part and the whole at a series of levels and understands analysis as dynamic and non-linear. In keeping with hermeneutic theory, IPA views data analysis as an iterative process whereby the researcher’s relationship to the data is constantly shifting as the process of going backward and forward through the data continues (Smith et al., 2009). As the researcher of this study, I engaged in such a process of data analysis which involved constant revisiting of the text and my interpretations of it.

3.1.3 Idiography

The third key underpinning of IPA is idiography, which relates to the ‘particular’ instead of the ‘general’, a key distinction from the more commonly utilised nomothetic approaches. The terms ‘idiographic’ and ‘nomothetic’ were first described in the late 19th century in the writings of German philosopher Wilhelm Windelband (1998). The terms were later introduced in English language by Gordon Allport who described ‘nomothetic’ knowledge as knowledge pertaining to the ‘general’ and ‘idiographic’ knowledge as knowledge of objects, events and attitudes pertaining to the ‘particular’ (Pelham, 1993; Krauss, 2008). Unlike nomothetic approaches that focus on aggregated data, an idiographic approach aims towards developing in-depth understanding of individual behaviour which may then be applied across groups and populations (Smith, 1995).

Proponents of IPA advocate the importance of single case studies. They emphasise researchers to commit to developing a detailed understanding of the lived experience of phenomena from the perspective of the individual within their unique contexts (Smith, 1995). This commitment to understanding the idiosyncrasies of human behaviour fits with IPA's methodological rationale for case studies. Furthermore, detailed examination of a single case or a small group of cases results in rich narratives of individual experiences that allow a thorough analytic process (Smith, 2011) and brings us closer to the salient elements of a shared commonality (Smith, 2004; Shinebourne, 2011) .

Thus, by adopting an IPA approach, I hoped to gain an awareness into the subjective reality of individual participants, which constituted their perceptions and experiences based on the representations of their religion in the social media. In accordance with IPA methodology (Smith et al., 2009), the sample size of the study was small (six participants in total). This allows a detailed analysis of specific occurrences of phenomena as experienced by individual participants. The process of analysis in this type of research is initiated by a 'micro-analysis' (Smith, 2011) with each individual case followed by an examination of the elements which are similar and different across all cases. The understandings gained through reflection and meaning-making in the process highlighted were then utilised to arrive at detailed understandings of common experience (Shinebourne, 2011).

3.2 Ontology and Epistemology

In order to select the methodological approach appropriate for an inquiry, the philosophical stance must first be determined. This requires the researcher to reflect on fundamental philosophical questions that relate to how one can examine and understand the social world

(Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These questions pertain to ontology and epistemology. Ontology is concerned with how the researcher views reality to understand their world. Epistemology refers to “the ways of knowing and learning about the world” (Ormston et al., 2014, p.6).

This IPA study assumes a critical realist philosophical stance. Given its phenomenological and hermeneutic underpinnings, IPA methodology is well aligned with the principles of critical realism (Reid et al., 2005; Finlay, 2006), which make it suitable for this examination. Critical Realism (CR) is a philosophy of science, which emerged in the late 20th century within the works of Bhaskar (1978), the British philosopher who described it as a comprehensible philosophical language (Danermark et al., 2002). It originated as an alternative to the existing positivist and relativist ideas (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Critical realists such as Collier (1994), Archer (1995) and Lawson (1997) furthered the understandings and applications of the CR approach, to a variety of disciplines (Fletcher, 2017). They asserted the existence of a reality independent of individual awareness and how our knowledge of that reality is socially constructed (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2010). This is in accordance with the discipline of counselling psychology, which emphasises the importance of people’s ‘lived experience’ and endeavours to understand their inner worlds and subjective meanings; whilst at the same time acknowledging the intersubjective processes that facilitate understanding of this reality. I therefore consider critical realism to be a useful philosophical position to explore how Pakistani Muslim students in the U.K. perceive and experience social media portrayals of their religion and how it implicates their lives.

CR can be seen to parallel the constructivist critique of positivist/realist perspectives that view reality as being reduced to what can be known empirically through experiments

(Bhaskar, 1998) whilst also objecting to relativist paradigms that interpret reality as being wholly constructed by human awareness or discourse (Fletcher, 2017). Notwithstanding, CR accepts the existence of an objective world where actual events occur but recognizes that knowledge of this world is socially constructed. It further suggests that these events are a result of real mechanisms often hidden from the researcher (Fletcher, 2017). IPA, the method of analysis utilised for this study is therefore compatible with critical realist epistemology (Reid et al., 2005; Finlay, 2006). Although this research was not aimed at identifying an objective truth, it offers valuable insights into the perspectives of the participants and reveal information pertaining to social media's role in forming perceptions about Muslims and Islam.

CR further assumes reality to consist of several domains. It involves a shift from epistemology to ontology and within ontology a shift from events to mechanisms. This means focusing attention on what causes or generates events (mechanisms) and not just the observable events (Danermark et al., 2002). The purpose of this research was to construct a shared understanding of these events and mechanisms through discourse between myself and participants. Such a process allows the researcher not just to observe the emerging of themes but to actively engage with participants in discovering those themes (Sismondo, 1993; Pringle et al., 2011).

Furthermore, IPA with its phenomenological origins demonstrates a strong commitment to hearing and understanding individual perceptions and experiences both personal and contextual. With that in mind, the study acknowledges the existence of an 'external reality' and aims to understand how participants make sense of this reality in varying contexts. The

latter alludes to the dimension of reality that is constructed intersubjectively through social and experiential mechanisms (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). This is also supported by IPA's commitment to hermeneutic thinking which is critical of the idea that knowledge of phenomena can be gained outside of an interpretive process (Larkin et al., 2006). Therefore in keeping with its philosophical rationale, the study subscribes to a critical realist perspective, which also views our access to knowledge to be socially constructed (Willig, 2008).

3.3 Design

In an attempt to explore participants' experiences of the phenomenon, the study employed a qualitative research design using inductive reasoning. Qualitative approaches allow researchers to develop idiographic understandings of people's perceptions and experiences and what this means for them in their unique contexts (Bryman, 1992). Qualitative researchers are concerned with the subjective experience of human beings in real life contexts instead of lab based scientific experimentation. The role of a qualitative researcher is to develop an understanding of phenomena and how participants make sense of and experience these phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). This was an important consideration for the study and informed the rationale for selecting an IPA methodology. Qualitative approaches also have a particular significance within psychological research as they allow researchers to explore and understand participants feelings and/or reflections based on their experiences (Biggerstaff, 2012). A qualitative approach therefore seemed most relevant to this research as it allows an in-depth exploration and examination of participants' 'individual experience' and the meanings they ascribe to it (Willig, 2008).

In this study an inductive approach, also known as inductive reasoning was utilised to systematically examine the qualitative data gathered. An inductive approach involves the search for dominant patterns within the data that in turn facilitate the development of theories and concepts (Bernard, 2002). Researchers derive these concepts from the data, through an interpretative process. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), “The researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data” (p. 12). The use of an inductive approach helps the researcher in developing a structure for the core processes that emerge from the data without the limitations of structured methodologies (Thomas, 2006). Such a ‘bottom-up’ approach to examining data and the meanings within it is in line with the aims of this study. It also allows the researcher in making observations to understand, interpret and describe a representation for the phenomenon under study (Lodico et al., 2010).

3.3.1 Methodological Rationale

Multiple factors were considered as part of the rationale for selecting IPA over other types of qualitative methodologies. First and the foremost what informed this decision were the philosophical underpinnings of IPA. IPA emphasises the importance of human lived experience from an idiographic standpoint. In addition to this, it proposes a ‘double hermeneutic’ whereby participants are engaged in a process of making sense of their experiences and the researcher interprets this process of sense-making (Smith, 2004). Given my similarities with the participant group, it was important to carefully consider and bracket any pre-conceived ideas or prior experiences (on my part) of the phenomenon under study. Awareness of the ‘double hermeneutic’ supplemented by continual reflexive journaling facilitated this process.

Another important consideration in qualitative research is the researcher's background and level of competence with regards to qualitative approaches. According to Lennie and West (2010) researchers in the discipline of counselling psychology when selecting methodologies are often guided by their familiarity and level of competence in those research methods. Hence, my familiarity with IPA was another factor that informed the decision to use it as the methodological approach for an exploratory study of this nature.

When selecting the methodological approach for this study, Grounded Theory and Thematic Analysis (TA) were also been considered. Grounded theory is often viewed more as a sociological approach (Willig, 2008). It utilises larger sample sizes and studies convergences between participants to provide wider conceptual ideas and explanations (Nunn, 2009). IPA however is more psychological in nature. It utilises smaller, homogenous samples to generate idiographic accounts of human lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). This was more aligned with the aims and questions of this study.

Thematic analysis can be described as 'an umbrella term' used to describe various qualitative approaches aimed at recognising patterns within qualitative data (Braun et al., 2019). A reflexive version of TA proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019) was also considered as a methodological option for this study particularly as it suits a range of inquiries pertaining to people's experiences. However, given that the focus of this study is on gaining an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and realities to make sense of a specific phenomenon, an IPA methodology was deemed as the most suitable methodological approach (McLeod, 2011).

In addition to this, IPA as a qualitative research approach allows an in-depth examination of people's subjective experiences and perceptions. It accepts that the engagement of the researcher with data from the participants has an interpretative quality (Potter, 1996) and assumes an epistemological standpoint through which it becomes possible to acknowledge and understand the meanings participants assign to their subjective feelings and inner cognitive experience (Biggerstaff, 2012). This view is compatible with a critical realist perspective (Reid et al., 2005; Finlay, 2006) and in accordance with the methodological and epistemological foundations of this study. It therefore allowed me the opportunity for an in depth exploration of Pakistani HE students 'subjective experiences' of social media portrayals pertaining to their religion, and their understanding of these experiences.

3.4 Recruitment Process

This study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of Pakistani Muslim HE students. It employs an IPA methodology, which provides a strong rationale for the inclusion of a small, homogenous sample. Pre-determined inclusion/exclusion criteria facilitated the recruitment of a purposive sample. In IPA studies a sample size between three and six participants is considered sufficient to provide "meaningful points of similarity and difference between participants but not so many that one is in danger of being overwhelmed by the amount of data gathered" (Smith et al., 2009, p.51) . Similarly, Morrow (2005) argued that the validity of data gathered through qualitative methods does not depend on how large the sample size is but instead on the depth and richness embedded within the data and its quality. With that in mind, six participants who self-identified as being Pakistani/British Pakistani, Muslim and HE student were recruited.

Participants were recruited using prior contacts within the Pakistani community (including representatives of Pakistani students' societies). The recruitment advertisement (see Appendix 1) was sent to relevant contacts who shared it within their social circles. Individuals who had expressed an interest to participate were emailed a copy of the 'participant information sheet' (see Appendix 4) and 'consent form' (see Appendix 6). Participant recruitment was based on self-selection. The aim of achieving a homogenous sample with some variability in gender and geographic location informed the selection process.

3.4.1 Sampling Framework

The participants for the study were selected purposively. Purposive sampling involves choosing research participants based on the qualities they possess. It also relies on careful identification and selection of individuals or groups who are familiar or experienced with the phenomenon under study (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2015). In qualitative research, purposive sampling is used to identify and select "information-rich cases for the most proper utilization of available resources" (Etikan et al., 2016, p.2). The sample recruited for this study, included three male and three female participants who self-identified as Pakistani/British Pakistani, Muslim, attending higher education (in the UK) and users of the social media. Further information on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria is presented in Table 1.

3.4.2 Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Participants for the study were recruited at varying points from February to May 2020. Certain inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. These criteria were developed in order to recruit a sample that facilitated the research process and fit the methodology and research

questions. As the researcher of the study, I considered it useful to have a sample of both male and female participants with some variability in their geographical locations. Three male and three female participants pursuing undergraduate study in universities in the North and South of England were included.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for participant recruitment

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pakistani/British Pakistani - U.K. citizenship/Indefinite leave to remain in the U.K. - Muslim - Undergraduate student (in a U.K. based university) - Social media user 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International students/ Temporary residents in the U.K.

3.4.3 Sample demographics

As stated earlier, three male and three female participants were recruited for participation in the study. At the time of recruitment and data collection all participants were enrolled on HE undergraduate level programmes of study at universities in the U.K. Certain variations such as those pertaining to gender and geographical location were deliberately included to an otherwise homogenous participant group. In IPA studies the use of homogenous samples is encouraged as it produces a richer, more detailed understanding of “particular persons and

their responses to a specific situation” (Smith et al., 2009; p. 51) or phenomenon.

Participants' ages ranged between 20 and 25 years. Five out of the six participants were born in the U.K. One of the participants was born in Pakistan and had relocated to the U.K. in their primary school years. All participants identified themselves as British Pakistani (and Muslim) and recognised English as their first language. Participant demographics relevant to the study are illustrated in Table 2. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for anonymity.

Table 2: Sample demographic information

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Geographical region (hometown)	Geographical region (university campus)
Mahnoor	F	20-25	North West	North West
Qamar	M	20-25	South East	South East
Zahra	F	20-25	North West	South East
Ahmed	M	20-25	South East	South East
Rahima	F	20-25	West Midlands	North West
Omair	M	20-25	South East	North West

3.5 The Participants

3.5.1 Mahnoor

Mahnoor is a British Pakistani woman in her early 20's. She was born in the U.K. to Pakistani parents. Mahnoor lives and studies in a diverse community in the North West region of England. She is currently completing undergraduate education. Mahnoor describes herself as being surrounded by relatives and friends who share the same ethnicity and religion as her. Mahnoor was raised with Islamic traditions passed on from her parents. She wears a head covering as a representation of her faith, religious values and affiliation. Mahnoor accesses a range of social media on a daily basis. These include apps such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter. She uses these apps to network with her friends and family and to follow famous people of interest to her. She uses Twitter in particular to access news on current affairs. In Mahnoor's view, the social media represents Muslims and Islam both negatively and positively.

3.5.2 Qamar

Qamar is a British Pakistani man in his early 20's. He was born and raised in the South East of England in an area that was predominantly white middle class. His parents originate from Pakistan and identify themselves as Muslims. Qamar is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree at a university in the South of England. Qamar considers 'being British' a strong part of his identity. He also maintains a strong connection with his Islamic values and beliefs.

Over the years, Qamar has embedded himself within the Muslim community and has found the diverse environment in his university to further this process. Qamar has a beard which he views as being indicative of his religious affiliation. Qamar uses a range of social media. He spends his time on apps such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook. He uses

these apps to stay in touch with family and friends and to follow pages/posts that interest him. Qamar has a great love for music. He uses social media (such as Instagram) to share videos of himself playing the piano. Qamar acknowledges social media's power in influencing people's perceptions about Muslims and Islam.

3.5.3 Zahra

Zahra is a British Pakistani woman in her 20's. She was born in the U.K. to Pakistani parents but relocated to Pakistan shortly after. She returned to the U.K. with her family in her mid-teens. Zahra resided with her parents in the North East of England up until she moved out for university. She is currently pursuing an undergraduate degree. Zahra and her parents identify themselves as Muslims. Zahra does not identify herself as a staunch Muslim, however she holds dear her Islamic traditions (fasting in Ramadan, celebrating Eid etc.). Zahra describes her social circle as being diverse, with people from various ethnicities and religious beliefs. She likes to wear western outfits and going out with her friends. Zahra has chosen to drink (Alcohol) socially in the past and does not judge other Muslims who do so. Zahra uses social media such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and Twitter on a daily basis. She uses most of these apps for staying in contact with friends/family, viewing posts, pictures and pages of interest to her. She uses Twitter to follow news and to stay updated on the views and opinions of the people she follows. Zahra sees social media as a source of negative and positive representations of Muslims and Islam.

3.5.4 Ahmed

Ahmed is a British Pakistani man in his 20's. He was born in the South of England to Pakistani parents. Ahmed identifies himself as Muslim and has been raised with Pakistani

values, beliefs and traditions. He is currently attaining an undergraduate degree at a university in the South of England. Ahmed has a beard and identifies it as a representation of his Islamic values. Ahmed uses social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. He uses Facebook and Snapchat to stay connected and communicate with people he knows. Ahmed described Instagram as a means of following pages that align with his interests. Ahmed finds the social media to be a powerful means of informing people's misperceptions about Muslims and Islam.

3.5.5 Rahima

Rahima is a British Pakistani woman in her 20's. She was born in Pakistan and relocated to Britain at age 3 years old with her parents. She is a dual national of Pakistan and Britain. Rahima lived with her family in the West Midlands region of England prior to starting university in the North West of the country. She is currently completing a degree at the undergraduate level. Rahima has a diverse group of friends and enjoys taking part in social activities and events with them. In social gatherings, she uses her Islamic values to inform her choices and behaviours (such as choosing not to drink Alcohol etc.). Rahima accesses several forms of social media on a daily basis. She uses Instagram as a means of photo sharing and Facebook as a way of staying in touch with friends and family. She also uses LinkedIn for professional purposes and YouTube to watch videos of interest to her. Rahima views the social media as a vehicle of information sharing which leads people to form opinions about people and things (including Muslims and Islam).

3.5.6 Omais

Omais is a British Pakistani man in his 20's. He was born and raised in the South East of England. His parents originate from Pakistan and identify themselves as Muslims. Omais is presently attaining an undergraduate degree in the Northern region of England. Omais identifies as a first generation British. He has maintained close ties with his family in Pakistan whom he has visited frequently over the years. Omais uses a range of social media including, WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook. He uses these for their communicative functions that allow him to stay connected with his family and friends. Omais describes social media as a luxury in his life and his core means of communication with others. Omais also acknowledges the role social media plays in informing people's views of others (including Muslims) and the world.

3.6 Data generation

The data generation process was initiated following ethical approval from the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee (UREC). Prior to recruitment, each participant was provided a 'participant information sheet' (see Appendix 4) detailing the purpose of the study, interview protocol, data handling/storage and withdrawal procedure. Before conducting the interviews, I also signed a confidentiality agreement in relation to the data gathered (see Appendix 7). This was shared with each participant at the start of their interview. Once the recruitment process had been completed, interviews with each of the participants were scheduled. These took place between March and July 2020. Each participant was interviewed on a single occasion and the interviews lasted between (approximately) fifty-nine and eighty-seven minutes (see Appendix 10). The first interview was conducted in a pre-booked room at the University of Manchester premises. It was recorded using an encrypted audio-recorder authorised by the University of Manchester. Due

to the imposition of a nationwide lockdown (following a surge in Coronavirus infection rates), the five remaining interviews were conducted online (video enabled) via zoom. The audio record function was used. All recordings were later transferred to the University of Manchester Research Data Storage for later listening and transcribing.

3.6.1 Conducting Interviews

Interviewing is an information gathering technique central to qualitative research methods (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). This study utilised semi-structured interviewing to generate data. The schedule for the semi-structured interviews was compiled in line with guidance outlined by Smith et al. (2009). It consisted of questions associated with the topic of study (see Appendix 5). Although for semi-structured interviews a list of predetermined questions is used, they unfold in a non-formulaic conversation in which participants are allowed the opportunity to explore the issues they feel are relevant (Longhurst, 2000). This flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to adapt and deliver questions relevant to the topic of study and in doing so allows greater understanding of the research question (Fylan, 2005). In IPA research semi-structured interviewing is seen as the most widely used method of data generation (Reid et al., 2005). Smith et al. (2009) describe qualitative research as a “conversation with a purpose” (p.57). In keeping with this view, the interview questions were kept open-ended and expansive, aimed at generating a detailed account of participants’ experiences of the phenomenon. Prompts were used to encourage deeper reflection.

The questions in the interview schedule were adjusted (in some instances) to reflect the individual contexts of the participants. This contextual awareness allowed me to develop and demonstrate empathy which is seen to be particularly valuable in sensitive forms of interviewing (Ingham et al., 1999). According to Smith and Osborn (2007) semi-structured

interviews that move away from pre-determined schedules most likely lead to emergence of new ideas that may be particularly valuable for the research. Reid et al. (2005) advocate such an open-ended approach to interviewing and view it as an “integral part of the inductive principles of phenomenological research” (p. 65). It allowed me to use the interview schedule as a guide and explore the perceptions and experiences of participants without having to adhere to a rigid interview process.

In IPA studies “a verbatim record of the data collection event” (Smith et al., 2009, p.73) is required so that the transcripts are not just a collection of words across a sheet of paper (Green et al., 1997). IPA researchers are therefore encouraged to notice and note down relevant non-verbal communication (Bennett, 2015). Upon completion of each interview, I noted my personal reflections based on the process or any thoughts/feelings I had in relation to the participants verbatim in my reflexive journal (see appendix 16). Despite exercising reflexivity, researchers may still have the potential to influence the interviewing process (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). This situates researchers in a position of power even before the interview has taken place (Corbin & Morse, 2003). Employing a semi-structured interviewing technique therefore offered me an opportunity to minimise control and reduce the power differential that may be created with other more structured/rigid forms of interviewing.

3.7 Transcription

As the researcher of the study, the decision to transcribe interviews myself was informed by the methodological approach taken. IPA places a strong emphasis on immersion in the data, which should ideally begin at the stage of data generation and transcription. Only one of interviews could be conducted in person and was recorded using an encrypted audio recorder.

The rest of the five interviews were conducted via zoom (video enabled) however only audio recordings were taken. All audio files were encrypted and transferred to University of Manchester Research Data Storage. Although transcription of participant interviews is a time-consuming process, I did not outsource it and instead wrote all transcripts completely on my own. Every word spoken by the participants and myself (as the interviewer) was transcribed. Significant non-verbal occurrences (such as pauses; denoted by ...) in the narrative (Smith & Dunworth, 2003) and utterances such as 'hmm', 'umm', 'aah' were also included so that the transcripts reflected as true a picture of participants' verbatim, as possible.

Again, informed by the methodological underpinnings of IPA the transcripts were reviewed against the audio tapes, multiple times, to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. In addition to this, personal reflections based on the data were continuously recorded throughout the process. According to Morrow (2005) such repeated forays into the data ultimately lead the investigator to a deep understanding of all that comprises the 'data corpus' (body of data) and how its parts interrelate. To ensure participant anonymity, all names and other identifying information was anonymised. All participants were assigned pseudonyms and all signed consent forms, transcripts and audio files were encrypted and stored in separate folders.

3.8 Data analysis

As previously highlighted, IPA was used to analyse the data generated. IPA is an idiographic approach that examines qualitatively how individuals make sense of their experiences rather than searching for universal themes and realities across populations (Smith et al., 2009). As the researcher of the study, I was involved in such a process of analysis facilitated by my interpretations of the data generated. I sought regular supervision throughout the research process, from my research supervisor who has extensive prior experience in supervising

qualitative research. In addition to this, I continually referred to the guidelines proposed by Morrow (2005) to ensure the quality and integrity of the study.

In keeping with the idiographic elements of IPA methodology, particular emphasis was placed on in depth case-by-case analysis. This involved focusing on each transcript separately to develop a deep understanding of the participants verbatim and their processes of meaning making (Osborn & Smith, 2008). Each original transcript was formatted to include line numbers and margins on either side. The left-hand margin was used to record exploratory comments and the right hand margin for noting emerging themes. This process was conducted manually (see Appendix 11).

3.8.1 Reading and re-reading

In the initial phase of transcription, the audio recording was paused and listened back at various points. This was done to ensure the quality and accuracy of the transcript produced. Following the initial transcription, the text was read multiple times alongside the interview recordings. This allowed me to acquaint myself with the data and stay as close as possible to the participants verbatim (Smith et al., 2009). It further facilitated the noting down of any filler words or hesitation forms that were meaningful within the text. During this process of reading and re-reading of the transcripts whilst I was immersing myself into the data, I remained acutely aware of my own processes, thoughts and emotions. It was helpful to note these down in a chronological order in my reflexive journal as a form of bracketing (see Appendix 16). Reading and re-reading the interview transcripts may open the researcher to different interpretations of existing phenomena whilst also providing new substantial knowledge of the field (Kvale, 2008). Once all transcripts had been reviewed multiple times

and checked for any inconsistencies or inaccuracies, the final transcripts were prepared for initial noting/coding.

3.8.2 Initial noting

As I went through the data, I began to note and highlight parts of the transcript that captured my attention. IPA involves various layers of interpretation from descriptive and linguistic to conceptual and interrogatory (Smith, 2004). With that in mind, I reviewed the transcript multiple times and recorded my initial comments using coloured pens (Descriptive - Blue, Linguistic - Green, Conceptual - Red). These initial exploratory annotations; describing my understanding of the content, use of language as well as the more conceptual aspects (Smith et al., 2009) within the data were noted in the left hand margin.

For descriptive comments, I focused on the content of the participants' narrative. I remained open to noting down any initial comments which I felt were relevant whilst at the same time ensuring I stayed as close as possible to the original narrative. In terms of the linguistic commenting, I examined the language within the text. I gave particular attention to words, sentences, pauses and hesitations forms within the participants' narrative. In addition to this, I maintained a sensitivity to any emotive content or language that was expressed in the data. From these levels of exploratory commenting, I moved towards a higher stage of abstraction (Eatough et al., 2008) paying close attention to the more conceptual and interrogative aspects of the process.

3.8.3 Developing emergent themes

The data analysis process that is flexible and dynamic requires the researcher to go back to the interview data multiple times and to pay close attention to meaning-making throughout

the analysis (Osborn & Smith, 2008). Following on from the initial noting phase, I began the process of developing themes from the data generated. This involved re-reading of the transcript and the exploratory commentary in the left-hand margin. Drawing on both the original transcript and the initial noting, I began to identify certain key themes through a combination of descriptive and interpretative processes (Smith et al., 2009). These emergent themes were recorded in the right-hand margin alongside the original transcript and exploratory comments (see Appendix 11). They comprised phrases and statements which I felt best reflected the essence of the participant's experience.

3.8.4 Searching for connections across emergent themes

The emergent themes were noted chronologically and subjected to further examination (see Appendix 12). This involved focusing on developing connections between themes to create super-ordinate themes. Smith et al. (2009) highlighted how higher-order/super-ordinate themes can be developed through processes of abstraction (clustering similar themes together to develop a new theme), subsumption (identifying an emergent theme as a master theme that relates to multiple themes), polarization (exploring oppositional relationships within the themes); contextualization (identifying contextual aspects of the data); numeration (the frequency of occurrence of a theme within the data) and function (examining themes on the basis of their function in the data; Nunn, 2009). Most of these processes informed the development of master/super-ordinate themes. Firstly, related themes were put together to create higher order themes that captured the essence of the cluster (see Appendix 13). The emergent themes that related to multiple themes were identified and labelled as a master theme. Each of the master themes corresponded to quotes in the original transcripts.

3.8.5 Moving to the next case

The above procedure was carried out separately for each of the six transcripts. Given IPA's emphasis on idiographic understandings and the subjectivities of human lived experience, each participant was treated as a distinct entity (Smith & Eatough, 2007). The idiosyncrasies within each case were treated with respect. As the researcher of the study, I carefully examined each transcript on its own following the steps highlighted above. This ensured that the integrity of participant data was maintained throughout the analytical process. During this process of moving from one case to the next, I was also acutely aware of how my bracketed beliefs and processes from the analysis of the first case could influence subsequent case analyses. I feel that this awareness led to greater transparency in my interpretative process, particularly when conducting the cross-case analysis.

3.8.6 Looking for patterns across cases

This stage involved a cross-case analysis, which began by reviewing master and sub-themes from the individual case analyses conducted previously. Accompanying quotes from the transcripts that supported each of the themes were also revisited to ensure they provided a good representation of the participants' experience. This process was followed by careful examination of connections between the master and sub-themes, which were then clustered, modified and/or relabelled to develop super-ordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009). This stage in the analytical process allowed the generation of higher order concepts through movement of conceptual understandings of phenomena from an individual to a shared level (See Appendix 14). All super-ordinate themes (and accompanying sub-themes) developed through the cross-case analysis and all files containing participant transcripts were then transferred to NVivo 12 software. In addition to allowing greater organisation and rigour, this step facilitated in the write up of the findings.

As the final step of the analytical process, all themes were reviewed (in NVivo) to determine if they were a true representation of excerpts from the transcripts and reflected commonalities across the wider data set. This stage further involved the rearranging and/or merging of some of the themes. Some themes were also re-configured, to include more descriptive elements of participants' verbatim (See Appendix 15).

3.9 Trustworthiness & Reflexivity

Qualitative research is embedded in the notions of subjectivity, reflexivity and interpretative processes of meaning making between researchers and participants hence, the criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative studies vary from those of quantitative studies (Lincoln et al., 2011). For ensuring the quality and validity of this IPA study, Morrow's (2005) transcendent criteria for quality and integrity were employed. As part of the transcendent criteria, certain guidelines for conducting qualitative research are proposed. These guidelines are used to examine the quality of research, in terms of "social validity, subjectivity and reflexivity, adequacy of data, and adequacy of interpretation" (Morrows, 2005, p.257).

3.9.1 Social & Consequential Validity

The criterion of 'social validity' as proposed by Morrow (2005) refers to the need to assess qualitative studies with regards to their social importance and applicability. In addition to social validity, the concept of 'consequential validity' is also of relevance to this study. Consequential validity is a paradigm specific criterion (for postmodern critical research) that stresses the need to assess research in terms of its ability to influence social and political change (Patton, 2002). Such research seeks to understand the historical contexts of phenomena. It aims to raise awareness of issues pertaining to power, oppression and

marginalisation, to create socio-political change (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Close consideration was given to this criterion when designing and conducting the study. It is hoped that the findings will contribute to an understanding of Muslim minority (in this case Pakistani Muslim) experiences based on the representation of Islam in the social media. This understanding should in turn create awareness of the issues of discrimination, racism and oppression (both implicit and explicit) that Muslims experience both online and offline.

3.9.2 Adequacy of data

Another criterion put forth by Morrow is ‘adequacy of data’. This involves judging qualitative studies on the basis of the quality, variety and complexity of the data generated (Ravenek & Rudman, 2013). Quantitative research in psychology has often associated ‘adequacy of data’ with the number of research participants as a means to determine the quality of the study. In qualitative studies numbers alone do not ascertain the quality of the study (Morrow, 2005). For IPA studies a sample size between three and six participants is considered sufficient (Smith et al., 2009) for meaningful exploration of phenomena pertaining to the lived experience of participants. Similarly, Patton (1990) argued that the “validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (p. 185). Hence, in terms of adequacy and richness of data for this study, a sample size of six participants was considered sufficient for answering the research questions appropriately.

3.9.3 Adequacy of interpretation

To ascertain the quality and trustworthiness, another important criterion to consider is the ‘adequacy of interpretation’ of the research process. It is essential that researchers immerse

themselves in the data. This process of immersion should ideally begin at the time of data generation through to transcription, analysis, interpretation until the presentation of research findings (Morrow, 2005). IPA strongly advocates using the participant's verbatim to support the researcher's interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). As the researcher of this study, I carefully selected extracts from the participants verbatim to support my interpretations of their experiences with regards to the social media representations of their religion and its followers. The number of research participants indicates the influence/persuasiveness of the claims made in quantitative studies. In qualitative studies however, it is the participants own words which show the reader that the claims and interpretations made by the researcher are a true depiction of the participants lived experience of the phenomena under study (Ravenek & Rudman, 2013). The findings for the study are also presented clearly and demonstrate a close association with the original transcripts (evidenced by the judicious use of participant quotes).

Member checks are commonly suggested as another means to ascertain the validity of the interpretation. IPA, however, cautions against the use of such checks (Smith et al. 2009). This may be seen by some as undermining the quality of the findings generated. Notwithstanding, I feel that this in accordance with IPA's idiographic commitment that relies on subjectivities in individual experience. Alternate means to ensure adequacy of interpretation were therefore used. These included: collaborative discussions in supervision meetings following each stage of the analytical process (from initial coding and generation of themes through to the development of super-ordinate themes). Participant quotes used in support of themes were also shared in supervision meetings. Employing such a process of interpretation, based on the analysis conducted by myself and feedback of my supervisor validated the 'adequacy of

interpretation' and ensured that I was able to gain an accurate in depth understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions of the phenomena under study.

3.9.4 Subjectivity and Reflexivity

The notions of 'subjectivity and reflexivity' are closely aligned with qualitative study and form the final criterion of Morrow's (2005) transcendent criteria for qualitative research.

Based on the methodological and epistemological approach, researchers may seek to either limit/manage their personal subjectivity or embrace it as part of the data to use in the process of interpretation and analysis (Ravenek & Rudman, 2013). Using IPA as the methodological approach from a critical realist positioning allowed a contextual understanding of Pakistani Muslim HE students' experiences in relation to the social media representations of Islam. As an IPA researcher, my primary role in the study was to understand how participants made sense of their experiences. This manifested as a co-constructed understanding of participant experiences whereby both participants and I were involved in an interpretive process of meaning making pertaining to the phenomena under study.

Scriven (1972) understood the idea of equating quantitative research with objectivity and qualitative research with subjectivity as being problematic and emphasised researchers to embrace subjectivity in the interpretative process that positioned them as co-creators of meaning (Morrow, 2005). Concepts such as "bracketing" or "monitoring of self" (Peshkin, 1988, p.20) are commonly associated with approaches to subjectivity. Rolls and Relf (2006) stressed the importance for researchers not just to involve themselves in bracketing at the start of the research process but to continue it through to completion. As the researcher of this study, I understood subjectivity as a dynamic process and demonstrated a strong commitment to bracketing my pre-understandings (Heidegger, 2010) and experiences of the phenomena

under study. Attempts were made to identify and embrace these as part of an iterative research process. This allowed me to gain an understanding of any preconceived ideas and views I had pertaining to the phenomena and how these could impact the research participants, the interpretation or analysis of the data gathered.

Fine (1992) encouraged researchers to engage in the process of bracketing by positioning themselves as “self-conscious, critical, and participatory analysts engaged with but still distinct from informants” (p. 220). This notion of bracketing is best achieved through reflexive practices in qualitative research (Finlay & Gough, 2008). Reflexivity can be described as “self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness” (Rennie, 2004, p.183). As the researcher of the study, I strived to gain awareness of (and bracket) my presuppositions on the topic. However, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) “one may only ever get to know what the pre-conceptions are once the interpretation is underway” (p.26). With that in mind, I engaged in reflexive journaling (to gain awareness of my own pre-conceptions) from the start through to the completion of the study. Given my similarity to the participant group, I was also acutely aware of the influence my personal subjectivity and bias could have on the participants and what they were sharing. In some ways this awareness allowed me to develop and demonstrate a certain level of sensitivity to the participants verbatim that facilitated the process of shared understanding and interpretation. Hence, to maintain an awareness of my own subjective processes, I maintained a reflexive journal and recorded any experiences, responses, assumptions or biases that came to my awareness in my interaction with participant data.

“Reflexivity is a potentially powerful agent for change within traditional academic disciplines, such as psychology and its research” (Wilkinson, 1988, p.497). The

methodological and epistemological positioning informs the methods through which researchers exercise reflexivity (Etherington, 2004). It is therefore important that researchers demonstrate transparency and allow readers to understand and assess how their beliefs and prior experiences values and experiences have influenced the interpretative process and shaped the research (Ravenek & Rudman, 2013). One of the primary reasons for selecting this topic of study is my own ethnic and religious background. I am aware that such similarity between the participants and myself may lead to certain biases on my part, as the researcher. With that in mind, I made every attempt to balance out subjectivity and reflexivity throughout the research process.

3.10 Ethical considerations

The study was carried out in compliance with the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2016) guidelines for ethical research. Ethical approval for the research was gained from the University of Manchester Research Ethics committee (UREC). Data collection commenced once ethical approval for the study had been granted in the form of an approval confirmation letter (see Appendix 17).

3.10.1 Obtaining informed consent

Prior to the interviewing, informed consent was obtained from each of the participants. A participant information sheet explaining the purpose and process of the study was sent out to all participants via email. The information sheet also provided details of the procedure of withdrawal, if the participants feel the need to drop out (see Appendix 4). The information sheet also stated clearly the researcher's responsibility in maintaining participant confidentiality/anonymity and outlined the process for seeking support if the participant experienced any distress during or after the interview. Based on the information provided,

participants were given the opportunity to ask questions in order to facilitate them in making an informed decision to participate. Following this, written consent was obtained. Client signatures on the consent forms were taken as formal confirmation of their agreement to participate in the study. The consent forms were revisited with each of the participants immediately prior to the interview to reconfirm that they understood the rationale for the study and the terms of participation they were consenting to. All signed consent forms were stored securely (separate from the interview data gathered).

3.10.2 Maintaining confidentiality

Alongside the participant information sheet and consent form, participants were also requested to read and sign a confidentiality agreement. The confidentiality agreement outlined the researcher's responsibility in maintaining the confidentiality and integrity of the data gathered. It also highlighted the steps that would be taken to ascertain confidentiality with regards to the identity of each participant, the information they shared and its safe storage. The interview data gathered was anonymised and stored safely in compliance with university recommendations for safe storage and data integrity. The encrypted forms were stored separately from the interview data gathered. This was done to ensure maximum confidentiality for each participant. The interview transcripts were also anonymised and pseudonyms were used wherever needed. The entire data generated was then encrypted and stored securely in encrypted files on University of Manchester data storage.

3.10.3 Managing risk of harm

Given the nature of the research, all efforts were made to reduce the impact of any potential distress or harm to participants as well as the researcher of the study. Included in the participant information sheet was a section providing advice in terms of any distress/harm,

were this to be experienced by the participant during or after the interview. This was shared with participants prior to obtaining their consent to participate in the study. It was also explained to participants at the time of the interview. The questions asked during the interview required participants to share their own perceptions and experiences pertaining to representations of their religion and its followers. It was assumed that such sharing could bring up some potentially difficult emotions during or following the interview. With that in mind, the option of taking a break/discontinuing the interview or withdrawing from the study altogether (should they feel the need to) were iterated. In addition to this, each interview ended with verbal debriefing. This was followed by a written debrief sheet that was sent via email to each of the participants immediately after the interview. The debrief sheet provided information on the psychological support available in the community (see Appendix 9).

As the researcher of the study and given my personal positioning on the topic, I was acutely aware of the impact participants' sharing of their experiences could have on my own psychological wellbeing. I, therefore, endeavoured to monitor these processes throughout the data generation and analysis phase. In addition to this, I maintained a reflexive record of my responses to the data gathered, throughout the research process. I also had access to regular personal therapy and both research and clinical supervision to reflect on my personal processes, which I found extremely beneficial.

3.11 Chapter Summary

This study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of Pakistani Muslim higher education students with regards to the dominant social media depictions of Muslims and Islam. It also aims to recognise the influence that such representations may have on the lived experience of the population under study. Furthermore, it is hoped that the findings of this research offer increased understanding of the role of social media in forming perceptions and in turn inform therapeutic practice in relation to working with difference and diversity. With these aims in mind, I employed an IPA methodology to explore in-depth, the lived experience of participants' pertaining to the phenomenon under study.

In this chapter, I began by providing a description of the IPA methodology, followed by a discussion of my rationale for selecting IPA in relation to my epistemological positioning on the subject. I clearly defined and presented all the steps involved in the research process, from recruitment and data generation to data analysis. Alongside the sample demographics, a detailed introduction of the participants was also illustrated. To ensure the quality, validity and trustworthiness of the process, I utilised certain quality assessment criteria, which have been explained in detail. I attempted to maintain reflexivity in order to limit my personal subjectivity and bias that could influence the research process. The steps I took towards achieving this have been highlighted. Finally, I presented a discussion of how I conducted the research in an ethical manner, informed by the BPS (2018) and the HCPC (2016) guidelines for ethical research.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents findings of an IPA of Pakistani Muslim HE students' perceptions and experiences of social media representations regarding Muslims and Islam. Guidance for conducting IPA proposed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) was used to facilitate the analytical process. In terms of the outline of this chapter, firstly an overview of the main findings is provided. Followed by a contextual understanding of social media influence in participants' lives. Subsequently, an illustration of key super-ordinate themes and their accompanying sub-themes is provided. Lastly, an in-depth analysis of each of the main themes and their accompanying sub-themes (using verbatim extracts from participant transcripts in the data corpus) is presented.

The application of IPA led to the development of four key super-ordinate themes: 'The self and the (perceived) other', 'Understanding exposure and influence', 'Making sense of intersecting identities' and 'Processes and coping'. These are illustrated alongside their accompanying sub-themes in Table 3. The process of generating themes involved analysing each participant transcript independently followed by a cross case analysis of the entire data set. Although, all six participants contributed to the development of the super-ordinate themes, they varied in their contribution towards the sub-themes. Understandably, the themes share certain similarities and the verbatim extracts used in support of sub-themes (in some instances) overlap. Notwithstanding, the participant extracts included in the description for each theme, have been interpreted as being the closest representation of that specific theme.

Tables for each of the super-ordinate themes (with their related sub-themes) have been created to indicate which participant contributed to the development of which of the themes

(and to what extent). Although the extent of contribution is not a focus of the exploration, it has been used to demonstrate transparency of the process. To evidence that themes are grounded in the data generated, line numbers from each transcript have been referenced (See Tables 4 to 7). The illustrative quotes used in the analysis have (in some instances) been shortened, however they have not been edited (for readability) with the aim to remain as close as possible to the expression of participants. Dotted lines have been used to denote pauses or silences in participants' verbatim. Participant quotes (in the description of themes) have been italicised and placed in inverted commas to emphasise a distinction between participants' verbatim and my interpretation of it.

4.1 A contextual understanding

In order to analyse how Pakistani Muslim HE students (in this study) experience and process social media portrayals of Muslims and Islam, it is first important to develop a contextual understanding of the role social media has in their lives. As indicated in participant narratives, social media has a "*fairly big place*" (Ahmed, 16) in their present lives, and its usage quite "*wide ranging*" (Omar, 24). Participants described being "*quite heavily*" (Qamar, 17) invested in the social media "*to keep in touch with friends*" (Rahima, 24) and family but also "*to be more aware of like, what goes on in the world*" (Zahra, 25). Some participants also referred to social media being integral to their lives as students with its role being "*bigger than ever*" (Omar, 20) given the restricted social mobility on campus following the (current) Coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdowns.

Similarities across the participant group were noted in the types of social media websites and apps accessed. All participants named various apps and websites, which they used routinely

for a variety of reasons and purposes. Nevertheless, it was interesting to note how participants (at times) varied in their understanding of what counted as social media. The most frequently used apps according to all participants included Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and Facebook. Some also alluded to apps such as WhatsApp, LinkedIn and YouTube when describing their engagement with the social media. Participants, however, appeared to vary in the nature and/or frequency of their daily usage of these apps.

Apart from its communicative and networking functions (as highlighted earlier), all six participants referred to the importance of social media as an influential transmitter of news, political commentaries and current affairs. Participants described using social media “*to know about what's happening*” (Mahnoor, 82). Even though commonly used apps such as Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook are viewed (by many of the participants) primarily as social networking apps “*there's always something to do with news...on them*” (Zahra, 45) that people come across on a regular basis. However, Twitter is increasingly being viewed as an important platform for “*posting like news*” (Rahima, 75) which can be transmitted globally.

4.2 Overview of themes

A contextual understanding of social media influence (highlighted above) was found to be particularly helpful in the development and interpretation of the key themes (illustrated in Table 3) which aim to address the following research questions:

1. How do Pakistani Muslim higher education students in Britain view the dominant social media representations of Muslims and Islam?

2. How may the social media portrayals of Muslims and Islam be relevant to the lived experience of Pakistani Muslim higher education students in Britain?

Table 3: Overview of themes

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-themes
1. The ‘self’ and the (perceived) ‘other’	1.1 Exposure to polarized representations 1.2 Denial of self-expression 1.3 Separating the self from the other: <i>“put up a wall”</i>
2. Understanding exposure and influence	2.1 Nature of influence: <i>“a seed in the head that grows”</i> 2.2 Ease of anonymous sharing: <i>“removing all barriers of communication”</i>
3. Making sense of intersecting identities	3.1 Perceived as <i>“brown Muslims”</i> 3.2 Subtle and explicit expressions of hate
4. Processing and coping	4.1 Exploring negative attitudes 4.2 Accepting undesirable emotions: <i>“just kind of used to it now”</i> 4.3 Cultures coming together: <i>“a melting pot”</i>

The following sections of this chapter provide an IPA of the four key super-ordinate themes and their ten accompanying sub-themes. In line with IPA’s idiographic commitment (Smith et al, 2009), I have made efforts to keep the focus of analysis on participants’ views and

subjective processes of sense making (whilst acknowledging my own). Substantial use of illustrative quotes in support of themes is aimed at facilitating phenomenological inquiry into Pakistani Muslim HE students' perspectives on social media representations of Muslims and Islam. I am acutely aware of the impact my own positioning may have on the generation, presentation and interpretation of these themes. I have therefore endeavoured to acknowledge my own views and theoretical fore understandings (as my own) throughout the analysis.

4.3 Super-ordinate Theme 1: The 'self' and the (perceived) 'other'

Most participants shared their experiences of polarised and often stereotypical representations of Muslims in the social media. There also appeared to be a consensus on these portrayals being skewed towards negative aspects pertaining to Islam. I selected 'The self and the (perceived) other' as the first super-ordinate theme to capture participants' experiences of the various depictions of Muslims as an outgroup symbolizing extremist ideologies and practices, which I interpreted (based on my theoretical fore understandings) as the 'other' (see Chapter 2). All participants described being exposed to such constructions of Muslims (and associated negative commentaries) in the social media. Many participants described withholding self-expression and efforts to distinguish themselves from this (perceived) 'other'. Hence, the three integral sub-themes supporting this super-ordinate theme are, 'Exposure to polarized representations', 'Denial of self-expression' and 'Separating the self from the other: "put up a wall"'. A summary of these sub-themes with accompanying references from participant transcripts (line numbered) is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Representation of super-ordinate theme 1

Super-ordinate Theme 1: The ‘self’ and the (perceived) ‘other’		
Sub-theme	Participant	Line numbers
<u>Exposure to polarized representations</u>	Mahnoor	124, 126-127, 129-133, 135-137, 154-160, 212-216, 236-237, 268-272, 275-276, 444, 449-451, 457-459, 494-497, 537-540, 814-822
	Qamar	61-64, 68-72, 179-183, 547-550.
	Zahra	67-72, 74, 230-231, 598-600.
	Ahmed	54-62, 160-162, 325-332, 624-630.
	Rahima	27-30, 97-99, 106-110, 183-184, 197-209, 314-325.
	Omair	173-174, 180-185, 207-208, 254-257, 404-405.
<u>Denial of self-expression</u>	Mahnoor	478-480, 682-689, 696-698, 701-703, 764-766, 898-901, 906-909.
	Qamar	328-331, 395-397, 442-447, 449-556, 471-474.
	Zahra	300-302, 370-375, 377-380, 444-446, 499-502.
	Ahmed	370-374, 404-405, 421-425, 547, 557-563, 564-568.
	Rahima	62-68, 115-117, 152-155, 167-168, 175-178, 559-561.
	Omair	155-160, 278-282, 559-564, 575-582, 585-587, 610-611.

<u>Separating the self from the other: “put up a wall”</u>	Mahnoor	617-622, 696-698, 701-703, 712-717, 855, 856-857, 874-875, 886-889, 895-901, 916-919.
	Qamar	184-187, 303-307, 311-312
	Zahra	128-133, 218-221, 491-494.
	Ahmed	66-76, 118-120, 130-139.
	Rahima	254-262, 375-380, 408-413, 421-427, 675-679, 719-723.
	Omaisr	209-213, 266-272, 274-276, 283-285, 408-419, 466-471, 475-478, 633-639.

4.3.1 Sub-theme: Exposure to polarized representations

When asked about the representations of Muslims and Islam in the social media, many of the participants described these as being “*quite divisive*” (Omaisr, 173) highlighting *both “the negatives and positives”* (Mahnoor, 124). However, most alluded to these being skewed in the negative direction often leading to misrepresentation of Islam and its followers. Mahnoor said, “*overall... I think overall, I'd say it's quite, uh misrepresented... for example, if we talk about, um, like, the connotations Islam has with terrorism (126-127)*”. Zahra also described being exposed to polarised views and portrayals of Muslims in the social media. However, in her experience people who had established personal connections with Muslims were able to develop more positive perspectives on the religion:

“there’s positive representations and there’s negative representations...”

Negatives are more like um how there's always like terrorists and bombings and stuff like that. And positive is more like, people who have, like Muslim friends

and Muslim families and stuff like that...that they spend time with and then they know what they're actually like...They have more positive opinions than just negative ones” (Zahra, 67-72).

This suggests that engaging with Muslims, on a more personal level, may provide an opportunity to challenge pre-existing perceptions based on what may be interpreted as widespread media (and social media) constructions of Islam as a religion of violence and extremism.

All participants referred to the dominant stereotypical representations regarding Muslims that portray Islam as a religion of rigid and extremist ideologies. Some described how stereotypes that have prevailed across societies (historically) are increasingly being reinforced through television and social media. Zahra suggested how *“the typical stereotypes are they're extremists, that rules don't really like mean anything...and like for example drinking... you can't really drink...arranged marriage, all of that”* (230-231).

Mahnour described the role of television media in the creation and transmission of negative stereotypes particularly related to Muslim women:

“There's so many shows now where like the main girl, she's a Muslim, and it's just about her life and how she feels forced at home and then she's going to get an arranged marriage and like a forced marriage or something and I think that totally blows that entire thing out of proportion” (Mahnour, 537-540).

This understanding of how the media blows things out of proportion was shared by Omair, who suggested it within a social media context:

“I'd say as soon as something does come to light with an event or an incident that does happen involving a Muslim, social media does allow for it to be blown out of proportion and allegations start to come” (Omair, 254-257).

He found the main stereotypes about Muslims to be “*associated with extremism and terrorism especially after 9/11 and 7/7*” (404-405) similar to Zahra who felt “*like that's when it mostly started when people started having very like bad reviews, not reviews, sorry... bad conceptions about Muslims when the whole 9/11 thing went down*” (598-600). These processes of sense making imply that media (and social media) coverage of terrorist incidents where Muslims are identified as the perpetrators are thought to contribute towards the negative imagery and opinions regarding the religion as a whole.

Appearing ‘visibly Muslim’ such as having a beard or wearing a headscarf were seen by most participants as characteristics (often) linked to extremist ideas and acts. Some participants explained how social media platforms such as Twitter play a significant role in perpetuating such stereotypes and linking these with acts of terror. In Mahnoor’s experience:

“I think its quite negative, how usually like when an event happens, like an act of violence...It's on Twitter, like all the time and it quite rapidly spreads on Twitter and before they've even said, like anything about the attacker, or the victim...Umm Twitter's already like tweeting things, like the people on Twitter, they're already saying, if he's got a beard, he's Muslim” (Mahnoor, 129-133).

She later added how she feels *“if the person doesn't really have the characteristics of someone that's Muslim, they're more likely to be put under the need for psychiatric help or stuff like that”* (135-137). This seems to suggest a media double standard that appears to vilify perpetrators identified as Muslims and positions others (who do not subscribe to the religion Islam) as vulnerable individuals in need of psychiatric help.

Some of the participants also described how promoting such representations via social media could be detrimental to the image of the religion and its followers, particularly in less diversified communities. Whilst making sense of his experiences, Ahmed suggested:

“the headscarf and modesty kind of thing... People may form perceptions about that too, when they see anything negative about that...I feel like, especially it has a big perception because lots of places that aren't diversified, they don't experience like all these different cultures first-hand and they gain all their knowledge or what they think about it... viewpoints... all from social media and like social media never really views things accurately. There's always some misconceptions... People take...always take things the wrong way” (Ahmed, 624-630).

This seems to reflect an understanding that in case of Muslims, personal characteristics (such as appearance and/or attire) tend to be stigmatised particularly in places where people do not have first-hand experience of engaging with Muslims. It can also be interpreted that there is greater potential (for people in such places) to develop an impression of Muslims based on the dominant social media portrayals that view adherence to Islamic values and traditions as problematic. Omair described how such portrayals may be associated to what could be

interpreted as a 'normalisation' of Islamophobia. He said: *"it's come to light so much that Islamophobia is....it's become a norm now and it's not... It's not fair on people who base the teachings on Islam"* (Omair, 207-208).

Despite there being a proliferation of negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam, participants also alluded to stereotypes that were seen as positive generalisations regarding Muslims. In Mahnoor's experience *"I don't think stereotypes are always bad"* (444). Earlier on, in her sharing she described how the choices of many Muslim students such as not drinking alcohol or attending late night parties, in her view led to the construction of positive stereotypes: *"so the tutors don't really ever think a Muslim child... a Muslim student will come in like that. They...they have like, a different kind of expectation from a Muslim which is a good expectation"* (214-216).

Qamar described positive social media representations of black and minority ethnic communities in the medical profession and how he felt these were helping to challenge some of the dominant negative imagery of Muslims:

"I think one doctor came in from abroad or his visa was extended, and he passed away, sadly... I think that man was, was being supported on social media at the time. And I think for me that...that was positive, and it was a good thing" (Qamar, 547-550).

Similarly, Ahmed shared how, with the social media, more recently *"All the positives are also coming out as well. So I think it's a good thing and definitely has been more positive over time, recent time"* (160-162). Here, Qamar and Ahmed reflect an understanding of

social media as an important platform for highlighting and promoting the positive contributions of communities that may otherwise be overlooked.

4.3.2 Sub-theme: Denial of self-expression

This sub-theme captures the participants' forms of self-expression in response to negative social media representations and/or commentary about Islam, its teachings or its followers. Self-expression here could be interpreted as freedom of speech and expression, based on ones personal positioning on certain topics (of relevance to them). Several participants alluded to instances of withholding self-expression to avoid being misunderstood as sympathisers of the (perceived) 'other'. Mahnoor reflected on her experience of following social media commentaries on developing stories. It appeared that she was apprehensive to share her views on such stories (being a Muslim) due to what could be understood as an underlying fear of being misperceived as someone who supports extremist ideologies. She explained:

“So, with social media... things come about like a day before and you don't really want to give your opinions yet... just in case, it might be twisted later. Like, if that person ends up being like a terrorist or something, you don't really want to be supporting them cuz you might not know the entire relation, like full information”
(Mahnoor, 898-901).

She later added how she feels Muslims generally tend to be *“more cautious than non-Muslims cuz non-Muslims can just take it back and they won't really have any, have any impact on how they get treated, whereas people always remember that you were supporting that person if you were Muslim”* (906-909).

Similar to Mahnoor, Zahra also referred to withholding her views even on issues that she felt were important to her, due to a possibility of these being misinterpreted. She described:

“Because like I said, people on social media are very sensitive, you can say something and they can make it like a complete different meaning out of it. So I tend to stay, stay out of all of that, like, even if I really want to express my view about something, I just think it's pointless trying to do it on social media” (Zahra, 499-502).

Participants also elaborated on other reasons for withholding their engagement with issues on the social media, despite wanting to express themselves. As Rahima related her experience of engaging with current affairs on the social media, feelings of annoyance were noted in her use of language and expression. She said:

“I've seen other people engage with it and then you see... like the circles they go in and the comments and it's just like, there's, there's no one side... either one of them has to try and see things from the other person's perspective or it's just gonna keep going on in circles...So I just try to avoid it” (Rahima, 175-178).

Qamar referred to a particular instance where he had refrained from engaging with negative commentaries on visible characteristics associated with followers of Islam:

“I guess there were a lot of pages about the beard, and one person in the comments section said something really controversial. And...and I saw one argument on that, can't remember what he posted but just ignored it and didn't get myself involved” (Qamar, 471-474).

It could be interpreted that engaging with such views targeting Islamic values and traditions, could result in what Rahima described as an inconclusive spiral of contradicting comments. Hence, withholding self-expression in such instances seems to suggest a process of acceptance and letting go.

Ahmed also described refraining from commentaries that targeted Islam in a negative manner, however he shared how he would support causes which:

“would like help with media representations that may be Islamophobic or something or against someone's faith, I would participate and like sign the petition, things like that. But in terms of like direct comments, or like commenting, or messaging someone directly about something if they said against my religion, I wouldn't” (Ahmed, 564-568).

In some instances, participants highlighted the significance of sharing via social media platforms, their religious views and practices, regardless of others views. Qamar described reaching a stage in life where he felt it was important for him to share his religious identity and beliefs with pride, rather than living in constant fear of being misjudged. He explained:

“I'm not ashamed of my religion, so I wouldn't... I would just post what I want to post even if somebody thought...Oh! that's a bit weird or always coming on a bit strong with that post... I would just post it, I don't care” (Qamar, 328-331).

He described further how *“obviously, I won't post anything inappropriate, but exactly how I feel I'll post it and how I want to post it, when I want to post it. I'll do that. And I'm happy to*

do that” (Qamar, 395-397). Here, a sense of simultaneous frustration and liberation was noted in Qamar’s language and tonality that seems to suggest a difficult period of restricted self-expression.

Ahmed described what could be interpreted as a shifting sense of self-expression (pertaining to his religious and cultural identity) arising from an increasing acceptance of diverse cultures within western societies. He described how *“previously they may not be accepting of that... or they may think he’s weird or something like that... So I wouldn’t be comfortable to share that... But over time, I have, like, opened up”* (Ahmed, 404-405). In relation to sharing social media posts on celebrating Islamic festivals (such as Eid) Ahmed drew comparisons with other religions:

“It’s nice, sharing things about my religion, always makes me feel very happy... Like its just a nice thing to be able to do. You always see people sharing things about their religion - in Christianity...Judaism people posting about Easter, Christmas, things like that. So if I want to post about my religion why can’t I, when I see everybody else posting and sharing about their religion too” (Ahmed, 421-425).

Omar stressed the importance of moving past ones apprehensions of being misperceived to expressing more openly, views and ideas (using social media) which may in turn (in his view) create a positive image of the religion. He explained:

“I’d say, being a Muslim, I feel like it’s my responsibility to bring a positive image for my religion and I don’t, I don’t like to be two faced in that sense and just not posting, just because people will misinterpret. I feel like the more you do and the more you

feed people, ideas, and teachings, the more they would welcome...I'm sure the more they will be open to it because we live in a world where people are so stimulated by intellectual conversations. They want to learn more things about other people's culture" (559-564).

4.3.3 Sub-theme: Separating the 'self' from the 'other': 'put up a wall'

Whilst the previous sub-theme explored participants' forms of self-expression particularly in response to negative representations and commentaries about Muslims and Islam in the social media, this sub-theme elucidates participants' attempts to "*put up a wall*" (Mahnoor, 855) between themselves and the (perceived) 'other'. Some described these as conscious efforts to differentiate themselves and their ideas from those associated with radicals and extremists. Whilst others attempted to demonstrate greater identification with what is interpreted as the 'presumed normal'.

In Mahnoor case, "*I don't agree with any of the terrorist attacks, obviously. So I don't want to be associated with that. No, I don't think that's my religion*" (874-875). She described how expressing her views on certain matters pertaining to her religion (on the social media) might mislead people in thinking she is siding with the (perceived) 'other':

"I would like to post it but I wouldn't because I don't want people to think that... I don't want people to get confused between what I believe in and what other people believe in. Yeah, even though we both come across as the same, having same religion" (Mahnoor, 696-698).

Mahnoor reflected further and added:

“Um so... obviously, you shouldn't care what people think. But you know, its human nature to and so it would be better if I didn't have to think like that, obviously and I didn't have to feel like I have to refrain from posting. But I think it'll always be there really” (Mahnoor, 701-703).

This seems to suggest Mahnoor's ongoing struggles as she continues to appraise situations where her views may be taken in the wrong context. Zahra also alluded to similar processes aimed at ensuring her views were not misperceived as being associated with extremist ideologies. She explained:

“As in anything to do with culture, religion...like I will speak about it but not necessarily to the point where people will take something from it. If you know what I mean. Like its not that strong for them to be like... Oh! she's an extremist or she's a very strong Muslim or she's a very strong Pakistani and... do you know what I mean?” (491-494).

This also appears to suggest Zahra's attempts to portray her views in a way that prevents her from being judged as an extremist or someone with rigid beliefs.

Greater identification with British culture and norms appeared to be another means for participants to create a separation between themselves and the extremist views and ideologies associated with their religion. In describing his understanding of what could be seen as 'normal', Qamar reflected on the multiple dimensions of his identity:

“Like most people are just normal people trying to get by with their daily lives and earn a living and doing things like just getting on with their lives generally... and... but I think there is that... there is that thing that people are...some people, not all people... some people do think... even if its online or in real... that if you are Muslim you have extreme views...” (Qamar, 184-187).

Qamar described further on having to reiterate his identity as a British, particularly when it was questioned (in both online and offline contexts):

“I was born in Britain... So, I guess I've lived here my whole life... It's all I know... My parents are Pakistani, which is why I have sort of a mix of Pakistani culture... But that's mainly how I identify... as British Pakistani. But mainly it's British, because it's the culture I know... it's where I've grown up as well.. It's where my friends are... So that's, that's how I identify myself” (Qamar, 303-307).

Qamar's expression here is suggestive of an effort to justify to himself and others (in both online and offline contexts) of his strong sense of affiliation to Britain and British values. It appears to arise from a feeling of being perceived as an outsider in his own country.

4.4 Super-ordinate theme 2: Understanding exposure and influence

This super-ordinate theme captures participants' understandings of the nature and intensity of social media influence. It is suggested that this understanding allowed participants to reflect on the potential link between exposure to negative views and constructions of Muslims (described earlier) and anti-Muslim attitudes and expressions in both online and offline contexts. All participants expressed the importance of social media as a powerful and

influential agent for disseminating views and ideas. In addition, the opportunity of doing so, anonymously was perceived to facilitate ease of expression particularly in relation to negative views. Therefore, I identified ‘Understanding exposure and influence’ as the second key super-ordinate theme, with two main sub-themes, titled, ‘Power to influence: *“a seed in your head that grows”*’ & ‘Ease of anonymous sharing: *“removing all barriers of communication”*’. A summary of these sub-themes with accompanying references (line numbered) from participant transcripts is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Representation of super-ordinate theme 2

Super-ordinate Theme 2: Understanding exposure and influence		
Sub-theme	Participant	Line number
<u>Power to influence: <i>“a seed in your head that grows”</i></u>	Mahnoor	139-140, 150-151, 154-160, 183-185, 187-188, 492-495, 793-794, 801-804, 814-822, 824-827, 832-838, 890-891, 895-896, 898-901.
	Qamar	55-57, 74-75, 108-113, 423-424, 483-485, 491, 493-494, 499-500, 517-519, 552-555.
	Zahra	28-31, 552-554, 558-561, 566-569.
	Ahmed	63-65, 78-82, 175-180, 281-285, 400-403, 466-469, 594-607, 608-610, 612-614. 638-640,
	Rahima	90-95, 97-99, 188-194, 217-222, 303-307, 327-334, 342-343, 614-616, 617, 630-635, 637-639.
	Omair	33-40, 44-45, 96-102, 104-110, 117-120, 162-168, 215-219, 391-397, 619-623, 655-658.

<u>Ease of anonymous sharing: “removing all barriers of communication”</u>	Mahnoor Qamar Zahra Ahmed Rahima Omair	847-848. 445-446. 695-699, 517-519. 570-573, 638-640. - 96, 645-647, 653-654, 664-666.

4.4.1 Sub-theme: Power to influence: “a seed in your head that grows”

All participants alluded to the power of social media in forming attitudes and perceptions.

The extent of involvement in the social media appeared to contribute to its intensity of influence. In Qamar’s opinion, social media has “*the biggest influence, I think, because people are just on it constantly*” (491). Many participants compared the social media to traditional media, in terms of its power in forming views and perceptions. Mahnoor described

the social media as *“such an important part of everyone's life”* (824). She suggested the social media as the most powerful mode of communication particularly given *“the way it normalizes everything by making it quite light”* (825) synonymous to *“a seed in your head that grows”* (827). She later described how these characteristics of social media make it easier to create strong impressions regarding people and issues that may be difficult to shift:

“the way they... the way they represent things like for example on Facebook or Instagram...the way like tweets come about... it's much lighter and it's more of a building up thing, which I think has a stronger impact, because it kind of becomes settled into someone's head. That... that's what it is and it's hard to get rid of such conceptual preconceptions” (Mahnoor, 834-838).

‘Power to Influence: *“a seed in your head that grows”*’ was therefore selected as the second sub-theme.

Many of the participants elaborated on the powerful informative function of the social media and emphasised its ability to represent and at times misrepresent people’s views and opinions as facts. Qamar suggested that *“while the news may be more factually correct compared with social media... like there's a lot of anything... that can be said on social media and people just believe it”* (483-485). Reflecting on the role of social media in informing attitudes regarding Muslims, Zahra described how *“there's so many people that have social media, they are on it all the time. They will be easily affected, and they will um... believe everything they hear and like yeah... They just believe everything they hear”* (552-554). Here, Zahra appears to draw a link between the nature/amount of exposure to social media and its intensity of influence. It is suggested that a similar link could be drawn between exposure to

negative social media portrayals of Islam and their influence on negative attitudes towards Muslims.

Some participants also emphasised the role of celebrities and politicians (on social media) in the context of informing public opinions regarding racial and religious minorities (including Muslims). Rahima suggested how *“with like, bigger figures in like... like in politics or just like celebrities or whatever... I think it can... Like people can take what a celebrity says, like it’s the truth basically”* (614-616). However she later contradicted herself in saying that *“because of the power of social media, people are very quick to call it out”* (Rahima, 617).

Some participants also elaborated on what they perceived as positive aspects of social media particularly as a platform for news updates on important issues. In Omair’s experience:

“I think social media is a good way to spread anything positive because otherwise if we didn't have social media, stuff like that would go overlooked like people wouldn't know that happened. Because a lot of people don't even watch the news...” (Omair, 552-555).

This suggests that social media is increasingly replacing traditional media as a popular forum for accessing news.

As Mahnoor reflected on the role of social media in creating awareness regarding important issues pertaining to Muslims, she described how there are:

“quite a few like Muslim influencers they... they like re-tweet stuff like that and it's getting like... Islamophobia is getting some kind of umm, like notice and stuff like that... So I think the fact that they do stuff like that...just to bring more awareness and stuff, which is good...” (Mahnoor, 492-495).

Rahima also alluded to the *“influencer aspect”* (27) of social media and shared names of a few influencers who in her view are helping to challenge the negative mainstream portrayals of Islam. She described how there several influencers *“like Casey Neistat, that post quite interesting things or like... there's different people now like Nadir Nahdi, who post a lot about Muslim representation around the world and makes a lot of videos that are quite, quite interesting”* (Rahima, 97-99).

Mahnoor highlighted another central aspect of social media news feeds that allows people's access to content to be tailored according to their interests. She described how *“because social media is like, individualized, like it is catered towards you... So depending on the people you follow, the posts you see... I think that can really have an impact on your perception”* (802-804). This implies that social media aligns itself to the views and interests of the individual using it and hence, appears to hold significant power to reinforce pre-existing ideas and perceptions. Participants also suggested how this feature of the social media could facilitate the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes regarding Muslims particularly in areas that lack (racial/religious) diversity. Ahmed suggested:

“people will only really gain knowledge and... and make images of these kind of people through social media but they will never know that person until they meet

them. So I feel like it does have a big role, especially in places that aren't really diversified...in forming perceptions” (Ahmed, 638-640).

Rahima again alluded to the role of influential figures (in the social media) however, in this instance she focused specifically on perceptions regarding Muslims. She described how *“It's very hard not to form a perception of someone or like the influence of like bigger personalities like what they say... it's difficult not to perceive a whole group of people on that...” (Rahima, 637-639).*

As described, social media's role in the creation of stereotypes and attitudes regarding Muslims were noted by many of the participants, however some such as Qamar, went further to suggest how *“stereotypes which have just existed, just continue on the social media” (499-500).* Omair found this aspect of social media to be *“very, very dangerous to developing your own genuine opinions...” (655-656).*

4.4.2 Sub-theme: Ease of anonymous sharing: “removing all barriers of communication”

Many of the participants' alluded to social media as a platform that allows people to share anonymously (without having to reveal ones identity) views that may otherwise be difficult to express or carry significant repercussions in a face-to-face context. Mahnoor explained how on *“social media, you can literally be who you want to” (847/848).* Omair found this aspect of anonymity as something that *“alters our sense of reality” (645).* There also appeared to be a sense amongst participants that such ease of anonymous sharing on social media *“basically removed all the barriers of communication” (Omair, 96).* I therefore selected 'Ease of anonymous Sharing: *“removing all barriers of communication”*' as the second sub-theme.

Many of the participants described how this ease of anonymous sharing enables people to share more openly, negative views and stereotypes about Muslims and Islam that may be difficult to share and transmit using social platforms (where the commenter may not be able to conceal their identity). Zahra discussed how:

“social media plays like a very big role in all of this... Cuz it's so easy to get like... to get one point of information from one place to another and stuff like that... So I feel like social media does play like a very vital role in this whole stereotypes and discriminating and stuff like that because... there's so many people that sit behind the screen and say racist stuff and read stuff that they wouldn't necessarily say in person” (Zahra, 695-699).

Here, Zahra appears to suggest a possible link between anonymous sharing of negative views to homogenisation and subsequent discrimination of those targeted.

As indicated in participant narratives, not knowing who the person on the other side was, led some to consciously withhold their engagement, particularly when negative views and commentaries about their religion and/or culture were being shared. Qamar suggested how he would *“rather debate with someone in person about it rather than speak over the internet”* (445-446). Similarly, Ahmed described:

“If I didn't know them I wouldn't be able to tell if they are stubborn or open minded. So if my comments are going to have any impact and I wouldn't want to waste my time on someone who's commenting those kind of things anyway...”
(Ahmed, 570-572).

This unwillingness to engage with negative comments, where there is a lack of knowledge regarding the personality of the commenter could be interpreted as an effort towards self-preservation.

4.5 Super-ordinate theme 3: Making sense of intersecting identities

This super-ordinate theme explores the multiple intersections of participants' identities including their ethnicity, skin colour and religion. Participants shared similarities in their understanding of ethnicity, with most referring to it as a combination of national origin (Pakistani) and ethnic group membership (South Asian), concerned primarily with cultural aspects. Interestingly, most viewed skin colour (Brown) to be a distinct category, with a predominantly biological origin. There also appeared to be a collective understanding of religion as category of identity in addition to ethnicity and skin colour.

This theme focuses on how participants conceptualise and experience the multiple (and intersecting) dimensions of their identities. All participants described various incidents involving subtle and explicit expressions of hate experienced by them (and others like them) perceived as "*Brown Muslims*" (Rahima, 124). Participants also indicated instances involving negative expressions (both online and offline) which could be interpreted as microaggressions based on my theoretical fore understandings (see Chapter 2). Most participants also described experiences involving such microaggressions in the form of humorous stereotypical social media representations of Muslims and Islam. Two sub-themes titled: 'Perceived as "*Brown Muslims*"' and 'Subtle and explicit expressions of hate' were therefore identified. A summary of these sub-themes with accompanying references (line numbered) from participant transcripts is presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Representation of super-ordinate theme 3

Super-ordinate Theme 3: Making sense of intersecting identities		
Sub-theme	Participant	Line numbers
<u>Perceived as “Brown Muslims”</u>	Mahnoor	129-133, 195-200, 258-261, 265-267, 268, 274-276, 440-443, 449-451, 453-454.
	Qamar	148-151, 163-166, 169-173, 291-294.
	Zahra	122-123, 77-80, 81-85, 99-110, 113, 119-126, 136-145, 156-159, 656-658.
	Ahmed	102-104, 106, 108-109, 111-124, 205-210, 216-220, 222-223, 321-325, 350-351, 354-359, 361-365.
	Rahima	123-129, 131-135, 272-281.
	Omair	226-236, 254-257, 319-324, 346-348, 353-357, 381-384, 437-452.
<u>Subtle and explicit expressions of hate</u>	Mahnoor	555-557, 561-563, 567-569, 579-580, 581-583, 590-593, 596-602, 604-608, 610-611, 620-622, 779-781.
	Qamar	213-218, 220-227, 232-235, 237-239, 485-488, 499-500, 502-512, 526-528.
	Zahra	136-144, 156-158, 240-243, 395-396, 535-536.
	Ahmed	94-100, 102-104, 106, 108, 196-201, 205-210, 239-252, 254-257, 354-359, 361-365, 620-624.
	Rahima	252-254, 639-641, 646-649, 650-655, 668-670.
	Omair	408-409, 410-414, 437-440, 447-452.

4.5.1 Sub-theme: Perceived as “Brown Muslims”

This sub-theme explores participants’ experiences as Pakistani Muslims (of colour). The term “*Brown Muslims*” (124) used by Rahima was selected to represent this sub-theme. All participants described experiences that suggested stigmatisation of their identities as Muslims of Pakistani origin. Most participants also alluded to the role of social media in the perpetuation of negative representations that singled out Muslims of South Asian and/or Pakistani origin as perpetrators of violence and extremism. In elucidating her experience, Rahima drew comparisons between Muslims of varying ethnic origins:

“when people think of terrorism, I think they really only think of like, Brown Muslims, whereas I think the negative aspect isn't on all Muslims, like for example... like black Muslims... Its not because they're Muslim, they have their own like negative light, but that's the negative that comes from them being black rather than their relationship with Islam or their relationship with being Muslim. And like Malaysian Muslims, like there's so many Malaysian Muslims in the world, but that's not like how people would associate... Islam in a negative light” (Rahima, 123-129).

Similarly, Mahnoor alluded to skin colour and presence of visible characteristics (such as a beard) as being significant to the creation of the “*typical image of a terrorist*” (260). She suggested:

“Pakistanis also have like the typical characteristics of a Muslim. So for example, you may have a beard, brown skin, and, and then with the way media portrays the typical image of a terrorist, for example, it's also very similar to the typical image of a Pakistani, I guess” (Mahnoor, 258-261).

She later made comparisons of Pakistani Muslims to (lighter skinned) Muslims of other ethnicities and described how “*with like some Arabs, you wouldn't really be able to differentiate between um for example, Tunisia and somebody who was born and bred in England, like British, White ethnicity and Christian*” (265-267). Here, Rahima and Mahnoor draw attention to (brown) skin colour as an important dimension of Pakistani identity that appears to compound the negativity associated with what could be interpreted as an (already) stigmatised Muslim identity.

Many of the participants shared examples of specific incidents that may be used, as Omair described, a “*reference point*” (381) to prejudge Muslims of Pakistani origin. He suggested how “*there have been lots of incidents and crimes that have been committed that have been attributed straightaway to someone who's both a Pakistani and a Muslim in the UK*” (346-348). To support his view, Omair alluded to the Rotherham incidents involving the sexual grooming of young girls by a group of “*Pakistani Men who... a lot of them were actually they'd claimed to be Muslim as well*” (354). After further reflection, Omair explained how involvement of Pakistani Muslims in such crimes could be “*negative for the (Pakistani) community and something... very bad portrayal of how Pakistanis are*” (356-357). In making sense of what could be interpreted as a ‘stigmatisation’ of his Pakistani Muslim identity, Omair described how social media references to such incidents were (in his view) being used to prejudge Muslims and/or Pakistani Muslims:

“things like sexual crime, sexual grooming, trafficking as well especially when it's seen as a reference point kind of... so when they... let's just say, on social media, they tweet about something happening or someone being victim to an incident,

they'd always bring up these.... sometimes they'd bring up Rotherham as a reference” (Omair, 381-384).

Zahra elaborated on the role of social media platforms (such as Twitter) in negative publicity of violent crimes committed by Asian Muslims and less so, of those from other ethnicities and/or religions. Upon further reflection, she added:

“like if there's anything to do with... say, there is a mass shooting in America or something like that... First, people... the first thought that will come into people's minds is... Oh! it's probably a Muslim... It's probably an Asian person and stuff like that... and if it's a Muslim Asian person, they'll proper publicize it and proper speak on it whereas if it's like... another race or another religion, they won't give as much importance to it... as like on media, they try and make a very strong point that its mostly always Muslims and Asians that are like troubled and that are more capable of doing messed up things” (Zahra, 81-85).

This implies a more deep-rooted bias against Muslims and (South) Asians and a sense that perhaps social media provides a (global) platform for these views and preconceptions to be publicised. Whilst expressing what could be interpreted (through changes in her tonality) as annoyance, Zahra added further: *“I just don't understand how they tend to judge the whole community just by one person's actions and um behaviour” (122-123).* Zahra's process of sense making here, seems to suggest a process of homogenisation that could lead to the construction and/or maintenance of negative stereotypes regarding Muslims of (South) Asian descent.

Ahmed alluded to a similar process of homogenisation particularly in relation to appearance and attire that might identify someone as being Muslim. He also described how (he feels) the social media facilitates people in building negative impressions regarding Muslims so when in real life they “*see a brown person with a beard... they associate it with Islam...*” (324). As Ahmed reflected on his own experiences as a Pakistani Muslim, there appeared to be a sense of disappointment with people judging him for his appearance (brown skin colour and beard). He later added: “*if you think about it deeply, it isn't great how they single out just Pakistanis*” (222-223).

Only a few participants shared perspectives specific to representations of Muslim women in both traditional and social media. Mahnoor was the only participant who shared more directly her experience of stereotypes pertaining to Muslim women of Pakistan origin. She alluded to Pakistani women being “*seen as quite limited*” (268) or attaining “*less education and not knowing really... not being as dominant as a male would be in like a household, for example...*” (274-275). She later reflected on how (she feels) such stereotypes are maintained in the media to create an image of a Muslim woman that can be quite limiting and restrictive. She said: “*I think the way media portrays that especially how it's still portraying that... can be quite a barrier towards some people*” (274-276).

Participants generally struggled to identify specific examples regarding positive depictions of Pakistani Muslims in the social media. Mahnoor, however, reflected on her experience as a medical student at a prestigious university (in the U.K.). She described how she feels that within certain contexts, Pakistanis may be stereotyped as hardworking and ambitious:

“the stereotypes that Pakistanis have, I guess, usually like stereotypes for Pakistanis are usually good like in medical school they’re seen as the ones that work harder.... Often seen more... as the ones that have like a straight idea of what they want to do and like a plan” (Mahnoor, 451-454).

It appears that engaging with Pakistani Muslims in what could be interpreted as more ‘real life’ contexts, may help in creation of positive images that Mahnoor describes here as ‘good’ stereotypes.

4.5.2 Sub-theme: Subtle and explicit expressions of hate

I selected ‘Subtle and explicit expressions of hate’ as the second sub-theme to explore the various overt and covert forms of discrimination and racisms experienced by participants across a range of contexts. All participants alluded to negative experiences that they perceived as being linked to the multiple intersections of their identities (as described in the previous sub-theme). All participants referred to the use of humour in the social media as an implicit form of communicating and normalising racist and/or discriminatory attitudes towards Pakistani Muslims and Muslims in general. Some participants also related their experiences of more overt forms of racist abuse targeting their religious and/or ethnic identities. As participants reflected on these experiences, they alluded to the role social media plays in perpetuating negative constructions of Muslims and Islam that appeared to (in some instances) inform racist attitudes and expressions both online and offline.

Participants also emphasised how jokes regarding major incidents (such as 9/11) particularly across social networking apps (such as Facebook and Instagram) could potentially take away some of the seriousness or gravity associated with major terrorist incidents. Zahra described

how “*people will like make fun out of it... They’d make jokes out of it and not necessarily like take it seriously*” (535-536). Relatedly, Mahnoor alluded to ways in which such use of humour in the social media could aid in normalisation of what could be understood (based on my theoretical understandings) as microaggressions. She described how “*Like, you have quite a lot of jokes about a lot of things, like everybody knows it's a joke, but the fact that they normalize it is wrong*” (555-557). She later reflected on her personal experience of ‘memes’ on the social media that stereotype Muslims as terrorists and explained:

“there’s quite a few memes where they’re... like he's about to like (blow up a bomb)... and they just make a joke out of it and it ridicules the religion and kind of makes a mockery of one's beliefs and I don't think that's fair... cuz... Yeah, I don't think that's fair at all and its quite bad that they're doing that” (Mahnoor, 599-602).

Qamar also reflected on major incidents such as 9/11 and described how humour is often used to portray these on social media:

“Now, that I think about it, I have seen like, jokes about the 9/11 bombings, I've seen talks about that on social media. I think it's less to do with the portrayal of Islam but more to do with the incident itself. And people make a lot of jokes about that. Which is, just unsavoury, I guess. But yeah, there's a lot about that as well. I see it on social media” (Qamar, 232-235).

He later explained that such portrayal “*doesn't exactly make me annoyed... but it's just... I'm just I guess... I'm just a bit disappointed because there's so many other things you can laugh*

about...” (237-238). Both Mahnoor and Qamar in their narrations, reflect a sense of displeasure with these negative expressions (in the social media). It also appears that the use of humour to communicate these expressions trivialises the extent of their adverse impact on those targeted.

Participants also related their experiences of comical memes on social media apps that portray Pakistani Muslims in a negative light. Ahmed described how he is increasingly noticing stereotypical memes about Pakistani British Muslims:

“So on some meme pages, like it would say, the typical Paki boy and then it shows four images that makes them up...There would be a picture of a skin fade, a picture of a BMW, a picture of a shisha lounge and it would say - this is your typical like... Pakistani British Muslim, or your typical Paki boy... Umm I see that quite a lot” (Ahmed, 198-201).

Here, it appears that the use of racialised terms such as ‘Paki boy’ which bear significant negative repercussions in offline contexts are normalised in the social media through humour.

Rahima explained how stereotypes and jokes about Islamic values and traditions from influential figures (in the media and social media) including politicians could have an impact on the views of the wider public. She emphasised how this could potentially legitimize further discriminatory and/or racist expressions towards people’s religious beliefs and traditions:

“Well, yeah I guess like Trump is an example. Boris Johnson is an example of like the negative like Boris Johnsons comment about women with like a niqab on... looking like a letterbox and things... so I think its because people so high up can say stuff like that, its opened up a door for everyone to be like, overtly racist”
(Rahima, 246-249).

Later, she also elaborated on the role such remarks may play in forming people’s views and determining their actions. For example, *“the way that like Boris Johnson says it like taking the Mickey out of someone for doing something like that and then...letting people think that they can do the same thing”* (Rahima, 252-254).

Some of the participants described how Muslims also (at times) find such portrayals amusing, which maybe misperceived by Non-Muslims leading them to think it is okay for them to do the same. When exploring the potential reasons for this, Mahnoor alluded to what could be understood as a means to distinguish the self from ‘the (perceived) other’ (discussed earlier in sub-theme 1.3). She said:

“Like obviously, this Muslim’s not going to be a terrorist and there’s no reason for them to be... So maybe making a joke about it shows that they’re not at all on the same page as someone who is radicalized” (Mahnoor, 620-622).

She later described how *“non-Muslims might get confused and think it’s okay to joke about certain things as well. And so I think that can act towards like normalizing like racism that Muslims may experience”* (779-781).

Rahima, however, found stereotypical cultural representations shared in the form of humour to “sometimes help people understand different cultures” (649). She referred to a social media channel called ‘the brown bar’ which she feels helps people in understanding (South) Asian culture:

“so it has like a help desk... so they'll show people coming in, they'll be like... Let's say for example a white guy comes in... he has an Indian girlfriend, and he's like, I've been with my girlfriend for four years, and she still hasn't told her parents about me. This sort of like stereotype about an Indian household, that sort of thing... Umm so like, I don't think it's necessarily always a bad thing when they portray stereotypes”
(Rahima, 650-655).

Participants also described their experiences of some of the more explicit forms of racism and discrimination based on their cultural and/or religious identities. In their narrations, some reflected on how negative social media constructions of Muslims or Asian/Pakistani Muslims influenced people’s attitudes towards them. Zahra related a recent incident where she felt discriminated based on (what could be understood as) certain preconceived ideas regarding her religious and/or cultural affiliation. She explained:

“I went to Asda with one of my friends the other day and we were walking around the aisles, but we weren't necessarily getting stuff. We were just looking around to see what we're going to get and then you can see a guard just eyeing us down like we're trying to steal or something and I feel like there was other people in the shop that was doing the same thing... But they weren't necessarily looking at them... just me and my friends. So, it was me and one of my black friends and they were just like, after us and

not other people in the shop... Like they just thought we're trying to steal something when we weren't, we were just walking around looking what to buy... So it's like people do treat you differently” (Zahra, 136-144).

She later explained how she made sense of this experience:

“So what I took from the situation is that they didn't really know us so didn't see what we was doing... They just saw us as a Pakistani and black girl and like just thought we'd be up to something wrong even if we weren't really doing anything” (Zahra, 156-158).

Similarly, Ahmed related his experiences of racist abuse as a result of people viewing negatively and prejudging him for his appearance. He described how media (and social media) representations of someone like him who looked ‘visibly Muslim’ (such as having a beard) could be associated to some of what he experiences when he is *“out and about.... from some people... let's say I'm driving... from people on the street”* (102-104). He added further: *“in the last year I've had people shout, like, things at me”* (106). Some of these included offensive racial slurs such as *“Dirty Paki things like that”* (108).

As Ahmed began to make sense of his experiences, he described what could be interpreted as a sense of confusion as to why he was subjected to such expressions of hate. He said: *“I'm not too sure... not too sure... I do see like... people just get intimidated even if I'm smiling or you know not doing anything”* (350-351). Whilst attempting to make sense of such attitudes, Ahmed alluded to the role of dominant stereotypes that position Muslims (of South

Asian/Pakistani origin) as an intimidating outgroup, involved in violence and terrorism. He said:

“I don't know maybe they're just assuming like, they see a bearded Asian man with a rucksack going to uni on the tube and they associate it with I don't know... gang boy or something like that... terrorist! something like that” (Ahmed, 354-356).

As he reflected on his recent experiences (on public transport) of what could be interpreted as perceived discrimination, Ahmed described how *“even now when I'd go sit down in the tube on an empty seat and someone next to me would get up and move and go stand up... Umm not for any reason... I wouldn't say anything...”* (357-359). Upon further reflection, Ahmed described the impact such experiences have on his emotional wellbeing:

“they make me feel a bit rubbish really because it's like filing you like... not that I'm ever trying to portray any negative energy... It's always positives and like so I'll be smiling or something... like I'm mannered, like well mannered, and respectful... If I go sit down calmly or something, having someone just like see me and judge me based on my appearance and then decide to get up and move. It is a bit upsetting” (361-365).

Similar to Ahmed, Omair described how he feels *“people look down upon you”* (410) based on characteristics (including appearance, attire, accent etc.) that might identify you as Muslim or Pakistani Muslim. He described how *“what you wear, and maybe how you speak and the language you speak... sometimes that can... sometimes be misinterpreted or misrepresented”*

(408-409). Omair also alluded to experiencing (what could be interpreted as) perceived discrimination based on stigmatisation of Muslim appearance and attire. He said:

“people choose to distance themselves from someone either wearing for example, like the long dress that males wear... shalwar kameez you could say... or a jubbah... We wear that let's say to the mosque and we put a hat on. It's seen as maybe signifying someone who has an association with Islam and Islam being portrayed as a very extremist, very violent religion” (Omair, 410-314).

The experiences shared by both Ahmed and Omair seem to suggest how visible aspects of the Muslim identity (such as appearance and attire) tend to be associated with negative constructions that position Muslims as an outgroup to be feared.

4.6 Super-ordinate theme 4: Processing and coping

As highlighted earlier, most participants' related multiple experiences of subtle and/or overt expressions of hate based on (what they perceived as) negative stereotyping of their religious or ethnic identities. As they related these experiences, many shared feelings of disappointment, annoyance and (in some instances) sadness in response to stereotypical representations of Muslims as the (perceived) 'other' (discussed in super-ordinate theme 1). This super-ordinate theme, titled, 'Processing and coping' explores how participants make sense of and cope with such experiences.

Most of the participants described how they had reached a level of acceptance by normalising expressions of racist and Islamophobic hate as ordinary phenomena in their everyday lives. For most of the participants, insight into (what they perceived as) determinants of negative

attitudes (against Muslims and Islam) appeared to be particularly important in making sense of these experiences. For some, greater in-group affiliation within the Muslim community appeared to mitigate the impact of difficult experiences. For others, shared spaces for mixing of cultures were seen as opportunities to portray Islam in a more positive light. The sub-themes selected in support of this super-ordinate theme therefore included, ‘Accepting undesirable emotions: *“just kind of used to it now”*’, ‘Exploring negative attitudes’ and ‘Cultures coming together: *“a melting pot”*’. A summary of these sub-themes with accompanying references (line numbered) from participant transcripts is presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Representation of super-ordinate theme 4

Super-ordinate Theme 4: Processing and coping		
Sub-theme	Participant	Line numbers
<u>Accepting undesirable emotions: <i>“just kind of used to it now”</i></u>	Mahnoor	581-583, 596-602, 604-608,
	Qamar	89-90, 94-96, 153-156, 220-224, 232-235, 237-239, 419-422, 443-445, 458-461, 477.
	Zahra	128-133, 161-162, 163-166, 172-175, 217-218, 248-252, 300-302, 321-323, 333-338, 539-544, 668-674, 686-688.
	Ahmed	108-109, 134-139, 140-143, 262-265, 361-365, 365-368, 413-418.
	Rahima	160-164, 262-263, 264-268, 283-285, 287-290, 695-697, 705-706.
	Omair	266-272, 288-290, 292-293, 422-432.
	Mahnoor	207-209, 236-237, 407-413, 426-430, 505-511, 868-870, 930-933, 935-939.

<u>Exploring negative attitudes</u>	Qamar	81-86, 98-101, 419-422, 458-461.
	Zahra	172-175, 224-225, 321-323, 402-407, 499-506, 566-569, 668-674, 686-688.
	Ahmed	101-102, 516-521, 632, 633-636, 638-640.
	Rahima	150, 153-154.
	Omair	197-202, 296-297, 597-602, 664-666.
<u>Cultures coming together: “a melting pot”</u>	Mahnoor	357-358, 407-413, 516-521.
	Qamar	207-210, 243-247, 250-254, 272-276, 291-294, 303-307, 317-318, 320-323, 351-354, 360-366, 371-373, 574-576.
	Zahra	410-412, 416-419, 624-630, 632-636.
	Ahmed	101-102, 181-190, 267-270, 451-462, 475-483, 489-496, 500-502, 504-507, 509-511, 516-520, 631-636.
	Rahima	562-566, 708-716.
	Omair	299-302, 457-458, 504-512, 536-537, 566-568, 569.

4.6.1 Sub-theme: Accepting undesirable emotions: “just kind of used to it now”

All participants were united in their experience of undesirable emotions following subtle and explicit expressions of racism and hate. Some participants reflected on their own experiences of being subjected to racist comments or abuse and others used examples of recent hate crimes against Muslims (more broadly). However, all alluded to what can be interpreted as processes of normalisation and acceptance in response to their undesirable (emotional) experiences. Qamar’s expression of being “*just kind of used to it now*” (89) is therefore used to represent this sub-theme.

Ahmed and Omair described their exposure to racialised social media representations of Muslims and Pakistani Muslims. In Ahmed's experience, such portrayals "*leave me feeling a bit... like bad for a little while and take like a bit of time to lift my mood back up again*" (264-265). Similarly, Omair described how he finds these portrayals to be "*very unfair and very sickening*" (272). Here, both Ahmed's and Omair's experiences, in response to negative portrayals of their religion, are seen to impact them on an emotional level.

Whilst describing her experience of undesirable emotions in response to social media commentaries regarding Muslims, Rahima made comparisons between attitudes of the older and younger generation. She said: "*when I see those, like people my age posting stuff and not really understanding then it just kinda like... frustrates me really... It's just a bit annoying*" (160-164). She later described how this is becoming a more everyday experience for her, where she feels annoyed but then lets go, attributing her undesirable emotional experience to the commenters' ignorance. This again seems to suggest a process of normalising and accepting undesirable experiences.

Qamar reflected on his experiences of racial abuse and said how these "*used to affect me a lot more... but I guess I'm just kind of used to it now. I'm sure that most... like most Muslims growing up are used to it by now*" (89-90). Here, Qamar seems to suggest how his experience of normalisation of negative expressions against his religious identity (in his view) could be a collective experience shared by Muslims more generally. Qamar alluded to a similar process of normalisation and subsequent acceptance when exposed to negative views and portrayals of Muslims and Islam (in the social media, more specifically) He said:

"Umm, like some of the views are like annoying but I guess I've got to the point

where I can accept something ignorant and I don't know... I just made peace with the fact that some people are ignorant... That if I focus on myself what I'm doing, it's a lot better than getting really annoyed at other people... So I'll accept that" (Qamar, 458-461).

Participants also reflected on their experiences outside of a social media context, where similar processes of normalisation and acceptance were noted. Zahra alluded to the Asda incident (highlighted earlier) that invoked undesirable emotions for her, which she had eventually learnt to normalise and accept. Zahra described how she *"didn't let it get to my head a lot because I know there's so many other worst cases that people go through"* (161-162). However, as she reflected on recent hate crimes against Muslims (including the east London acid attacks), she added:

"I get more angry than upset because people are not appreciating what other cultures and other ethnicities and religions do for them. They just, they just want to be racist, I guess and discriminate. They're just ignorant about what other people are doing" (Zahra, 686-688).

Ahmed described (more generally) how in recent years Britain has become more diverse and inclusive with the British public becoming more open and accepting towards minority ethnic and religious groups. However, he also added how *"People do still... are racist and there is still hate crime towards British Pakistanis and Muslims"* (134-135). When reflecting on his exposure to racial slurs like *"Dirty Paki"* (108), Ahmed spoke openly about the distress he had experienced at the time and how he *"didn't retaliate or say anything back. I just ignored"* (108-109). Ahmed also described how a recent rise in hate crimes against Muslims

in U.K. (and other western countries) have impacted his everyday life, where he now feels more apprehensive especially when going out with his family and younger siblings. He explained:

“whenever I'm out with my mum or with my youngest siblings... because I'm the oldest, I'm always aware and I'm always wary... I'm always watching people, seeing if... if it's all safe and stuff and that's just become habit for me... like that's just my life... that's just like... that's just how I live my life now” (Ahmed, 136-139).

Here, Zahra and Ahmed seem to suggest that even if they are not directly subjected to hate crimes themselves, incidents of other Muslims being targeted has implications for their emotional wellbeing and (in some respects) the way they lead their lives.

4.6.2 Sub-theme: Exploring negative attitudes

In making sense of their undesirable experiences (described in the previous sub-theme), all participants explored the reasons for negative attitudes towards their religious and ethnic identities. Participants described lower education, poverty and a lack of exposure to diverse cultures as key determinants in the formation of negative attitudes towards Muslims and/or Pakistani Muslims. This sub-theme therefore focuses on ‘Exploring negative attitudes’ that participants described as being central to their processing of undesirable experiences.

As Mahnoor attempted to make sense of racist attitudes towards Muslims, she explained:

“I think the more educated you are the more you become aware of what either religion means and you need to respect each religion to its own and you know... Like for example, like that stereotypes aren't necessarily correct and aren't necessarily... um about every one... That you can't really say one stereotype for the entire, for everyone in the entire religion” (Mahnoor, 426-430).

Similarly, in her exploration of negative attitudes regarding Islamic teachings, Zahra suggested: *“Hmm. I feel like it just depends on the person, like if they wanna, if they're educated enough to know, like, the teachings and like everything” (224-225).* Here, both Mahnoor and Zahra seem to be involved in similar processes of sense making. There appears to be a shared sense of (what could be understood as) rationalisation of negative attitudes that could help explain why people act in ways that may be racist and/or discriminatory towards Muslims.

Alongside educational level, participants also referred to upbringing and home environment as other key factors in attitude formation. As Rahima reflected on some of her recent experiences of microaggressions in the social media, she suggested:

“Like, I understand where they're coming from because everyone has different experiences” (150) and “like their family, treat people differently or they've just had like their own perceptions of Muslims because of the people they grew up with” (Rahima, 152-153).

Here, Rahima seems to be utilising what appears to be a process of reasoning (similar to Mahnoor's and Zahra's) to make sense of racist attitudes.

Ahmed alluded to the influential role of social media portrayals in determining racist attitudes, particularly in areas that lacked in diversity. He suggested:

“people will only really gain knowledge and make images of these kind of people through social media but they will never know that person until they meet them... So I feel like it does have a big role, especially in places that aren't really diversified, in forming perceptions” (Ahmed, 638-640).

In addition to education and lack of exposure to diverse cultures, some participants also described economic disadvantage as a significant factor in formation of negative perceptions and racist attitudes towards diverse ethnic and religious communities (including Muslims and Pakistani Muslims). As she reflected further on factors that may contribute to negative attitudes towards Muslims, Mahnoor explained:

“if I went to a school on like a council state, like a really rough area...and where the... for example, the wage isn't the minimum, like they're under the minimum wage and they're not very well educated... I think you would experience a lot more racism there...” (Mahnoor, 508-510).

Qamar found a general lack of awareness and understanding of eastern cultures as an important factor in the development of racist and discriminatory attitudes towards Muslims. He suggested:

“a lot of people fail to understand sometimes not all the time, but sometimes fail to understand Muslim culture and sort of the... because there is a lot of stuff that's different to Western culture... a lot of Muslim culture comes from the east. So a lot of people I think, fail to understand that. And then from that arises, sort of, it's not exactly hate, but because people, when people don't understand something, they sort of react badly to it... I don't know” (Qamar, 81-86).

4.6.3 Sub-theme: Cultures coming together: “a melting pot”

I selected ‘Cultures coming together: “a melting pot”’ as the final sub-theme to capture participants’ perspectives on (increasing) representation of ethnic and religious minorities in Britain. Most participants described a variety of contexts where this was advantageous to acceptance of their ethnic and religious identities as Pakistani Muslims. Omair described living in Britain *“like a melting pot, as they say where there are so many different cultures and groups... minority groups, religious people, people from all different faiths”* (566-568) and how *“it does have a positive effect on me”* (569). Similarly, Mahnoor described her hometown and university as being *“quite culturally diverse, and especially in medical school, we have so many Muslims and non-Muslims... so quite mixed”* (357-358).

Ahmed elaborated on his positive experiences associated with living and studying in a multicultural environment:

“my university is well cultured, really diversified and everyone's just accepting of everyone's different beliefs really. So, in that sense, my education hasn't really been affected everyone is treated equally in the university and I've noticed that all the lecturers, maybe teaching assistants and staff they're all, everyone's diversified. I've

never met... like I couldn't say there's any specific major dominance in terms of race or faith at my university” (Ahmed, 516-520).

Here, Ahmed seems to suggest that (increasing) representation of ethnic and religious minority students and staff across his university campus allows him to feel more accepted for his religious cultural beliefs and practices.

Similarly, Zahra explained how living and studying in a multicultural surrounding has allowed her to feel more accepted (for her ethnic and religious identity) and minimised her exposure to racist remarks or abuse:

“So, I also think it depends what kind of area you live in cuz some people are more racist depending on what area they're from and stuff like that. Like I said, the university... the university that I go to, and the area that I live in is very, like multicultural. So I haven't really experienced anything like that” (632-636).

For some of the participants, greater in-group affiliation with the Muslim community allowed them to feel more accepted and open towards sharing their religious values and beliefs. Participants also shared how interacting with other Muslims and Pakistani Muslims made them feel they were not alone in their experiences (particularly those of racism or Islamophobia). Qamar reflected on his positive experiences as a result of Britain becoming more diverse:

“I guess when I was a lot younger... like in year seven, Year 8...it's when I was maybe 11/12, there were... people were more ignorant then but I think, as I grew the

communities became more diverse and I started like... making friends with a lot more Muslims. So I think that's been... it's generally been positive for me as a student”
(Qamar, 207-210).

He later added how he now feels *“a lot more comfortable... I'm happy, surrounded by people who understand Pakistani culture and Islamic religion and beliefs. I'm a lot more... I think I'm able to express myself more freely, for sure”* (371-373). Similarly, when reflecting on the impact of negative expressions towards his religious identity, Omair suggested how the *“tipping point in overcoming those things was to surround myself with like minded people, and establishing a community with my friends who were Muslim”* (457-458). Both Qamar and Omair emphasised the importance of close relationships with other Muslims/Pakistani Muslims. Such relatedness with others sharing similar religious and/or ethnic identity seems to be important to developing a shared understanding of experience.

Contrarily, others like Zahra and Ahmed described how greater affiliation and connection with people outside of their ethnic/religious communities allowed them to feel more integrated and comfortable in sharing their religious views, customs and traditions. In Zahra's experience despite being the only Muslim in her peer group, she had received acceptance and respect for her religious values and traditions. She explained:

“I'm probably the only Muslim friend in my group of friends. So when I am praying, and when I am fasting and stuff like that, they take it to be a very positive thing cuz they know like... I'm doing it for like, a greater reason” (Zahra, 410-412).

Similarly, Ahmed alluded to a yearly South Asian cultural charity event he had been involved

in organising. He described how each year the event brings together people from different ethnicities including his “*white friends and black friends*” (555). In Ahmed’s experience:

“seeing everybody just in my culture where everyone was just loving it and having fun, and posting it everywhere on social media... like that was... that was a huge part of what made me more comfortable with my religion and culture” (457-459).

Here, Ahmed seems to suggest the importance of cultural mixing to develop a more positive image of ethnic minorities. There also appears to be an understanding of social media as an important channel for transmission of such images.

Some participants alluded to the role of Islamic and Pakistani societies (in universities across Britain) in spreading awareness and positive messages about Muslims and Pakistanis. Omair described how “*a positive would be the growth of like Islamic societies in universities today. They’ve become some of the largest societies in universities, I’d say, in my experience*” (536-537). Similarly, whilst recalling his experience of attending social events and gatherings (such as the ones in Ramadan) hosted by the Islamic society at his university, Ahmed explained how these “*weren’t restricted to people who are Muslims and I saw a lot of people who weren’t Muslims there...*” (504-505). He later described how events like these have made him “*more comfortable, really... it’s not just the university, the sort of... the people in the university itself... that makes it positive and comfortable* (509-511)”. These shared spaces for student mixing appear to facilitate an understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures and religions. It can be interpreted that such understanding may also allow people to develop more positive opinions and attitudes towards Muslims and Islam.

4.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have provided a detailed description of the findings from an IPA of the qualitative data gathered through six participant interviews. Ten sub-themes were identified and organised under four key super-ordinate themes. These included The ‘self’ and the (perceived) ‘other’, Understanding exposure and influence, Making sense of intersecting identities, Processes and coping. All sub-themes were supported with representative quotes from the participant transcripts. Tables were used to illustrate the contribution of each participant to the generation of individual sub-themes.

I began the chapter by presenting a contextual understanding of social media, relevant to the interpretation of the phenomenon under study. Participants’ experiences of social media in general including their nature and intensity of involvement were highlighted. This provided an important context for presentation and discussion of the key themes. Subsequently, an illustration of the key findings was presented. Followed by a detailed description of each key super-ordinate theme and its accompanying sub-themes.

For the first super-ordinate theme, I presented participant descriptions of their exposure to polarised (predominantly negative) social media representations of Muslims, which appeared to facilitate constructions of Muslims as the ‘other’. I also discussed participants’ efforts to withhold self-expression in response to negative portrayals of their religion in an attempt to separate themselves from the (perceived) ‘other’. In the second super-ordinate theme, I explored participants perspectives on what could be understood as the link between exposure and influence, relevant to understanding the role of social media in informing opinions and attitudes towards Muslims and Islam. The third super-ordinate theme focused on participants’ perspectives on the multiple intersections of their identity (skin colour, ethnicity, religion).

Here, I explored how participants made sense of their experiences as Muslims of Pakistani origin. In the final super-ordinate theme, I analysed participants' processes of rationalising and coping with the negative experiences associated with their identities as Muslims and/or Pakistani Muslims.

It is important to state that the write up of the analysis involved continuous revisiting of participant transcripts (alongside initial annotations) to capture the closest possible representation of their experiences. I also remained acutely aware of my own pre-conceptions and understandings on the subject. Hence, attempts were made to bracket these as much as possible through the use of reflexive journaling.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter highlights how the interpretation of findings (detailed in the previous chapter) led to an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of Pakistani Muslim HE students (in Britain) with regards to the dominant social media representations of Muslims and Islam. In keeping with its methodological considerations, the study reports on subjective processes of meaning making and experiences of a homogenous sample, as a foundation for further research inquiry (Smith et al., 2009). With that in mind, firstly, a detailed summary of key findings from the analytical process is presented. Subsequently, the research questions are discussed with reference to existing literature. Finally, the strengths, limitations, contributions and recommendations for future research are highlighted. The chapter ends in a presentation of implications and concluding comments.

5.1 Summary of key findings (in relation to existing literature)

An IPA of the collected data led to the development of four key super-ordinate themes (with ten accompanying sub-ordinate themes). These included: ‘The self and the (perceived) other’, ‘Understanding exposure and influence’, ‘Making sense of intersecting identities’ and ‘Processing and coping’. In the following sections, I draw upon the literature reviewed to discuss each of these key findings in turn.

5.1.1 The ‘self’ and the (perceived) ‘other’

The first key super-ordinate theme, ‘The self and the (perceived) other’ encompassed participant perceptions and experiences of polarized social media representations of Muslims and Islam. However, most found these to be predominantly negative in nature. This is in line with existing research on race and religion (in the media) which positions western media platforms to be heavily inclined towards broadcasting negative and problematic discourses

pertaining to ethnic and religious minorities (Silva, 2017). Several prominent authors have analysed negative media representations of Muslims through a range of conceptual frameworks across a variety of contexts. However, much of this research is focused on traditional media (e.g. Said, 1981; Poole, 2002; Aydin & Hammer, 2010; Ghauri et al., 2017; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Based on narratives of participants in the current study, it was interpreted that negative social media representations risk homogenising Muslims as an outgroup; with Muslim men having violent and extremist tendencies and women as limited and lacking in education and ambition. The literature reviewed also supports this finding. According to Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005), processes of homogenisation may lead Muslim men to be viewed as violent extremists and women as oppressed hijab wearers needing freedom from patriarchal oppression. Some of the participants in the current study also alluded to social media coverage of major terrorist attacks being used to justify such homogenised identities and prejudice all Muslims. Expressions of annoyance and frustration from participants were noted as they related these experiences. Alghamdi (2015) suggested how media's stance on issues involving Muslims and Islam ranged from simple suspicions to more explicit accusations of violence and terror.

Western media coverage of Islam has been heavily focused on portraying aspects that associate Islamic thought as violent and irrational and Muslims as rigid, extremist and backward (Poole, 2002). A unique finding of the current study was how participants withheld their self-expressions when exposed to similar negative representations and associated commentaries in the social media. Some described how they actively refrained from sharing their views on certain issues where they felt they could be seen to sympathise with radical or extremist ideologies. This appeared to manifest as efforts (both conscious and subconscious) to separate themselves (and their understandings of Islam) from those that were identified as

perpetrators of violence and extremism. Participants also reflected on aspects of their ethnic origin and nationality. Some made explicit references to the importance of their 'British identity' alongside their Pakistani roots and Islamic beliefs. A strong sense of belongingness to this identity was noted in the narratives of several participants. In some cases, however, this was accompanied by justifications to self and others, which appeared to result from insecurities on being questioned for their loyalty to British values. Such insecurities may be associated with the mainstream depictions of Muslims that position them as what Saeed (2007) termed, the 'alien other' associated with 'deviance' and 'un-Britishness'. According to O'Neill and Bird (2008) such processes of 'othering' in addition to criminalising the perpetrator(s) also perpetuate assumptions about their capacity to influence and radicalise other Muslims who may then indulge in extremist acts themselves (Poole, 2011). Thereby, creating an image of Islam as a dangerous religion hallmarked by radicalism and violence.

5.1.2 Understanding exposure and influence

The second super-ordinate theme, 'Understanding exposure and influence' was significant to gaining insight into participant perspectives on the potential link between social media exposure and influence. It also facilitated the interpretation of other key themes central to developing an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. Despite its increasing popularity and importance in people's day-to-day lives (as indicated in participant narratives) research on social media influence on public attitudes remains limited particularly in relation to racialised representations of ethnic and religious minorities (including Muslims). This could be associated with the constantly evolving nature and usage of social media platforms. Researchers often report methodological difficulties with regards to collection, management and analysis of the vast unstructured or loosely structured data that is characteristic to the social media (Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016).

Recent discourses in the area (however limited) suggest social media as an online amplifier of issues and debates that have existed across traditional media (Lilleker et al., 2011). The current study extends this existing body of literature and highlights the growing importance and influence of social media platforms (apps and websites) such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube etc. on people's opinions regarding Muslims and Islam (particularly where first-hand engagement with Muslims is limited). Another important aspect highlighted by many of the participants was how ease of anonymous sharing on the social media allowed the spread of misinformation and misrepresentation of diverse ethnic groups (particularly Muslims). It was interpreted that such misrepresentation could arguably result in the creation of a homogenised identity for all Muslims, which may manifest as hostile behaviours and attitudes towards Muslim communities.

Rane and Abdalla (2008) suggested media as being a society's key source of information about Muslims and Islam. They further described how a mass media version of Islam was emerging on the basis of recurrent associations to violence, terrorism and backwardness. In addition to Muslim representations, participants in the current study also described the power of social media in forming public attitudes and perceptions regarding individuals, groups and issues more generally. Jackson (2010) argued the importance of mass media (including news and entertainment sources) in informing people's attitudes, beliefs and actions. He further suggested this view to be most compelling when exploring media impact on young impressionable minds who may not have developed the capacity to differentiate fully, fantasy from reality. Participants in the study also alluded to the increasing discursive power of social media platforms like Twitter (more broadly) in the dissemination of information on important socio-political issues and debates. One participant used the phrase "a seed in the head that

grows” to describe social media’s power to influence thinking and beliefs. It can therefore be suggested that social media is a powerful vehicle for transmission of views and in turn development of attitudes on a variety of social issues and groups including racialised communities.

5.1.3 Making sense of intersecting identities

Participant accounts revealed how homogenisation of the Muslim Identity (as described earlier) could result in racist and Islamophobic experiences (both online and offline).

This finding is in line with previous studies (including those that predate 9/11; e.g. (Said, 1981; El-Farra, 1996) that highlight dominant media constructions of Muslims as the ‘other’ and the maintenance of these constructions to be associated with hate practices that embolden judgemental and prejudiced attitudes towards Muslims. The current study, similar to the studies reviewed (e.g. Saeed, 2007; Creutz, 2008; Poole, 2011; Colic-Peisker et al., 2016) also identified western media as being central to such mechanisms of othering.

This super-ordinate theme emphasises how participants make sense of such processes of homogenisation and othering by reflecting on the intersecting dimensions of their identities; ethnicity (Pakistani), skin colour (Brown) and religion (Islam). This key finding of the current study can be considered a particularly novel contribution to literature on the subject as it focuses exclusively on how participants experience these identity markers (and their interaction) in their lives as Pakistani Muslims (in Britain). Drawing upon the notion of intersectionality allows the elucidation of the meanings participants ascribe to their experience of being members of various groups, simultaneously (such as ethnic/religious etc.). By adopting an intersectional lens, it also becomes apparent how the multiple intersections of participant identities as ‘brown Muslims’ shape their subjective identities

which, as Crenshaw and Harris (2009) argue, make certain social groups more vulnerable to different forms of bias.

Participants of the current study also explained how their experience of being ‘Brown’, ‘Pakistani’ and ‘Muslim’ varied from that of Muslims with other ethnicities. It was suggested that media associations of Muslims (of South Asian and/or Pakistani origin) have a greater potential to influence public attitudes in a negative direction. These were also seen to be associated with anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistani sentiments; particularly against those with visibly identifiable (Muslim) characteristics such as a beard, veil or other Islamic clothing. In addition to some of the more explicit experiences of racism, participants were also seen to experience ‘microaggressions’ in the form of jokes/memes based on stereotypical representations of Muslims and Pakistani Muslims. Interestingly, many of the participants described having mixed responses to such portrayals, ranging from amusement to annoyance and frustration.

Despite the Nadal et al. (2012) examination of experiences of subtle and overt forms of Islamophobia amongst Muslim Americans, this area remains underdeveloped in academic literature. Their study found Muslims as common subjects of several forms of religious microaggressions, which included stereotypes related to terrorism as well as mocking representations of Muslims and the Islamic faith more broadly. This is in line with the findings of the current study whereby participants alluded to derogatory stereotypical portrayals of Muslims and Pakistani Muslims often concealed in the form of jokes and memes. Many participants also described how terrorist incidents from the last couple of decades including those that occurred in the U.K. (7/7 London underground, Manchester Arena and London Bridge attacks) are used as reference points for negative stereotyping of

Muslims. In turn leading to, what could be interpreted (based on participant accounts) as legitimisation of anti-Islamic sentiments and hate speech/crime towards British Muslims both online and offline.

5.1.4 Processing and coping

Exposure to online hate is often associated with feelings of anger, anxiety, depression as well as apprehension of future verbal intimidation or abuse (Awan, 2016). The final super-ordinate theme encompassed participants' descriptions of their processing and coping in relation to negative views and expressions of their ethnic and religious identities. All participants described experiencing undesirable emotions in response to such views and attitudes. Tyrer and Ahmad (2006) reported Muslims' experiences of verbal or physical abuse to result in feelings of sadness, disappointment and anger. As highlighted earlier, participants in the current study also experienced undesirable emotions in response to negative attitudes against their religion. However, novel insights were gained through an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective processes of meaning making and coping with these undesirable emotional experiences.

Most participants suggested a general lack of awareness, lower educational attainment and economic disadvantage as the key factors contributing to hateful attitudes towards ethnic and religious minorities. This process of sense making appeared to facilitate participants in understanding and dealing with their experiences of racism and hate. Despite there being a dearth of literature exploring the formation of such attitudes in relation to Muslim identities, some studies have highlighted that lower skilled/lower educated natives are more likely to have discriminatory attitudes towards ethnic minorities who they view as their competitors in access to resources (Scheve & Slaughter, 2001; Rustenbach, 2010). Even though such an

exploration of hateful attitudes facilitated the participants (of the current study) in processing and coping with their subtle and overt experiences of racial hatred and abuse, it (arguably) manifests as finger pointing of one marginalised and/or oppressed group towards another. These issues are therefore more complicated than they appear.

In describing their processing and coping of discriminatory and racist sentiments, many participants also alluded to their experience as students in British universities. Several studies conducted in western countries including the U.K. have found students from diverse ethnic backgrounds to be under-represented in prestigious educational institutions (Modood, 2012; Boliver, 2016; Mirza & Meeto, 2018). Despite increasing diversity across western societies leading to Muslim students becoming more visible on western university campuses, little attention has been given to identify and accommodate their unique needs (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Boliver, 2016) with some Muslim students attending higher education in Britain utilising contradictory discourses to construct their university campuses as simultaneously “diverse and tolerant and discriminatory and exclusionary” (Hopkins, 2011, p.1).

Many of the participants in the current study, however, described their universities as being inclusive with an openness towards making campuses more suited to the needs of students from a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. Some participants also described how creating and sharing multicultural spaces on campus facilitated an understanding of important differences amongst individuals and groups. This in turn allowed participants to feel more accepted and included. It has been argued that individuals from ethnic minority groups have a greater likelihood to endorse multiculturalism more strongly (as compared to the majority group) and ideas of assimilation and acculturation less strongly (Verkuyten, 2005; Verkuyten, 2011).

5.2 Discussion of research questions

Through this study, I aimed to gain an in depth understanding of the lived experience of six Pakistani Muslim HE students in relation to the dominant social media portrayals of Muslims and Islam. Being a Pakistani Muslim HE student in Britain myself provided a useful yet challenging vantage point to examine participant experiences in relation to this phenomenon. I was therefore compelled to explore the similarities and differences in experience and thought of others who shared similar identity markers as myself. With a view to developing an insight into how individuals made sense of their experiences pertaining to the phenomenon under study, I developed two research questions:

1. How do Pakistani Muslim higher education students in Britain view the dominant social media representations of Muslims and Islam?
2. How may the social media portrayals of Muslims and Islam be relevant to the lived experience of Pakistani Muslim higher education students in Britain?

In this section, I explore these questions by utilising the findings of the study (summarised above) and the literature reviewed. The key issues relevant to this exploration are presented and discussed.

5.2.1 Variations in exposure: The ‘positive’, the ‘negative’ and the ‘comical’

Research focusing on media representation of Muslims and Islam, particularly in the last few decades has focused largely on the more traditional media such as news and television (Baker et al., 2013). Until recently, studies examining this phenomenon in the social media remained limited (Evolvi, 2018) with the Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) study on ‘Muslims in social media discourse’ being the first of its kind. 2018 however, saw a surge in studies examining representations of Muslims and Islam in the media (including social media) however, these

appeared limited in scope. Although the portrayal of Islam in social media was found to be wide ranging, most of the empirical research reviewed indicated a proliferation of negative constructions of Muslims and Islam (Hashmi et al., 2020). All participants in the current study described being exposed to a range of social media representations regarding Muslims and Islam, making their experience quite varied. The most dominant ones, as expressed within participant narratives were, however negative in nature and resulted in Muslims being misrepresented. Participants alluded to the negative representations as being largely associated with extremism and terrorism and the positive ones, to be a result of people's interaction with followers of Islam or a result of positive role modelling by social media influencers. Another category of representations illuminated within participant accounts was that of comical representations. Many participants described how such portrayal of Muslims ridicules the religion and makes a mockery of Islamic beliefs and tradition. Some found such comical representations to be amusing yet unpleasant whereas others felt such responses from Muslims themselves could be misunderstood and legitimise people (particularly non-Muslims) to think it is acceptable to take amusement out of comical racialised portrayals of Muslims and Islam.

The negative constructions

All participants alluded to the dominant representations of Muslims being heavily inclined towards beliefs of Islam as a religion of violence and extremism. Participants also suggested how stereotypes, which have existed in the media or otherwise are being disseminated with greater ease on social media platforms. Social media with its power of influence, is increasingly being recognised as an online amplifier reinforcing social structures and dialogues that have perpetuated within the traditional media (Lilleker et al., 2011). Evolvi (2018) found exposure to anti-Islamic views and representations of Muslims as backward,

extremist and violent (in the social media) to be associated with an increase in Islamophobic discourses and attitudes offline. Participants in the current study described how terrorist attacks in the last couple of decades including 9/11 and 7/7 have led to an increase in the construction and transmission of negative images of Muslims and Islam. Others suggested how such terrorist events where perpetrators were identified as Muslims exacerbated the negativity associated with the religion and its followers. Social media on the whole was also described by many as a vehicle of information sharing that has a tendency to prematurely perpetuate ideas that lead to assumptions and allegations based on the religion and/or ethnicity of the perpetrator(s) of extremism.

Most participants described how appearing to be Muslim (e.g. having a beard, wearing hijab etc.) is seen to suggest rigidity and extremism. Such attitudes could potentially risk positioning Muslims as the 'other', which according to Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) may lead to perceptions of Muslims as a homogeneous outgroup involved in conflict, violence, extremism and terrorism. Participants in the current study also found transmission of such ideas across the social media to exaggerate stereotypes regarding Muslims and Islam that have prevailed across other types of media. Some explained how influential social media platforms (such as Twitter) are central to the perpetuation of anti-Muslim stereotypes, whereby visible Muslim characteristics such the presence of a beard or religious clothing is stigmatised often in the form of speculations regarding the ethnicity and/or religion of the perpetrators (of violent crimes).

Many of the participants also alluded to the gendered nature of stereotypes regarding Muslims in the social media. In relating their experiences of those pertaining to Muslim

women, some described how a common stereotype of a Muslim woman positions her as submissive and in need of rescuing from patriarchy. Similarly, some participants alluded to negative public attitudes regarding something as personal and seemingly non-threatening as a headscarf or ‘hijab’ worn by many Muslim women across the world. Recent studies (e.g. Törnberg & Törnberg, 2016; Ittefaq, 2018; Evolvi, 2018) found a significant proportion of anti-Islamic views to suggest the wearing of ‘hijab’ as a symbol of rigid beliefs and gender based discrimination. However, these studies also reported how a vast majority of Muslim women on the social media who wear a ‘hijab’, follow the Islamic tradition by choice not force and do not consider themselves to be suffering from patriarchal oppression. In the social media, one of the primary motivations for users to have ‘discussions on hijab’ is to draw attention to Islam as a religion of patriarchal oppression against women (Baulch & Pramiyanti, 2018).

Despite a recent upsurge of research on Muslim representations in the social media, there has been a profound lack of empirical research focusing on participants from some of the key countries that are subjected to widespread racism and Islamophobia e.g. Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq etc. (Hashmi et al., 2020). All participants in the current study reflected on their multiple intersecting identities. Most participants also alluded to their experiences as “brown Muslims” with many describing how people associate intersection of male gender with brown skin colour and the presence of a beard with Islamic extremism. In recent years the concept of intersectionality has been widely utilised across academic literature to address the question of how different dimensions of identity and inequality (including gender, race, disability, social class etc.) are inter-related (Gillborn, 2015). It also allows us to identify how simultaneous membership of many groups (e.g. ethnic, religious, social etc.) can increase ones vulnerability to several forms of bias and discrimination (Crenshaw & Harris, 2009). All

participants described how the social media increasingly publicised Brown or South Asian (particularly Pakistani) Muslims as instigators of violence and extremism. Some also shared how the social media highlights characteristics such as ethnicity, skin colour and religion etc. where Muslims or South (Asians) are (thought to be) involved in acts of violence and terror. This in turn was considered by many to have the potential to initiate prejudiced attitudes towards the whole community based on one person's actions.

Participants in the current study also made comparisons between Muslims of varying ethnicities (e.g. South Asian, East Asian, and African) and how some, particularly those with brown skin colour (as in the case of Pakistani Muslims) carry significant stigma in relation to extremism and terrorism both in the media and societies in general. Some of the participants shared examples of occurrences such as the Rotherham incidents involving grooming and sexual abuse of young girls and described how such incidents are sometimes used as a reference point to misperceive and prejudge Muslims of Pakistani origin. It was also evident in participant narratives how such references led to a proliferation in Islamophobic hate and abuse and its subsequent normalisation. In recent times, several studies have examined anti-Muslim perspectives using a variety of conceptual tools. However, those focusing on Islamophobic attitudes in the social media remain limited in scope (Evolvi, 2018). Some recent studies on the subject have indicated how western users of social media through their comments, posts and campaigns have facilitated the development of a one-sided view of Islam, which in turn leads to the construction of a homogenised stereotypical identity for all Muslims (Farkas et al., 2018). In addition to extremism and terrorism, some participants also alluded to other common stereotypes particularly those of Pakistani Muslims in Britain that situated them as less educated or having limited financial resources. However, it was felt that

this stereotype has become less prevalent now, due to an increase in Pakistani students pursuing higher education and becoming more visible in sought after professions.

Seeking out the positives

Most research on representation of Muslims in the social media has originated in the west and focused largely on the negative experiences of minoritised Muslim communities. Some recent studies (e.g. Saany et al., 2015; Abu Hatab, 2016; Kadir et al., 2018; Husein & Slama, 2018; Harris & Isa, 2019) have highlighted the role of social media in educating people on Islamic ethics and values and in doing so, created a more positive image of Islam. Much of this research, however, has generated from east Asian countries like Indonesia and Malaysia (Hashmi et al., 2020). In the current study, despite there being a dominance of references to negative representations in participant narratives some examples of ‘positive portrayals’ were also noted. One of the participants described how some stereotypes position Pakistanis as ambitious and hardworking. Other participants alluded to their experiences of positive social media representations of black and minority ethnic people seen as heroes for the NHS in the COVID-19 pandemic. There was also shared sense of social media being an important source for challenging negative stereotypes and misinformation regarding racialised groups through positive commentary and role modelling by the younger generations. Such engagement with the social media was found to shift the prevailing beliefs that rely heavily on a homogenised version of Muslim identity. Islamic beliefs and practices are increasingly being viewed by the younger users of social media, to be of a personal rather than collective nature (Kadir et al., 2018). This could facilitate in challenging the ‘assumption of homogeneity’ (Nadal et al., 2012) towards the emergence of a more individual version of Islam.

Some users of the social media portray Islam in a positive manner, however, some others strategically represent Islam in a manner that fuels anti-Islamic sentiments and Islamophobic hate (Awan, 2016). Most participants in the current study struggled to identify and share examples of positive representations of Muslims and Islam in the social media. Some however, alluded to the role of Muslim social media influencers and celebrities in promoting positive representations and challenging the widespread negative imagery of Islam and its followers. There was a shared sense that social media serves an important purpose in raising important issues highlighting the struggles and needs of minoritised individuals and groups. There was also a collective sense that social media has a central role in creating awareness regarding Islamophobia and the positive role played by Muslim influencers in this regard. Previous research has found Muslim scholars and preachers running Islamic blogs, Twitter groups and Facebook Pages to support in delivery of comprehensive information on Islamic concepts and practices (on social media) in order to challenge some of the common misconceptions about Muslims and Islam, which may in turn allow non-Muslims to develop a better understanding of the true Islam (Mohamad, 2017; Hashmi et al., 2020).

Using humour to stereotype

Lockyer and Pickering (2008) argued how racism in the form of humour “not only permits but can also legitimate and exonerate a racist insult” (p.811). Thereby creating a social, cultural and political context for shared laughter. Zimbardo (2014) analysed various forms of comedy following the War on Terror and found it to be associated with a rise in Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments. Many of these comical representations pre-dated 9/11, both in the media and in literature (on colonialism). Despite some post 9/11 studies on the use of humour to convey racisms and Islamophobia, academic literature on the use of humour in this regard, remains largely under-studied. All participants shared various examples of exposure

to stereotypical portrayals of Muslims illustrated as comical memes on a variety of social media platforms (particularly Instagram). A meme can be described as an idea or expression communicated for humorous purposes via the internet and social media platforms (Phillips & Milner, 2017).

The use of racialised (comical) memes, particularly those described by some participants (as highlighted earlier) can be seen as covert forms of racist or discriminatory expressions towards Muslims and Pakistani Muslims. The term 'microaggressions' is used to describe such exchanges that reflect derogatory attitudes towards individuals based on their membership to certain social groups. These can be intentional or unintentional (Sue, 2010). Nadal et al. (2010) extended the concept of microaggressions to include religious aspects. They suggested 'religious microaggressions' as "subtle behavioural and verbal exchanges (both conscious and unconscious) that send denigrating messages to individuals of various religious groups" (p. 297). Participants in the current study also suggested how humour tends to 'normalise' which may otherwise be deemed inappropriate. Participants' experiences of racial and religious microaggressions (in the social media) that make a mockery of Islamic beliefs and practices were found to result in feelings of annoyance and frustration.

Some participants also expressed undesirable feelings such as annoyance and disappointment in relation to their personal experiences of microaggressions in the social media. There was also a shared sense that making jokes about major incidents such as the 9/11 or 7/7 (and the likes) can mislead people into thinking that such behaviour is permissible and acceptable. Anger and disappointment were evident in participant narratives particularly in response to comical representations of Muslims' involvement in acts of violence and terror. This finding is in line with the Nadal et al. (2012) study that found Muslims (in America) to be subjected to a

range of religious microaggressions; ranging from pathologization of their religion, subtle and overt references to terrorism and mocking representations of their beliefs.

With widening use of the social media, such microaggressions based on humour appear to have become more commonplace. Islamophobic stereotypes have emerged as a new category of religious microaggressions which involve instances of people making fun of Islam using hurtful language to tease its followers (Nadal et al., 2010). In addition to mocking portrayals of Muslims in general, some participants in the current study also alluded to comical representations of Pakistani Muslims. Participants described their experiences of stereotypical social media posts regarding Pakistani Muslims in Britain. One of the participants alluded to memes (on social media) that illustrate stereotypical images of the ‘typical’ Pakistani boy/man leading to the construction of a homogenised identity. Such portrayals were experienced as humorous but at the same time quite derogatory towards Pakistani Muslims. It is therefore, becoming increasingly important to combat such subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination that may directly or indirectly cause hurt and distress to those targeted (Hashmi et al., 2020).

5.2.2 From ‘exposure and impact’ to ‘processing and coping’

Most participants in the current study described experiencing negative emotions in response to subtle and explicit expressions of discrimination and racial bias, both online and offline. Many also explained how social media content and commentaries particularly those that promoted negative constructions of Muslims led to undesirable feelings for them. Samari et al. (2018) found racial discrimination to be related to unfavourable mental health outcomes. In describing the impact of such experiences, all participants in the current study suggested

how they had learnt to accept discrimination and racisms as a normal aspect of their lives. Participants were also found to normalise their experiences of explicit discrimination (illustrated earlier) and explained how they continually compared these to racist hate of greater severity that others endured. This process of rationalisation and subsequent normalisation was evident in the narratives of many participants. Normalisation can be understood as a gradual process that involves viewing as acceptable, ways of thinking and behaving, previously understood to be objectionable (Krzyżanowski, 2020).

Many of the participants appeared to facilitate this process of normalisation through their sense making of negative attitudes held against their religion and its followers. Education and social class were frequently cited as the key factors in development of such attitudes. Kuppens and Spears (2014) argued that the relationship between education and prejudice was more complex than commonly understood. In their view, it does not reflect substantial differences in prejudice held but instead only reflects differences in whether or not someone chooses to express their prejudice or not. Relatedly, the widespread belief of White working class individuals as victims of minoritised ethnic groups has been sustained over decades through political commentaries and perpetuated within media discourses (Gillborn, 2010).

Additionally, participants also shared personal examples of explicit forms of racist attitudes with many explaining how being in diverse surroundings limited their exposure to such forms of racisms. Participants, however, struggled to delineate the experiences, which they perceived as being a direct result of negative constructions regarding Muslims and Islam (in the social media) from those stemming from prejudice in general. Nevertheless, most participants alluded to the power of social media in formation of attitudes, particularly in

areas that lacked (ethnic and/or religious) diversity. There was also a collective sense amongst the participants of the crucial role social media plays in forming perceptions in such areas. Glaeser, (2005) argued how even reasonable individuals are more open and sympathetic to hostile attitudes when they are less informed about minority groups and their experienced struggles.

Experiences of racism and hate

Racisms (both implicit and explicit) embedded within social systems are an ordinary experience for many people of colour particularly those that comprise minority groups (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). The recurring nature of such experiences in the lives of most participants (in the current study) had led them to normalise and accept these as everyday occurrences. This could be interpreted as a form of processing and coping of undesirable emotional experiences in relation to prejudice towards their racial and religious identities. My interpretation of participants' experiences of racism and hate as 'undesirable emotional experiences' was perhaps in part (implicitly) informed by my own normalisation of racialised expressions and attitudes directed towards my identity as a Muslim of Pakistani origin.

Participants also shared instances where they perceived themselves as subjects of discriminatory and racist attitudes. Perceived discrimination can be understood as a social stressor (personal or institutional) which may be intentional or unintentional but leads to suspicion and mistrust and in turn impacts the wellbeing of those targeted (Straiton et al., 2019). As a result of perceived discrimination, some participants described what could be interpreted as increased vigilance that had become a part of their everyday experience. One

participant explained how scanning his surroundings for danger to ensure they are safe for him and his significant others has become a normal part of his life. Rippy and Newman (2008) in a study with Muslim Americans found a significant association between perceived religious discrimination and subclinical paranoia. Muslims often report feelings of fear and apprehension regarding their safety and that of their loved ones, particularly following news stories of violent attacks perpetrated under the name of Islam (Haque et al., 2019).

All participants described instances based on what appears to be a homogenisation of their identities as Muslims or Pakistani Muslims. Evident within participant narratives were experiences that appeared to stem from processes of racialisation of their identities as Muslims of Pakistani origin. To understand these processes it is important to draw upon Fanon's (1986) postcolonial understandings of 'racialisation' as 'dehumanization' of one who is deemed 'different'. and Omi and Winant's (1986) description of racialisation as the attachment of racial meaning or attributes to a previously racially uncategorised social group or practice, which appear to facilitate the construction of a homogenised identity for all Muslims.

Reducing individuals to homogenised racial categories (through processes of racialisation) can undermine efforts towards multiculturalism and social justice for disenfranchised communities (Hage, 1998). The media also appear to facilitate such mechanisms of homogenisation, which may in turn inform public attitudes towards minority groups. Oboler (2016) revealed frequent western media depictions of Muslims as terrorists, rapists and a threat to the western way of life. Similarly, Awan (2016) found a large proportion of online hate messages that targeted Muslims and Islam. Most participants in the current study alluded

to their discomfort with social media posts involving negative portrayals of their religion and its followers. These experiences were found to result in feelings of anger, sadness, frustration and disappointment for participants in the current study.

According to Rattansi (2005) “Racism is never simply racism but always exists in complex imbrication with nation, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality” (p.296). In addition, exposure to racist social media posts/commentaries may lead to an internalisation of racist beliefs, which may in turn manifest as derogatory comments or abuse, online and offline (Ben-David and Fernández, 2016). Participants in the current study also described their exposure to hateful comments and portrayals regarding the intersectional nature of their identities as Pakistani Muslims. Some participants were also found to experience significant distress associated with verbal abuse and overt expressions of hate in the form of racial slurs such as ‘Dirty Paki’. Many participants described opting for silence and not retaliating to such expressions, despite the distress they brought up for them.

Several studies and media reports have documented the widespread discrimination and rise in racially motivated hate crimes towards Muslims, particularly since the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent wars on terror (Rippy & Newman, 2008). Most participants in the current study alluded to the rise in hate crimes to be associated with the widespread negative constructions of Muslims and Islam (based on their presumed involvement in terrorism and violence). One participant described how it hurts him to see how his fellow Muslims are victimised by racial violence and hate crimes. Whilst reflecting on media reports on recent hate crimes against Muslims in Britain, some of the participants also described feeling more angry than upset due to a lack of appreciation of the contributions made by ethnic minorities (in the NHS and

otherwise). Gillborn (2010) argued how minoritised migrant communities in the U.K., who are often victims of racist violence themselves, are positioned as the cause of conflict and, therefore, needing to be controlled. Such arguments can ultimately legitimise exclusionary practices through harsh immigration policies that target Black and South Asian communities (Simpson & Finney, 2009).

Stigmatisation of the 'visibly Muslim'

Appearance and attire (such as beards, veils etc.) for many Muslims are key markers that help them in constructing their identities as Muslims. These visible identifiers have continued to feature negatively in the mass media and invited widespread curiosity and concern amongst Non-Muslims in the West (Rehman & Hanley, 2021). In western countries with predominantly White populations, it is believed (on a conscious or subconscious level) that there is something peculiar or fundamentally 'wrong' about the ways in which those from diverse ethnic and religious groups appear and dress (Nadal et al., 2010). Some participants reflected on their experiences regarding the 'visible' aspects of their religious identities. One participant described his experience of being prejudged as being a terrorist or gang boy whilst carrying a rucksack on his way to university, merely due to his (South) Asian ethnicity and a beard. Another participant expressed how such instances are a form of ethnic profiling on the basis of 'difference' in terms of what a person wears, how they speak, what the colour of their skin is, etc. Difference in such contexts can be seen to embody a deviation from the presumed 'normal'. It is also important to note here that difference does not signify all differences but those that within prevailing debates, are seen as "deviant or deficient" (Burman 2003, p.4).

Such experiences based on appearance and attire do not appear to be limited to Muslim men alone. A study conducted by Haque et al. (2019) found Muslim women to be frequent subjects of stares when wearing their 'hijabs' in public. The women interviewed, perceived the stares as intentional expressions of discomfort and hate directed towards their appearance. One participant in the current study expressed her annoyance at people's attempts to categorise her into what could be understood as a 'specific type of Muslim woman' based on appearance, attire, level of religiosity or lifestyle choices. In her experience, when someone has met a Muslim different to her, she is subjected to speculation that she deliberately tries to avoid and ignore as it invokes negative feelings for her.

Making sense of negative attitudes

As they made sense of their experiences of perceived discrimination and racisms, most participants reflected on the role of social class, education and exposure to diverse cultures in the formation of attitudes towards ethnic and religious minorities. Middle-class families are better placed to provide support for their children to access higher education leading to enhanced employment opportunities (Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Reay et al., 2005). On the other hand, working-class families with limited means often struggle to provide the support their children require in order to access and complete higher education that enhances their employment prospects (Al-deen, 2019). All participants in the current study came from middle class families with adequate support and financial means to pursue higher education at prestigious British universities. In making sense of negative attitudes pertaining to their religion and its followers, many alluded to lower educational attainment and higher levels of economic disadvantage. According to Jackman and Muha, (1984) those educated to a higher level might just be more skilled at expressing themselves without appearing to be prejudiced. Similarly, Crandall and Eshleman (2003) argue how assumed differences between the

educated and less educated do not reflect actual differences in prejudice but instead differences in whether or not people choose to express or act on their prejudice. According to Kuppens and Spears (2014), this relationship between education and prejudice could be better understood in terms of wanting to appear socially desirable (more evident amongst the higher educated) rather than internal attitudes.

Alongside educational factors, some participants also alluded to differences in social class and suggested economic disadvantage as central to attitude formation regarding minoritised ethnic and religious groups. One participant described how people who live on council estates, particularly those who are less educated and exposed to diverse views and cultures are more likely to be overtly racist or discriminatory towards ethnic and religious minorities. Class differences constitute the basic fabric of societies and exaggerate disparities in power and influence (Liu, 2011) with some being above and some below others (Trott & Reeves, 2018). Several critical race authors argue how such differences of class are used to support the 'What about poor White people?' argument (Allen, 2009). They argue how both middle class and working-class White groups benefit from a shared identity of privilege. Arguably, this shared identity is promoted in nationalist political commentaries that serve to mobilise working class individuals to compete with ethnic minorities for access to resources (Gillborn, 2010). In addition to educational level and socio-economic factors, there was a shared sense of upbringing and home environment as other important factors in attitude formation. Some participants also described how this understanding of attitude formation particularly in relation to people's upbringing and exposure (in terms of prejudice and racism) facilitated them in rationalising their experiences of racist abuse and hate.

Several participants also perceived those with lower educational attainment and a lack of exposure to diverse cultures to be more easily influenced by the social media (particularly) in relation to portrayals of ethnic and religious minorities. There was a shared sense amongst the participant group that people who are not as exposed to diverse individuals and communities are more likely to gain knowledge and construct images of these communities through the social media. It was therefore evident that participants viewed social media influence as being a powerful agent in forming perceptions especially in places that lack in racial diversity. Similarly, participants also suggested how some people on the social media, particularly those who are less educated believe what is being shared without verifying the authenticity of the source, which was in turn seen to confirm pre-existing biases regarding Muslims and Islam. Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) found negative social media portrayal of Muslims and associated hateful commentaries to reinforce the pre-existing biases that have prevailed across the more traditional media (news, television etc.).

Embracing diversity

When reflecting on the importance of diversity particularly in relation to acceptance and inclusion of minority groups, many participants alluded to their experiences on the university campus. Most participants described how there was a greater acceptance of Muslims in communities and settings with higher ethnic and religious diversity. One participant identified himself to be part of what he perceives as “a melting pot” of several groups of people with varying cultures, religions and other affiliations. He described how being in such a surrounding has a positive effect on him. Similarly, some participants found living in multicultural surroundings (on campus and at home) as one of the main reasons for not being subjects of overt racism based on their religious and cultural identities.

Most studies focusing on diverse ethnic and religious students experiences of western university campuses have originated in the US (e.g. Cabrera et al., 1999; Morrow et al., 2000; Edirisooriya & Mclean, 2003). They highlight students experiences of widespread discrimination and racial harassment within classrooms and student residences as well as prejudiced attitudes from faculty members and campus administrations more broadly (Johnson, 2003). Participants in the current study, however, described their university campuses as being inclusive and sympathetic towards the needs of diverse ethnic and religious students. Some participants also described their universities as being quite culturally diverse, accepting and accommodating towards the religious beliefs and cultural practices of students.

Some of the participants in the current study perceived greater in-group identification with their fellow Muslims as an important factor in mitigating the impact of negative experiences based on their ethnic and religious identities. One participant made comparisons between his life at school and at university; the latter making him feel a lot more comfortable with his expressions of religion and culture. He also described feeling happy, surrounded by people who understood Pakistani culture and Islamic beliefs. It was evident in his sharing that this made him a lot more comfortable to express himself more freely. Similarly, another participant described how ‘the tipping point’ in overcoming his experiences of racial abuse was to establish a greater sense of community with other Muslims. Group identification is an “important factor affecting a person’s readiness to use a social category for self-description” (Verkuyten, 2011, p. 343). The understandings gained through shared identity and experience appear to mitigate against cultural threats (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

On the other hand, some participants described how increased contact and affiliation with people different to them in ethnicity or religion allowed them to feel more integrated and open to sharing their cultural and religious identities. One participant described how despite being one of the only Muslims in her social circle, she felt accepted and open to sharing her religious and cultural values. According to Glaeser, (2005) racial integration and cultural mixing could prevent the spread of misconceptions and hatred, as a result of people being more correctly informed. Clive (2012) suggested how white individuals who live amongst racially diverse communities are likely to be more informed about the cultural and religious traditions of their non-white neighbours and hence more likely to reject discourses that position diverse groups as being problematic.

Interfaith connections between Muslim and non-Muslim students have also been found to help in demystifying the negative and often unhelpful prejudgements of Muslims and Islam (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Some participants in the current study alluded to the role of Islamic and Pakistani societies in challenging the negative views and constructions of Muslims and Islam. It was evident in participant narratives that the growth of Islamic and Pakistani societies in British universities were not only helping students to build a shared sense of community but also in challenging some of the misconceptions regarding the Islamic faith. One participant explained how events hosted by such societies, despite following cultural or religious traditions like fasting in Ramadan allow opportunities for people to be appreciative of each other's culture (regardless of their cultural/religious affiliations). He further described how instances like these where cultures came together and offered mutual respect (for one another) made him feel more comfortable with his religious and cultural identity. Diversity in friendship groups on campus has been associated with an overall improvement in attitudes towards ethnic and religious minorities (Putnam & Campbell, 2010; Rockenbach et al.,

2017). Some studies on campus climate also indicate how greater interaction with students of one minority group (perceived as an out-group) may even result in development of positive attitudes towards other minoritised groups (Bowman & Griffin, 2012; Eller & Abrams, 2004). Hence, to challenge racial discrimination and bias there needs to be a greater commitment towards understanding and challenging the mechanisms that (arguably) create minoritised identities and sustain social injustice.

5.3 Strengths and limitations

Whilst there exists a significant body of literature focusing on media representations of Muslims and Islam, studies examining such representations specifically within the social media remain limited. Most prior research in the area has focused heavily on the experiences of Arab Muslims or Muslims more generally (e.g. El-Farra, 1996; Abu-Ras & Abu-Bader, 2008; Abdulrahim et al., 2012) with Pakistani Muslim perspectives and experiences of the phenomenon being largely unexplored. A key strength of this research is that it appears to be the first study to offer an in-depth exploration (using IPA) of the phenomenon as experienced by HE students in Britain who identify as Pakistani/British Pakistani Muslims. To carry out this exploration, a total of six participants (both men and women) were selected using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves choosing research participants based on certain characteristics they possess which are meaningful to understanding a phenomenon (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Palinkas et al., 2015). The small sample size in the study could arguably be viewed as a limitation. In contrast however, IPA's commitment to idiographic understanding of human experience supports the use of small samples (Smith, 2004). Larger sample sizes are therefore seen to limit the time and reflection required for an interpretative phenomenological inquiry (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

The purpose of this qualitative study was not to make broad generalisations of the findings to all Muslim HE students in Britain, but instead to offer an idiosyncratic understanding of experiences that could contribute to develop knowledge pertaining to the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009) as experienced by Pakistani Muslims. My decision of recruiting six participants enabled me to work with data that had the depth and richness needed for this type of qualitative inquiry, rather than working with surface-level or unmanageable amounts of data (Sandelowski, 1995). Inclusion of men and women allowed unique insights into the gendered nature of stereotypical social media portrayals of Muslims and how these were experienced by participants of either gender. Participants also reflected deeply on other key intersectional dimensions of their identities (skin colour, ethnicity and religion) particularly in the context of social media representations of “Brown Muslims”.

In addition to the strengths highlighted above, my experience of engaging in this exploration also led to the identification of certain limitations. Firstly, the study could have generated more nuanced and diverse perspectives and experiences of the phenomenon if other dimensions of diversity for example class, disability or sexuality were considered. A potential reason for lack of such representation in the current study, could be that individuals with disabilities and those from working class families remain under-represented in HE institutions across the U.K. (Stubbs & Murphy, 2020). The term ‘under-represented’ can be used to refer to students from working class, ethnic minorities (or other minoritised groups) as well as those who are first in their families to gain entry into higher education (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Office for Students, 2019). Relatedly, it can be argued that a lack of Muslim students who self-report as LGBTQ+ could potentially be accounted for, by the

stigma associated with non-heteronormative identities within the Islamic faith. Hence, exploration of the phenomenon as experienced by those with disabilities, from working class families or sexual minorities could be an avenue for future research.

Given that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, five of the six participant interviews had to be conducted using online media. This may have created some non-uniformity particularly in relation to my exposure to and interpretation of some of the non-verbal communication in participant narratives (of relevance to the nature of this type of inquiry). Additionally, the imposition of lockdowns could have potentially increased people's involvement with online media (including the social media) and arguably led to a possible increase in their exposure to representations and views regarding a variety of issues including the ones highlighted in this study. Also noteworthy is a potential 'disinhibition effect' in online modes of inquiry (Leibert & Archer Jr., 2006), that may have allowed participants to share and reflect on the topic more freely than they would have in an in-person context.

Lastly, it is important to consider how my own background and proximity to the subject matter could have influenced the research process, including my interpretations of participant experiences. However, my commitment to reflexivity and attempts to gaining insight into my fore understandings (Heidegger, 2010) allowed me to minimise personal bias and maintain the integrity of the research process. Some of the reflexive aspects of the study are revisited in the following section.

5.4 Revisiting the reflexive aspects

Reflexivity is central to a researcher's attempts to keep their preconceptions in check (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). Whilst conducting the current research, I remained acutely aware of my own preconceptions and aimed to utilise these constructively and reflexively in making sense of participant experiences of the phenomenon. Smith et al. (2009) emphasised how the "fore-structure is always there and it is in danger of presenting an obstacle to interpretation. In interpretation, priority should be given to the new object rather than one's preconceptions" (p. 25). Through my efforts to maintain reflexivity, I identified and utilised elements of my individuality, which provided a foundation for phenomenological inquiry into participant experiences. My similarity with participant group in terms of ethnicity and religion meant that I had certain pre-understandings through my own experience of being exposed to social media portrayals of Muslims and Islam. As I moved into the role of the researcher, I was presented with the challenge of bracketing my own experiences of the phenomenon whilst immersing myself in the stories held within participant narratives.

According to Finlay (2008), one of the key challenges experienced by qualitative researchers "is to remain focused on the phenomenon being studied while both reining in and reflexively interrogating their own understandings" (p. 29). Throughout the interview process, I endeavoured to maintain reflexivity by remaining mindful of my position (regarding culture, ethnicity, values, beliefs etc.) and any bias that could (implicitly) be created by colluding with participant accounts of experiences that I could relate to. My role as trainee counselling psychologist, allowed me to develop and practise skills to minimise the introduction of my personal agenda within the therapeutic relationship, which I was able to carry into my research relationship with the participants. Given my knowledge and practice in the person centred framework (Rogers, 1975), I endeavored to maintain a non-directive stance; a state of

not-knowing, being surprised by the other and open to what they are willing to reveal about themselves (Schmid, 2001).

Lastly, it is important to note that despite my efforts to bracket my fore understandings on the issues presented, I am acutely aware of how aspects of my identity and positionality on the topic of study (discussed earlier) may have influenced my sense-making of participant experiences. Other researchers would therefore have constructed different meanings of the stories presented.

5.5 Recommendations for future research

The findings of this study have highlighted certain important areas for future research. As indicated earlier, this study explored social media representations of Muslims and Islam as experienced by Pakistani Muslim HE students in Britain. In doing so, it considered the multiple intersections of ethnicity, skin colour and religion. However, experiences of the phenomenon across different socio-economic levels and abilities were not explored. I, therefore, argue that differences in class and abilities are considered in future research on the topic. Another important area for future research would be to explore such experiences and their potential impact on the wellbeing of individuals that are diverse to the heteronormative. It would be interesting to explore the dynamics of inter-group and intra-group othering that may be associated with Muslims with non-heteronormative identities.

Through my interviews with participants of the current study, I learnt how exposure to racialised representations of Muslims (and associated negative commentaries) online, appeared to be associated to undesirable experiences in both online and offline contexts. I was able to explore the implications of such experiences with some of the participants,

however a more in-depth understanding of such experiences and their impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of the concerned group requires further research. The theme of ‘normalisation’ in processing and coping of undesirable experiences (pertaining to racism or Islamophobia) was common within the participant group. In their sense-making processes several participants alluded to lower educational attainment, economic disadvantage and lack of exposure to diversity as the key determinants of racist and discriminatory attitudes towards racialised minorities. Arguably, political elites appear to benefit from this finger pointing of one marginalised group towards another, in that it may shift attention from the actual issues maintaining oppression and social injustice. Hence, understanding these processes of sense making in a socio-political context would be an important avenue for future research.

There appears to be limited research regarding positive experiences of ethnic and religious minority students attending western higher education institutions. Most prior research centres around discourses that construct western campuses to be unfavourable for minority students. Many participants in the current study, however, described how university campuses (in Britain) were becoming more diverse (in terms of staff and student body), open and accepting towards minorities and how this change led them to feel more comfortable with their cultural/religious identities and expressions. It would, therefore, be beneficial for future research to focus on more varied constructions of campuses in Britain. Lastly, given the current COVID-19 pandemic, with most universities moving to online or hybrid models of teaching/interaction, more research is needed to examine how religious and ethnic minority students (including Muslims) view and experience online spaces.

5.6 Contribution to Knowledge

The review of literature presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis highlights existing research pertaining to the various aspects of the topic under study. Despite there being a significant body of literature on media representations of Muslims and Islam, empirical research examining such portrayals in the social media remains limited. When exploring specifically, the perspectives of Pakistani Muslims regarding western media images of Islam, no empirical research data was discovered. Similarly, in the literature assessed, the experiences of Pakistani Muslim students (in a HE context) were also found to be largely unexplored. The detailed assessment of literature in chapter 2 identified these gaps and provided the rationale for the current study that focuses exclusively on the perspectives of Pakistani Muslims HE students regarding the social media representations of their religion and its followers. This study (in my knowledge) is also a first synopsis of the topic that explores the multiple intersecting identities of Pakistani Muslims (skin colour, ethnicity and religion) and examines associated experiencing, sense making and coping. Finally, it is important to state that this is the first study to adopt an IPA methodological design to gain subjective understanding of the phenomenon (as experienced by individual participants) and therefore, does not claim to make any broad generalisations of findings to the wider population.

The key findings presented and discussed indicate that this study has achieved its aims of carrying out an initial in-depth exploration of Pakistani Muslim HE students' perceptions and experiences of the dominant social media representations of Muslims and Islam. The findings suggest the significance of these representations to the lived experience of participants. It emphasises the power of social media to influence public opinions and attitudes, which appear to facilitate negative stereotyping and othering of Pakistani Muslims (and Muslims more generally). The study highlights how such stereotyping can be associated with overt or

covert expressions of hate and abuse towards the concerned group. It further suggests how racial and religious microaggressions (both online and offline) based on negative stereotyping of Muslims are also an everyday experience for many (with similar identity markers) and therefore normalised.

The study also illuminates the importance of processes of normalisation and rationalisation that participants utilised to cope with undesirable experiences based on their ethnic and religious identities. Particularly relevant to these mechanisms of rationalisation were references (by participants) to the social class and educational level, of perpetrators of racial abuse. Furthermore, the study (based on participant accounts) highlights the importance of greater in-group identification with other Muslims to mitigate against the negative impact of discrimination and racism. In addition, racial and religious diversity on and off campus as well creation of spaces that allow cultural/religious mixing were found to be associated with greater feelings of acceptance and freedom of cultural and religious expression. I hope that these findings (taken together) provide a modest yet valuable contribution to literature and elucidate a useful framework for future research in the area.

5.7 Implications

It is now well documented how oppression and marginalisation experienced by many from minoritised groups manifests across social systems and structures (Eleftheriadou, 2010). As noted in the findings of this study, there is a proliferation of negative imagery pertaining to Muslims and Islam across the social media. It was interpreted (based on participant narratives) that perpetuation of such portrayals contributes to the negative stereotyping and othering of Muslims. Past research has linked experiences of othering (manifested in the form

racism and discrimination) with poor psychosocial outcomes (e.g. Karim, 2000; Rippy & Newman, 2008; Colic-Peisker et al., 2016). Participant experiences of Islamophobic and racist attitudes/expressions, such as those explored in this study are important and meaningful and therefore warrant much needed attention in psychological research and practice.

Based on the findings of this study, to develop an increased understanding of social media representations of Muslims and Islam and their implications for the lived experience of Pakistani Muslims, it is necessary to recognise how racialised categories (more broadly) are constructed and maintained through processes of othering (in a variety of contexts).

Particularly relevant to this study is the context of social media. Given the increasing influence of social media in the world today, it is crucial to examine qualitatively, individual experiences of the social media with a particular focus on what determines how and why people chose to engage with certain issues (Hashmi et al., 2020). As indicated in the findings of this study, social media platforms (such as Twitter) are playing a central role in the perpetuation of hateful comments towards Muslims that appear to implicate the (emotional and psychological) health and wellbeing of those targeted. Particularly relevant to this discussion is the understanding of the various intersections of the Muslim identity(s) in the construction of the 'other'. I therefore argue the importance of developing an understanding of the complex intersections of marginalised characteristics such as skin colour, ethnicity and religion (in the case of Pakistani Muslims) and how these may compound individual experiences of discrimination and racisms across the social media.

In the following sections, I will discuss practical implications and suggestions based on an anti-racist agenda for social change. I will also offer suggestions specific to counselling psychologists based on intersectionality and social justice perspectives.

5.7.1 Promoting an anti-racist agenda

Anti-racism can be understood as “forms of thought and/or practice that seek to confront, eradicate, and/or ameliorate racism” (Bonnett, 2000, p. 4). Based on this definition, an anti-racism framework can be understood as a set of principles and practices aimed at addressing the racisms that permeate social structures. Anti-racist practices also challenge the unequal power relations that lead to the construction of racialised categories (Bonnett, 1993; Dei, 2000; Dalal, 2008). Dominelli (2008) defines anti-racism as “a state of mind, feeling, political commitment and action to eradicate racial oppression and transform unequal social relations...” (p. 28). Promoting an anti-racist agenda is vital to addressing unequal social relations and challenging the racisms (both implicit and explicit) that implicate the lives of many Muslims in a variety of contexts, online and offline. In the following sub-sections I utilise an anti-racist framework to discuss the practical implications and suggestions based on the findings of the study.

Challenging dominant media discourses

When discussing the implications of the current study, it is important to consider the discursive power of social media influence. The findings suggest how social media is increasingly replacing mainstream media (such as television, newspapers etc.) and arguably becoming more significant to influencing negative public opinion and attitudes regarding Muslims and Islam. With limited frameworks on understanding social media influence in attitude formation (particularly regarding racialised groups), it is difficult to determine fully its intensity and implications. It is therefore of high importance to develop new concepts and theories specific to understanding and conceptualising the nature and intensity of social media influence. I believe that this will facilitate an increased understanding of the

implications of online hate and abuse for the wellbeing of those targeted (including Muslims and Pakistani Muslims).

The media is central to how we make sense of our world and holds a powerful position in the development and maintenance of discourses on Islam (Poole, 2002). As indicated in the findings of this study, negative social media portrayals and narratives regarding Muslims and Islam appear to facilitate the construction of a widespread normalised association of Islamic beliefs and practices with extremism, terrorism and backwardness. In line with previous research, several participants alluded to media coverage of terrorist attacks being used to facilitate the creation and perpetuation of racialised stereotypes that appear to frame Muslims as a homogenous outgroup having violent and extremist tendencies (Nadal et al., 2010). The findings of this study confirm how non-Muslims (particularly those with limited exposure to diverse cultures and religions) learn about Muslims and Islam through dominant media discourses which appear to construct a predominantly negative view of the religion (Hashmi et al., 2020). It is therefore, imperative to promote anti-racist strategies that challenge these negative media discourses and expose viewers to a greater diversity of information regarding Muslims and Islamic beliefs.

Here, it is also important to note the relationship between traditional and social media. Participants in the current study described how negative stereotypes regarding Muslims in traditional media are maintained and perpetuated via social media platforms (particularly Twitter). This appears to create what (Ter Wal et al., 2005) describes as a mono-dimensional view of minoritised social identities, further exacerbated by a lack of minority journalists in western media. Hence, in line with the principles of anti-racist agenda, to challenge such

mono-dimensional constructions, I emphasise the need to train reporters and journalists in culture, religion and other diversities. I believe that this may allow more balanced representations of Muslims and Pakistanis in the western media, instead of the existing discourses that focus heavily on constructing them as the ‘other’.

Transforming educational settings

Anti-racist education can be described as “an action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression” (Dei, 1996, p.25). It also includes the examination of racism (both on an individual and institutional level) by gaining insight into the definitions, historical origins and manifestation of racism that appear to be associated with health and social inequalities, job opportunities and treatment of minoritised identities in the media (Kailin, 1994; Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). In their application of this concept to the educational context, Jackson (2010) suggested that even if people are not taught by the media to associate Muslims with extremist and terrorist ideologies, they will, nevertheless, learn that making such associations is normal as it is widely recognised by the media.

Participants in the current study described how greater understanding of diverse cultures and religions, could help in challenging some of the prevailing misrepresentations of Muslims and Pakistani Muslims in the media. I believe educational settings to hold an influential position in this regard. Hence, in line with the principles of anti-racist education (Van Leeuwen, 2007; Franklin et al., 2012) it is imperative that educators focus on deconstructing the constructs of race, racism, and white privilege to help students in developing greater understanding of how ethnicity, religion and skin colour as in the case of Pakistani Muslims

compounds their experiences of discrimination, racism and Islamophobia. Such an education may allow people to understand and challenge racist practices, both explicit and insidious, including those that manifest as stereotypical portrayals (in jokes or social media commentaries).

Alongside transforming educational programs and curricula, it is also important for educational institutions to provide effective counselling services for an increasingly diverse student population. Many participants in the current study described experiences of implicit and explicit expressions of hate targeted towards their ethnic and religious identities. These were (in multiple instances) found to result in negative emotional experiences (including sadness, fear, apprehension and disappointment). It is therefore of high importance that universities recognise the implications of (particularly) the more insidious forms of racism and Islamophobia and encourage Muslim students to access appropriate psychological services to support their wellbeing needs. Reeves (2017) highlighted the importance of university counselling services in supporting the diverse psychological and emotional needs of students and staff. He suggested that an effective counselling service is one that understands:

“...the nature of the institution it is serving: the culture of learning, the profile of other staff (e.g. academics, support staff, administrative staff), the profile of students (e.g. age, culture, diversity), the community in which it is located, the socio-economic climate of the area, competitor institutions and so on...” (Reeves, 2017, p.554).

I argue for university counselling services to adapt to the diverse needs on an ever-changing student population based on the diverse needs of the students they serve.

Some participants also described how sharing religious and cultural festivals (such as Eid) with their fellow non-Muslims students, helps them to feel more accepted and confident in expressing their religious and cultural identities. It appears (based on the findings) that such mixing provides an opportunity to clear misconceptions regarding Muslims and Islam. I therefore suggest creation of such spaces for cultural mixing (on campus) where students can develop first hand understanding of Islamic customs and traditions (in a safe environment). Cole and Ahmadi (2010) emphasised that in order to demystify the widespread negative preconceptions regarding the religion of Islam, it was important to facilitate respectful interfaith exchanges between Muslim and non-Muslim students.

Several authors have stressed the importance of training and hiring people of colour as a means to redress some of the unequal power relations that are fostered within organisations (O'Brien, 2009; Fernando, 2010; Corneau & Stergiopoulos, 2012). Some participants in the current study related positive experiences on campus which allowed them to feel more accepted and integrated. These included increasing representation of ethnic minorities in the staff body, the development of Islamic and Pakistani societies and universities' overall commitment towards accommodating the needs of Muslims students (such as wudu facilities, prayer rooms etc.). It is therefore imperative to build diverse institutions (Savigny, 2019) that listen and respond to the varied needs of minority students. As Dei argues, "the inclusion of multiple voices from multiple social locations is one powerful way to rupture the institutional structures of society and to address questions of social credibility, fairness, justice and equity" (Dei, 1996, p.18).

5.7.2 Committing to an Intersectional Approach to Social Justice in Counselling Psychology

Counselling psychology as a discipline prides itself on its commitment to holistic understanding of human lived experience and an increasing consensus towards implementing a social justice agenda in its research and practice (Ali & Sichel, 2014). As suggested by Bell and Griffin (2016), the key to achieving social justice is to ensure that processes are democratic and respecting of diversities amongst individuals and groups. Hence, instead of striving towards a universal bond reliant on notions of integration and acculturation (Chin et al., 1993), I argue the need to acknowledge important differences in identity and experience, instead of relying on mainstream media discourses that appear to portray the different as the deviant, particularly in the case of (Western) Muslim minorities (as highlighted in this study). I believe this understanding to be particularly important in achieving equity and social justice for minoritised Muslim communities (including Pakistani Muslims). Efforts towards achieving social justice should be aimed at redressing disadvantage caused by discriminatory and racist experiences that implicate the lives of many from diverse ethnic and religious groups (Berman & Paradies, 2010).

Significant to social justice is the notion of ‘intersectionality’. Often linked with transformative approaches, in both research and practice (Shin et al., 2017), intersectionality is increasingly being utilised (in counselling psychology research) as a conceptual lens to examine various societal issues that expose inequalities and disparities entrenched within systems and structures (e.g. Sarno et al., 2015; Grzanka et al., 2017). The concept of intersectionality is central to this study particularly in relation to how the participants experience their multiple intersecting identities as Pakistani Muslims. Participants were also found to experience both subtle and explicit expressions of racism, discrimination and hate based on the intersectional nature of their ethnic and religious identities. As Keating (2000) argues, for an effective anti-racist framework it is important to understand how

“racism intertwines or intersects with sexuality, gender, class and other forms of oppression” (2000, p. 83). I consider this view to be aligned with the humanistic underpinnings of counselling psychology practice that promote contextual understandings of human lived experience. Researchers and practitioners in the field of counselling psychology therefore possess a unique vantage point to advocate (through impact research and practice) the cultural, religious, psychological and social needs of racialised minority groups such as Muslims and Pakistani Muslims.

“Advocacy ensures that people are able to make informed and free choices. Advocacy is about advising, assisting and supporting. It is not about pressurizing or persuading, which would be disempowering” (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995, p.69) Counselling psychology practice is inclined towards a person centred ethos, where therapists maintain a stance of curiosity, unknowingness and human agency. I argue that assuming such a stance allows practitioners to understand, respond to and advocate for the wellbeing needs of minoritised Muslim communities without disempowering them. Therefore, it is of high importance that the development and application of person-centred values, is encouraged across counselling psychology training and practice.

In addition, several authors in counselling and psychotherapy have also stressed the importance of multicultural competencies alongside core therapeutic skills (Sue et al., 2019). Parker et al. (1998) suggested that guidance on multicultural competencies for trainee counsellors increased their preparedness to recognise cultural (and religious) differences amongst individuals as important and meaningful and relevant to the therapeutic process. Zhang and Burkard (2008) found acknowledging such differences to have a positive impact

on the therapeutic relationship and outcomes. I therefore suggest that issues pertaining to difference, diversity and intersectionality are foregrounded and enhanced on curricula for counselling psychology training programmes. I believe this would enable trainees and practitioners in the field to develop a better (co-constructed) understanding of intersecting social identities of race, religion, culture etc. (as in the case of Pakistani Muslims) and how these may compound their experiences of racism and in turn implicate their (psychological and emotional) wellbeing, as indicated in the findings of this study. Leading by example, the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at the University of Manchester now includes extensive teaching and training on various aspects of diversity and intersectionality (including race, sexuality, class etc.).

I believe that counselling psychology as a helping profession has much to offer in regards to anti-racist practices. It is therefore important that counselling psychologists look beyond individual practice and enact social justice leadership to raise awareness on the difficulties experienced by minoritised Muslim communities and challenge prejudiced practices and policies (such as those pertaining to immigration and ethnic profiling) that promote (implicit bias) towards these communities and implicate their wellbeing. “Enacting social justice leadership involves active listening, more truth telling, having difficult dialogues, risk-taking, and applying collective empowerment strategies to combat systems of oppression” (Arredondo & Rosen, 2007, p. 453).

5.8 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

A major part of this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that all but one of the participant interviews were conducted online. This was seen as both a

challenge and opportunity. IPA, the methodological approach adopted for this study relies heavily on subjective accounts of phenomena and places a strong emphasis on the researcher's ability to notice and analyse non-verbal elements within participant verbatim. Despite the option of videoconferencing, online media can restrict observation and analysis of non-verbal communication between participants and the researcher. In addition, several participants in the current study alluded to an increase in their (and others) usage of the internet and social media during this time particularly due to restrictions on social mobility and in person contact. It can therefore be argued that participants' exposure to representations and commentaries regarding Muslims in the social media had also increased. This could be seen as both a strength and limitation of the study. On one hand, it appears to magnify the extent and intensity of exposure participants had to the representations under study but on the other, provides useful insights into people's engagement with social media during a time in history where most relations have been via online media.

5.9 Concluding comments

This study has generated unique insights into the perceptions of Pakistani Muslim HE students' regarding the dominant social media representations of Muslims and Islam. The use of a qualitative IPA approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of subjective narratives imperative to understanding such portrayals and their relevance to participants' lived experiences. Such an exploration allowed me to offer suggestions based on an anti-racist agenda to challenge dominant media (and social media) discourses that appear to facilitate the construction and perpetuation of negative portrayals pertaining to Muslims and Islam. Specific recommendations for counselling psychology training and practice as well as recommendations for HE institutions, in relation to accommodating the needs of ethnic and religious minority students such as Muslims and Pakistani Muslims have also been offered.

The findings developed from the study are consistent with the existing body of literature on the subject. However, novel insights have been gained by drawing on an intersectional approach to understand participants' experiences of stigma and othering as 'brown Muslims' of Pakistani origin. Importantly, the analysis revealed how negative social media constructions of Pakistani Muslims and Muslims in general appear to result in participants' experiences of perceived discrimination, microaggressions and racist abuse (in both online and offline contexts). A key finding of the study was how participants made sense of these expressions of hate (subtle and overt). Participants highlighted various subjective processes of meaning making that allowed them to rationalise and normalise hateful attitudes (towards their ethnic and religious identities) as everyday experiences. These processes of normalisation appeared to facilitate participants in coping with the impact of their experiences of discrimination, racism and Islamophobia. Also imperative to these processes of coping, were participants' positive experiences within British HE institutions, where most felt integrated, included and respected for their identities as Pakistani Muslims.

Although the study lacked in some important aspects of diversity (such as class) in the sample, it has generated knowledge that contributes to understandings of the phenomenon based on the intersecting ethnic and religious identities of Pakistani Muslims. My hope is that the important insights offered through this study will raise awareness regarding the role of social media in creating and perpetuating negative constructions of Muslims as the 'other' which (based on the findings of this study) generate widespread negative public opinion and attitudes towards minoritised Muslim communities.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Advertisement for recruitment



My name is Ishba Rehman and I am a Trainee Counselling Psychologist at the University of Manchester. As part of my doctoral study, I am exploring '**Pakistani Muslim Higher Education students' perceptions and experiences of Social Media representations of Muslims and Islam**'.

Participation in this study will involve a 60 to 90 minute interview with myself. The interview will be recorded and later transcribed and analysed.

I am looking for Higher Education Students who self identify as:

- Pakistani/British-Pakistani
- Muslim

It is a further requirement of the study that participants are users of the Social Media.

If you are interested in participating in this study, or require any further information/clarity, please do not hesitate to contact me on the email provided below. I can then send you the 'Participant Information Sheet' and 'Consent Form' to confirm your participation.

This study has been granted ethical approval by the University of Manchester and is being conducted under the supervision of Dr Terry Hanley. If you wish to contact him, please refer to his email below.

Thank you.

Researcher Details:

Ishba Rehman

School of Education, Environment and Development (SEED)

University Of Manchester

Email: ishba.rehman@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Supervisor Details:

Dr Terry Hanley

School of Education, Environment and Development (SEED)

University Of Manchester

Email: terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk

Appendix 2: Letter/email to gatekeepers



The University of Manchester

My name is Ishba Rehman and I am a doctoral student (of Pakistani origin) based at the University of Manchester. As part of my doctoral study, I am exploring '**Pakistani Muslim Higher Education students' perceptions and experiences of Social Media representations of Muslims and Islam**'.

I am looking for Higher Education Students who self identify as:

- Pakistani/British-Pakistani
- Muslim

It is a further requirement of the study that participants are users of the Social Media. Participation in this study will involve a 60 to 90 minute interview with myself. The interview will be recorded and later transcribed and analysed.

Please share my contact details (see below) with any students at the university that meet the above criteria and would like to participate in the study. If they require any further information/clarity, please ask them to contact me directly. I can then send them the 'Participant Information Sheet' and 'Consent Form'.

This study has been granted ethical approval by the University of Manchester and is being conducted under the supervision of Dr Terry Hanley. If you wish to contact him, please refer to his email below.

Thank you.

Researcher Details:

Ishba Rehman

School of Education, Environment and Development (SEED)

University Of Manchester

Email: ishba.rehman@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Supervisor Details:

Dr Terry Hanley

School of Education, Environment and Development (SEED)

University Of Manchester

Email: terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk

Appendix 3: Participant Recruitment Form/Email



Dear [Participant Name],

My name is **Ishba Rehman** and I am a student on the ‘Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology’ Programme at the University of Manchester. I am writing to invite you to take part in my research project titled, **Exploring Pakistani Muslim Higher Education students’ perceptions and experiences of Social Media representations of Muslims and Islam.**

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be required to read through a ‘Participant Information Sheet’ and sign a consent form confirming your participation. As part of the study, I would like to audio record the interview with you and then transcribe it. The information collected will be used in the analysis to generate findings.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any point. If you wish to take part or have any questions/queries with regards to this project, please do not hesitate to contact me on: Ishba.rehman@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Ishba Rehman

*PD Counselling Psychology
School of Education, Environment and Development.
University Of Manchester.*

Appendix 4: Participant information sheet



Exploring Pakistani Muslim Higher Education students' perceptions and experiences of Social Media representations of Muslims and Islam.

Participant Information Sheet (PIS) - Version 1

(This PIS should be read in conjunction with [The University privacy notice](#))

You are being invited to take part in a research intended to study the perceptions and experiences of Pakistani Muslim students' perceptions and experiences of social media portrayal of Muslims and Islam. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Who will conduct the research?

Name: Ishba Rehman (Trainee Counselling Psychologist, PD Counselling Psychology)
University ID: 10224810
School of Education, Environment and Development (SEED)
University of Manchester.

What is the purpose of the research?

This study aims to highlight the perceptions and experiences of Pakistani Muslim higher education students with regards to the prevailing social media depictions of Muslims and Islam. It also aims to recognise the influence that such representations may have on the population under study. Furthermore, I hope that the findings of this research offer increased understanding of the role of social media in forming perceptions and in turn inform therapeutic practice in relation to working with difference and diversity.

Why have I been chosen?

You have purposively been chosen for this study. The inclusion criteria was, being Pakistani Muslim and a higher education student in the U.K.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

You will be required to take part in a semi-structured interview. The questions asked will be closely aligned to the topic of research. The interview will be audio recorded.

What will happen to my personal information?

We are collecting and storing this personal information in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act 2018 which legislate to protect your personal information. The legal basis upon which we are using your personal information is “public interest task” and “for research purposes” if sensitive information is collected. For more information about the way we process your personal information and comply with data protection law please see our [Privacy Notice for Research Participants](#).

The data collected will consist of an audio recorded IPR interview and its accompanying transcript. The data generated will be used to produce a final report which will include details of data collection, methodology and analysis. The researcher and assessor(s) will have access to this information.

The University of Manchester, as Data Controller for this project, takes responsibility for the protection of the personal information that this study is collecting about you. In order to comply with the legal obligations to protect your personal data the University has safeguards in place such as policies and procedures. All researchers are appropriately trained and your data will be looked after in the following way:

- The data gathered via audio recording(s) will be transported via an encrypted memory stick to university approved devices and stored in an encrypted folder.
- All personal information collected (including demographic info) will be anonymised. However, any identifiable information, such as the consent form, will be stored in encrypted files and held securely.

You have a number of rights under data protection law regarding your personal information. For example you can request a copy of the information we hold about you, including audio recordings. This is known as a Subject Access Request. If you would like to know more about your different rights, please consult our [privacy notice for research](#) and if you wish to contact us about your data protection rights, please email dataprotection@manchester.ac.uk or write to The Information Governance Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, M13 9PL. at the University and we will guide you through the process of exercising your rights. You also have a right to complain to the [Information Commissioner's Office](#), Tel 0303 123 1113

Will my participation in the study be confidential?

Steps will be taken to ensure confidentiality, such as anonymising any identifiable data, and referring to you by an assigned participant ID only known to researcher (pseudonymised/coded data). The reporting of the data will also be done in a way that your personal information/identity remains confidential.

With regards to audio recordings;

- The transcribed audio data collected will be used to assist the researcher in data analysis. However, all identifiable information will be removed from the final transcript.
- The audio data/transcript will be transported and stored securely (as explained above).
- The duration for retaining data will be in accordance with the UoM retention schedule (5 to 10 years).
- The researcher and the assessors at UoM will have access to the recordings.

- The equipment/devices used to record the interview will be encrypted by UoM and be exclusively for use by staff/students.

There may be circumstances that may require third party disclosure of your information. These may be to the GP/family member/care team in the event of concerns about yours or another person's safety, or to authorities where there is a professional obligation to report misconduct or illegal activities.

Also, in the event of an incident, individuals from the University site where the study is being conducted and/or regulatory authorities may require access to study information.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without detriment to yourself. However, it will not be possible to remove your data from the project once it has been anonymised and forms part of the dataset as we will not be able to identify your specific data. This does not affect your data protection rights.

You have the right to decline the recording and participation in the study. You should be comfortable with the recording process at all times. Should this change, you are free to withdraw from recording at any point.

Will my data be used for future research?

When you agree to take part in a research study, the information about you may be used for future research but this should not be incompatible with this research project and the information used will not identify you and will not be combined with other information in a way that could identify you. The information will only be used for the purpose of health and care research, and cannot be used to contact you regarding any other matter or be used to make decisions about future services available to you.

Will I be paid for participating in the research?

You are not being paid to take part in this study.

What is the duration of the research?

The total interview process will last approximately 1 to 2 hours.

Where will the research be conducted?

The study will take place on your university premises or a suitable alternate location.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The findings of the research may/may not be published but they will be shared with the participant, regardless.

Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Check (if applicable)

The researcher has undergone a satisfactory DBS check.

Who has reviewed the research project?

This project will be reviewed by the Research Risk and Ethics Panel at the University of Manchester School of Environment, Education and Development

What if I experience distress during or after the interview?

If you have been upset by any of the topics discussed and/or found the experience to be distressing in any way, please speak to the researcher who will offer support and/or signpost appropriately.

Researcher: **Ishba Rehman**

Email ID: ishba.rehman@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

What if I want to make a complaint?

Minor complaints

If you have a minor complaint then you need to contact the researcher in the first instance.

1. Researcher: **Ishba Rehman**

Email ID: ishba.rehman@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

2. Supervisor: **Dr. Terry Hanley**

Email ID: terry.hanley@manchester.ac.uk

Contact Number: 0161 275 3432

Formal Complaints

If you wish to make a formal complaint or if you are not satisfied with the response you have gained from the researchers in the first instance then please contact

The Research Governance and Integrity Manager, Research Office, Christie Building, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, by emailing: research.complaints@manchester.ac.uk or by telephoning 0161 275 2674.

What Do I Do Now?

If you have any queries about the study or if you are interested in taking part then please contact the researcher.

Name: **Ishba Rehman**

Email ID: ishba.rehman@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

This Project Has Been Approved by the University of Manchester's Research Ethics Committee [ERM reference number]

Appendix 5: Semi structured interview schedule

Sample Interview Schedule

Demographic info obtained/confirmed prior to recording: Age, ethnicity, hometown, university etc.

Brief Introduction: I am interested in how you perceive social media representations of Muslims and Islam. I am also interested in your experience of being a Muslim student in a university in the U.K.

1. Can you tell me what place the social media has in your life at present?

Prompts:

Approximately how much time do you spend on Social media each day?
What kinds of material/apps do you access?

2. How do you think Muslims and Islam are represented in the Social media?

Prompts:

Can you think of anything you have seen, heard or read in the social media that portrays Muslims and Islam in a negative manner?
How does this portrayal impact you?

3. Can you tell me how you experience the dominant social media representations of Islam, as a Pakistani Muslim in Britain?

Prompts:

What examples (positive and/or negative) stand out to you?
If yes, can you describe them?
How did these tweets/posts etc impact upon you immediately/after the event?
How do you think this/these experiences have impacted you over time?

4. In your experience, how do you think the dominant stereotypes about Muslims and Islam (in the social media) may be affecting your student life in the U.K.?

Prompts:

Are there any difficulties you have experienced?
Can you tell me about the positive experiences you have had?

5. Do you use social media to convey a particular impression related to your religion?

Prompts:

How has this experience been for you?

6. Do you refrain from sharing/posting content that may reflect a certain image of your religion and/or culture?

Prompts:

How has this been for you?

7. If you looked at your social media profile/sharing as an outsider, what might you think or feel about the way you have portrayed your religion?

Prompts:

Is it different from how you perceive yourself?

8. What role, if any do you think social media may have in forming perceptions?

Prompts:

Could you share any examples (positive and/or negative) you have come across?
If yes, can you describe these?

9. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Prompts:

In your experience, have there been any other related challenges/difficulties with you would like to share?

Appendix 6: Consent form



Exploring Pakistani Muslim Higher Education students' perceptions and experiences of Social Media representations of Muslims and Islam.

Consent Form (Version 1)

To participate in this study, please complete and sign the following consent form:

	Activities	Initials
1	I confirm to have read the information sheet (Version 1) accompanying the above study and any questions that I had were responded to, appropriately.	
2	I am aware that my involvement in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw my participation at any point, without providing an explanation and without any negative consequences for myself. I also realise that once my data has been anonymised and becomes a part of the project, it will not be possible to remove it. With the above knowledge, I agree to being involved in this study.	
3	I agree to be interviewed by one of the Trainees on the Counselling Psychology Doctorate programme	
4	I agree to the audio recording of my interview(s) .	
5	I agree to my interview being transcribed by the researcher and used for data analysis.	
6	I agree to anonymised transcriptions of my interview being held on the University of Manchester encrypted device for up to 5 years.	
7	I agree that all data will be presented in anonymous form.	
8	I agree that the researcher may retain my contact details in order to provide me with a summary of the findings for this study.	
9	I realise that during the interview(s) information is revealed that may require the researcher to breach confidentiality and this has been detailed in the information sheet.	

10	I agree to participate in this study.	
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Data Protection

The personal information collected and used as part of this study will be stored and processed in compliance with the data protection laws as detailed in the Participant Information Sheet and the Privacy Notice for Research Participants.

Name of Participant Signature Date

Name of the person taking consent Signature Date

Copies of this consent form will be provided to: the participant, the researcher and the Research Risk and Ethics Panel at the University of Manchester School of Environment, Education and Development.

Appendix 7: Confidentiality agreement

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Exploring Pakistani Muslim Higher Education students' perceptions and experiences of Social Media representations of Muslims and Islam.

Name of the Researcher/Investigator:

As a part of this research, I realize that I may have access to confidential information, understand related to the participants and the data gathered/used as part of the study. My signature on this agreement indicates that I understand my responsibility in maintaining confidentiality and agree to the following statements.

1. I am aware that names any identifiable information about study participants and sites are to be kept confidential.
2. I agree to not disclose any information with regards to participant(s) or the dataset unless authorized to do so; only in exceptional circumstances (such as those detailed on the Participant Information sheet)
3. I agree not to publish, disclose, or make public any identifiable information that is used/generated as part of this study.
4. I fully understand that all information gathered as part of the study that all information about participants or any confidential documents is to remain confidential.
5. I agree that all questions asked from the participant(s) will be in accordance with the purpose of the research.
6. I agree to inform the researcher if/when I become aware of a breach of confidentiality or of any situation which could result in such a breach, whether this is on part of the interviewer or the participant(s).

Signature

Date

Printed name

Signature of Researcher/Investigator

Date

Printed name

Appendix 8: Distress Protocol

Distress Management Protocol

Prior to the study

Prior to commencement of the study, the participants will be given a participant information sheet with details of who to contact if they experience distress (e.g. the researcher of the study who will signpost to appropriate services) and these details will be reiterated (Debrief Sheet), again with the participant at the conclusion of the interview.

During the study

Should a participant report or show signs of distress and feeling uncomfortable (such as crying, etc.) while the interview is taking place, the following actions will be taken by the researcher.

Step 1:

- Suggest that the participant (take a break, stop the interview, have a drink of water, go to a separate room, etc.)
- Ask the participant how they are feeling, listen with empathy and offer support.

Step 2:

- If the participant would like to continue, (offer continued support and reiterate that the participant can stop the interview at any time to take a break)
- If the participant would like to stop or appears highly distressed (anxiety/panic etc.), follow the actions in Step 3.

Step 3:

- Stop the interview.
- Mild distress: Encourage the participant to speak to family members or friends for support OR offer to do so for the participant.
- Moderate distress: Immediately inform (family members or friends), ask them to come and collect the participant and stay with the participant until they arrive.
- High distress: Researcher will phone the police/an ambulance/mental health services for assistance but remain with the participant until they arrive.
- In all instances the researcher will seek support from their supervisor/line manager.

Follow-up actions

- Offer to follow participant up with a phone call the following day.
- Offer the participant the opportunity to withdraw from the study and for their data to be destroyed.
- Signpost the participant to appropriate services (mentioned on the debrief sheet) if they continue to feel distressed.

Appendix 9: Debrief sheet



Exploring Pakistani Muslim Higher Education students' perceptions and experiences of Social Media representations of Muslims and Islam.

Participant Debrief Sheet

Thank you for participating in the interview. We hope that you have found it interesting and have not been upset by any of the topics discussed. However, if you have found any part of this experience to be distressing and you wish to speak to the researcher, please contact: *Ishba Rehman (Trainee Counselling Psychologist, MIE, SEED, University of Manchester)*
Email ID: ishba.rehman@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Alternatively, you can also access the Student Union Services offered at your respective university.

There are also a number of organisations listed below that you can contact.

ORGANISATIONS	
Samaritans Website: www.samaritans.org Helpline: 116 123 (24 hours a day from within the UK and Ireland)	Mind Website: www.mind.org.uk InfoLine: 0300 123 3393 to call, or text 86463. (Mon-Fri 9am to 6pm - except bank holidays).
NHS Direct Helpline: 0845 46 47 (In operation 24 hours a day)	Anxiety UK Website: www.anxietyuk.org.uk Helpline: 03444 775 774 (Mon-Fri 9:30am to 5.30pm) Text Service: 07537 416 905

Appendix 10: Process of data production

Table A: The data production process

Interview (in order)	Interview Method	Participant Pseudonym	Duration of interview	Transcript word count
1	In person	Mahnoor	01:04:11	11173
2	Online (via Zoom)	Zahra	01:02:29	9710
3	Online (via zoom)	Rahima	01:17:38	11402
4	Online via Zoom)	Qamar	59:55:00	8579
5	Online (via Zoom)	Ahmed	01:13:24	10055
6	Online (via Zoom)	Omair	01:26:16	10489

Appendix 11: Example of manual coding (Transcript 3)

ANALYSIS - TRANSCRIPT 3

Colour Coding Key:

- Descriptive – Blue
- Linguistic – Green
- Conceptual – Red

Exploratory Comments	Original Transcript	Emerging Themes
<p>Social media is a networking tool. Connection with friends, our family appears to be important. (acknowledging impact of covid)</p> <p>Social media is a log of significant events.</p> <p>Is there a varied understanding of social media? what counts as social media?</p> <p>Social media as a source of news & information.</p>	<p>1. R: Hi Rahima.</p> <p>2. RA: Hi, you alright?</p> <p>3. R: I'm okay thanks. So as you may previously be aware of, you know, my research topic and some of the other things related with my research. Thank you so much for signing the confidentiality agreement and the consent form.</p> <p>4. RA: Yeah. Thank you.</p> <p>5. R: So just to restate, um my name is Ishba Rehman and I'm a trainee counselling psychologist at the University of Manchester. And as part of my doctoral study, I am exploring Pakistani Muslim higher education students perceptions and experiences of social media representations of Muslims and Islam.</p> <p>6. RA: mhm.</p> <p>7. R: Yeah. And participation in this study will involve an interview between 60 and 90 minutes, with myself, which of course is previously known to you. The interview will be recorded and later transcribed and analyzed. Okay. And that's really it. So do you have any questions based on that?</p> <p>8. RA: No, no questions.</p> <p>9. R: No? And like details about you know, how I'll store my data and how the information will be confidential are mentioned on the confidentiality agreement, which I'm sure you've read.</p> <p>10. RA: Yeah.</p> <p>11. R: Okay, so Rahima can you tell me what place the social media has in your life at present?</p> <p>12. RA: Umm so I think I talked about this a little bit before. I think it sort of has three different, three different aspects to social media that influence my life. There's one, I use it as like an outlet for memories or like a way to document them and sort of look back on events that have happened. Umm I also use it to keep in touch with friends. Especially people who I know like, especially in university, my friends that are abroad or friends that live in different cities. But also now with COVID it's just even friends that used to be next door that are still using that to like FaceTime them or anything like that. And, and also, I guess when people talk about social media, you also include things like YouTube and that sort of like influencer aspect. So I think that they also like, you know, post on Instagram, post on Facebook, that sort of thing. Umm so I think that's like the other aspect to it is that it's watching their YouTube videos, listening to their opinions and that sort of um, relationship with that sort of social media which is slightly different.</p> <p>13. R: Okay, so Rahima, approximately how much time do you think you spend let's say per week on social media?</p> <p>14. RA: Umm Yeah, hate to admit it, but I think I think probably, I guess it varies, but normally</p>	<p>Varied nature of usage</p> <p>Intensity of involvement</p>
<p>Resistance on disclosing amount of time spent using social media else of the phone. (I hate to) (previous page)</p> <p>Accessing a range of media for various reasons. Are there some platforms more preferred than others?</p> <p>Sharing photos of religious events or celebrations. Could this be a way of showing your culture or identity?</p> <p>Selective sharing. Being good at sharing has been a bit of a challenge. I am selective with. Does this reflect a sense of uncensored expression?</p> <p>Twitter used for accessing news & info on current affairs. Is social media becoming a popular means of accessing news & info? particularly amongst students / certain age groups</p>	<p>36. maybe like, you don't realize it but like three to four hours in a day could be spent. Because like from the moment you wake up to like having a little bit of a break, while you're studying, having lunch, watching something like that sort of time it just it does builds up to like 4, 4 hours.</p> <p>37. R: um, okay. Yeah, so what kind of websites, apps, social media apps websites do you access in that time?</p> <p>38. RA: Umm so Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. Again, like YouTube's definitely a big one. And like, yeah, I think those four are the main ones. And then there's obviously social media like LinkedIn, which I have, but I wouldn't say I necessarily use to the full extent rather than just, I'd use that to like, scroll through and read different sort of things...</p> <p>39. that are coming up, but not necessarily something I post on.</p> <p>40. R: Okay, so you've mentioned a few apps there, like Instagram and Facebook. And previously, you mentioned YouTube as well. And now LinkedIn. So what, what do you use these apps for? So let's say if you could start with perhaps Instagram, what kind of?</p> <p>41. RA: Yeah, okay. Yeah so I think Instagram is mostly like, a memory log in that sense. So like posting photos, you show, like when you post it, so like, when I post it's usually like, mostly events that are happening, or, sorry events that have happened. Um and yeah, I don't usually post things like selfies or I'm not like I don't really post that sort of aspect but some people obviously do. But usually like photos of events that have happened or, I can't really think of anything else. Scenery, usually that and then for example on Instagram we have stories and that's again, things like events that are happening or sometimes I post um other people's like videos or things that I found interesting.</p> <p>42. R: Hmm.</p> <p>43. RA: And so for example, like I posted a video that was made for Eid like celebrating Eid last year and that was, that just sort of like represented like quite a lot about Eid in different cultures around the world and I thought okay, that's really interesting and a different aspect that people that I'm friends with on Instagram, probably haven't seen. So I think I'm quite selective with what I post with that but I thought it was quite interesting. So I posted, so say I sometimes post things I think are like quite interesting that I think people will engage with. Umm That's, I think for Instagram. Facebook, I don't really use Facebook anymore. I think um like once in a while I'll post or like, share something like people that I know that need flatmates in London or something, I'll re-post that or pair in here and there like repost an article. I don't really post anything myself. And then just adding friends on Facebook, I think, especially at university, you meet a lot of people that you meet, sort of maybe like for half an hour on one day and then never again. So if you like, connect with them quite well and you add them on Facebook, then you've always got that sort of relationship that you can have with them. Outside of like University whenever that you can keep in contact with them. And Twitter, I used to use Twitter, but that was like a lot younger. I still have it. I sometimes retweet things that I relate to. I don't really tweet anymore, but it's quite an interesting platform that has a lot of different things or a lot to read like, from people posting like news so I'm currently applying for jobs in government. So I follow like a lot of political correspondence, so that is like half of my feed and then the other half is just people posting</p>	<p>Resistance to admit</p> <p>what counts as social media?</p> <p>Varied nature of usage</p> <p>Selective sharing in posting</p> <p>Important source of news</p>

<p>Social Media influencers side. Does this suggest the power of the social media in Rahima's life? Is this a new phenomenon?</p> <p>Both negative & positive portrayals of Muslims on the social media. Is Rahima alluding to the role politicians can play in influencing attitudes?</p> <p>Underlying racism from people in early social environment.</p> <p>Always "One day I might engage with it but one day I won't". There appears to be a sense of confusion here?</p>	<p>78. normal tweets about everyday life.</p> <p>79. R: Hmm.</p> <p>80. RA: So that aspect to it. Umm, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. LinkedIn - don't really post on there, just obviously, it's a career sort of oriented social media. But usually just keeps me up to date with different people's experiences and careers and opportunities that are on there, that I can use to further my career. But I think that's pretty much all the social media that I use.</p> <p>81. R: okay and you've said in terms of like posting things is... could say a bit more?</p> <p>82. RA: Yes. Sorry you got cut out.</p> <p>83. R: So Rahima, you said that you, you've mentioned the things that you would normally post on, you know, different apps or social media apps? Is that any different from what you would access on social media like things that you look at? Or is it the same?</p> <p>84. RA: Um, I think access wise mostly it's like the content I post is the same as the content that my friends post necessarily. But then again, like the YouTube influencer side of it, they have Instagrams and they have Facebook or whatever. So for Instagram, especially, I do follow people on there, but I think, like I'm very, like very specific on who I follow, like there's a lot of like makeup artists, that sort of thing that I tend not to follow because I just think it's just repetitive content that is just a bit boring.</p> <p>85. R: Hmm.</p> <p>86. RA: Then there's certain people like, like Casey Neistat, that post quite interesting things or like not that there's like different people now like Nadir Nahdi, who post a lot about Muslim representation around the world and makes a lot of videos that are quite, quite interesting. And he also like, runs a running club in London and that sort of thing. And I like to try and follow those sort of things which are obviously like Muslim represented, representatives on social media that are like, sort of influencing in that sense. So I think that's like one half I access.</p> <p>87. R: Yeah, thanks for sharing that Rahima. So now if we look more specifically at how you think Muslims and Islam are represented in the social media, what are your thoughts on that?</p> <p>88. RA: Umm So I think it's a bit varied. Um I think there's like, the negative aspect to it where you've got a lot of like. I don't know like, you've got Trump and, you've got, like even people that like I grew up with, like you didn't necessarily think that sort of saw Islam and Muslims in a bad way, but you'll see sort of like that underlying racism or whatever. Um on like, posts on Facebook and things.</p> <p>89. R: Like the people that you grew up with, are these from your school?</p> <p>90. RA: Umm, so not necessarily like people that, umm not necessarily in my school, but some. So like we, I don't know, whether you've heard it, see that NCS, the National citizen service in the UK, they sort of send away, send 16 year olds away for like three weeks with a bunch of other people from their city but in different schools and like, there's this one person I have on Facebook, where, I can sort of like see the underlying racism and I'm like, one day I might engage with it, but one day, I won't. Umm which I think so you sort of see that like, within our age group, but mostly I think, its that I think it is the older generation that you see the sort of negative aspects of Islam and Muslims are like being shared and like, it's pretty sad.</p>	<p>The influential aspects</p> <p>Varied representation of Muslims.</p> <p>Role of influential figures</p> <p>Underlying racism</p>
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<p>Muslims portrayed as terrorists</p> <p>Use of the term ^{term} Brown Muslims suggests appears to suggest the creation of a sub category of Muslims, associated with extremism & terrorism.</p> <p>Muslims of other ethnicities / skin colour targeted in other ways but not associated with terrorism in the same way.</p> <p>Is there something about the reputation of Brown Muslims? What is it?</p> <p>'All lives matter', some allegiance is reflected here. Is using such statements dismissive of the racial abuse experienced by people of colour?</p> <p>Trying to understand why people play it more out of proportion. Is Rahima suggesting widening her views? Could this be a sign of pre-empting what may be vulnerable?</p> <p>'most, mostly' - complains</p> <p>Difference in attitudes of young & old. Is there some side racialisation happening here?</p>	<p>120. But yeah, I think I've lost my trail of thoughts, forgotten what I was saying... yeah, so I think you've got the negative aspects,</p> <p>121. but I think like things with like terrorism and this sort of that sort of negative light, but any sort of portrayed in like, from like, for example, like, when people think of terrorism, I think they really only think of like, brown Muslims, whereas I think the negative aspect isn't on all Muslims, like, for example, like black Muslims, it's not because they're Muslim, they have their own like negative light, but that's the negative that comes from them being black rather than their relationship with Islam or their relationship with being Muslim. And like Malaysian Muslims, like there's so many Malaysian Muslims in the world, but that's not like how people would associate Islam in a negative light.</p> <p>122. R: Hmm.</p> <p>123. RA: like they associate it with Brown Muslims. But then there's that negative aspect, but I don't, I don't think I necessarily like people that, umm not necessarily in my own social media feed, but because of things like on Instagram, you have like the Explore thing, the Explore, section or whatever that's posting from everyone rather than just the people you follow. So you, sometimes do see that sort of negative posts about Islam and Muslims on there. And then.</p> <p>124. R: Can you give a few examples of something that you've shared that you've seen, perhaps recently?</p> <p>125. RA: Like, for example, my friends just sent me something that was on social media this morning and it was actually about, sorry I forgot.</p> <p>126. R: that's absolutely fine.</p> <p>127. RA: Umm so it's just about this girl that had racial slurs and whatever messaged to her. And like, I went on to his profile, and I saw that, you know, like he posted like, all lives matter and how like some people find that as like a negative connotation. I don't think I've necessarily seen it too much like myself on social media, but I know that it's there if I wanted to look for it.</p> <p>128. R: Hmm.</p> <p>129. RA: So I kind of actively try to avoid it in that sense, but.</p> <p>130. R: So you try to avoid it...could you say more on that?</p> <p>131. RA: um because I think I like I know it's wrong and I think that, the person that's posting this clearly just doesn't understand. Like, I understand where they're coming from because like everyone has different experiences like they might have grown up with people in school that are Muslims and like their family, treat people differently or they've just had like their own perceptions of Muslims because of the people they grew up with. So I think as bad as they might perceive it or post about it, by listening to them or engaging with them, it just kind of plays it more out of proportion. But yeah.</p> <p>132. R: Hmm, so how does it impact you kind of seeing such things or knowing that they exist or even coming across them on social media?</p> <p>133. RA: Umm I think because, for the most part, a bit that I see it's mostly the older generation. And I think because of that, I don't think it affects me as much because I like I kind of, to an extent, understand they grew up in that generation and but they, yeah, they grew up in that generation. But I do understand that like, they have that influence on their children. And</p>	<p>Perceived as terrorists</p> <p>Being Brown & Muslim</p> <p>Variation in ethnicities</p> <p>Racial slurs</p> <p>'All lives matter'</p> <p>Avoiding racist commentary</p> <p>Formation of Negative attitudes</p> <p>Impact of upbringing</p> <p>Younger generation vs older generation</p>
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Appendix 12: List of emergent themes (Transcript 3)

- Varied nature of usage (x2)
- Intensity of involvement(x2)
- Resistance to admit (x1)
- What counts as social media? (x1)
- Selective sharing/posting (x3)
- Resisting the urge (x2)
- Important source of news (x2)
- Perceived as terrorist (x4)
- Being brown and Muslim (x3)
- Racial slurs (x3)
- All lives matter (x1)
- Avoiding racist commentary (x4)
- Formation of negative attitudes (x3)
- Impact of upbringing (x1)
- Younger generation vs older generation (x1)
- Varied representations of Muslims (x1)
- Role of influential figures (x3)
- Underlying racism (x2)
- It frustrates me, it's annoying (x2)
- Ignoring to cope (x2)
- Black lives matter (x1)
- Impact of Covid-19 (x2)
- Lack of positive portrayals (x2)
- Politicians causing divisions (x2)
- Legitimising overt racisms (x1)
- The urge to defend the religion (x1)
- Double standards (x1)
- Social media replacing mainstream media (x2)
- Intolerance of contrary views (x2)
- Social media quick to react (x1)
- Nobody gets the others perspective (x2)
- Social media individualised to user (x1)
- Negative stereotyping of the visible Muslim (x3)
- Influencers challenging negative stereotypes (x2)
- Differentiating from the terrorist (x2)
- The moderate Muslim (x2)
- Variation in ethnicities (x1)
- Inter-group judgments (x2)
- The role of cultural/religious societies (x1)
- Piggy back culture (x1)
- Islamophobia (x2)
- Coronavirus and the social media (x1)
- Acculturating into British ways of life (x1)

- The power of social media (x2)
- The role in forming perceptions (x2)
- Positive aspects (x2)
- Stereotypes not always bad (x1)
- Jokes about Muslims (x2)
- Polarities between Muslims (x1)
- Ignorance and immaturity (x3)
- Frustrating and boring (x2)
- Mostly I'm fine with it (2)
- Being left wing (x1)
- The need to fit in (x1)
- The need to be accepted (x2)

Appendix 13: Clustering of themes (Transcript 3)

Theme 1: Relevance of social media

- Varied nature of usage (x2)
- Intensity of involvement(x2)
- Resistance to admit (x1)
- What counts as social media? (x1)
- Social media individualised to user (x1)
- Important source of news (x2)

Theme 2: Holding back

- Selective sharing/posting (x3)
- Resisting the urge (x2)

Theme3: Negative representations

- Lack of positive portrayals (x2)
- Negative stereotyping of the visible Muslim (x3)
- Perceived as terrorist (x4)
- Being brown and Muslim (x3)

Theme 4: Implicit and explicit racisms

- Racial slurs (x3)
- All lives matter (x1)
- Social media quick to react (x1)
- Underlying racism (x2)
- Islamophobia (x2)
- Jokes about Muslims (x2)

Theme 5: Avoiding and rationalising

- Avoiding racist commentary (x4)
- Formation of negative attitudes (x3)
- Impact of upbringing (x1)
- Younger generation vs older generation (x1)
- Ignoring to cope (x2)
- The urge to defend the religion (x1)

Theme 6: Social media influence

- The power of social media (x2)
- The role in forming perceptions (x2)
- Role of influential figures (x3)

- Politicians causing divisions (x2)
- Legitimising overt racisms (x1)
- Social media replacing mainstream media (x2)
- Intolerance of contrary views (x2)
- Nobody gets the others perspective (x2)

Theme 7: Positive aspects

- Positive aspects (x2)
- Stereotypes not always bad (x1)
- Influencers challenging negative stereotypes (x2)

Theme 8: Range of feelings

- Frustrating and boring (x2)
- It frustrates me, it's annoying (x2)
- Mostly I'm fine with it (2)

Theme 9: I am not 'them'

- Differentiating from the terrorist (x2)
- The need to fit in (x1)
- The need to be accepted (x2)
- Acculturating into British ways of life (x1)

Appendix 14: Example of theme generation from cross case analysis

Table B: Development of sub-theme 1

Transcript	1	2	3	4	5	6
Pseudonym	Mahnoor	Zahra	Rahima	Qamar	Ahmed	Omair
Sub-theme 1 <i>Exposure to polarised portrayals</i>	<p>The good and the bad</p> <p>Muslim men as terrorists and women backward</p> <p>Good stereotypes</p> <p>Influencers spreading positivity</p>	<p>Muslims capable of doing messed up things</p> <p>Muslims violent and rigid</p> <p>Direct contact with Muslims more positive views</p>	<p>Varied representation of Muslims</p> <p>Perceived as the terrorist</p> <p>Stereotypes not always bad</p> <p>Lack of engagement with positive portrayals</p>	<p>Divisive nature of portrayals</p> <p>Muslims rigid and extreme</p> <p>Association with acts of terror</p>	<p>There's both sides to it</p> <p>Negative portrayal of the visible Muslim</p> <p>Islam as a violent religion</p>	<p>Both negatives and positives</p> <p>Terrorist acts as reference points</p>

Appendix 15: Example of electronic coding using NVivo

The screenshot displays the NVivo 12 Plus software interface, divided into two main sections: the Nodes table and a document transcript.

Nodes Table:

Name	Files	References	Created On	Cre
1. The Self and the (Perceived) Other		0	2/3/2021 10:50 AM	IR
a. Exposure to Polarized Representations		6	2/3/2021 10:52 AM	IR
b. Denial of Self Expression		6	2/3/2021 10:58 AM	IR
c. Separating the 'self' from the 'other' - 'put up a wall'		6	2/3/2021 11:17 AM	IR
2. Understanding Exposure and Influence		0	2/3/2021 10:46 AM	IR
a. Nature of influence - 'A seed in the head that grows'		6	2/3/2021 10:49 AM	IR
b. Ease of anonymous sharing - 'removing all barriers of'		5	2/3/2021 10:49 AM	IR
3. Making Sense of Intersecting Identities		0	2/3/2021 11:00 AM	IR
a. Perceived as 'brown Muslims'		6	2/3/2021 11:02 AM	IR
b. Subtle and explicit expressions of hate		5	2/3/2021 11:03 AM	IR
4. Processing and Coping		0	2/3/2021 11:04 AM	IR
a. Accepting undesirable emotions - 'just kind of used to'		6	2/3/2021 11:06 AM	IR
b. Rationalising negative attitudes		6	2/3/2021 11:05 AM	IR
c. Cultures coming together - 'a melting pot'		6	2/3/2021 11:07 AM	IR

Document Transcript (T4 - Qamar):

ANALYSIS - TRANSCRIPT 4

Colour Coding Key:

- Descriptive – Blue
- Linguistic – Green
- Conceptual – Red

1. R: Right. Hi Qamar, my name is Ishba Rehman and I'm a trainee counselling psychologist at the University of Manchester. And as part of my doctoral study, I will be exploring Pakistani Muslim higher education, students perceptions and experiences with regards to social media representations of Muslims and Islam, as I've sent you the details before, so it's just kind of reiterating some of those. Okay. Umm also, this interview is going to be roughly about an hour and a half, we can take between an hour and an hour and a half and I'm flexible with that. Okay. And yeah, that's that's pretty much it. And at any point, if you feel like you have to go for any reason, or if you have to stop the interview, or you find something distressing, please feel free to let me know and we'll conclude it there.

2. Q: Alright Let's go.

3. R: Okay. And also the study's been granted approval by, ethical approval by the university of Manchester.

4. Q: Okay.

5. R: Okay. Right. So Qamar Can you tell me what place the social media has in your life at present?

6. Q: So, at the moment, I use all sorts of social media, I think pretty much everything apar from Twitter. So I use WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook. So I'm quite heavily, I use it like most of the day, most of my life basically. takes up a lot of time. (16-18)

Appendix 16: Reflexive journal entry

May 9th 2020

It was quite interesting to see how ~~people were using~~ social media being used to access news. I do not do this personally. It was a bit surprising for me to see how twitter was becoming so popular with young adults to access news. I do not know at this stage if others I will interview share this experience. I do not want to pre-empt anything though: ~~perhaps~~ It will be useful to park this here for now & let the participants explore the aspects they wish to bring my attention to.

May 22nd 2020

This was a difficult interview. There were multiple instances where I felt sad & at times annoyed & angry. I knew in some ways, based on my own experiences & those of others I know, that Muslims who appeared 'visibly Muslim' may experience greater difficulty in terms of people's perceptions & attitudes towards them but I didn't know how people could experience discrimination that was so overt. It bothered me when I heard how people would dare not to sit by him on the tube. It ~~was~~ made me quite sad listening to their experience. Given my training in person centred therapy, I endeavoured to be non-directive whilst also offering empathy. I had remind myself though.... I was a researcher in that instance & not a therapist....

Appendix 17: Ethical approval



School for Environment, Education and Development
Humanities Bridgeford Street 1.17

The University of Manchester

Manchester

M13 9PL

Email: PGR.ethics.seed@manchester.ac.uk

Ref: 2019-7917-12010

18/10/2019

Dear Mrs Ishba Rehman, , Dr Jo Shuttleworth, Dr Terry Hanley

Study Title: Exploring Pakistani Muslim Higher Education students' perceptions and experiences of Social Media representations of Muslims and Islam.

Environment, Education and Development School Panel PGR

I write to thank you for submitting the final version of your documents for your project to the Committee on 11/10/2019 15:24 . I am pleased to confirm a favourable ethical opinion for the above research on the basis described in the application form and supporting documentation as submitted and approved by the Committee.

Please see below for a table of the titles, version numbers and dates of all the final approved documents for your project:

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Data Management Plan	Thesis DMP	18/08/2019	1
Consent Form	Thesis - Consent form_GDPR	18/08/2019	1
Letters of Permission	Thesis - Participant Recruitment Form	18/08/2019	1
Additional docs	Thesis - Debrief sheet	18/08/2019	1
Additional docs	Thesis - Distress Protocol	18/08/2019	1
Additional docs	Thesis - Confidentiality Agreement	19/08/2019	1
Additional docs	Thesis - Interview Schedule (Revised)	26/08/2019	2
Participant Information Sheet	Thesis - Participant Information Sheet (PIS_GDPR) - Revised	26/08/2019	2
Additional docs	Thesis - Advertisement for Recruitment	06/10/2019	1
Additional docs	Letter to Gatekeepers- Pakistan Society (Students Union)	10/10/2019	1

This approval is effective for a period of five years and is on delegated authority of the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) however please note that it is only valid for the specifications of the research project as outlined in the approved documentation set. If the project continues beyond the 5 year period or if you wish to propose any changes to the methodology or any other specifics within the project an application to seek an amendment must be submitted for review. Failure to do so could invalidate the insurance and constitute research misconduct.

You are reminded that, in accordance with University policy, any data carrying personal identifiers must be encrypted when not held on a secure university computer or kept securely as a hard copy in a location which is accessible only to those involved with the research.

For those undertaking research requiring a DBS Certificate: As you have now completed your ethical application if required a colleague at the University of Manchester will be in touch for you to undertake a DBS check. Please note that you do not have DBS approval until you have received a DBS Certificate completed by the University of Manchester, or you are an MA Teach First student who holds a DBS certificate for your current teaching role.

Reporting Requirements:

You are required to report to us the following:

1. [Amendments:](#) Guidance on what constitutes an amendment
2. [Amendments:](#) How to submit an amendment in the ERM system
3. [Ethics Breaches and adverse events](#)
4. [Data breaches](#)

We wish you every success with the research.

Yours sincerely,