

“I Found Myself Shouting at the TV Screen”: Media Representations and the Emotional Wellbeing of Muslim Women in Britain

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Abstract

For many Muslim women in Britain, media representation is not just about visibility; it is about misrepresentation, exclusion, and the emotional toll of being persistently framed through an Orientalist and Islamophobic lens. This thesis investigates how such portrayals shape the emotional wellbeing, identity, and agency of Muslim women, particularly those who wear visible markers of their faith. Whether depicted as oppressed victims in need of saving or as threats to societal cohesion, these reductive narratives, which intensified in the post-9/11 era, reinforce systemic biases, contribute to discrimination, and fuel social marginalisation.

Informed by concepts from the Social Identity Approach and Intergroup Emotions Theory, this study employed a qualitative methodological framework, incorporating dialogical and photo-elicitation interviews with 28 participants to explore the lived experiences of Muslim women in Britain. By centring emotions as a key analytical lens, the research reveals how media portrayals elicit anger, frustration, fear, and self-censorship, shaping self-perception, social interactions, and broader engagement with media and society. These emotional responses emphasise the profound impact of persistent misrepresentation.

Despite these challenges, Muslim women actively resist and negotiate their representation through various coping strategies, including social creativity, identity consolidation, and self-representation. Some challenge dominant narratives through activism and media participation, while others reinforce their religious and cultural identities as acts of resilience and empowerment. These strategies illustrate how Muslim women navigate and counteract media bias, asserting agency in a space that often marginalises them.

By providing an in-depth analysis of the intersection between media, identity, and emotions, this study contributes to broader discussions on Islamophobia, gendered discrimination, and representation. The findings highlight the urgent need for more inclusive, accurate, and nuanced portrayals of Muslim women in media, advocating for greater diversity in representation to foster understanding, dismantle systemic biases, and promote social cohesion.

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Dedications

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1 Introduction

1.1 *Background and Motivation*

The media's power to shape societal perceptions of marginalised groups has long been recognised as both an opportunity and a source of harm (Herman 1994; Hall 1997; van Dijk 2012). Despite the rise of social media as a tool for marginalised groups to challenge stereotypes and assert nuanced identities (Echchaibi 2013), traditional media continues to dominate public narratives, often reducing Muslims in Britain to stereotypes (Poole 2002a; Al-Hejin 2012). For Muslim women in Britain (MWB), these portrayals are particularly damaging, as they frequently reinforce stereotypes rooted in Islamophobia and Orientalist narratives (Ahmed 1992; Yegenoglu 1998; Kundnani 2014; Zempi and Chakraborti 2015; Abbas 2021).

These depictions have evolved significantly, especially in the wake of 9/11, the subsequent War on Terror, and ongoing societal shifts. The “War on Terror” refers to the global military, political, and ideological campaign led primarily by the United States and its allies following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the USA by the terrorist group Al-Qaeda¹(9/11). This campaign aimed to combat terrorism, particularly linked to Islamist groups, but has often been critiqued for perpetuating Islamophobic narratives and disproportionately targeting Muslim communities (Cesari 2013; Kundnani

¹ Al-Qaeda is a militant Islamist group founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden and others during the Soviet Afghan war. Al-Qaeda is thought to be responsible for 9/11 attacks in the United States.

2014). The campaign's rhetoric and policies have had far-reaching consequences, framing Muslims as inherent security threats and fostering a climate of suspicion and prejudice (Saeed 2007) and it has "normalised the securitisation of Muslims and regularised the existence of Islamophobia"(Abbas 2021, p.402).

Historically, representations of Muslim women in British media were often tied to notions of exoticism, oppression, and victimhood (Ahmed 1992; Yegenoglu 1998; Shaheen 2000). Post 9/11, these portrayals became explicitly connected to narratives of security, integration, and religious extremism, framing visibly Muslim women as symbols of cultural conflict and political tension (Poole 2002b; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010). Whether depicted as victims in need of rescue or threats to societal norms, these entrenched narratives perpetuate systemic Islamophobia. This thesis examines the emotional and psychological toll of such representations on Muslim women in Britain, focusing on their lived experiences and emotional responses to this fraught representational landscape.

1.1.1 A Focus on Emotions

Emotions form the backbone of this research because they provide critical insight into the personal and social consequences of media misrepresentation. Media portrayals of Muslim women are not merely external occurrences; they are deeply internalised, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. These portrayals directly influence social interactions, emotional wellbeing, and self-perception, often creating feelings of alienation, fear, and frustration among the women they target.

While there is a wealth of research documenting the prevalence of stereotypes and their societal implications, much less attention has been paid to the emotional toll of these

portrayals on Muslim women themselves². I argue that this oversight leaves a critical gap in our understanding of how media narratives are experienced at the individual level. In this study, I focus on the emotions evoked by these portrayals, such as anger, frustration, fear, and self-censorship, and examine how these emotions shape Muslim women's identities and responses.

Emotions are not merely individual experiences; they are inherently social and political. As Sara Ahmed (2014) posits, emotions are tied to broader power structures, shaping and being shaped by societal dynamics, cultural norms, and systemic inequities. Media portrayals of Muslim women do not exist in isolation but are embedded within these power structures, reinforcing existing hierarchies and marginalisation. By examining how Muslim women emotionally navigate these portrayals, this study provides a lens to understand their lived realities while recognising their resilience and agency.

The decision to focus on emotions is also informed by the theoretical recognition of their transformative potential. Emotional experiences often motivate action, from personal coping mechanisms to collective resistance and social mobilisation (Jasper 2011; Kleres 2018). By examining the emotional impact of media portrayals, this study highlights how Muslim women use their feelings as a lens to make sense of their marginalisation, as well as a resource for resilience and empowerment. In doing so, the study extends beyond the structural critique of media content to explore its deeply human and psychological

² There is a limited literature with key writings from (Zempi and Chakraborti 2015; Eijberts and Roggeband 2016; Zempi 2020) see section 2.3 for details.

dimensions, as well as contributing to a broader understanding of the dynamic interplay between representation, identity, and emotions.

1.1.2 Motivation

My motivation for this study is both deeply personal and firmly rooted in academic inquiry. As a visibly Muslim woman, one who wears hijab, I have witnessed and experienced the powerful role media plays in shaping public attitudes and internalised perceptions of self. Moving to the UK heightened my awareness of Islamophobia, which became a recurring topic of conversation with fellow Muslims. These discussions often emerged even in informal exchanges, sometimes in the form of jokes that subtly revealed underlying experiences of discrimination and verbal microaggressions.

One significant moment that deepened my interest occurred during my visit to a mosque in Canterbury during Ramadan. While the congregation was praying, a burglary took place, with money stolen from the mosque. This event left the Muslim community feeling vulnerable and unsafe, and there was a heightened fear of neglect and bias. On the women's side of the mosque, conversations with law enforcement revealed tensions; many expressed frustration and anger while addressing the police about their security concerns. Some women voiced dissatisfaction with law enforcement, arguing that the police were not doing enough to ensure the safety of Muslims. The discussion quickly evolved into a broader conversation about Islamophobia, particularly given Canterbury's demographic: a predominantly white town with a small Muslim population at the time. One woman who wore the niqab suggested that, from her personal experience, police officers themselves might harbour biases, especially when interacting with visibly Muslim women, such as those dressed like herself. In response, the attending officer showed compassion and proposed regular visits to the mosque

by his team members to build familiarity and address these concerns. In this interaction, I witnessed a profound display of emotions from the women in the mosque, ranging from frustration and fear to anger, as well as a remarkable display of compassion and understanding from the police officer. This demonstrated to me that Islamophobia cannot and should not be studied in isolation from emotions, as they play a pivotal role in shaping both the experiences of those affected and the responses of those in positions of authority.

Later, when I moved to Cardiff, a much larger and more diverse city with an active Muslim community and prominent mosques, the nature of conversations around Islamophobia shifted. Here, the focus was less on microaggressions and more on systemic issues, including discriminatory government policies, media portrayals and the normalisation of exclusionary practices. These contrasting experiences in two different cities revealed to me the multifaceted nature of Islamophobia, shaped not only by individual perspectives but also by broader socio-political and cultural contexts.

During this time, British media was filled with televised debates surrounding the contentious issue of whether Britain should impose a ban on the burqa and hijab. In 2018, Boris Johnson, who served as the prime minister of the United Kingdom in the period between July 24, 2019, and September 6, 2022; made derogatory comments about Muslim women wearing the burqa, comparing them to “letterboxes” and “bank robbers”. These remarks sparked widespread debate about a potential burqa ban in the UK and coincided with a surge in anti-Muslim attacks all across the UK, as reported by Tell Mama (2018), anti-Muslim hate crimes surged by 375% in the week following Johnson's comments, rising from eight incidents to 38. Alarming, 22 of these incidents specifically targeted Muslim women wearing the niqab or face veil.

This event gained significant attention on TV shows like Good Morning Britain, broadcast on September 4, 2018. Sahar Al-Faifi, a Welsh molecular geneticist who wears the face veil, was invited to what appeared to be a platform for “defending” and “justifying” her decision to cover her face; she argued that represents her freedom of expression and religious practice. She countered claims that the burqa is oppressive or incompatible with British values. On the opposing side, journalist Rachel Johnson (Boris Johnson’s sister) argued that her brother’s article about the burqa “didn’t go far enough” and called for a full ban in the UK (Good Morning Britain 2018). This was not an isolated occurrence; similar scenarios have played out multiple times. Muslim women who wear the niqab, including Sahar herself, have often been called upon by media outlets to respond, justify, or persuade audiences of their right to wear a face veil; or even to wear the hijab. Such scenarios highlighted for me how media narratives disproportionately target visible Muslim women, politicising their identities and forcing them into roles of defence and justification.

These personal encounters with media narratives and the pervasive Islamophobia they perpetuate fuelled my academic interest in understanding their emotional impact on Muslim women. While existing literature has focused on quantifying negative portrayals (Poole 2002b; Saeed 2007; Moore et al. 2008; Alsultany 2012a) or examining their effects on non-Muslim audiences (Saleem and Ramasubramanian 2019; Sutkutè 2019), very few studies explore how these narratives are experienced by Muslim women themselves (Tarlo 2010; Zempi 2020). My research seeks to address this gap by amplifying the voices of Muslim women and placing their emotional experiences at the centre of the analysis.

It is well-established that negative stereotypes about Muslims resonate strongly in public consciousness because they easily “stick in people’s minds” (Shadid 2005, p. 337), justifying emotions such as “anger, resentment, and fear” among non-Muslims towards Muslims (Said

1997, p. 43) and fostering anti-Muslim prejudice (Shaver et al. 2017). However, there is a limited body of research exploring the specific emotional impact of media portrayals; particularly the negative stereotyping of Muslims and Muslim women, on the emotional experiences of Muslim women themselves. Few studies investigate the range of feelings and emotions these portrayals evoke among those directly targeted by them (Mastro 2017).

Therefore, my research focuses directly on examining how such stereotypes provoke emotions like anger, frustration, fear, and even self-censorship among Muslim women, who are the direct subjects of these harmful representations. Amplifying the voices of Muslim women is not only a deeply personal mission but also a necessary academic endeavour to address this overlooked emotional toll. By centring the emotional dimensions of media misrepresentation, my study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the lived realities of Muslim women and to contribute to broader discourses on representation, identity, and emotional wellbeing.

1.2 Research Context

Muslim women have been the focus of widespread media scrutiny, often portrayed in ways that reduce their identities to symbols of religion, oppression, or threat. In this study, the definition of “media” is intentionally broad and was shaped in part by the materials that participants themselves referenced and discussed. Rather than limiting the focus to traditional forms of media that predate the internet such as newspapers or television, participants frequently engaged with and reflected on content from films, online streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime, as well as social media channels like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), and video-sharing platforms like YouTube. This participant-led approach enabled a more comprehensive and grounded understanding of how Muslim women

in Britain encounter and interpret media narratives across a range of traditional and digital sources.

I drew upon scholarly work that consistently highlights the prevalence of negative stereotypes. These portrayals frame Muslim women as either oppressed victims or radicalised threats, perpetuating what Poole (2002) describes as a “crisis of representation”. Such narratives not only mischaracterise Muslim women but also reinforce broader societal fears and biases. In my exploration of the literature, I identified two dominant approaches to studying this issue. Firstly, many studies quantified the extent of negative portrayals of Muslims in Western media. For instance, Baker et al. (2013) conducted corpus-based studies to analyse the frequency and tone of terms associated with Muslims in British newspapers, finding a disproportionate emphasis on terrorism, violence, and extremism. Secondly, some studies explored the effects of such portrayals on public perceptions, showing how they fuel Islamophobia and justify policies of surveillance and exclusion (Morey and Yaqin 2011; Kundnani 2014). Although these studies have uncovered critical patterns and societal implications, they often assume the lived emotional experiences of the individuals targeted by these portrayals, taking the emotional impact for granted rather than demonstrating the connection between the representations and their reception. My research foregrounds these experiences by treating Muslim women’s voices, emotions, and resilience as key elements in understanding the broader impact of media narratives.

Islamophobia, particularly as propagated in media discourse, is a powerful force in shaping public perceptions of Muslims and justifying exclusionary practices. Media outlets often disguise Islamophobic narratives as a defence of secular values, free speech, or national security, thereby normalising anti-Muslim prejudice. For example, Khiabany and Williamson (2015) argue that incidents such as the Charlie Hebdo publication of caricatures of the

Prophet Muhammad exemplify how Islamophobia is framed within a liberal framework of free speech. This approach equates the denigration of Islam with an exercise of democratic freedom, eclipsing the profound emotional and social harm inflicted on Muslim communities.

The intersection of Islamophobia with broader political and cultural anxieties further reinforces its normalisation. Khiabany and Williamson (2008) observed a shift in British media discourse, where progressive multicultural attitudes gave way to a “new orthodoxy” framing diversity as a threat to British values and free speech. Their later work (2010) highlights how the veil has been politicised as a symbol of this perceived threat, casting Muslim women’s dress as a challenge to liberal ideals and perpetuating racism disguised as cultural critique. These narratives not only target Muslim women but also construct a broader societal fear of Islam as incompatible with Western norms.

Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) contribute to this discussion by identifying how media discourses create “hybridised threats”, portraying Muslims as both symbolic and realistic dangers to societal cohesion. Such portrayals undermine identity principles for Muslim and non-Muslim communities alike, disrupting continuity and distinctiveness. These narratives fuel Islamophobic discourse by constructing Muslims as inherently other, incompatible with Western ideals, and a source of conflict.

The media's Islamophobic discourse is deeply rooted in Orientalist traditions, which, as Ewart and O'Donnell (2018) argue, reduce Muslims to simplistic, monolithic, and stereotypical categories. Building on this perspective, Aydin Varol (2022) highlights the enduring influence of Western philosophical traditions in shaping Islamophobic narratives. She demonstrates how contemporary media representations of Islam often echo historical depictions, portraying it as inherently violent, irrational, and oppositional to Western values.

These portrayals are not isolated incidents but are deeply embedded in Eurocentric ideologies that stretch back to the Classical Greek, Medieval, and Enlightenment periods. During these eras, Islam was systematically “othered”, depicted as a threat, and reduced to a symbol of fear and hostility. Aydin Varol (2022) argues that these narratives have been perpetuated over centuries, becoming ingrained in collective memory and continuing to inform the Islamophobic discourse prevalent in modern media.

This analysis resonates with Huntington's 1993 “Clash of Civilisations” thesis, which frames cultural and civilisational differences, especially between the West and Islam, as an inevitable source of conflict. As Haynes (2019) observes, Huntington’s paradigm continues to influence right-wing populist rhetoric, where Muslims are often collectively vilified as threats to Western security, values, and identity. This securitisation of Islam in both policy and media, fuelled by globalisation and glocalisation, reinforces the narrative of a fundamental cultural divide. Such framings not only perpetuate stereotypes but also obscure the diversity within Muslim communities, further entrenching Islamophobia in public discourse and policy. By linking historical Orientalist narratives with Huntington’s framework, it becomes evident that these overlapping ideologies sustain a cycle of exclusion and fear in Western media and political spheres.

Allen (2010) and Jaber (2022) delve deeper into the foundations of Islamophobia, framing it as an intersection of racism, cultural prejudice, and religious discrimination. Media representations, which often draw from these Orientalist and Huntingtonian narratives, contribute to systemic Islamophobia by perpetuating stereotypes and legitimising exclusionary practices. These portrayals evoke emotions of fear and alienation, especially among Muslim women who bear the brunt of these narratives due to their visibility.

Islamophobia is inherently gendered, with Muslim women often subjected to intensified scrutiny and discrimination. As Khiabany and Williamson (2010) argue, the politicisation of the veil exemplifies this dynamic, framing Muslim women as symbols of oppression or defiance within public discourse. Such narratives intersect with gender, religion, and culture, portraying Muslim women as both victims in need of liberation and as perceived disruptors of societal norms. This framing diminishes their agency and renders them disproportionately vulnerable to verbal and physical attacks, as their appearance is often interpreted as a public statement of their religious identity and “otherness”. Together, these analyses illustrate how systemic Islamophobia operates through overlapping narratives of race, culture, and gender, demonstrating that media is deeply entangled with broader social, cultural, and political issues and cannot be understood in isolation, thereby perpetuating exclusion and vulnerability for Muslim women in particular.

Islamophobia is a contested and evolving concept that encompasses both overt and subtle forms of anti-Muslim sentiment. The Runnymede Trust (2017) defines Islamophobia as “rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.” Similarly, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism describes it as “a baseless hostility and fear vis-à-vis Islam,” which leads to exclusion, discrimination and stigmatisation of Muslim individuals and communities (United Nations 2007, p.9). This thesis adopts a working definition aligned with Awan and Zempi (2020, p.3), who conceptualise Islamophobia as “a fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims... motivated by institutional, ideological, political and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of being a Muslim.”

In this study, Islamophobia is understood as operating at both the individual level through interpersonal interactions, emotional harm and microaggressions, and at the systemic level

through media discourses, state surveillance and exclusionary policies such as Prevent. While these structural forces shape public discourse and institutional practice, Islamophobia is also lived and embodied, producing emotional consequences such as fear, frustration, anger and alienation.

This research places particular emphasis on gendered Islamophobia, a form of intersecting oppression experienced disproportionately by Muslim women due to their religious visibility and intersecting identities. Muslim women are often targeted because of visible markers such as the hijab or niqab, which render them more susceptible to both public scrutiny and institutional control. Gendered Islamophobia is not only characterised by hostility but also by misrecognition, in which individuals are misread, misrepresented or essentialised based on appearance or perceived behaviour (Zine 2004; Zempi 2016).

Islamophobia can also manifest internally within the Muslim community, where individuals are judged or excluded for not conforming to dominant cultural or religious expectations. In such cases, internalised Islamophobia reproduces dominant hierarchies and can exacerbate feelings of exclusion and marginalisation.

This study therefore treats Islamophobia not only as a matter of direct hostility but also as a form of cultural and emotional misrecognition (Fraser 2000), where Muslim women are denied affirmation of their identity and belonging. By taking seriously the emotional impact of both external and internalised forms of Islamophobia, this research adopts an intersectional and affective approach that foregrounds the lived realities of Muslim women and the diverse strategies they use to navigate them.

1.2.1 Visibility and its Implications

The term “visibly Muslim women” refers to individuals whose attire or appearance, such as wearing the hijab, jilbab, or niqab, signifies their religious identity as Muslims (Tarlo 2010; Tarlo and Moors 2013; Lewis 2015). Visibility in this context serves as a religious identity marker that renders these women hypervisible in public spaces, making them more susceptible to scrutiny, discrimination, and targeted violence. Hijab, as a symbol of Islamic faith, has become a focal point in Islamophobic narratives, positioning visibly Muslim women at the intersection of gendered and religious discrimination. This heightened visibility significantly contributes to the gendered nature of Islamophobia, a concept that scholars have termed “gendered Islamophobia” (Zine 2004). Research has demonstrated that Muslim women are targeted by hate crimes significantly more often than Muslim men (Alimahomed-Wilson 2020; Carr 2016; Hammer 2013; Hopkins 2016), with their attire often serving as a pretext for verbal and physical attacks. Gendered notions of Islam, as Hammer (2013) explains, play a central role in organising anti-Muslim racism, portraying women as oppressed victims or cultural disruptors.

Initially, this research focused exclusively on visibly Muslim women, recognising them as primary targets of Islamophobic representations and violence due to their recognisability as Muslims. However, framing visibility solely around religious attire inadvertently renders non-hijab-wearing Muslim women invisible, as they are not as easily identified as Muslim in public spaces, thereby overlooking the diversity of Muslim women’s experiences and identities (Tarlo 2010; Abu-Lughod 2013). This invisibility often leads to underrepresentation in media and academic discourse, overshadowing the distinct forms of racism and discrimination they may face, which intersect with ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. Furthermore, when representations of non-hijab-wearing Muslim women

do appear in media, they often fail to reflect the complexities of their realities.

Acknowledging this gap, I widened my study to include all women who identify as Muslim, irrespective of their visibility. This inclusive approach ensures a more comprehensive exploration of the varied experiences and challenges faced by Muslim women, enabling a richer understanding of how media narratives impact diverse identities within the Muslim community.

Importantly, Islamophobia extends beyond racism, encompassing complex dimensions of cultural and ideological bias. Allen (2010) and Jaber (2022) highlight how Islamophobia targets not only physical or cultural attributes but also religious practices and beliefs. This intersectionality reveals how Islamophobia operates at multiple levels, combining racialisation with hostility towards Islamic symbols, values, and traditions. The focus on Muslim women's dress reflects both a racialised fear of the “other” and a discomfort with visible expressions of Islamic faith, demonstrating the layered nature of Islamophobic narratives.

In this study, I draw on these critical insights to examine how media portrayals of Muslim women sustain and amplify Islamophobic discourse. By focusing on the emotional impacts of these portrayals, I aim to highlight the psychological impact that Islamophobic narratives in media exert on their direct subjects. Negative portrayals, such as framing Muslim women as oppressed or as threats, not only harm individual wellbeing but also reinforce societal biases that perpetuate exclusion and hostility. Amplifying Muslim women’s voices is essential to counter these narratives and advocate for inclusive and accurate representations in media.

This approach is particularly significant given the diversity and rapid growth of the Muslim population in Britain. According to the 2021 Census, Muslims make up 6.5% of the UK

population, or approximately 3.9 million people from 2.7 million in 2011 (Office for National Statistics 2021). While individuals of South Asian heritage; predominantly Pakistani (38%), Bangladeshi (15%), and Indian (6%); form the majority, the Muslim community also includes Arabs (8%), Black Africans and Black Caribbeans (10%), and those from mixed or other ethnic backgrounds (6%).

This demographic richness challenges monolithic portrayals of Muslim women in the media and underlines the importance of exploring diverse perspectives. A notable example of this complexity was shown in another episode of *Good Morning Britain*, broadcast on April 25, 2017. The program featured Sahar Al-Faifi alongside an imam who supported the burqa ban, arguing that the word “burqa” is not mentioned anywhere in the Quran. In response, Sahar emphasised that this was her own interpretation of ‘hijab verses’ in Surat An-Nur (see section 2.3 for full verses). This exchange made me reflect on not only the diversity within the Muslim community but also the contested nature of religious interpretation. Such instances further validate the need for nuanced research that captures the heterogeneity of Muslim women’s identities and experiences.

Although my sample does not fully reflect the ethnic composition of Britain’s Muslim population, I sought to include participants from a range of backgrounds to capture this complexity. Most of my participants were of South Asian heritage, reflecting the demographic majority, but I also engaged with women of Middle Eastern, North African, and mixed ethnic backgrounds. This diversity is not only a strength but also a reminder of the need for media narratives that do justice to the plurality of Muslim women’s identities.

1.3 Aim and Research Questions

This research aims to illuminate the emotional impacts of media representations on Muslim women in Britain, exploring how these portrayals shape their identities, wellbeing, and coping strategies, while offering insights for more inclusive media practices. By foregrounding the voices of Muslim women, I sought to provide a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences and amplify their perspectives in academic and public discourse.

I structured the study around the following research questions:

1. How do Muslim women perceive, engage with, and navigate media portrayals of their identities?
2. How do Muslim women think they should be represented in media?
3. How do stigmatising portrayals of Muslim women impact their emotional wellbeing?
4. What strategies do Muslim women use to cope with and resist negative representations?

These questions guided my inquiry, allowing me to move beyond structural analysis of media content and prioritise the emotional dimensions and impacts of media misrepresentation.

1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organised into the following chapters:**Chapter 1: Introduction**

This chapter introduces my research, outlining its background, motivation, and context. I also describe the research aims and questions and provide an overview of the thesis structure.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I synthesise the main body of research on the portrayal of Muslims in Western media, focusing particularly on visible Muslim women. I begin by outlining foundational theories, such as Orientalism, and tracing the post 9/11 shift towards securitised representations, demonstrating how political, cultural, and historical factors have shaped reductive and stigmatising narratives. I also examine the gendered framing of Muslim women as either oppressed victims or threats, linking these portrayals to broader societal impacts. Through this synthesis, I aim to contextualise the topic and lay the groundwork for analysing how media-driven stigma influences the identity, emotional wellbeing, and strategies of resistance of Muslim women in Britain.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I presented the theoretical framework guiding this study, developed in response to the data rather than imposed in advance. Adopting an interpretive and flexible approach, the analysis drew on concept from the Social Identity Approach (SIA), Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET), and Nancy Fraser's concept of misrecognition. These frameworks were used as conceptual tools to understand how Muslim women in Britain experience and respond emotionally to media misrepresentation. While SIA and IET offered insight into group-based identity, emotion, and collective responses to stigma, Fraser's theory helped situate these experiences within broader structures of inequality and cultural devaluation. The chapter also addressed the limitations of applying these Western-derived theories to the diverse, intersectional realities of Muslim women in Britain, highlighting the need for critical engagement and contextual sensitivity.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the qualitative framework underpinning this study, which examines the impact of media representations on the emotional wellbeing of Muslim women in Britain. Drawing on social constructionism and reflexivity, the chapter discusses how dialogic interviews and photo-elicitation methods were utilised to co-construct knowledge with participants. I explore my positionality as a researcher navigating insider/outsider dynamics, emphasising the importance of empathy and critical detachment. The chapter details the sampling process, ethical considerations, and use of NVivo for thematic analysis, illustrating how these methods fostered a nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences. Limitations and reflexive practices are also addressed

Chapter 5: Navigating Media Representation: Trust, Misrepresentation and Exclusion in Muslim Women's Experiences

This chapter explores the complex relationships between Muslim women in Britain (MWB) and media portrayals of their identities. Grounded in scholarly debates on media misrepresentation and exclusion, it addresses participants' perceptions of media as a source of mistrust and the emotional impact of being consistently stereotyped or erased. The chapter examines critical themes such as trust in media, processes of misrecognition and dehumanisation, and the construction of "good Muslim" archetypes. The chapter also reflects on participants' insights into positive representation and their perspectives on the significance of creating portrayals from within the Muslim community.

Chapter 6: Muslim Women's Emotional Journeys in Response to Media Representation

This chapter investigates the emotional landscapes sculpted by media portrayals of Muslim women. Building upon insights from the previous chapter, I examine how these portrayals evoke both individual and collective emotions, influenced by participants' social and personal

identities. By drawing on aspects of Social Identity Theory and Intergroup Emotions Theory, I explore how negative media representations impact emotional wellbeing, fostering responses like anger, frustration, fear, and self-censorship. This chapter highlights the burdens of representation faced by Muslim women and illustrates the complex interplay between media narratives and emotional health.

Chapter 7: Navigating Media Bias: Coping Mechanisms and Strategies Adopted by Muslim Women

In this chapter, I explore the strategies employed by Muslim women in Britain to cope with the pervasive effects of negative media portrayals. Building on prior discussions of the emotional and social impacts of these representations, I examine how participants navigate identity threats through individual and collective approaches, drawing on aspects of Social Identity Theory. From redefining group identity to leveraging spiritual and community support, their strategies highlight resilience and adaptability. This chapter sheds light on the participants' active responses to societal pressures, showcasing their agency and the significance of solidarity in combating media bias.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The final chapter synthesises my findings, reflecting on their implications for media practices, policy, and future research, and advocates for more inclusive and accurate representations of Muslim women in British media.

2 Literature Review

2.1 *Introduction*

In recent decades, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the portrayal of Muslims in media and its impact on societal perceptions. This body of literature spans multiple fields, reflecting the global importance and complex nuances of how Muslim identities are represented, particularly in Western media. Since the events of 9/11, research has shown a marked shift in the media landscape, with Muslims frequently depicted through the lens of terrorism, extremism, and cultural otherness. This chapter explores these portrayals through a comprehensive review of relevant literature, aiming to contextualise how media discourses contribute to the stigmatisation of Muslim communities, especially visibly Muslim women, whose religious symbols such as the hijab have become powerful markers of identity.

This literature review begins by examining foundational theories of Orientalism, as developed by Edward Said (1978), which highlight how Western media constructs the Muslim “Other” through stereotypical and often reductive narratives. Following this, the chapter delves into various national contexts, such as the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US) and France; each reflecting unique socio-political dynamics that shape media portrayals of Muslims. These portrayals are scrutinised to understand how historical legacies of colonialism, multiculturalism, and national identity intersect with contemporary Islamophobic discourses.

The chapter further explores the gendered dimension of these portrayals, illustrating how Muslim women are depicted in polarising ways: either as passive victims requiring “saving” or as threats embodying radical ideology. This binary framing, reinforced by political agendas and the broader narrative of the “war on terror” (see section 1.1 for details) impacts

the public perception of Muslim women and exacerbates the challenges they face in navigating societal and cultural expectations.

Through this review, I aim to lay the groundwork for a nuanced understanding of the power of media in shaping public perceptions and its implications for the emotional wellbeing of Muslim women in Britain (MWB). This discussion will serve as the foundation for examining the intersectional effects of media-driven stigma on their identities, experiences, and strategies of resistance, which are central to this study.

2.2 Framing Muslim Identities in Media: From Orientalism to Post-9/11

Islamophobia

The representation of Muslims in the media has emerged as a central topic of academic inquiry, gaining attention from scholars across various disciplines (Said 1981; Poole 2002b; Richardson 2004; Kabir 2006; Moore et al. 2008; Baker et al. 2013; Ahmed and Matthes 2017; Schmuck et al. 2017). This research spans multiple global contexts, each shaped by unique socio-political influences. In the United Kingdom (UK), for example, scholars have explored how media portrayals of Muslims are framed within the complexities of multiculturalism and post-colonial legacies, which have long influenced national discourse (Franks 2000; Afshar et al. 2005; Moore et al. 2008; Meer et al. 2009; Brown et al. 2015; Sealy 2017; Zempi 2020). Similarly, in the United States (US), the representation of Muslims has been scrutinised, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11, when media narratives began to pivot heavily towards fear, security concerns, and questions of identity (Shaheen 2000; Mishra 2007; Byng 2010; Jackson 2010; Hamzeh 2011; Alsultany 2012b). In Canada, this issue is often viewed through the lenses of multiculturalism and national security legislation, both of which have significantly impacted the representation of Muslim communities (Bullok

and Jafri 2000; Eid and Khan 2011; Perry 2014; Nagra 2018). Likewise, in Australia, media portrayals are frequently analysed within the context of the country's evolving immigration policies and attitudes toward refugees (Kabir 2006; Kabir 2008; Hebbani and Wills 2012; Anderson 2015; Keddie 2018).

Research extends beyond the Anglophone world, highlighting patterns in the representation of Muslims in European news media. In France, for example, the interplay between *laïcité* (secularism) and post-colonial tensions shapes how Muslim identities are portrayed, with the media often reflecting deeper societal debates about national identity and religious expression (Idriss 2005; El Hamel 2002; Navarro 2010, Ait Abdeslam 2019). Research from the Netherlands and Germany further illustrates how portrayals of Muslims intersect with national debates on integration, Islamophobia, and immigration (D'Haenens and Bink 2007; Eijberts and Roggeband 2016; Weichselbaumer 2019). These varying national contexts demonstrate the complexity and global relevance of how Muslims are depicted in the media.

Numerous scholars have highlighted how media coverage, both preceding and following the 9/11³ terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in the United States (US), persistently associated Muslims with terrorism (Said 1981; Shaheen 2000; Poole 2002b; Cañas 2008). This pattern of representation can be traced to a longer history rooted in European anti-Semitic and orientalist ideologies, which positioned Islam as a threat to Western modernity (Said 1978 1981). Edward Said's groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) conceptualised this notion of the 'Orient' as a construct of Western imagination, which exoticized and

³ 9/11 refers to series of four coordinated attacks on World Trade Centre in New York city- United States on the 9th of September 2001, resulting in the death of 2996 victims and 25000 injured. The attack was conducted by an extremist terrorist group called Al- Qaida.

subjugated the Middle Eastern and African ‘Other’ through discourse and representation. Said’s work critically questions whether the legacies of modern imperialism have ever fully ended (Said 1978, xvi). Said defined the Orient as “not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilisations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (Said 1978, p. 1). This deliberate contrast between the Orient and the West highlights how Orientalism served as a tool to polarise differences, with the West defining itself in opposition to an imagined inferior ‘Other.’ Yegenoglu (1998) further argues that Orientalism provided the West with a cultural framework for self-definition, with the West portraying itself as modern, enlightened, and superior, while the ‘Other’, in this case, Muslims, was cast as backward, violent, and premodern.

These Orientalist discourses persist in contemporary media portrayals, where Muslims continue to be depicted as “inferior, premodern, and violent”, while the West is presented as “superior, modern, and enlightened” (Cañas 2008, p. 196). Within this framework, the term “West” in this project is used to refer primarily to Europe, specifically the United Kingdom and France, as well as the United States, reflecting how these regions have historically positioned themselves in opposition to the Muslim Other through both colonial and contemporary discourses. This entrenched narrative, reinforced by media portrayals, remains central to understanding the complex relationship between Muslims and Western societies in the post-9/11 era.

Prior to 9/11, Jack Shaheen (2000) conducted a critical review of Hollywood’s portrayal of Muslims and Arabs across various media, including films, television, and even cartoons. Having studied this issue since 1982, he documented patterns of stereotyping across multiple decades, particularly from the 1960s to the 1990s (e.g., *Exodus* (1960), *The Delta Force*

(1986), *True Lies* (1994)). However, his analysis was not limited to this period, as he examined a broader range of portrayals spanning Hollywood's history. Shaheen argued that Hollywood consistently depicted Muslims and Arabs as a monolithic group, assigning them a range of negative traits, with violence, barbarism, and terrorism being the most prominent. His research documented how films routinely portrayed the diverse Muslim world as populated by stereotypical figures, such as "bearded mullahs, billionaire sheikhs, terrorist bombers, backward Bedouins, and noisy bargainers" (2000, p. 26).

Muslim women, in particular, were often reduced to one-dimensional characters, portrayed either as "gun toters, bumbling subservient figures, or belly dancers bouncing voluptuously in palaces and erotically oscillating in slave markets" (Shaheen 2000, p. 26). In other depictions, this stereotype shifted to project Muslim women as fully veiled and oppressed, characterised by their perceived lack of agency and autonomy. Shaheen noted that in these portrayals, Muslim women "covered in black from head to toe, they appear as uneducated, unattractive, and enslaved beings, solely attending to men and walking several paces behind abusive sheikhs, with their heads lowered" (Shaheen 2000, p.26).

This negative image of Muslims promoted by Western media has long been the dominant, and often the only, mediated image available to non-Muslims, even prior to the 9/11 attacks (Poole 2002b; Sheridan 2006; Cañas 2008). However, the tragic events of 9/11 are widely considered as a turning point, marking the start of the west's alleged "war on terror". This shift not only signified a more overtly hostile stance in Western political discourse towards Muslims but also intensified the negative representations of Muslims in some Western media.

Poole's systematic analysis of British press coverage, both before and after 9/11, offers critical insight into how media narratives about Muslims evolved. Poole (2002) undertook a

comprehensive quantitative and qualitative content analysis of UK newspapers in the mid-1990s, encompassing both broadsheet and tabloid publications. Though her study was published in 2002, it provides a valuable window into representations of Muslims in British news media prior to 9/11. Specifically, she analysed two British broadsheet newspapers with different political orientations: *The Guardian* and *The Times* over a three-year period from January 1994 to December 1996. She also carried out a qualitative examination of articles from two popular tabloids, *The Sun* and *The Daily Mail*, in 1997. This research formed the foundation of her critique, revealing how Muslims were consistently portrayed as a homogenous group, often linked to violence and terrorism. Importantly, Poole's pre-9/11 analysis identified the media's role in shaping public perceptions, highlighting the lack of nuanced or diverse representations of Muslims in the UK.

While preparing her book for publication, Poole (2002) had the opportunity to include a preface that presented a quick study of coverage of British Muslims in *The Guardian* and *The Times* in the initial weeks following the 9/11 attacks from 25 September to 6 October 2001. This addition allowed her to explore whether these representational patterns persisted or intensified. Poole also examined the online content of both newspapers over a broader period, from 12 September to 25 October 2001. This follow-up study revealed a substantial increase in the volume of articles about Muslims, reflecting heightened media interest. For example, a search of articles published between 12 September and 25 October found 700 articles on Muslims and Islam in *The Times* and 1,085 in *The Guardian*; numbers equivalent to each newspaper's typical annual coverage. This rapid increase is also evident in the daily coverage of Islam immediately after the attacks: on 12 September, 19 articles were published, followed by 20 on 13 September, compared to just four articles on 11 September.

It is important to note that Poole's research focused on articles where Muslims were explicitly identified as such, meaning the actual volume of content referencing Muslims indirectly or without specific labels is likely much higher. This sharp increase in coverage not only highlights the intensified media focus on Islam but also suggests that the representation of Muslims, both overt and implicit, became a major focal point in the post-9/11 media landscape

Notably, Poole found that while terrorism had been previously linked to the global Muslim community, the post-9/11 media discourse began to explicitly associate terrorism with British Muslims themselves (Poole 2011). This shift represented a dangerous conflation of British Muslim identity with extremism, exacerbating public fears and reinforcing Islamophobic stereotypes.

One key finding from Poole's analysis was that the representation of Muslims in the media prior to 9/11 had already established a framework in which Muslims were predominantly depicted through a lens of suspicion and threat. However, post-9/11 coverage intensified these portrayals, solidifying the image of Muslims as inherently tied to terrorism. Poole (2002, p. 240) argued that "British Muslims are known to non-Muslims in the United Kingdom (UK) mainly through the media; it is the media that define the meaning of the Muslim presence in Britain." This observation emphasises the media's critical role in shaping public understanding, particularly in a context where direct interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim communities is limited.

It is also essential to note that Poole's foundational research was conducted before 9/11, during a time when public awareness of Muslims was already influenced by media portrayals. Her categories, themes, and critiques were developed from the analysis of news coverage

between 1994 and 1997, long before the attacks of 2001. When 9/11 occurred, Poole applied her existing model to assess how the attacks impacted media representation. Conveniently, the timing of this event allowed her to include an analysis of post-9/11 coverage in the preface of her book, strengthening the relevance of her earlier findings.

To understand the ways in which media narratives shape public perceptions of Muslims, it is crucial to examine how representations of terrorism intersect with portrayals of Muslim identities. A 2015 content analysis of American news programs, which sampled broadcasts from 2008 to 2012, revealed that Muslims were significantly overrepresented as terrorist suspects (Dixon and Williams 2015). According to the study, 81% of the perpetrators shown on these programs were portrayed as terrorists, despite official reports indicating that only 6% of actual terrorists in the U.S. fit this profile (Dixon and Williams 2015, p. 32). This misrepresentation reflects a broader media pattern in which Muslims are disproportionately linked to terrorism, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and contributing to public fears.

Similarly, Moosavi (2015a) conducted a discourse analysis of 111 speeches from 16 British Labour cabinet ministers between 2001 and 2007, uncovering how politicians essentialised Muslims as a homogenous group. In these speeches, Muslims were often stereotyped as either terrorists or as refusing to integrate into British society, with Islam frequently positioned in opposition to modernity. This essentialist framing not only homogenised Muslim identities but also reinforced negative perceptions of Muslims as inherently resistant to Western values.

2.3 Gendered Representations of Muslim Women

Beyond these general portrayals, several studies have explored the gendered aspects of Muslim representation, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11. Researchers argue that mainstream international media has continued to frame Muslim women through a narrow and biased lens (Poole 2002; Zempi and Chakraborti 2015). Muslim women, as part of the broader Muslim community, are often depicted as a threat to British national security or to the country's social and cultural identity (Chakraborti and Zempi 2012; Amer and Howarth 2018). These representations frequently carry the assumption that Muslims in the United Kingdom (UK) are incapable of adapting to the nation's gender equality norms (Ryan 2011).

Despite extensive research on the negative stereotyping of Muslim women, there is very limited research on the emotional toll of Islamophobia and media portrayals of Muslim women, except for key writings by Eijbert and Roggband (2016), Zempi (2020), and Zempi and Chakraborti (2015). These studies offer critical insights into the psychological and emotional impact of Islamophobic narratives, highlighting how these representations contribute to feelings of fear, exclusion, and marginalisation among Muslim women. Eijbert and Roggband (2016) examined the long-term psychological effects of Islamophobic media representations, arguing that these narratives not only shape public attitudes but also create internalised feelings of anxiety and alienation among Muslim women. Similarly, Zempi (2020) provides a comprehensive analysis of hate crimes against Muslim women, illustrating how negative media portrayals fuel hostility and reinforce societal exclusion. Zempi and Chakraborti (2015) further explored the intersection of gender and Islamophobia,

demonstrating how visibly Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab or niqab⁴, experience heightened levels of discrimination, both in public spaces and institutional settings. Unlike these studies, which primarily focus on structural and policy implications, my research delves into the lived experiences of Muslim women in Britain, centering their personal narratives to highlight the emotional weight of media misrepresentations. By prioritising their voices, my study contributes a critical, firsthand perspective that complements existing scholarship by focusing on the affective and psychological dimensions of Islamophobia.

This emotional toll is further compounded by the deeply entrenched Orientalist frameworks that shape media narratives about Muslim women. These frameworks have historically constructed Muslim women as symbols of “otherness”, and these reductive portrayals have been critiqued (Ahmed 1992; Yegenoglu 1998; Cañas 2008; Al-Saji 2010; Ryan 2011). Muslim women are often depicted as “traditionalist, religious, and submissive”, standing in contrast to their “modern, liberated” Western counterparts, who are portrayed as capable of liberating their allegedly oppressed Muslim sisters (Cañas 2008, p.196).

In *Colonial Fantasies* (1998), Meyda Yegenoglu argued that the veil, in particular, has long been an Orientalist fantasy for the West, functioning as a symbol of the supposed impenetrability of the Orient. For Yegenoglu, the veil represents “one of the tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the Other are fantasmatically achieved” (Yegenoglu 1998, p.39). Ahmed (1992),

⁴ The niqab is a veil worn by some Muslim women that covers the face, leaving only the eyes visible. It is typically worn in addition to the hijab, which covers the hair and neck.

similarly observed “the peculiar practices of Islam with respect to women had always formed part of the Western narrative of the quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam” (p. 149).

Western colonial feminist discourse has long justified the unveiling of Muslim women as part of a civilising mission. Yegenoglu (1998, p. 12) noted that this discourse was “characterised by a desire to master, control, and reshape the bodies of subjects by making them visible”. Since the veil prevents this colonial gaze from attaining such visibility and, by extension, mastery, unveiling becomes a central act of control, often framed within the language of Enlightenment and Muslim women’s victimisation (Yegenoglu 1998). Arguably, by emphasising the hijab as the main form of Islam’s visibility, the West deflects attention away from its patriarchal structure and directs the attention on the Islamic world (Al-Saji 2010) that was regarded as the enemy since the Crusades and colonialism (Ahmed 1992).

Alia Al-Saji (2010) argues that Western feminist discourses that position Muslim women as the ‘oppressed’ reinforce a sense of Western superiority. By contrasting the “liberated” Western woman with the “oppressed” Muslim woman, these narratives help construct an idealised image of femininity and freedom in the West. This mechanism, as Al-Saji notes, fosters the illusion that women in Western societies are neither oppressed nor bound by gender norms, with the Western woman being portrayed as truly “free” (2010 p.15).

More recent media portrayals of Muslims have increasingly focused on demonising Muslim men while victimising Muslim women, often by linking the Islamic headscarf to Islamic fundamentalism and framing the hijab as a symbol of oppression. This narrative has perpetuated the idea that Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab or niqab, are inherently oppressed. For example, in 2006, *Daily Mail* columnist Melanie Phillips controversially argued that the hijab is not merely a religious or cultural garment but an

Islamist political symbol, comparing its use to the swastika⁵ under Nazism. She went even further, suggesting that wearing the hijab could be equated with criminal or illegal activities (Williamson and Khiabany 2010). For Muslim women who choose to wear the hijab or niqab, this type of representation acts as a semiotic signifier of victimhood and backwardness, reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes about Islam and gender (Al-Saji 2010; el-Aswad 2013).

Such portrayals suggest that the hijab is emblematic of the oppression of women in Islam, echoing long-standing narratives that frame Muslim women as passive and subjugated (Ahmed 1992). These reductive interpretations not only marginalise the agency of Muslim women but also reinforce a binary opposition between the “liberated” Western woman and the “oppressed” Muslim woman, a recurring theme in Western media representations.

Leila Ahmed (1992) examined the British colonialism in Egypt and the French colonialism in Algeria, highlighting how both powers employed a ‘colonial-feminist’ discourse that framed Muslim women as victims oppressed by Muslim men, in need of saving by the West. For Ahmed, this narrative was used to morally justify colonial rule by portraying it as a mission to liberate Muslim women. A similar discourse resurfaced to support the U.S led war in Afghanistan 2001-2002 (Abu-Lughod 2002), where the hijab was used as a “signifier of Islam in the ‘war on terror’” and a “key justification of bombing Afghanistan and Iraq” (Williamson and Khiabany 2010, p.88).

⁵ The swastika is an ancient symbol of good fortune, but it became infamous when adopted by the Nazi Party, representing fascism, racism, and the Holocaust. Today, it's largely seen as a symbol of hate due to its Nazi association.

Notably, media coverage of Muslim women's suffering under Taliban⁶ was scarce before the 2001 invasion, but there was a surge in attention by 2000 as part of the pre-war narrative justifying the invasion (Williamson and Khiabany 2010). This has been criticised as an exploitation of women's plight for political ends, particularly benefiting entities like the U.S. government (Stabile and Kumar 2005). The Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) questioned this Western mindset of "saving" Muslim women, arguing that it implies cultural superiority and can legitimise violent foreign interventions. Abu-Lughod (2002), linked this attitude of saving with "ethnocentrism, racism, cultural imperialism, and imperiousness" (p.786).

The concept of "saving" Muslim women is frequently invoked in discourses, often as part of the broader "White Saviour Complex" where Western actors position themselves as rescuers of oppressed non-Western women (McCurdy 2016, p.27). This narrative is not limited to Muslim women but is prominent in Western depictions of women in Islamic societies, particularly in the context of Afghanistan and other Muslim-majority countries.

However, this portrayal of Muslim women as victims in need of rescue contrasts sharply with another common representation, depicting them as terrorists or as threats to Western society. For example, in the BBC drama *Bodyguard* (2018), a Muslim woman is revealed to be the mastermind behind a terrorist plot (Nazeer 2018). Similarly, the hijab has increasingly become a symbol associated with Islamist terrorism in certain media representations (Zempi

⁶ Taliban is a Pashto word that means 'Students'; it is used to refer to an ultraconservative, political and religious, faction that emerged in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s following the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

and Chakraborti 2015). Leonie Jackson's *The Monstrous and the Vulnerable* (Jackson 2022) offers a detailed analysis of this duality, focusing on representations of young British Muslim women who went to Syria to join ISIS. Jackson highlights how these women are often portrayed in the media as both monstrous threats and vulnerable victims, reinforcing reductive stereotypes that oscillate between fear and pity. Additionally, media outlets often employ strategies like the "number game" emphasising the growing Muslim population in Britain, particularly the number of female converts to Islam, as a threat to British culture and identity (Amer and Howarth 2018). These portrayals further position the hijab as a symbol of failure to integrate (Bilge 2010; Williamson and Khiabany 2010; Zempi and Chakraborti 2015), and serve to justify irrational fears and negative assumptions about Muslim communities (van Dijk 2006).

The contrasting narratives that portray Muslim women as either oppressed victims or dangerous actors draw attention to how media representations are often shaped by political agendas. These depictions frequently manipulate Muslim women's identities to reinforce Western notions of cultural superiority or justify fears of Islamic extremism. A prime example of this occurred in France, where the hijab was officially banned in schools in February 2004. This decision was largely driven by the association of the hijab with Islamic fundamentalism, coupled with a growing sense of Islamophobia (Idriss 2005; Thomas 2005; Syed 2013). The hijab was depicted as a symbol of a "very well-organised Islamic fundamentalist network" (Idriss 2005, p. 275), while Muslim schoolgirls were portrayed as victims of oppression and the so-called "bearded Men" who were often mocked by the French media (Idriss 2005).

The issue of the hijab in France has also been framed as a rejection of Western cultural norms, with the ban used as a tool to reinforce French national identity (Al-Saji 2010).

Immigrants in France were expected to fully assimilate in order to be accepted as French citizens, and the wearing of the hijab was interpreted as a “rejection of Western values” (Thomas 2005, p. 375). In an analysis of the historical context and motivations behind the ban on religious symbols in French state schools, Idriss (2005) noted that, according to the French model of assimilation, the typical “French citizens are neither black nor white”, and certainly “don’t wear the hijab” (p. 266). Any deviation from this model was perceived as a failure and unwillingness to integrate into the French society.

Although the ban was ostensibly designed to apply to all “ostentatious” religious symbols to prevent discrimination in the public sphere, it disproportionately targeted Muslim women and failed to achieve its stated goal of equality (Idriss 2005). This approach has been widely criticised for violating human rights by enforcing a specific dress code on Muslim women, thus restricting their sense of autonomy. Moreover, the ban limits religious practices, which are vital to many individuals' physical and psychological wellbeing (Franks 2000; Idriss 2005; Syed 2013). As such, this forced assimilation not only marginalises Muslim women but also undermines their rights to freedom of religion and self-expression, raising significant ethical and health concerns.

Feminist scholars have highlighted how Muslim women are dis-identified and excluded from media representations of feminism, which is often depicted as a movement for women’s liberation. Rather than being portrayed as active agents of their own liberation, Muslim women are frequently ‘othered’ and constructed as powerless victims of patriarchal oppression (Scharff 2011). This marginalisation is reinforced by a “culturalist approach” where the media attributes gendered violence against Muslim women to their cultural backgrounds, framing it as a cultural issue rather than addressing it as part of broader social problems like patriarchy and domestic violence. In contrast, when individuals from Western cultures

commit similar acts of violence, these behaviours are typically viewed as individual deviance rather than a reflection of their culture (Volpp 2001; Volpp 2006; Virdi 2013; Nagra 2018). A notable example of this is the case of the Shafia family murders in Canada in 2012, where three daughters were killed by their family members. While the judge referred to the case as murder, much of the Canadian media labelled it an “honour killing”, framing the violence as a cultural problem. By emphasising the cultural aspect, the media overlooked the issues of femicide, patriarchy, and domestic violence, thereby reinforcing the assumption that Canada had transcended its own patriarchal structures (Nagra 2018). This selective cultural framing contributes to the continued marginalisation of Muslim women and reinforces the notion that gendered violence is an issue exclusive to non-Western societies.

A similar controversy unfolded in 2011 in the United Kingdom when British Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron declared in a speech that “state multiculturalism has failed” and that the UK needs a “strong national identity” to prevent extremism. His remarks implicitly targeted Muslim communities, suggesting that heightened scrutiny would be directed toward some Muslim groups (Kuenssberg 2011). The issue resurfaced in 2016 when Cameron further commented that Islamic extremism could be curtailed if Muslim women were taught English, implying that the “traditional submissiveness” of Muslim women was a factor in young men’s vulnerability to radicalisation, his statement sparked widespread outrage, particularly among Muslim women (The Telegraph 2016). This rhetoric parallels the underlying assumptions of the *Prevent* policy, introduced as part of the UK’s counter-terrorism strategy to prevent radicalisation and terrorism. The *Prevent* policy was developed in response to a series of national incidents and terrorist attacks in the UK and Europe, which were often perpetrated by individuals identifying as Muslim. These attacks led to extensive media coverage, which frequently highlighted the attackers’ religious identity. This emphasis

in media reporting contributed to a negative portrayal of Muslims, reinforcing stereotypes and associating the Muslim community with terrorism. A 2011 study further highlighted how this media coverage impacts public perception, amplifying the perceived threat of terrorism and fostering a climate of fear. Additionally, the disproportionate media attention on arrests compared to the lack of reporting on releases without charge exacerbates the stigma and social isolation of those targeted, even if innocent (Choudhury and Fenwick 2011). As a result, the Prevent policy has been criticised for disproportionately targeting Muslims reinforcing stereotypes of Muslims as inherently prone to extremism, leading to increased scrutiny, stigma, and alienation of Muslim communities in the UK.

Tarek Younis (2021), a scholar focusing on the intersection of psychology and Islamophobia in counter-terrorism policies, examines the trend of pathologizing Muslim identity by portraying Muslims as psychological subjects inherently at risk of radicalisation. This approach, which he terms “psychologisation”, frames ordinary religious and cultural practices as potential indicators of extremism. In their earlier work, Younis and Jadhav (2019) argued that Prevent has fostered a climate of racialised self-censorship, fear, and anxiety, particularly among professionals required to implement the policy. They highlighted how racialised minorities, in particular, feel compelled to self-censor, avoiding cultural or religious expressions that might be misinterpreted as suspicious. This environment, they suggest, not only alienates minority groups but also undermines trust and inclusivity in public spaces, creating a pervasive atmosphere of surveillance and unease.

Cameron’s comments, along with the *Prevent* policy, reinforced the cultural narrative that isolates Muslim women from the broader struggle for gender equality, while also positioning their oppression as an issue unique to their communities. This approach not only perpetuates Islamophobic narratives but also legitimises the scrutiny of Muslim individuals, especially in

public institutions such as schools and healthcare and in settings such as airports, where visible markers of Muslim identity invite heightened surveillance and suspicion (Blackwood et al. 2013a).

In response to Cameron's comments, Muslim women launched the hashtag #TraditionallySubmissive on Twitter, where over 30,000 British Muslim women voiced their frustration and shared stories of their active engagement in various sectors, effectively challenging Cameron's reductive narrative (Hughes 2016). This social media movement became a powerful counter-narrative, where Muslim women asserted their agency, refuting the stereotype of passivity and victimhood that Western media and political discourse often impose.

The portrayal of Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab, often reflects a simplistic assumption that their choice is not only an expression of faith but also a political endorsement of specific Islamist views (Hamzeh 2000; Ismail 2003). However, For Afshar (2005) this assumption is unfounded. While the decision to wear the hijab can be deeply tied to notions of belonging and identity within the Muslim community and a public assertion of this identity, particularly for convert women in the West, it is not necessarily a rejection of nationality, culture, or kinship ties (Afshar et al. 2005). This discourse of belonging, often tied to veiling, intersects with broader discussions of bodies, borders, and nationalism. As Smith and colleagues note "bodies challenge and subvert state control of territory, become vulnerable to violence due to state bordering practices, and experience and produce smaller-scale forms of territory" (Smith et al. 2016, p. 258). In this context, Muslim women, by choosing to make their religious identities visible through veiling, often become targets of public hostility and Islamophobic actions (Tarlo 2010).

This visibility makes Muslim women more vulnerable to both physical and symbolic violence, as their public display of faith is frequently misinterpreted as a challenge to national identity or a rejection of Western norms. According to Chakraborti and Zempi (2012), “veiled women are routinely perceived as submissive, passive, and with very little power over their lives”. This stereotype, rooted in Western perspectives, increases their vulnerability to assaults, as they are often viewed as ‘easy’ targets. At the same time, veiled women may be seen as more visually threatening than Muslim men because their Muslim identity is unmistakable and cannot be denied or concealed. This visibility “renders them ‘ideal subjects’ against whom to enact Islamophobic attacks” (2012, p.276).

The hijab as “cultural symbol”, has dominated discourses related to Muslim women, often interpreted in terms of its spatial significance (Stowasser 1994; Mernissi 1995). In her critical reading of the hijab, Stowasser (1994) linked it to the concept of spatial “seclusion” as domesticity, privacy and physical protection of Muslim women (p. 91), while Fatema Mernissi (1995, p.42) viewed it as a marker of “woman trespassing beyond her assigned private space”, suggesting they do not belong in the public sphere. However, the hijab can also be understood as a means of defying the Western male gaze. For Franks (2000), veiling allows women to reject being the object of the gaze and instead become the observer, reversing the traditional power dynamics of the gaze and giving veiled women control over their bodies. Myfanway Franks (2002) conducted a study involving 30 questionnaires and interviews with nine women who identified as revivalist sisters; a group of Muslim women affiliated with modern Islamic movements, such as student Islamic societies, Young Muslims UK, and the Islamic Society of Britain. Several respondents in Frank’s study noted how wearing the hijab helped them gain respect and avoid being sexualised, underscoring how the veil not only disrupts the male gaze but also repositions women in a space where their

intellect and presence take precedence over their physical appearance. This shift empowers women by freeing them from societal expectations of femininity and resisting the objectification typically imposed by the male gaze (Glapka 2018).

For some scholars, veiling is considered as both a political statement and a form of empowerment (Hamidi 2017; Rosenberg 2019). For instance, Hamidi (2017) argues that the 2004 Hijab ban in schools in France, followed by the 2011 face veil (niqab) ban, marked a significant turning point for many French Muslim women. Rather than retreating from the public sphere, these women increasingly asserted their presence in political debates, using the bans as a catalyst to claim their rights and challenge the state's efforts to regulate their religious and cultural identities.

The representation of the Islamic headscarf can often be understood as a semiotic signifier of “cultural racism” (Anthias 1995), as even white women who wear the hijab are racialised regardless of their ethnic background. The racialisation of Muslims, as Meer and Modood (2019) explain, refers to the process by which Muslims are assigned a racial identity based on cultural or religious markers, such as the hijab, which are perceived as fixed and homogenous. This process treats Muslims as a distinct racialised group, irrespective of the diversity within Muslim communities, framing them as inherently different from and subordinate to the Western norm. Sufi and Yasmin's (2022) critical analysis of the media reporting of two Islamophobic incidents highlighted that the racialisation of Muslims in public discourse is perpetuated through media portrayals that frequently associate Islam with violence and backwardness, constructing a monolithic and threatening image of Muslims that fuels societal suspicion and hostility.

The concept of racialisation helps explain how, regardless of physical appearance, country of origin, or economic status, Muslims are homogenised and degraded by Islamophobic discourses and practices (Garner and Selod 2015). They are “interpellated” as Althusser (1971 as cited in Garner and Selod 2015, p 17) suggests, solely as Muslims, with their bodies transformed into racialised “others”. This process is often illustrated in the experiences of white converts to Islam, who often find their whiteness questioned and downgraded because of their association with the Muslim faith. Moosavi (2015b) explored the “re-racialisation” of white Muslim converts in Britain, who lose access to white privilege and are marked as “non-white” or “not-quite-white”, encountering Islamophobia as a result. Moosavi highlights how this racialising process reflects an inability to comprehend the existence of a “white Muslim” and perpetuates a distinct understanding of Islam as inherently “non-white”. These dynamics lead to both overt and subtle forms of Islamophobia, including negative family reactions, derogatory jokes, and subtle marginalisation, which contribute to the broader Islamophobic climate.

Similarly, Myfanway Franks (2000) findings revealed that these women, irrespective of their ethnicity or skin colour, are subjected to the same treatment due to their association with the hijab, which has been negatively portrayed in the media and marks them as highly visible figures in public spaces. Participants in Franks’ study shared feelings of being perceived as inferior by non-Muslims, who viewed them as willingly oppressed “others”. They also recounted experiences of being seen as traitors to their race by white supremacists, who interpret their choice to wear the hijab as a rejection of their supposed racial “superiority” (Franks 2000). Furthermore, the participants expressed frustration with being criticised by certain Muslim scholars for their choice of how to wear the hijab, leading them to feel alienated from both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. This rejection from both sides

stresses the complexity of their identity and highlights how the hijab serves as a focal point for both cultural and racial discrimination (Franks 2000, p. 923).

This rejection from both sides mirrors the complexity of hybrid identity described by Bhabha's prominent theory of the Third Space, as outlined in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha illustrates how interactions between opposing groups often expose underlying racism, discrimination, and binary relations, and proposes the concept of a Third Space wherein individuals exist between cultural binaries, navigating both racial and religious tensions (Bhabha 1994). Al Ghamdi (2023) extends this idea, arguing that Arab American women experience similar intersectional struggles in the "Third Space" feeling marginalised by both Western and Arab communities, much like the women in Franks' study who face cultural and racial discrimination, making them the "othered other" (Al Ghamdi 2023) highlighting the hijab's role as a focal point at the intersection of multiple forms of exclusion, where women become both visible and vulnerable as the "othered Other" in cross-cultural encounters.

Building on this exploration, the following section will delve into the deeper meaning and multifaceted significance of the hijab. I will provide a detailed analysis of its religious, cultural, and political dimensions, examining how the hijab functions as more than a personal expression of faith. This discussion will position the hijab as a key symbol that not only reflects individual and collective identity but also intersects with broader socio-political and media narratives, often influencing perceptions of Muslim women on a global scale.

2.4 Unwrapping the Veil: Religious, Cultural, and Social Contexts

This section will explore the concept of the hijab, its religious and cultural significance, and its varied interpretations within Islam. Derived from the Arabic word meaning “curtain”, the hijab has been linked to modesty and privacy, with roots in Qur’anic verses (Mernissi 1995; Stowasser 1994). However, its meaning is not uniform; Muslim women may wear it for religious reasons, cultural identity, or as an expression of empowerment. I will also address how interpretations of the hijab differ, particularly in Western media and political contexts, and how it has become a symbol of identity and debate.

According to the mainstream Islamic injunctions, wearing hijab is a fardh (a religious obligation), and all women are required to wear it (Mernissi 1995). The term hijab, meaning “curtain” in Arabic, was first revealed in the Qur’an in verse 53 of sura (chapter) 33 during year five of hijra (AD 627). This verse states:

“O ye who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless permission be granted you. But if ye are invited, enter, and, when your meal is ended, then disperse. Linger not for conversation. Lo! that would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be shy of (asking) you (to go); but Allah is not shy of the truth. And when ye ask of them (the wives of the Prophet) anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts.” (Qur’an 33:53)

While this verse specifically applied to the prophet’s wives and only within their homes, some scholars extended its application to all Muslim women. Stowasser (1994) notes that

“the Qur'anic directives addressed to the Prophet's consorts were naturally seen as applicable to all Muslim women” (p. 93), establishing the broader religious expectation of modesty.

This interpretation was later endorsed by other verses of the Qur'an that reinforced the importance of modesty on both Muslim men and women, for instance, sura 24:30-31 advises:

“Say to the **believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty**; that will make for greater purity for them: And Allah is well acquainted with all that they do; and **say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands**, [a list of relatives], [household servants], or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O ye Believers! turn ye all together towards Allah, that ye may attain Bliss.” (Qu'ran 24: 30-31) [my emphasis]

More verses were revealed that extended the concept of modesty from the prophet's wives and daughters to all believing women according to traditionalist interpretations.

“O Prophet! Tell Thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that They should cast their outer garments over their persons (When abroad): That is most convenient, That they should be known (as such) and not molested. And God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (Qur'an 59:33).

This verse was a reference to traditional scholars and Muslims to extend the concept of modesty beyond the Prophet's wives to encompass all believing women, requiring them to cover themselves when in public as a form of protection and recognition (Stowasser 1994).

However, this traditional interpretation has been critiqued by some Muslim feminists, as it relies on specific terms that are ambivalent and open to varying interpretations. Instead, they employ new methodologies to interpret the Qur'anic view of veiling (Barlas 2002). Fatema Mernissi (1991) challenges the conventional interpretation of the hijab as a compulsory garment for Muslim women, emphasising that while modesty is a Qur'anic requirement, there are no clear instructions on the specifics of how it should be enacted. According to her, the idea that women must wear a hijab is not explicitly commanded in the Qur'an, thus leaving room for diverse interpretations. Mernissi critiques the male-dominated discourse surrounding the hijab, which has often positioned it as a tool of patriarchal control. She argues that "reducing or assimilating this concept (hijab) to a scrap of cloth that men have imposed on women to veil them when they go into the street is truly to impoverish this term, not to say to drain it of its meaning" (1991, p. 95). This critique extends beyond the garment itself, as Mernissi highlights the hijab's spatial and symbolic dimensions. She asserts that, in the Qur'an, the hijab "descended from Heaven to separate the space between two men" (Mernissi 1991 p.95), marking boundaries and thresholds rather than solely dictating female modesty.

The association of the word hijab in the Qur'an with domestic segregation led to its broader connection with various forms of modest dress, such as the khimar (kerchief), jilbab (mantle), niqab (face veil), and burqa (full body covering with a mesh for the eyes) (Stowasser 1994). While some women view the hijab as a mandatory religious duty, for others it is an

expression of modesty, identity, and protection from the “the objectifying male gaze” (Abdul Rahman 2015, p. 5).

The hijab, across various cultural and political contexts, carries diverse meanings and practices that reflect the specific histories, politics, and religious interpretations of the regions in which it is worn. In some places, it has become a statement of fashion, while in others, it functions as a political tool or symbol of identity. In the Arab Gulf states, for instance, the abaya⁷ has undergone significant transformation. Al Qasimi (2010) explored how the abaya has shifted from a symbol of modesty to a fashionable item, particularly in Gulf countries like Saudi and the UAE⁸, where women negotiate their religious commitments while embracing modernity through the fashion industry.

In Egypt, Abaza (2007) documented similar shifts in fashion, where modesty was redefined through urban trends. Egyptian women often blend traditional veiling with modern, cosmopolitan styles, reflecting broader negotiations between Islamic values and global fashion. This blending highlights how regional styles of hijab are not static but adapt to shifting cultural landscapes.

South Asian Muslim women, particularly in Pakistan and India, often interpret the hijab differently by integrating it into their traditional attire, such as the shalwar kameez⁹. The

⁷ Abaya is a long black cloak traditionally worn over clothes in the gulf and some areas of middle east

⁸ United Arabic Emirates

⁹ Kameez is a long tunic worn over loose trousers

dupatta¹⁰ and chador¹¹, common in South Asia, are as much cultural symbols as they are religious ones, reflecting social class and regional identity (Moruzzi 2008; Tarlo and Moors 2013). This contrasts with the simpler styles of veiling seen in the Gulf, where modest fashion is more standardised.

In terms of personal expression, younger Muslim women in Europe and North America sometimes reveal small amounts of hair, typically near the forehead or temples, as part of modern interpretations of modesty (Tarlo 2010; Tarlo and Moors 2013). This is influenced by fashion trends and personal preferences, where the visibility of hair is not always seen as a violation of religious principles but rather a way to blend cultural identity with modernity. Similarly, Reina Lewis (2015) and Emma Tarlo (2010) discuss how fashion-conscious Muslim women incorporate different levels of hair visibility as a form of personal expression. For example, some women prefer loosely wrapped hijabs that allow the fringe of their hair to show, reflecting a balance between religious identity and participation in global fashion trends. In addition, Claire Dwyer (2008) explores how the construction of diasporic identities among Muslim women in Britain occurs at the intersections of socio-cultural contexts, highlighting how Pakistani, Middle Eastern, and English dress styles influence veiling practices. For example, Pakistani women in Britain may incorporate traditional shalwar kameez with their hijabs, blending cultural heritage with British fashion sensibilities. Similarly, Middle Eastern women may adapt abayas or more loosely fitted dresses,

¹⁰ The dupatta is a long scarf commonly worn by women in South Asia, draped over the shoulders or head as a modesty garment.

¹¹ The chador is a full-body cloak, mostly worn in Iran, covering the body while leaving the face exposed, symbolising modesty in Islamic culture.

integrating them with Western clothing to navigate cultural expectations while expressing a modern diasporic identity. These examples reflect how dress becomes a tool for negotiating multiple identities, where the hijab is not just a religious symbol but also a means of engaging with both cultural heritage and modern, globalised fashion trends.

Moving beyond fashion, the hijab has also been deeply political. In Algeria, during the French colonial period, the haik¹² was not only a garment but also a political statement of defiance against the French unveiling policies. El Guindi (1999) explains that although Algerian women today have shifted to wearing the modern hijab, during colonial times, the haik symbolised cultural pride and resistance. Similarly, in Turkey, the hijab continues to carry significant political weight, often symbolising resistance to the country's secularist policies. As in France, where women wear the hijab as a form of resistance against the ban on veiling, the act of wearing the hijab takes on a dual role: it becomes both an assertion of religious identity and a protest against state-imposed restrictions (Lewis 2015).

For many Muslim women today, the hijab also represents a symbol of empowerment and identity, particularly in Western societies where wearing the hijab can affirm both their religious beliefs and national identities, whether British, American, or French (Abdul Rahman 2015). It is seen as a means to assert agency and counter negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women. Researchers have highlighted the negotiated meaning of veiling for women living “in a nexus between two cultures” (Williams and Vashi 2007, p.285), explaining how the veil serves as a performative practice that communicates and manages

¹² Haik is a traditional Algerian garment, typically white, that covers the entire body, leaving only the eyes exposed. Worn especially during the French colonial era

different aspects of social identity (Hopkins and Greenwood 2013). The varied and often coexistent functions of veiling, such as communicating Muslim identity, resisting sexual objectification (see section 2.3), and protecting the privacy of close relationships, have also been documented (Droogsma 2007). For instance, in Britain, the hijab has been incorporated into modest fashion trends, as described by Tarlo and Moors (2013), who emphasise how young British Muslim women use modest fashion to express their identity, navigating both religious and fashion spaces. Online spaces have allowed for a global intersection of modest fashion, as Moors (2013) highlights, demonstrating the hijab's role in fostering new forms of cultural and social expression.

Thus, the hijab is far more than a religious garment; it represents complex intersections of culture, politics, and identity. In modern Britain and elsewhere, the focus on modest fashion illustrates how Muslim women use the hijab to assert their agency, negotiating societal pressures and engaging with global fashion trends (Moruzzi 2008; Tarlo 2010; Tarlo and Moors 2013). These varied interpretations across regions reflect the hijab's ability to function as a symbol of both modesty and resistance, shaped by the cultural and political contexts in which it is worn.

In this research, the term hijab is used as it is most commonly understood by both media and participants, referring specifically to a headscarf that covers the hair and much of the body. This definition aligns with how the hijab is portrayed and interpreted in various public discourses, although the broader concept can encompass a wide range of meanings and practices.

In summary, the hijab is a symbol layered with multiple, often contested meanings. It is deeply embedded in religious, cultural, and political contexts, where traditional

interpretations generally view it as a mandated expression of modesty. However, scholars like Fatema Mernissi (1991) argue against this rigid understanding, suggesting that the modern hijab is shaped by patriarchal systems rather than grounded in explicit religious scripture. For many Muslim women, the hijab has evolved beyond a religious obligation; it serves as a way to assert identity, claim agency, and navigate societal expectations. It functions as both a personal and political marker, representing boundaries not just between public and private spaces but also between sacred and profane realms.

In the next section, I will explore how the media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of the hijab and Muslim women. I will examine how negative media portrayals have influenced consumer attitudes, contributing to broader misconceptions about Islam and further complicating the complex relationship between Muslim identity and societal perception. These portrayals not only affect the way Muslim women are viewed but also have far-reaching impacts on their lived experiences in both Western and global contexts.

2.5 Power of Media: The Implications of Negative Portrayals of Muslim

Women

As demonstrated in the previous section, the hijab holds multiple interpretations; political, cultural, and religious, depending on the context in which it is viewed. Media, as one of the most powerful institutions, plays a pivotal role in shaping and often redefining these interpretations, not only of the hijab but also of Muslim women themselves. Through its portrayals, the media holds the power to frame public understanding, influencing how Muslim women are perceived and how their identities are constructed in the broader societal context. In this section, I discuss the power of the media in shaping perceptions of Muslims, with a particular focus on how biased representations can contribute to the reinforcement of

stereotypes, perpetuate Islamophobia, and potentially incite hostility and hate crimes against Muslim women in Britain.

Media wields substantial power in shaping social norms and public perceptions, influencing how individuals view themselves and the world around them (Arias 2019). It serves as a medium through which the representation of different social groups is constructed and disseminated (Wagner et al. 1999; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010). Mainstream media institutions, as van Dijk (1996) argues, are central to this process by controlling narratives, opinions, and ideologies. This control, often organised and institutionalised, positions media as a powerful tool in shaping societal beliefs and attitudes, particularly towards marginalised groups (van Dijk 1996; Elchereth et al. 2011).

Negative media portrayals are particularly impactful when the audience has limited access to alternative narratives. Van Dijk (2012) asserts that this dominance can result in audiences internalising biased representations without the critical tools to challenge them.

Consequently, the media shapes social reality in ways that perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce existing power dynamics. For instance, Howarth (2002, 2007) highlights how less powerful groups are often depicted negatively, contributing to their marginalisation.

The effects of media are not limited to specific events but are embedded in the broader construction of public perceptions. Allen and Nielsen (2002) note that while the media may not directly cause acts of aggression, it plays a significant role in shaping societal views and reinforcing dominant ideologies. The framing of Muslims, particularly in European media, has been notably negative, often associating Islam with terrorism and violence (Allen 2010).

“The role and impact of the media is one that is contentious and debatable...to try and explain the media’s role therefore remains difficult. None of the reports suggested that

the media directly caused or, indeed, were responsible for any reported or identified act of aggression or significant change in attitude. However, this is not to dismiss their impact in any way, and despite there being no direct evidence to suggest otherwise, the media continue to play a major role in the formulation and establishment of popular perceptions in the public sphere” (Allen and Nielsen 2002, pp.46–48)

Van Dijk (2012) argues that media dominance and the exercise of social power are not random but are often organised and institutionalised. This dominance becomes particularly effective when audiences are unaware of the biases in media representation and lack access to alternative discourses. This singular narrative restricts mental freedom, allowing those controlling the discourse to shape perceptions of reality. Consequently, media dominance can manipulate public opinion and limit independent thinking, making the analysis of media discourse essential, as it enables a deeper understanding of how social symbols are manipulated, and offers communities the intellectual tools to resist this domination (van Dijk 2012).

Researchers examining race and ethnicity in relation to media content have identified two primary sources of bias. First, journalists operate within the confines of their news organisations, which have specific values, ethics, and professional standards that may skew reporting (Pritchard and Hughes 1997; Dixon and Linz 2000; Dixon et al. 2003).

Second, unconscious biases frequently influence journalists, leading them to favour certain racial, ethnic, and religious groups over others (Dixon et al. 2003). This is particularly evident in European and international contexts, where media discourse related to Islam often portrays Muslims negatively, associating them with terrorism or other forms of deviant behaviour (Allen 2010). This kind of representation could play a critical role in influencing public attitudes and social hostility towards Muslims.

The real-world impact of these negative portrayals is evident in the rise of Islamophobic attacks following high-profile terrorist incidents. For example, in the aftermath of events such as the Charlie Hebdo in 2015 and the London Bridge attacks in 2017, Islamophobic attacks on Muslims spiked dramatically. According to *The Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks monitoring group* (Tellmama 2018b), 1,201 verified reports of anti-Muslim hate crimes were recorded in 2017, marking a 26% increase from the previous year. Of these, over two-thirds (70%) occurred in person or at a street level, disproportionately targeting women, often by male teenage perpetrators. Furthermore, online Islamophobia saw a 16.3% rise compared to 2016 (Tellmama 2018a). These attacks were not isolated incidents but reflect a broader pattern of hostility, as evidenced by another Tellmama report that found 57% of all anti-Muslim hate crimes in 2018 targeted women (Tellmama 2019).

Similarly, after the Christchurch mosque terrorist attack in New Zealand in 2019, the number of Islamophobic hate crimes in Britain surged by 593% in just one week (Dodd 2019).

The spike in anti-Muslim hostility is not limited to the UK; in France, the Collectif de Lutte Contre l'Islamophobie en France (CCIF 2018) documented an increase in Islamophobic discrimination, with over 80% of the victims being women (CCIF 2018). These reports highlight that woman, particularly those who are visibly Muslim, are the primary targets of such violence.

Research conducted by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) in the United States reported the heightened vulnerability of Muslim women to emotional trauma and fear for their safety, particularly in comparison to their male counterparts. The findings indicate that following the 2016 presidential elections, Muslim women in the USA were significantly more likely to take proactive measures, such as enrolling in self-defence classes,

as a response to escalating threats and fear (Mogahed and Chouhoud 2017), highlighting the disproportionate impact that hostile socio-political climates have on Muslim women.

Additionally, various studies (McCann and Pearlman 1990; Deering 1996) have documented the phenomenon of secondary traumatisation a form of psychological distress experienced by individuals indirectly exposed to traumatic events, such as through media coverage of violence or disasters (British Psychological Society 2023). This indirect exposure can trigger symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), further exacerbating the emotional toll on marginalised groups, including Muslim women, who frequently encounter negative and distressing portrayals of their communities in the media.

These studies highlight the tangible and dangerous consequences of negative media portrayals of Muslims. As van Dijk (2012) emphasised, media dominance in shaping narratives about marginalised groups, particularly Muslim women, creates a public discourse that reinforces stereotypes, promotes fear, and often legitimises acts of aggression. When individuals are repeatedly exposed to biased representations of Muslims in the media, it can lead to a normalisation of hostility and discrimination. This growing hostility towards Muslim women, evidenced by the sharp rise in hate crimes, highlights the critical need to study and analyse media portrayals. Understanding how media representations contribute to public attitudes and hostile actions is essential to address the broader impacts these portrayals have on marginalised communities.

However, my research diverges by focusing specifically on the impact of these negative portrayals on Muslim women in Britain (MWB), not just as audience members but also as the direct subjects of these biased representations. This study will explore the dual role of

Muslim women as both the consumers and targets of these portrayals, examining the impact this has on their emotional wellbeing.

This leads into the next section, which explores how Muslim women often occupy multiple minority positions, making them particularly vulnerable to negative portrayals due to the intersecting aspects of their identities.

2.6 How Does Stigma Affect Emotional Health?

2.6.1 Muslim Women at the Intersection of Identities

Understanding the intersectionality of Muslim women is essential for analysing the broader effects of negative media representations. Intersectionality, as Crenshaw (1998) defines it, refers to how various forms of discrimination, such as those based on gender, race, and religion; overlap and compound, creating unique experiences of oppression. For Muslim women, especially those who wear the hijab, this intersectionality means they face compounded stigmatisation as visible minorities, where their identities are not only hyper-visible but also marginalised. Their gender, religious identity, and often racial identity intersect, exposing them to discrimination from multiple fronts, including Islamophobia, sexism, and racism.

This intersectionality is compounded by negative media portrayals, which consistently reinforce harmful stereotypes that obscure the diversity and complexity of Muslim women's experiences. As research on Black women's intersectionality has shown, such media representations can profoundly affect both identity and mental health (Jean et al. 2022). Just as Black women must contend with reductive stereotypes in media, Muslim women find themselves subject to portrayals that essentialise them either as victims of patriarchy or

threats to Western values (Ryan 2011; Hamad 2020). These negative images perpetuate discrimination, magnified at the intersections of race, gender, and religion (Hopkins and Greenwood 2013; Eijberts and Roggeband 2016).

The compounded stress from these portrayals results in significant psychological consequences for Muslim women, who, like other marginalised groups, experience the effects of stigmatisation and discrimination at multiple levels. This leads to immense pressure to counteract these negative stereotypes by “performing” their identities in ways that resist stigmatisation (Chapman 2016). Similarly, Black women have long had to navigate the harmful impacts of media stereotypes on their identities, reinforcing the parallels between the two groups. Both groups face hyper-visibility and constant scrutiny from both the state and society, making their race, gender, and religious expression subject to societal judgment and marginalisation.

Laird et al. (2007) emphasise that Islamophobia is a major contributor to health disparities among Muslim women, particularly in terms of mental health and stress. This finding parallels Krieger’s (1990) quantitative research on Black women in the United States, which revealed that an internalised response to unfair treatment, coupled with the non-reporting of race and gender discrimination, may constitute significant risk factors for high blood pressure among Black women. This demonstrated that the compounded experiences of racism and sexism can have measurable negative effects on both physical and mental health. These studies highlight the importance of examining intersectionality to understand the broader effects of negative media representations and their impact on mental and emotional wellbeing.

Although there is limited literature specifically addressing the psychological effects of media representations on Muslim women's mental health (Chapman 2016), existing research suggests that these portrayals stigmatise Muslim women, particularly those who wear the hijab. This stigma forces women to become more conscious of how they present themselves and their community. Ryan (2011) drawing on interviews with Muslim women from diverse backgrounds in post-9/11 and 7/7 Britain found that participants often felt pressured to counteract negative stereotypes by proving they were not terrorists and by actively presenting themselves in a positive light. Ryan's research highlights the emotional labour involved in navigating public spaces where their identities are scrutinised, demonstrating how media-driven stigma shapes their daily interactions and self-presentation. While the women appeared to embrace a shared desire to be seen as "just normal", Ryan's analysis (2011) uncovered differing interpretations of what being a "normal" Muslim woman means in multicultural Britain, raising critical questions about whether such normality can ever truly be achieved in the face of pervasive societal and media-driven bias.

Most research into veiling and stigma focuses on the ways veiled Muslim women challenge these stereotypes by re-presenting their identities in positive ways, often highlighting their collective Muslim identity and sense of belonging to their religious community (Hopkins and Greenwood 2013; Eijberts and Roggeband 2015). These strategies demonstrate the resilience of Muslim women in the face of pervasive stigmatisation, although they also highlight the emotional and psychological toll of living under such pressures.

2.6.2 What is Stigma?

Stigma, as defined by the American social psychologist Erving Goffman (1963), refers to an "attribute that is deeply discrediting," which reduces the bearer "from a whole and usual

person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). Goffman further indicated that stigma can be understood as the relationship between an “attribute and a stereotype” (p. 4), where a marked attribute deviates from social norms and becomes associated with negative stereotypes. For Muslim women who visibly embody their faith, such as through the hijab, this process is particularly salient. Their religious identity is not only visible but also often stereotyped within the dominant cultural narratives, creating a distinct stigmatised identity.

Link and Phelan (2001) build on Goffman’s work by identifying multiple components of stigma: people distinguish and label human differences; dominant cultural beliefs link labelled individuals to undesirable stereotypes; and those individuals are subsequently separated into categories that reinforce status loss and discrimination. These labels, sustained by social, economic, and political power structures, exacerbate inequality and marginalisation (Link and Phelan 2001). Expanding on this, Tyler (2020) conceptualises stigma as a form of “machinery” that systematically produces and enforces inequality. According to Tyler, stigma functions as a powerful tool to marginalise and control certain groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, through institutional narratives and media representations. For Muslim women in Britain, this machinery of stigma is particularly evident in media portrayals that frame them as ‘Others’ and perpetuate stereotypes of oppression and threat. This categorisation not only separates Muslim women from dominant societal groups but also limits their ability to fully engage in public life without facing prejudice.

Stigma is not a static process but rather a dynamic one and varies in intensity based on factors such as visibility, disruptiveness, and societal context (Jones et al. 1948) cited in (Pachankis et al. 2018). Stigmatised attributes that are visible, such as wearing a hijab in the case of MWB, often result in increased prejudice and discrimination, leading to heightened psychological distress and lower self-esteem (Stutterheim et al. 2011). However, individuals

who conceal their stigmatised identities may also experience psychological stress due to the fear of being “found out” leading to social avoidance and negative self-perception (Pachankis 2007).

Research consistently links stigmatisation to psychological distress, with discrimination ranging from microaggressions to overt hate crimes. These experiences correlate with higher rates of mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Williams et al. 2014; 2018). This connection is particularly salient for people of colour, where repeated exposure to stigmatising events can lead to long-term “race-based stress and trauma” (Williams et al. 2014). Moreover, gender discrimination has been linked to a variety of psychiatric disorders, including depression and anxiety, which are more prevalent and disabling among women than men (Hosang and Bhui 2018).

In addition to these effects, stigmatisation has been shown to influence coping mechanisms, such as substance use. Research reveals that individuals who experience discrimination are more likely to use substances as a means of coping, a behaviour observed across multiple racial and ethnic groups (Gerrard et al. 2012).

2.6.3 Religious Identity, Intersectionality and Labour Market Marginalisation

For visible Muslim women, the hijab and other markers of faith serve as symbols of religious identity that can make them targets of discrimination and prejudice. This visibility not only distinguishes them within broader society but also associates them with negative stereotypes perpetuated by media representations, which extend into professional contexts. For Bonino (2015), “visibly presenting oneself as a Muslim was perceived as a potentially detrimental factor in both reaching certain positions and securing a job” (p. 376). The visibility of

Muslim identity can thus function as a liability in professional contexts, where it may be interpreted as a barrier to career progression or even job attainment.

Muslim women in Britain experience profound marginalisation in the labour market, shaped by intersecting barriers of gender, ethnicity, and religion. Early studies identified a Muslim penalty in labour market outcomes (Khattab 2012), reporting systemic disadvantages faced by Muslim women, even when they hold comparable qualifications to their non-Muslim counterparts. This penalty persists across generations, for example, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women remain disproportionately overrepresented in manual occupations and economically inactive roles (Karlsen et al. 2020; Daoud and Khattab 2022).

Processes of racialisation further amplify these inequalities. For instance, Black-Muslim women face compounded disadvantages due to racial discrimination and religious stigma, while White-British Muslim women, marked by visible religious identifiers like the hijab, experience racialisation that positions them as “other” (Khattab and Hussein 2018). This conflation of race and religion highlights how multiple identities intersect to reinforce exclusion and economic marginalisation.

Cultural expectations and structural barriers also constrain Muslim women's economic participation. Khan (2024) notes that caregiving roles, influenced by cultural norms and religious frameworks, intersect with challenges like limited language proficiency and restricted qualifications, perpetuating their underrepresentation in the workforce. Together, these dynamics perpetuate the underrepresentation of Muslim women in the workforce, demonstrating that their labour market exclusion results from a complex interplay of systemic discrimination, socio-cultural norms, and intersectional inequalities.

The interplay between religion, gender, and ethnicity becomes evident in the broader effects of structural stigma. A cross-sectional study conducted by Kunst et al. (2012) examined the direct and indirect effects of religious stigma on the national affiliation of two Muslim minority groups: 210 Norwegian Pakistani and 216 German Turkish participants. This study revealed that German Turkish participants who perceived higher levels of Islamophobia were more likely to experience religious identity threats, which negatively affected their engagement in societal and professional spaces. Similarly, Norwegian Pakistani participants expressed heightened alienation due to frequent exposure to negative portrayals of Muslims in the media, which reinforced stereotypes and restricted their access to professional networks. This ultimately led to attempts to challenge and counteract the stereotypes and attitudes disseminated through media discourse, further reinforcing the complex relationship between religious stigma, media representations, and national identity.

These findings illustrate how intersecting forms of discrimination perpetuate labour market exclusion. Tyler (2020) conceptualises stigma as a “machinery of inequality”, wherein powerful institutions and public narratives systematically devalue and control marginalised groups. For MWB, this machinery is perpetuated by negative media portrayals that frame them as oppressed, threatening, or incapable of contributing meaningfully to public and professional life. Such stigma limits their ability to succeed economically, undermining both their individual potential and their emotional wellbeing.

2.6.4 Gender Discrimination and Intersectionality

Women, in general, are more likely than men to experience mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, with gender-based factors playing a significant role in these disparities (Pigott 1999; Kuehner 2003). These mental health challenges are further

intensified for women who face intersecting forms of discrimination, particularly racial and gender discrimination, which compound stress and exacerbate psychological distress (McLean et al. 2011). Krieger' (1990) research on Black women highlights how the internalisation of racist and sexist incidents correlates with increased risk for high blood pressure, illustrating the profound health impacts that arise at the intersection of race and gender. This intersectional framework provides valuable insight into the experiences of other marginalised groups, including MWB, whose religious identity further compounds their exposure to discrimination.

Ethnic minority women, including Muslim women, often encounter additional barriers to accessing quality healthcare. Cultural and linguistic differences, coupled with discrimination from healthcare providers, contribute to poorer health outcomes for these women compared to their white counterparts (Reitmanova and Gustafson 2008). For Muslim women, the intersection of gender, race, and religion magnifies these disparities, as they face unique forms of bias not only as women and as ethnic minorities but also as visibly Muslim individuals. Laird et al. (2007) suggest that this compounded discrimination results in elevated stress levels and worsened mental health outcomes for Muslim women, who must navigate a healthcare system that often fails to recognise or accommodate their specific needs.

Reports highlight the prevalence of religious discrimination against Muslim women in the UK, underscoring the impact of structural and institutional biases. According to the Office for National Statistics (2011) report on religious discrimination, Muslim organisations reported higher levels of unfair treatment comparing to other religious groups, both in the frequency and intensity of incidents. Problem areas identified included attitudes and behaviour of health care staff, along with institutional policies that marginalise Muslim women. The 2004

Maternity Alliance Report revealed that Muslim women frequently encountered stereotypical comments during their maternity care which only exacerbated feelings of exclusion and mistrust within the healthcare system (Hassan 2017). Such experiences highlight how intersectional discrimination can undermine Muslim women's access to essential services and contribute to their overall psychological burden.

Researchers exploring the stigmatisation of minority groups have noted the profound effects of stigma on identity and self-perception (Howarth 2006; Hopkins and Greenwood 2013; Chapman 2016). They argue that this disrupts an individual's ability to present themselves authentically and disassociates them from the societal "norm", thereby impeding their efforts to achieve social acceptance. For Muslim women, who may already experience exclusion based on gender and race, religious stigma compounds this alienation, particularly when they visibly embody their faith through dress or other markers of identity. This stigmatisation pressures them to negotiate their identities carefully, often prompting them to "perform" or modify aspects of their identity to fit into societal expectations (Pyke 2000; May 2008).

Yang et.al (2007) introduce the concept of "moral standing", suggesting that stigma not only diminishes individuals' social standing but also devalues what they consider most meaningful in their lives. For Muslim women, stigmatisation can undermine the moral and cultural significance of their religious identity, especially when wider societal narratives; reinforced by media and government policies; portray Muslims as a separate, 'othered' group. Such classification contributes to feelings of separation and alienation, as Vertigans (2010) argues, and can have detrimental effects on Muslim women's psychological wellbeing. This compounded stigmatisation impacts not only how Muslim women view themselves but also how they interact with society, often leading to heightened psychological distress and a struggle for identity resilience amidst pervasive societal pressures.

Building on this context, this research examines how media in Britain stigmatises Muslim women, contributing to their emotional distress and affecting their sense of belonging. By focusing on the lived experiences of Muslim women, this study investigates how they perceive and make sense of media portrayals, how they interact with these representations, and the coping strategies they develop to manage and resist the adverse effects on their emotional wellbeing and daily lives.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has endeavoured to provide an account of the main scholarly perspectives on the representation of Muslim identities in Western media, with a particular focus on the intersectional portrayal of Muslim women. By exploring the roots of Orientalism, the post-9/11 shift towards securitised depictions of Muslims, and the gendered stereotypes that dominate media narratives; this review has highlighted how media representations are deeply entwined with political agendas, colonial legacies, and cultural assumptions.

Through a comparative analysis across various national contexts, this chapter has shed light on how these portrayals shape public perceptions and contribute to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of Muslim communities. The chapter also emphasised how MWB are often depicted in reductive, polarised ways, reinforcing stereotypes that impact their lived experiences and emotional wellbeing.

Rather than quantitatively analysing media content, this study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the impact of media-driven stigma on the emotional wellbeing of MWB, with a focus on how such portrayals shape their everyday lives and identity negotiation. As I began analysing the data, it became clear that a deeper engagement was needed with how identity,

emotion, and group belonging intersect in participants' narratives. This realisation prompted an exploration of theoretical frameworks that could meaningfully capture both individual and collective experiences of emotional distress, stigmatisation, and resistance. The following chapter outlines the theoretical framework that informed this analysis. Developed in response to the empirical data rather than imposed in advance, it offers an interpretive lens for understanding how social identity and collective emotions interact with processes of misrecognition and stigma.

This study aims to contribute to the existing scholarship on the media representation of Muslim women by revisiting and reflecting on the following questions:

1. How do Muslim women perceive and engage with and navigate different media portrayals of their identity?
2. How do Muslim women think they should be represented?
3. How does media stigmatising visible Muslim women affect their emotional wellbeing?
4. What strategies do Muslim women use to cope with negative representations?

By synthesising this literature, the chapter has laid a foundation for understanding the psychological and social implications of media-driven stigma for visible Muslim women in Britain. This sets the stage for the next chapter, which introduces the theoretical framework that supports the data analysis.

3 Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that guided the analysis of this study. Rather than relying on a single overarching theory, I adopted an interpretive and responsive approach, allowing the data to lead the selection and application of theoretical concepts. The framework draws selectively on ideas from the Social Identity Approach (SIA) and Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET), as well as the concept of misrecognition, particularly as articulated by Nancy Fraser. These perspectives are not applied rigidly but rather used as conceptual tools to support the interpretation of participants' emotional responses to media misrepresentation. This chapter explains how these frameworks help illuminate the relationship between identity, emotion, and media stigma, while also acknowledging their limitations and adapting them to the lived realities of Muslim women in Britain.

Having established the psychological, social, and intersectional dimensions of stigma in the previous chapter, this chapter now turns to the theoretical perspectives that inform the analysis of this research and their relevance to the findings. This study examines the portrayal of Muslim women in Britain (MWB) and the emotional and social impact these portrayals have on their sense of identity and belonging. To address these research questions, I have drawn on concepts from SIA and IET, alongside theoretical discussions of recognition and misrecognition, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

It is worth emphasising that I intentionally began drafting this chapter only after completing interviews and thoroughly engaging with the data. While a diverse range of contemporary and well-established theories could have been used to frame this research, my engagement with the data led me to select the specific framework discussed here. This decision was driven by insights from the data itself, as will be elaborated in the following paragraphs. As

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle aptly noted, “it is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts” (Conan Doyle 2014, p.163). Following this principle, I allowed empirical evidence to guide my theoretical choices, ensuring that the research framework was grounded in and responsive to the realities revealed by the data.

Before presenting and discussing the theoretical framework that guided the analysis in this thesis, I will first review the theoretical frameworks that were considered during the initial stages of my research. This discussion will provide context for the choices made and highlight how the selected framework aligns with the research aims and the data generated in this study.

3.1 Theories Considered during Conceptualisation

Before finalising the theoretical framework, I explored several other theories that could have potentially shaped the analysis. These theories, which include Stigma Theory, Critical race Theory (CRT), and Intersectionality Theory, were valuable in enriching my understanding of the broader literature and providing alternative perspectives on the research topic. While these theories were instrumental in shaping the conceptualisation of the study and were discussed in the literature review, they were ultimately not utilised in the analysis for reasons outlined below. Their contributions, however, remain essential in situating this research within the wider academic discourse on identity, media, and social dynamics.

Stigma Theory, as outlined by Goffman (1963), was discussed in the literature review to guide the examination of how visible identity markers, such as the hijab, are stigmatised in Western contexts. This theory provided a foundation for understanding the broader societal

and psychological impacts of stigma on Muslim women. However, Stigma Theory primarily focuses on individual-level responses to stigma, whereas my data highlighted the importance of collective dynamics and group-based coping strategies. For this reason, while Stigma Theory informed my discussion of existing literature, it was not directly applied to the analysis.

Similarly, Intersectionality Theory (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1989) was also addressed in the literature review to explore the overlapping and interlocking systems of oppression faced by Muslim women as they navigate multiple identities, including gender, race, religion, and class. Intersectionality provided critical insights into the structural inequalities shaping their experiences, serving as a guiding lens for discussing the literature around these themes. However, for the analysis, I required a framework that focused specifically on how participants responded to identity threats, which is better addressed by SIA and IET.

Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw 1991; Delgado and Stefancic 2017), while not discussed in detail in the literature review, was considered as a potential framework for its focus on systemic racism and the structural dimensions of inequality. CRT offers a robust critique of the legal and societal structures that perpetuate marginalisation, particularly of racial and religious minorities. This framework is especially relevant considering the Runnymede Trust's (2017) definition of Islamophobia as being "rooted in racism" and operating as a form of racialised discrimination (see section 1.2). Although it provided a valuable perspective during the conceptualisation of this research, its primary focus on structural oppression did not align as closely with the emergent themes in my data, which centred more on individual and group-level coping strategies in response to identity threats.

In summary, Stigma Theory and Intersectionality Theory were instrumental in shaping my engagement with the literature, while Critical Race Theory (CRT) was considered during the conceptual phase of the research. Although these perspectives enriched my understanding of the structural and social dimensions of identity, they were not used directly in the analysis. Instead, concepts from the Social Identity Approach (SIA) and Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET) were drawn on selectively and interpretively, where they helped illuminate patterns that emerged from the data. Rather than adhering to a fixed theoretical model, I allowed the participants' narratives to guide the analytical direction, ensuring that the insights remained grounded in their lived experiences.

In the following section, I outline the conceptual tools that supported the analysis, highlighting their relevance to the research aims and the insights they offered into the emotional and social dimensions of the participants' accounts.

3.2 Social Identity Approach and Intergroup Emotions Theory

The Social Identity Approach (Tajfel 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1986), which encompasses two theories in social psychology, namely Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Categorisation Theory (SCT); explores how individuals define themselves through their membership in social groups. This approach redefines identity in psychology by highlighting its inherently social nature. Social identity is relational, shaped by the similarities and differences we perceive with others, and it is shared among group members, forming a foundation for collective social action. Additionally, the meanings associated with social identity are rooted in collective history and societal context. In essence, social identity serves as a bridge between the individual and society, linking personal identity to the broader social world (Reicher et al. 2010).

According to Reicher et al. (2010), the Social Identity Approach (SIA) aims to explore how psychological processes intersect with social and political dynamics to explain human social behaviour. As John Turner (1990) suggested, SIA compels psychologists to direct their focus toward the social world (Reicher et al 2010, p 46). I find this perspective particularly valuable for my study, as it aligns with my interest in examining the emotional experiences of Muslim women in Britain (MWB). While I do not come from a psychological background and lack the expertise to address this topic from a strictly psychological lens, the SIA offers a framework that is positioned to understand and interpret these emotional experiences. By emphasising the role of social factors, this approach provides a meaningful way to uncover how societal influences shape the emotions of MWB, bridging the gap between individual experiences and broader social contexts.

Thus, concepts from SIA were drawn on selectively for their ability to provide insight into how individuals categorise themselves as part of a social group. Rather than being applied as a comprehensive framework, these ideas were used to support the analysis of the emotional and social dimensions of my participants' experiences as they navigate their identities as both Muslims and women in Britain. SIA concepts offer a useful lens to consider how negative media portrayals impact not just the individuals, but also their collective identities as part of a broader community. The concepts of social categorisation, social comparison, and in-group/out-group dynamics were particularly helpful, offering critical tools to unpack the processes influencing MWB's experiences.

In the following sections, I will explain the relevance of each theory that together make up the SIA.

3.2.1 Social Identity Theory SIT

Social Identity Theory (SIT) builds on Tajfel's (1969) early work, emphasising the significance of group membership in defining who we are, how we feel, and how we perceive others as "different" or "other", Tajfel argued that understanding group behaviour requires recognising that people define themselves in terms of the groups to which they belong. This view challenges the traditional assumption that identity is purely individual and rooted solely in relationships with other individuals. Instead, Tajfel posited that, in certain situations, individuals derive their sense of self and behaviour from their group membership (Tajfel 1978). SIT provides a framework to explain "how large numbers of people can act in coherent and meaningful ways, by reference to shared group norms, value and understandings rather than idiosyncratic beliefs" (Reicher et al 2010, p 48).

Tajfel (1978) set out that social identity is both personal and social, carrying emotional and social value that shapes individuals' self-esteem and motivates them differentiate their group from others in favourable ways. This perspective emphasises the role of group membership in fostering a sense of self and collective belonging.

Tajfel's minimal group studies (1969) demonstrated that individuals tend to favour their in-group over out-groups, even under minimal conditions, through processes of social comparison. This involves differentiating one's group positively along specific dimensions of comparison, such as intelligence or morality, to enhance the group's status. However, these studies do not suggest that discrimination is universal or inevitable. The outcomes of social comparison depend heavily on contextual factors, such as the relevance of social categories and shared belief systems within specific settings.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) emphasises that group differentiation is not inherently hostile. While social comparison can lead to bias, it can also foster collective action for positive social change. By understanding the dimensions of comparison that groups value, SIT explains not only the mechanisms of group-based favouritism but also the potential for resistance to discrimination. This dual perspective is particularly powerful for analysing how group identities influence behaviour, offering insight into the pathways through which MWB might respond to societal pressures. As Hewstone and Greenland (2000) note, “Social identity theory helps us to understand the behaviour of those whose identity is perceived to be threatened, and whose behaviour might otherwise seem quite irrational or pointless” (p. 138).

Most importantly, SIT provides a framework for understanding the strategies and behaviours of low-status groups in addressing inequality. Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that individuals strive for positive self-esteem through group differentiation, but these processes are shaped by the unequal social contexts they inhabit. In systems of inequality, low-status groups can respond in two main ways: social mobility or social creativity. Social mobility occurs when group boundaries are permeable, allowing individuals to leave their group and align with a higher-status group. When boundaries are impermeable, groups may engage in social creativity by redefining their group's position positively, comparing themselves favourably to more disadvantaged groups, or redefining the meaning of their group membership (e.g., “blessed are the poor”) (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979); however, social creativity does not alter the material conditions of disadvantage.

Real change occurs when low-status groups perceive the existing hierarchy as illegitimate and unstable, leading to collective action or direct challenges to high-status groups. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), such moments are driven by “counterfactual

thinking”, where groups envision alternatives to the status quo, fostering hope and mobilising efforts toward social transformation.

SIT’s key contribution lies in its ability to link psychological and social processes, demonstrating how collective identity drives resistance to inequality and fosters social change. It moves beyond individualistic explanations of group behaviour, emphasising the role of group-based strategies and the contextual factors that determine whether groups adapt to or challenge systemic inequalities (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). By incorporating this framework, my research is equipped to explore both the barriers and pathways for MWB to assert their collective identity and challenge societal misrepresentation.

3.2.2 Social Categorisation Theory (SCT)

Social Categorisation Theory (SCT), introduced by Turner (1982), provides a cognitive framework for understanding how individuals define themselves within social groups. It explains the transition from personal identity (“I” vs “you”) to social identity (“we” vs “they”) by categorising oneself and others into groups. Social identity, viewed as a shared psychological process, facilitates group behaviour by framing groups as cognitive entities rather than just interpersonal bonds. SCT involves depersonalisation, where individuals adopt group norms and perceive themselves as embodying the group’s characteristics, leading to self-stereotyping and fostering group consensus (Haslam et al. 1992). Extending Social Identity Theory (SIT), SCT highlights the role of salient social identity in shaping intergroup dynamics and behaviour. As Hewstone and Greenland (2000) explain, “when group membership is salient (e.g. during overt conflict), the individual tends to become

depersonalised in the group; this is not a loss of identity (deindividuation) but a shift from personal to social identity” (p. 138).

Social categorisation itself is the cognitive process of organising individuals into groups based on perceived similarities and differences (Tajfel 1981). This process is foundational to identity formation, as individuals derive their self-concept from group memberships. For Muslim women in Britain (MWB), their intersecting identities as both Muslims and women situate them at the crossroads of multiple social categories, rendering them particularly vulnerable to the impacts of media portrayals and societal expectations.

In the context of Muslim women in Britain, negative portrayals in the media often place Muslims, particularly Muslim women, as the ‘other’ reinforcing stereotypes and perpetuating social hierarchies. These portrayals might not only marginalise MWB but could also provoke in-group solidarity as a coping mechanism to counteract these external threats. This distinction between in-groups and out-groups is particularly critical in understanding the emotional and social dimensions of MWB’s experiences. In-group identification fosters a sense of belonging and shared identity, which can provide resilience against negative portrayals. Conversely, out-group categorisation by the broader society; often influenced by media misrepresentation, can create a sense of alienation, exclusion, and vulnerability. Examining this interplay between in-group and out-group dynamics is pivotal in understanding MWB’s collective emotional responses.

Previous studies have demonstrated the utility of SIA in exploring the identity negotiations of Muslim communities in various contexts. For instance, Verkuyten and Yildiz (2007) applied SIA to understand how Turkish-Dutch Muslims manage their ethnic, religious, and national identities in response to increasing Islamophobia. The study highlights how social

categorisation can influence feelings of belonging and disidentification, which are relevant to the emotional responses of MWB in my research. Similarly, Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2004) explored how British Muslims construct their identities in the face of negative stereotyping and political discrimination, providing insights into how media portrayals may impact collective identity and political engagement. In this study, SIA allowed for a deep understanding of how MWB's self-concept is shaped by their media environment and how they interpret these portrayals as a threat to their collective identity.

Therefore, the Social Identity Approach (SIA) provides a comprehensive and dynamic framework for understanding group processes, including identity, behaviour, and emotion (Reicher et al., 2010). For my research on Muslim women in Britain (MWB), concepts from SIA were particularly useful in providing a theoretical foundation for examining how these women navigate their intersecting and often marginalised identities within a broader social context shaped by negative media representations. Rather than applying the framework prescriptively, I used it as a sensitising tool to explore how MWB experience and respond to societal pressures, stereotyping, and prejudice. By emphasising the importance of shared group identity, elements of SIA help illuminate how these women collectively construct a sense of self that transcends individual experiences, reflecting broader societal patterns and challenges.

Furthermore, what drew me to SIA was Tajfel's recognition of the transformative power of collective identity and action. His optimism and activist perspective stress how group processes enable marginalised communities to challenge oppression and foster collective resistance (Reicher et al., 2010). This emphasis on identity as both a psychological and social construct, capable of driving meaningful social change, aligns closely with the objectives of my research. These ideas informed how I analysed and interpreted the participants' emotional

and social experiences, especially in the context of how shared identities serve as a source of resilience and empowerment against societal misrepresentation and exclusion.

3.2.3 Extending SIA with Group Emotions and Incorporating IET

Reicher et al. (2010) argue that while the Social Identity Approach (SIA) is already a leading framework for understanding group processes, its potential can be expanded further to provide a nuanced perspective for the study of group emotions. Group emotions are collective experiences that arise from shared identities and are shaped by the appraisal of events relevant to the group. This extension is vital because emotions are not purely individual responses; they are deeply embedded in the collective histories, values, and social contexts of the group. For example, Muslim women in Britain (MWB) may experience shared emotions such as anger, frustration, or resilience in response to negative media portrayals that marginalise or misrepresent them.

To help contextualise these emotional responses, I drew on ideas from Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET), developed by Smith (1993) and further elaborated by Mackie et al. (2000) and Mackie and Smith (2018). IET offers an important extension to SIA by focusing on the emotional responses triggered when group membership becomes salient, and it offers a conceptual tool to think through how emotions like anger, fear, and frustration emerge as collective reactions to perceived threats or injustices faced by the group. For low-status groups like MWB, anger may arise from societal structures and media discourses that perpetuate misrepresentation, while fear may result from experiences of discrimination. These collective emotions, grounded in group identity, often drive specific action tendencies such as resistance, resilience, or efforts to challenge stereotypes.

Furthermore, IET emphasises that such emotions are not isolated to individuals but are shared within the group, reinforcing solidarity and collective action. Blackwood and colleagues (2013b) illustrate this dynamic in their study of how Muslims construct and defend their identities in response to political and media narratives that position them negatively. In my analysis, I engaged with SIA alongside IET as interpretive tools which helped enrich my understanding of how MWB emotionally respond to the persistent misrecognition they encounter in British media and society.

Incorporating aspects of IET enabled the research to explore how collective emotions like frustration, resilience, or anger are tied to MWB's shared experiences of marginalisation. These theoretical ideas helped shape my understanding of how emotions influence MWB's engagement with and resistance to societal pressures. By doing so, the research offers a more comprehensive perspective on the interplay between identity, emotion, and media representation.

3.3 Problems of Recognition- Misrecognition

Building on these psychological frameworks, I also contextualise the concept of misrecognition within the wider literature on multicultural societies and Muslim communities in the West. Nancy Fraser's (2001) concept of misrecognition is particularly relevant to this study. Fraser defines misrecognition as the "deprecation of group-specific identities by the dominant culture," which results in damage to individuals' sense of self and social participation (Fraser 2001, p.23). This form of social subordination occurs when media and societal institutions fail to recognise or misrepresent the identity of marginalised groups.

For MWB, the issue is not one of non-recognition (where a group is entirely invisible), but rather one of misrecognition, where they are inaccurately represented, often through stereotypes that undermine their agency and reinforce a subordinate status. This became evident in my participants' frustration with media portrayals that reduce them to one-dimensional characters. Examples of this misrecognition, such as portrayals of MWB as oppressed or passive, will be discussed in more detail in the analysis chapter. Amena Amer's (Amer 2020) study on identity negotiation among white Muslims in the UK highlights how Muslims are not only misrecognised but are often pressured to conform to dominant societal expectations. This research resonates with my findings, as many participants expressed how media portrayals misrepresent their identity, contributing to a sense of alienation. They highlighted how the media often reinforces a subordinate status for MWB, presenting them as passive and ignoring the complexity and diversity of their experiences. This persistent misrecognition not only marginalises them but also distorts their image, leading to emotional and social consequences, which are explored in more detail in section 5.3.

Misrecognition, as Nancy Fraser argues, is a form of political and social injustice that denies individuals the opportunity to be seen accurately and with respect, often rooted in unequal power structures that damage both self-esteem and a healthy sense of identity. Fraser (2001) explains that misrecognition stems from "institutionalised patterns of cultural value" that subordinate specific groups, making them feel unworthy of respect or participation. In the context of Muslim women in Britain (MWB), misrecognition is not merely a lack of recognition but often manifests as distorted and stereotyped media portrayals that perpetuate harmful misconceptions. This misrecognition denies them visibility as full, multifaceted individuals, reinforcing social subordination and contributing to feelings of alienation.

Medina (2018) expands on Fraser's concept by distinguishing between two types of recognition deficiencies: quantitative recognition deficits, where there is simply a lack of representation, and qualitative misrecognition, where the representation exists but in an inaccurate, harmful manner. For MWB, media misrecognition reflects this second deficiency, as the media consistently fails to capture the complexity and diversity of their identities, instead portraying them through narrow, reductive stereotypes. This kind of misrecognition not only marginalises MWB but also damages their sense of self and belonging within broader British society. Similarly, Vertovec (2011) discusses in *Islamophobia and Muslim Recognition in Britain* how British Muslims are often misrecognised within the media, reduced to simplistic portrayals that overlook the diversity of the Muslim community. This echoes the experiences of MWB in this research, who expressed frustration over how they are frequently represented in ways that strip them of their agency and reduce them to passive or oppressed figures. Such portrayals not only reinforce negative stereotypes but also undermine the participants' self-esteem, reinforcing their subordinate status in British society and exacerbating their emotional burden.

Furthermore; Giladi (2018) highlights the distinction between misrecognition and nonrecognition, noting that misrecognition occurs when a group is acknowledged but not afforded the same level of respect or value as the majority. MWB are not entirely non-recognised, but at best they experience scarce opportunities to be represented in a positive light, and at worst, they are misrecognised through inaccurate and stereotypical portrayals that fail to reflect their complexities. This misrecognition aligns with Fraser's (2001) assertion that coupling recognition with identity can be problematic, as it risks imposing a single, simplified group identity that overlooks the multiplicity and richness of individual experiences.

Demands for recognition; as Fraser (2001) and Medina (2018) explain, involve more than just increasing visibility. Simply producing more representations of MWB in media without addressing the accuracy and quality of those portrayals can exacerbate the problem. Medina (2018) warns that distorted visibility can worsen injustices, as seen in cases where racial violence has been sensationalised in media, normalizing harmful stereotypes. In this research, participants highlighted how the media's misrepresentation of MWB not only dehumanises them but also reinforces the public's skewed perception of their identity. When applying this analysis to the experiences of MWB, recognition issues can be categorised into two key areas:

a) **Underrepresentation**, where MWB are scarcely seen in media and therefore demand more recognition, including the creation of more spaces for Muslim women both in media production and representation.

b) **Misrepresentation**, where MWB are inaccurately portrayed, leading to misrecognition. This can only be corrected by challenging the media's long-standing approach to portraying Muslim women and encouraging representations that reflect their diverse and complex realities.

As Medina (2018) argues, simply increasing visibility without correcting the distorted portrayals can entrench harmful stereotypes. Therefore, the solution must involve changing the terms of how MWB are seen, understood, and represented in the media, ensuring that their identities are portrayed with respect, accuracy, and depth. These issues of misrecognition will be explored further in section 5.3, with specific examples from the participants, illustrating the emotional and social consequences of misrecognition in British media portrayals of Muslim women.

3.4 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has introduced the integrated theoretical framework that guides the data analysis in this study. Drawing on concept from the Social Identity Approach (SIA) and Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET), in combination with Nancy Fraser's concept of misrecognition, this framework offers a holistic lens through which to interpret the data. SIA and IET help provide critical insights into how group-based emotions and identities are shaped by the constant misrecognition MWB experience in the media. Meanwhile, Fraser's theory of misrecognition allows us to understand how these portrayals are tied to broader societal structures of power and inequality, offering a comprehensive view of both the emotional and social impacts of media misrepresentation.

However, this framework is not without its limitations. Both SIA and IET were developed primarily within Western contexts, which may limit their applicability to MWB, whose identities are deeply influenced by cultural and religious dimensions, particularly the concept of the global Muslim '*ummah*'¹³. While these theories provide a robust foundation for understanding the collective emotional responses of MWB, they may oversimplify or inadequately capture the intersectional nature of their experiences as both women and Muslims. Fraser's (Fraser 2001) concept of misrecognition, though valuable, also risks imposing a singular, homogenised identity onto MWB, overlooking the diversity within the

¹³ The word *ummah* refers to the global community of Muslims who are bound together by their shared faith in Islam. It represents a sense of collective identity and solidarity among Muslims, transcending national, ethnic, or cultural differences, and emphasises the unity of all Muslims under the principles of the faith.

group. These limitations highlight the need for ongoing critical engagement with the framework as the findings unfold.

The next chapter will be the methodology chapter; in which I will detail the research design and methods employed to explore these issues. It will outline the qualitative approach used, including the rationale for conducting interviews with Muslim women, the sampling process, and the techniques for data generation and analysis. By doing so, it will provide the framework necessary to examine how Muslim women articulate their experiences of media representation and its impact on their emotional wellbeing.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the research methodology for my qualitative study of how Muslim women in Britain emotionally experience and respond to media representations. The study adopted a multi-method design rooted in a social constructionist framework. As a Muslim woman who wears the hijab, my positionality was central to the research process and shaped the dynamics of the interviews. A total of 28 Muslim women from across England, Wales, and Scotland participated, representing diverse ethnic and social backgrounds. I conducted 26 individual dialogical interviews, one group interview with two participants, and one interview via email (involving multiple email exchanges), as this was the participant's preferred method. Each interview incorporated visual methods. I brought four media images that portrayed Muslim women in varied ways, while participants were asked to bring three images of their own choosing (images that had resonated with them emotionally or intellectually). The sources of these images were wide-ranging and included portrayals of public figures, children's storybooks, magazines, online articles, and social media platforms. This combination of researcher-and participant-selected visual material facilitated in-depth, emotionally grounded conversations about identity, misrecognition, and resistance. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, supported by NVivo 12.

The aim of this chapter is to describe the methods and strategies used to generate data on the effects of media representations of Muslim women on their emotional wellbeing.

Accordingly, the chapter will outline the design and approach of this research project. This research was characterised by its overarching qualitative approach; its main aim was to highlight the participants' lived experiences concerning media representations. Therefore, a

large section of this chapter will be dedicated to the different research methods techniques utilised and the reasons for selecting those specific methods.

The first section of this chapter will discuss the relevant epistemological and ontological assumptions that form the foundation on which I based my own thinking about and understanding of the world and its phenomena; and how this has influenced the present study. The next section considers how I situate myself within the outsider/ insider binary and how I navigated my own positionality and personal biases that I bring with me to the research as a social researcher. This section examines the different ways that the researcher's positionality can impact the data generation process.

The selected methods of data production are explained and justified in the following section, where I describe how I used interviews to co-construct knowledge with participants and create data and how visual methods were utilised to support the interviews. The chapter then, gives attention to the ethical considerations of this research and covers the various ethical challenges.

As outlined in chapter 2, the existing academic literature studying Muslim women's representation in mainstream media is vast; however, this project aims to contribute to the field by addressing this topic from the Muslim women's personal lived experiences with an emphasis on their emotional wellbeing and feelings about those representations. As set out in chapter 2, the research was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Muslim women perceive and engage with and navigate different media portrayals of their identity?
2. How do Muslim women think they should be represented?
3. How does media stigmatising visible Muslim women affect their emotional wellbeing?

4. What strategies do Muslim women use to cope with negative representations?

4.2 Research Approach and Design

The present study was an in-depth, multimodal qualitative project that drew from a social constructionist framework. The main focus was to prioritise the perspectives of research participants in order to examine their lived experiences and emotional responses to negative portrayals. Accordingly, the research aimed to privilege the participants' subjective experiences and their processes of meaning making.

The research approach of this project rests upon the various ways that people interpret 'the actions of others, how they make sense of events and how they build worlds of meaning' (Bouma 2000, p.180). It was designed to examine, at different levels, how the social group under investigation receives, understands, interprets, and reacts to the different media portrayals, and how the media, as a social actor, affects this group's emotional wellbeing.

The research questions in this study address various themes related to the complex relationship between Muslim women in Britain (MWB) and the media. These questions highlight the need for an in-depth exploration of how Muslim women respond to media representations and how these depictions shape their self-perceptions. Furthermore, the research invites a detailed analysis of the participants' reactions to media portrayals, shedding light on the diverse coping strategies that they employ.

A qualitative research approach enables an emphasis on the viewpoints of the research participants by focusing on their experiences and how they perceive and make sense of the world around them (Creswell and Creswell 2018) and develops a nuanced understanding of

the social phenomenon under inspection and how individuals view it (Alston and Bowles 2018).

Drawing from a social constructionist, interpretivist standpoint as an ontological and epistemological commitments of this research; it is believed that multiple realities and truths exist, deriving from multiple subjective positions, which the qualitative approach can attempt to understand (Lincoln and Guba 1985). As such, the study takes the position that there is no singular way to form and view knowledge and to construct reality (Burr 2015). According to Cohen et al. (2007), “the social world can be understood only from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated” (p.19). This suggests that reality is intersubjective and co-constructed and “all meanings are a product of time and place...the researcher cannot capture the social world of another, or give an authoritative account of their findings because there are no fixed meanings to be captured”(Ormston et al. 2014, pp.15–16). Moreover, knowledge is historically and culturally bound; that is, the processes, observations, findings and interpretations are specific and determined to historical and cultural context and cannot be generalised beyond that specific context (Burr 2015), which is further supported by implementing the qualitative approach.

This approach deems that an understanding of human behaviour occurs through interaction with research participants, which helps researchers to acquire meaning from the researched ‘consciousness’ (Patton 2015). The current study, therefore, examined one version of reality which was produced from the interaction between myself as the researcher and the research participants, and it is neither generalisable nor did it aim to be generalisable.

Qualitative methods of research do not fit easily in the model of scientific research with its strictly defined notions of generalisability, validity and reliability or the ‘scientific

criteriology' (Mason 2002, p.38) and the belief that there is only one version of reality, which may be insufficient for qualitative research. This approach is often criticised, mainly by quantitative researchers for being subjective and depending too much on the researcher as a tool for both data collection and data interpretation (Creswell and Creswell 2018), and for its lack of transparency and the ability of generalisation (Marshall and Rossman 2011; Bryman 2012). In this debate of whether the qualitative approach is as objective as scientific research is required to be, where objectivity is defined in quantifiable terms, researchers have suggested that the qualitative approach should be evaluated based on criteria that are different than the ones used in quantitative research. An alternative framework to assess a qualitative study is trustworthiness, authenticity and credibility (Bryman 2012; Patton 2015; Lincoln et al. 2018) which attempts to provide good quality research with rigour and robustness (Mason 2002; Marshall and Rossman 2011; Creswell and Creswell 2018).

In naturalistic inquiry, to which qualitative research belongs, researchers tend to avoid making hypotheses or assumptions at an early stage of research. Instead, they focus on producing a thorough description of all the implicated factors linked to the researched phenomena to generate a new theory or match the findings with an existing theoretical framework by comparing them to other studied phenomena. In qualitative research, comparability and translatability are both considered as crucial criteria for good quality research. Accordingly, the researcher can overcome the criticism of generalisation and to ensure the credibility of the research findings by ensuring "clarification, refinement, and validation of constructs" (Lecompte and Goetz 1982, p.34). To achieve comparability and translatability in qualitative research, the researcher is required to give a clear description of the characteristics of the studied group or phenomena to make comparison with other similar groups or phenomena possible. This was an approach adopted in this chapter as I have

provided detailed descriptions of my studied group which is the Muslim women in Britain (MWB).

Moreover, qualitative inquiry is data-driven (Mason 2002; Patton 2015) and it requires the researcher to ensure their neutrality and self-reflexivity by including techniques that help the investigator to become aware of, and to clarify any potential personal biases or predetermined results or theories to prove, and to comment on how the interpretation was shaped by the researcher's background such as gender, ethnicity, age or cultural background.

Reflexivity can help to ensure that the end result is a high-quality, credible, authentic and a trustworthy research (Bryman 2012; Creswell and Creswell 2018), "balanced about the phenomenon under study, and fair to the people studied" (Patton 2015, p.113).

The qualitative approach is concerned with and interested in understanding humans, their perception of the world, their behaviours, discourse, feelings and meanings behind all these aspects; and it relies on the researcher as the main research instrument. The researcher, therefore, is required to have empathy while conducting qualitative research to be able to understand and interpret the participants' worlds. Empathy can develop from the non-judgemental, interpersonal interactions between the research and the participants, and it enables the researcher to "take and understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences, and worldview of others" (Patton 2015, p.114) and to immerse themselves in the participants' worlds. Accordingly, it is important to consider my positionality as the researcher in relation to the field of inquiry, which will be the focus of the following section.

4.2.1 The Researcher's Positionality

Qualitative inquiry situates the researcher in close contact with the research participants and their lives. In an emotive study such as the present one, empathy is an important asset in the

researcher. Unlike positivist approaches that promote objectivity and emotional distancing between the researcher and the participants, Lerum (2001) argued that emotional detachment can have a negative impact on qualitative research. Therefore, the blurred lines that define the relationship between the researcher and the participants require a special attention to the researcher's background and its implications on the research. Consequently, in this section, I present a brief introduction to myself, as the researcher, and discuss how I positioned myself while interacting with my research participants and how I situated myself within the insider/outsider binary.

For classic sociologists, objectivity is a crucial constituent of good research as it distinguishes sociology as a science and a discipline according to the scientific criteria (Lerum 2001) and this can be achieved through emotional distancing from the research participants. To a certain extent, objectivity in social research can bring mental clarity as it encourages the researcher to stay alert in order to prevent personal biases. The American sociologist Peter Berger explained that “the sociologist tries to be objective, to control his personal preferences, and prejudices, to perceive clearly rather than normatively” (cited in Lerum 2001, p. 472). Additionally, it is often argued that to balance the power dynamics between the researcher as an academic authority and the participants one should follow an objective and emotionally detached approach. This link between mental clarity and objectivity might be justified if objectivity is understood as being aware of one's biases. However, by detaching oneself from the research participants, the research is situating themselves as an outsider.

The debate about insider/outsider positionality still raises many questions in academia. While the positivist perspective considers being ‘an outsider’ as the best position to optimise the research findings and prevent personal biases (Chavez 2008), other scholars argue that being familiar with the group of people under investigation can evoke better understanding. Sharing

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identity, linguistic or cultural backgrounds or an experience base with the participants might give the researcher more acceptance, which can make participants more open and enable in-depth data to be generated (Corbin Dwyer and Buckle 2018). Both ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ positionalities have advantages as well as drawbacks and they both bring different types of biases (Chavez 2008); the outsider researcher may risk imposing their perceptions and beliefs on the participants while the insider researcher may overlook details of knowledge by taking it for granted. Hence, both positionalities cannot ensure complete objectivity in qualitative research since the researcher is considered as a co-participant (Ellis 2004; Gergen 2015).

As a Muslim woman who wears a hijab, I might be perceived as an ‘insider’ by my research participants. This connection is further deepened by the cultural and linguistic commonalities we share, as I come from an Arabic-speaking background. Additionally, being married to an Asian Muslim has granted me insights into certain aspects of the Muslim Asian community in Britain. However, despite these shared identities, I also occupy an ‘outsider’ position. As someone who is not a British Muslim woman, I may lack a full understanding of British life and the unique experiences of navigating a non-Muslim society, particularly in terms of media engagement. Throughout my research, I have strategically leveraged both of these positions. I emphasised my insider identity and our commonalities to establish trust and create a rapport with the participants, helping to ‘break the ice’. Yet, I also consciously embraced my outsider status when necessary, ensuring that I did not make assumptions about their experiences. This enabled the participants to feel comfortable in explaining their perspectives in greater detail, enriching the depth and authenticity of the research.

Moreover, my role as the researcher inevitably influences the power dynamics between me and the participants. I may be perceived as an academic authority, which, combined with my personal experiences and other distinguishing characteristics such as age, ethnicity, class, and

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education, can further differentiate me from the group I am studying. These intersecting layers of identity position me as both an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’ simultaneously. Given the complex and fluid nature of identity, scholars argue that a researcher can never be fully an insider or an outsider (Chavez 2008; Mannay 2010). Nevertheless, Mannay (2010), argued that “despite the inadequacy of the insider/outsider binary in absolute terms, the concept retains methodological usefulness” (p. 93), and some of the “methodological advantages” of being an insider researcher is the “unique insight about underrepresented and colonised groups to which they belonged” (Chavez 2008, p.476).

For Banks (1998), the insider positionality can be conceptualised in a continuum of proximity to or distance from the indigenous community under investigation, ranging from indigenous-insider, indigenous-outsider, external-insider and finally, external-outsider. However, I could not find my position in this linear conceptualisation of insiderness as it represents the researcher’s identity as a static one rather than a fluid one that changes according to situation and context.

Emerging from black feminist studies, the American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (1986), introduced an interesting perspective on the outsider/insider debate which is the ‘outsider within’. An ‘outsider within’ is the one who has a “particular knowledge/power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about or of a dominant group without gaining full power accorded to members of that group” (Harrison 2008, p.18). This, according to Collins (1986), allows the researcher to have multiple lenses of reality and be privileged with both the outsider’s objectivity and the insider’s insight (Collins 1986).

I found this perspective of the ‘outsider within’ to be more representative of my relationship and position with my research participants. I am neither a full insider, nor a complete

outsider. I share with the MWB various knowledge, religious, cultural and linguistic aspects in addition to gender and the way I wear hijab, which might give me access to a more in-depth insight. Simultaneously, being the non-British, Academic outsider might give me more credibility to a certain extent, and by this unique “composition of nearness and remoteness” (Collins 1986, p.515) might enable me to view the object of my study in a rounded way.

I also believe that my positionality as a researcher is not fixed and rather fluid and changes according to the circumstances, resonating with the idea of a ‘transient insider’ (Roberts 2018, p. 116). Roberts (2018) highlights how researchers can navigate varying degrees of intimacy and distance within the research process, a dynamic particularly relevant to my relationship with MWB participants. This idea reinforces the adaptability and fluidity of my positionality, allowing for both shared understanding and critical detachment within my work. In navigating my positionality as a researcher, I found myself frequently shifting between different roles depending on the context and the dynamics of each interaction. Despite my role as a researcher in this study, the majority of participants had an academic related background and possessed a vast knowledge of the topic. As a result, I was constantly learning from their experiences and insights, even as I led the interviews. This fluidity in my identity as a researcher, oscillating between the roles of learner and leader, challenges traditional notions of insider and outsider status.

4.3 Strategies for Data Generation

4.3.1 Dialogical Interviews

The present research is interested in the meaning and structure of the ‘lived experiences’ of those people who have lived and continue to live the phenomenon under examination (Patton 2015, p.190). In-depth interviews enable researchers to gain an insight into and explore

participants' lived experiences and to generate meaning; hence, knowledge from this social interaction. Kvale (1996, p. 2) described in-depth interviews as a 'construction site of knowledge' where the researcher and participants discuss 'a theme of mutual interest'. The researcher then makes sense of those experiences to understand the processes through which they are transformed into individual or shared consciousness.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2014) described researchers' attitudes toward interviewing as those of a miner or a traveller. The miner tends to assume that their role in research is digging for knowledge and assuming that ideas and knowledge exist within the interview participants, this makes their role more distant and objective, whereas the traveller's role lays in co-constructing knowledge through intimate interaction with the interview partners. The traveller is on a journey 'to a distant country' to 'unknown terrain or with maps' (Brinkmann and Kvale 2014, p.57) and in this journey the researcher might gain knowledge as well as reflecting on previous, taken-for-granted values. Following the latter approach to interviewing in my research, I am seeking to generate knowledge through in-depth conversations with the participants, and I consider myself as a traveller along with them to gain an understanding of their emotions and lived experiences throughout the journey.

Since its emergence as a research technique, the interview has become essential to qualitative research, leading to the development of the concept of the "interview society," as described by Silverman (1993). The term "interview society" reflects the pervasive role interviews play in contemporary culture, where personal narratives and individual perspectives are increasingly seen as valuable sources of insight. However, traditional interviews often involve the interviewer asking questions that steer the conversation towards topics they deem relevant to their research focus. When conducted in this manner, interviewing can become a mechanical process of "gathering" data and "reporting" participants' truths. This approach

implies that truth is singular and resides solely within the interviewee, akin to a miner extracting information. Yet, as Denzin (2000) contends, “the interview is a way of writing the world, a way of bringing the world into play. The interview is not a mirror of the so-called external world, nor is it a window into the inner life of the person” (p. 25).

In my research, this notion has influenced my approach by prompting careful consideration of how interviews capture both the individual and collective perspectives of Muslim women, while also being mindful of the limitations of relying solely on personal accounts for broader social insights. Accordingly, this project approached research from a social constructionist point of view, that is based on the ontological assumption that truth or knowledge is socially constructed through communication and interaction. I, therefore, opted to use dialogic approach for the interviews as it enabled me to both guide the conversation and at the same time evoke research participants’ reflexivity and encourage them to get involved to construct knowledge in a non-judgmental environment (Marshall and Rossman 2011; Way et al. 2015).

Based on the rejection of interviews as a process of merely exchanging already existing knowledge, dialogic interviewing creates an opportunity to “transform information into shared experience” (Denzin 2000, p.24) and to “capture the complex, interactional and emergent nature of our social experience” (Cunliffe 2003, p.984). For Kvale and Brinkman (2014), an interview is literally an inter View: an interchange of views between different parts, a form of “dialogue [that] encourages perspective taking and non-judgmental engagement to achieve a deep understanding.” (Way et al. 2015, p.721)

A dialogic approach for interviewing requires a safe environment with empathy and non-judgmental intervention to encourage the interviewees to hear and reflect on their own ideas while unpacking their assumptions. This enables the interviewer to “delve beyond the

interpersonal interactions” (Way et al. 2015, p.730) of the participants to uncover the discourses that shaped their beliefs. It perceives participants as individuals with complex and ever-changing worldviews rather than just a source of data.

This approach to interviewing emphasises the role of the researcher or the interviewer and considers it an important part in the knowledge construction process as much as the interviewee’s role is. It is also often referred to as the reflexive interview as it encourages the interviewees to be self-reflexive in a way that enables us to “capture the complex, interactional and emergent nature of our social experience” (Cunliffe 2003, p.984).

Consequently, this approach to interviewing might be criticised for the high risk of biases shaped by the researcher’s background and positionality. In order to overcome concerns about the researcher’s positionality and to maximise the advantages from dialogical interviews, as well as developing an interview schedule (see Appendix 1) to have guided conversations with participant, visual methods were also integrated in the interviewing process.

4.3.2 The Visual and Elicitation Interviews

Photo-elicitation as defined by Harper (2002) is as simple as “inserting a photograph into a research interview” (p. 13). This technique was first used by the photographer and researcher John Collier (1957). As a member of Cornell University’s multi-disciplinary research team, John Collier used photographs in his research examining mental health in changing communities in the Maritime Provinces in Canada. At first, he used photographs to categorise houses; later, the team used photographs as tools of elicitation in interviewing participants to examine the acculturation process of the French-Acadian migrant families to residing in

English dominated industrial towns and to new workspaces in urban factories and the implicated psychological stress.

Researchers found those particular themes difficult to explore in surveys and in-depth interviews without the assistance of photographs. The researchers interviewed the same participants using both photo-elicitation interviews and non-photographic interviews. Collier (1957) concluded that “the material obtained with photographs was precise and at times even encyclopaedic ... [and the participants’] statements were in direct response to the graphic probes and different in character as the content of the pictures differed”, whereas the non-photographic interviews “were less structured, rambling, and freer in association... and seemed to be governed by the mood of the informants” (p. 856). Collier (1957) noted that “photos were capable of reaching deeper centres of reaction, triggering spontaneous revelation of highly charged emotional nature”. (p.858)

Photographs may also help to reduce fatigue and achieve better memory stimulation. This is because the parts of the brain responsible for processing visual information are evolutionary older than parts responsible on verbal information (Harper 2002). Consequently, visual images can potentially overcome this limitation in conventional interviews.

Visual and creative methods in general can be used to research emotions and to examine layers of human experience that cannot be easily expressed in words; and to enable participants to move beyond the ‘verbal mode of thinking’ (Bagnoli 2009, p.565; Hunt 2014; Pink 2013; Pink et al. 2015 Kapur 2019). The visual also plays an important role in psychology as a discipline and psychology related research (Kantrowitz-Gordon and Vandermause 2016; Glaw et al. 2017), including its use for psychotherapeutic purposes among other uses (Kapur 2019; Loewenthal 2023).

More specifically, visual images have been used as a tool to trigger responses to understand the individual's personality. For instance, the Rorschach test, in which subject's perceptions of inkblot images are interpreted and analysed to understand their personalities and emotional functioning (Reavey and Johnson 2017). Additionally, photo-elicitation is sometimes used in research to examine sensitive topics about emotional experiences and stigmatised cases and it also proved beneficial to engage less expressive participants (Kantrowitz-Gordon and Vandermause 2016). This method is also often used to generate a different type of data which cannot be generated from traditional semi-structured interviews (Rose 2016), data that cannot be expressed in words including emotions and feelings and other subjective thoughts (Kapur 2019). Accordingly, images offer a potential way to "enrich and extend existing interview methodologies" (Collier and Collier 1986, p.99).

It is important to note that in photo-elicitation interviews the images are not our main research interest; instead the focus is directed to how the participants respond to and explain those images and how they attribute different social and personal meanings to them (Kantrowitz-Gordon and Vandermause 2016). In most interviews, I had planned to leave the images for discussion until the end. However, participants often brought up images themselves as examples to illustrate their points, which greatly enriched and stimulated the conversation. This organic use of images highlighted the dynamic nature of the interviews and emphasised the value of the photo-elicitation method. By incorporating photo-elicitation, the present study sought to actively involve participants in the research process, promoting dialogue through images and allowing their responses to move beyond the confines of the pre-set interview questions. This approach introduced new dimensions of interest, guided by the participants' interpretations and meaning making in relation to the photographs; perspectives that I had not initially considered. Additionally, since this project aimed to

examine the representations of Muslim women in media, I used found images¹⁴ from various media platforms to elicit information and maintain a focused discussion on media portrayals. This strategy not only deepened the exploration of the topic but also ensured that the interviews remained centred on the participants' real-life interactions with media representations.

Furthermore, photo-elicitation is particularly valuable when investigating topics that are often taken for granted, as it illuminates aspects that might be overlooked due to their familiarity. By using photo-elicitation and visual research methods, researchers can defamiliarise the ordinary, making the familiar seem strange again (Mannay 2010). This process of defamiliarisation is crucial in social research, as it helps to challenge and expand the researcher's and participants' perspectives. Gurevitch (1988) noted that when researchers focus solely on what is familiar, they risk limiting their understanding. In contrast, embracing strangeness can stimulate thought and provoke dialogue, opening up new, unexplored perspectives for both researchers and participants.

In the present study, I am a visible Muslim woman investigating the experiences of other Muslim women, which introduces an insider/outsider dilemma. As Mannay (2010, p.94) suggests, "working within familiar territory carries the risk that findings may be constrained by the shared, self-contained world of common understanding" (p. 94). Therefore, photo-elicitation was adopted as a useful technique to attend to this potential difficulty.

¹⁴ Found images refer to pre-existing visuals, such as advertisements, news photos, or social media content- not created by the researcher or participant but selected for their relevance to the research topic (Pauwels et al. 2020).

This research is inherently collaborative, involving both the researcher and participants in selecting, interpreting, and analysing existing visual representations of Muslim women in the media. The use of found images serves as a two-way process to combat the risks of familiarity for both the researcher and participants. On one hand, involving participants in the search and interpretation of images empowers them to take on the role of a ‘researcher’, encouraging them to reflect on mediated images in new ways. This process of defamiliarisation prompts them to critically examine their own thought patterns, potentially introducing perspectives that might not have emerged otherwise. On the other hand, the images I selected and presented during the interviews also served to stimulate new ideas and discussions, encouraging participants to engage more deeply with the research topic and reflect on it in novel ways.

Photo-elicitation can be conducted using photographs produced by the researcher, where these researcher-initiated images form the basis of the interviews, as seen in the early work of Collier (1957). However, this method can also involve photographs taken by the research participants themselves; a technique pioneered by Wang and Burris (1997) that became known as ‘photovoice’. The primary aim of photovoice is to actively engage participants in the research process, enabling them to contribute to and document their own realities as they perceive them (cited in Milne and Muir 2020).

Wang and Burris argued that photovoice technique is grounded in the theoretical concept that “knowledge is co-constructed in dialogue with participants who are actively involved in shaping the project, identifying issues through photographs, drawing out common themes, undertaking critical analysis and enabling action to occur” (cited in Milne and Muir 2020). This approach emphasises the collaborative nature of research, allowing participants to play an integral role in the exploration and interpretation of their experiences.

In the present research, the primary focus was to investigate the impact of media images on the emotional wellbeing of Muslim women. To effectively address this research question, I adopted a different approach by designing the photo-elicitation interviews around found images. However, to also incorporate the principles of the photovoice technique and further involve participants in the research process, I asked them to select three images that already existed in any type of media. This approach not only engaged participants in a critical examination of media representations but also allowed them to reflect on and share their own perspectives, thereby enriching the research with their personal insights and experiences.

The interviews were enriched by the incorporation of visual methods, specifically through the use of photo-elicitation. To engage participants more deeply in the research process, they were approached prior to the interviews and asked to collect three images from any type of media that depicted Muslim women or Muslims in general and had a significant impact on them whether they viewed it as a positive or negative depiction. This open-ended request allowed participants the freedom to choose images from a wide range of sources that resonated with their personal experiences and perceptions.

In addition to the images selected by the participants¹⁵, I also curated a collection of images that I believed were relevant both to the research focus and to the specific participant being interviewed. These images were drawn from diverse sources, including newspapers, magazines, TV shows, and social media, spanning different time periods. Each image featured a portrayal of a Muslim woman in various contexts, highlighting different

¹⁵ The images are not included in this thesis as I do not have the rights to reproduce them due to copyright restrictions.

backgrounds and topics. Here is a brief description of the images I have presented to my participants:

- Figure 1: an image of **Nadiya Hussain** in a stylish turban and bright green jumper (Nadiya Hussain. n.d.)¹⁶, the British baker and television personality was selected because she is a well-known public figure who has broken stereotypes about Muslim women in the media. Her success on *The Great British Bake Off* and her openness



Figure 1: Nadiya Hussain

about her identity as a British Muslim woman offers an example of ‘positive representation’. I chose this image to explore how participants perceive such portrayals of visible Muslim women in Western media and their impact on challenging stereotypes.

- Figure 2: An image of the Somali-American model **Halima Aden** wearing a black turban (CNN Style n.d.)¹⁷. Halima was the first model to wear a hijab and burkini in the Miss Minnesota USA pageant and on major magazine covers. This image was selected to prompt discussions about the intersection of



Figure 2: Halima Aden

¹⁶ <https://www.nadiyahussain.com/>

¹⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/halima-aden-hijab-quits-intl-hnk-scli/index.html>

fashion, representation, and the visibility of Muslim women in global media, as well as the participants' views on the balance between representation and commodification.

- Figure 3: **Malala Yousafzai**¹⁸, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and education activist was included because of her global influence as a Muslim woman advocating for girls' education. I selected this image (Hello Magazine 2020) to explore participants' opinions on political and activist representations of Muslim women in the media and how these impact their own perceptions.



Figure 3: Malala Yousafzai

- Figure 4: An image of **women wearing niqab at a protest in Copenhagen** (The Standard 2018). This image was chosen to highlight issues related to the visibility and political symbolism of Muslim women's dress. It was featured in a web article discussing Boris Johnson's comment comparing burqas to 'letterboxes' and 'bank robbers'¹⁹. The image is intended to evoke discussion around the themes of freedom, agency, and how Muslim women's attire is often politicised or misunderstood in media portrayals. It also helped to explore participants' views on the representation of women who wear the niqab

¹⁸ <https://www.hellomagazine.com/news/20201204102135/apple-lisa-jackson-reducing-environmental-footprint-working-with-malala-yousafzai/>

¹⁹ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/boris-johnson-sparks-furious-row-after-comparing-women-in-burkas-to-letter-boxes-or-bank-robbers-a3904611.html>

or burqa and the complexities of identity within these portrayals.



Figure 4: Women wearing niqab at a protest in Copenhagen after the face veil was implemented

This approach not only stimulated rich conversations but also enabled the participants to critically engage with and reflect on the diverse portrayals of Muslim women in the media. By combining the participants' chosen images with those I provided, the photo-elicitation process became a collaborative effort that deepened the exploration of media representations and their impact on the emotional wellbeing of Muslim women. This method ensured that the interviews were not confined to preset questions, but instead were guided by the participants' interpretations, adding layers of meaning and insight to the research.

At the outset of each interview, I began by obtaining the participants' verbal consent, introducing myself, and providing a brief overview of my research. I took the time to review the aims of the study with them, ensuring they were clear about the purpose and scope of the research. I then initiated the interview with semi-structured questions. These questions often served as a springboard, leading to further inquiries and expanding the discussion into unexpected areas. I made sure to give participants ample time to fully understand each question and formulate their responses. When possible, I encouraged them to elaborate, probing for longer, more detailed answers to enrich the dialogue. Following the initial

questions, I asked participants to present and discuss the images they had selected. I encouraged them to describe each image and explain why they chose it. This process typically allowed the participants to provide deeper insights into their responses, often expanding the discussion to cover topics not directly addressed by the interview questions. Frequently, participants would refer to an image they had selected earlier in the conversation, using it as a reference point to illustrate their thoughts on a new topic. This approach opened up new perspectives and directions for the conversation, making the dialogue more dynamic and exploratory.

Notably, some of the images I had initially selected, particularly those featuring well-known Muslim female public figures like Nadiya Hussein, were repeatedly chosen by participants themselves. In these cases, when participants had already selected these images, I would skip them when presenting the images I selected to avoid redundancy.

Lastly, I introduced the images I had selected for the interview. This final step provided an opportunity to further delve into the participants' perceptions and responses, offering additional layers of context and insight to the discussion.

In the following section, I will introduce the research participants in detail, offering insight into their backgrounds, which further contextualises the findings from these interviews.

4.4 Research Participants

This section provides a detailed introduction to the participants, along with an explanation of the sampling technique employed to select them. It delves into the rationale behind these choices, offering a thoughtful reflection on the potential benefits and limitations of the sampling framework. By examining the criteria and process used in participant selection, this

section aims to shed light on how these decisions influenced the scope and depth of the research, as well as the richness of the insights gained.

4.4.1 Participants

The participants in this research were Muslim women living in Britain, all of whom were aged 18 and above. The sample was intentionally diverse, encompassing participants from various ethnic backgrounds and including British residents from England, Wales, and Scotland. These women were selected based on their potential experiences with, and reactions to, negative media portrayals. To achieve this, a combination of snowball and purposive sampling methods was employed, both of which are well-suited to the qualitative nature and objectives of this research. These methods allowed for the identification and inclusion of participants who could provide rich, nuanced insights into the study's focus on media representation and its impact.

In total, 28 self-identified Muslim women took part in the study, with ages ranging between 20-29, 30-39 and 50-59 years old reflecting a diverse spectrum of life stages and experiences. The group also reflected a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, including South Asian (e.g., Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian), Central Asian, Middle Eastern, North African, French, Welsh, British and mixed heritage. Sixteen of the participants were born in the UK, while the remaining nine had migrated from countries such as France, Iraq, Algeria, Malaysia, Jordan, Luxembourg and Pakistan, arriving either as children or adults. Participants represented a variety of educational and professional backgrounds: some were undergraduate or postgraduate students, while others worked in healthcare, education, law, the civil service, creative industries, media and entrepreneurship. A few were full-time homemakers or active in voluntary community roles. Most participants wore the hijab, with variations in style

including the jilbab, turban-style hijab, and more loosely worn headscarves, while others did not wear a head covering or expressed their religious identity in other ways. This range of experiences and perspectives helped to ensure a comprehensive and multi-layered exploration of how Muslim women in Britain engage with, respond to, and resist media portrayals. Additionally, women designated as professionals worked across a broad range of sectors, including media, business, law, finance, health, academia, and government agencies. The specific job titles within these sectors have been anonymised to protect participant identities and to prevent the potential misidentification of other professional Muslim women. Similarly, for participants identified as students, details such as the level of study and subject area were concealed, referring to them more generally as students in higher education.

4.4.2 Sampling

Sampling was instrumental in this research, as it allowed for the identification and in-depth study of information-rich cases. According to Patton (2015) purposive sampling is particularly effective for researching specific people, programs, organisations, and communities. One of the key reasons for choosing purposive sampling in this project was its capacity to select participants who are rich in relevant information, thereby creating a group capable of illustrating important patterns within the broader population (Emmel 2013; Patton 2015). In this study, I aimed to include participants from diverse age groups and ethnic backgrounds to closely examine and compare their different understandings, interpretations, and coping strategies concerning media portrayals. This comparison-focused purposive sampling method allowed me to carefully select participants who could provide insights across various dimensions, such as age, ethnicity, cultural background, and visibility.

Initially, the sample was intended to include only women who wear some form of hijab, thereby making them visibly Muslim. This focus stemmed from an interest in how visible markers of Muslim identity could influence experiences of media representation. Choosing visibly Muslim women provided a clearer lens through which to explore how media might portray or misrepresent these women, given that their religious identity is immediately identifiable. This visibility seemed essential as it could potentially make them more susceptible to specific stereotypes or forms of misrecognition within media portrayals, aligning with broader questions about Islamophobia and representation. However, as the project evolved, the inclusion criteria expanded to encompass women who do not wear hijab, introducing a layer of nuance to the exploration of visibility and invisibility. This shift was influenced by interactions with participants and reflections on the broader landscape of Muslim identity in Britain, where not all Muslim women display visible markers of their faith. This change allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how media representations impact both visibly and non-visibly Muslim women, offering insights into the unique challenges and perceptions that may arise from each positionality. Including both groups enriched the study by enabling a comparison of how media narratives affect Muslim women differently based on their visibility, adding depth to the analysis of representation and its implications.

Participants were initially recruited through existing social networks. As the study progressed, additional participants were recruited via social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. I joined various groups for Muslim women in Britain, where I advertised and shared information about the research. The call for participants, which outlined the detailed criteria for inclusion, was widely disseminated (see Appendix 2).

Although ethnicity was not a specific criterion for recruitment, the majority of interviewees were of Asian ethnic backgrounds, reflecting the demographics of Muslims in the UK. Other ethnic backgrounds represented among the participants included Middle Eastern, Arab, Welsh, and North African. Additionally, most participants were either working or studying in fields related to sociology, media, or politics, which contributed to their depth of understanding and engagement with the research topics. However, this also means that the sample is not fully representative of the broader Muslim women population in Britain. The overrepresentation of participants with academic or professional backgrounds in related fields may have influenced the findings, offering a more analytical or critical perspective that may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and views among Muslim women across the country.

Interviewing women from these diverse cultural, ethnic, and professional backgrounds proved particularly valuable in diversifying the narrative. It also enabled an examination of whether ethnic background and professional or academic focus influence how these women perceive and are affected by media portrayals. This diversity within the sample provided a richer and more nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which media representations impact Muslim women in Britain.

4.4.3 Research Setting and Remote Researching

Britain (including England, Wales, and Scotland) served as the geographical research site for this study, as it was focused on exploring the experiences of Muslim women within Britain. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated conducting interviews in online spaces, primarily using Zoom. While this shift to remote interviews made the process more convenient,

eliminating the need for travel across Britain and reducing time constraints, it also introduced certain limitations to the research.

Conducting interviews via video calls (Jowett et al. 2011; Lo Iacono et al. 2016) presented a more constrained experience with participants. I was unable to fully immerse myself in or grasp the depth of their emotional experiences, as my access was limited to their voice, tone, and facial expressions. These elements were consistently used to gauge their emotional responses, but the absence of physical presence diminished the richness of the interaction. In some instances, participants opted for audio-only calls, further limiting my ability to observe non-verbal cues, which are critical for understanding nuanced emotional reactions.

Additionally, the reliance on online platforms like Zoom restricted the sample to Muslim women who had access to and were comfortable using such technology. This technological barrier excluded potential participants who either lacked access to these platforms or were not proficient in their use. Moreover, since the call for participants was advertised in English, it inherently excluded non-English speakers, limiting the diversity of the sample. The inability to visit mosques or community centres in person also meant I missed opportunities to recruit participants more selectively, based on a broader set of criteria. Instead, I had to rely on those who responded to the online advertisement, giving me less control over who participated in the study.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The protection of human participants through the application of appropriate ethical principles is paramount in any qualitative study. This project received approval from the School of Social Sciences Ethical Committee at Cardiff University (see Appendix 3). Although this

procedural approval is considered pivotal to the research, a signed informed consent form is merely an observable indicator of the researcher's sensitivity (Marshall and Rossman 2011). Conducting qualitative research requires an ongoing ethical behaviour from the researcher and a special consideration on how to achieve confidentiality and anonymity throughout the recruitment, interviewing and data dissemination processes, and often attempting to anticipate any ethical issues that may arise. Davies and Dodd (2002) suggested in this matter that ethics cannot be treated as a separate part of process; instead they “...exist in our actions and in our ways of doing and practicing our research; we perceive ethics to be always in progress” (Davies and Dodd 2002, p.281).

Therefore, the consideration of ethical issues was crucial in all stages of the present study with the aim of assuring the three moral principles in which ethical research practice is grounded: respect for persons, beneficence and justice (Marshall and Rossman 2011). By adhering to these principles, the research sought to ensure participants' autonomy, protect their wellbeing, and promote fairness throughout the study. This comprehensive ethical approach not only safeguarded the participants but also enhanced the integrity and trustworthiness of the research process Informed Consent, Anonymity and confidentiality.

I took deliberate steps to ensure that all participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Each participant was clearly advised of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any obligation, and I made sure they understood the extent of their commitment to the research. Before any interviews were conducted, I provided participants with accessible and comprehensive written information sheets (see Appendix 4), along with consent forms, via email (Appendix 5). These documents included a clear explanation of the study's aims and objectives, as well as an outline of the potential themes to be discussed during the interviews. To ensure participants had ample time

to consider their involvement, I allowed a sufficient period for reflection after they expressed initial interest in the study, I reached out again to arrange convenient dates and times for the interviews. No interviews were conducted until participants had explicitly indicated their consent, ensuring that their participation was informed and voluntary.

At the beginning of each interview, I introduced myself and provided a brief overview of my research to set the context for our discussion. I took care to confirm that the participants had thoroughly read and understood the information sheet that had been provided to them in advance. Following this, I reviewed the consent terms aloud to ensure clarity and requested that participants electronically sign the consent form that had been emailed to them earlier, reaffirming their understanding and agreement to participate in the study.

Before proceeding with the interviews, I sought verbal permission from each participant to record our conversation. To further protect their privacy, I asked them to choose pseudonyms, ensuring their anonymity throughout the research process. Finally, at the conclusion of each interview, I took a moment to ask participants to reconfirm their consent, reinforcing their voluntary participation and the ethical integrity of the study.

Any details related to the participants and could potentially identify them, such as name, address and profession, was carefully concealed and anonymised in all records and only I had access to the non-anonymised data. Throughout the research, participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality unless in the circumstances of intention of serious crime or potential harm to the participants and/or others was uncovered, in which case the researcher would be obliged to make a disclosure to the appropriate authorities. However, this was not required at any point of the research.

To guarantee confidentiality during the interview process, I used a Zoom account provided by Cardiff University. Interviews were recorded using Zoom's built-in recording functionality and the recordings were saved to the computer and then promptly transferred to a secure storage (Cardiff University One-Drive space) and immediately deleted them from the computer, including the trash folder. All meetings were password-protected, and the attendees required both the meeting link and the password to join.

4.6 Reflections on the Research Process

As discussed earlier in this chapter, a qualitative researcher is required to have sensitivity to the ethical issues that might arise during the research process in order to ensure an ongoing ethical practice that goes beyond the consent form and participants' anonymity. The study must be designed in a way to anticipate potential ethical challenges and to work to overcome them, and in an emotionally engaging research such as this present one; the researcher must evaluate and construct their behaviour continuously (Lerum 2001). Throughout the research process, I maintained a strong commitment to ethical conduct, particularly in navigating the insider/outsider dynamics and ensuring empathy without bias. Following Patton's (2015) concept of empathic neutrality, I strived to balance my emotional engagement with the participants while maintaining objectivity. I was conscious of not confusing empathy with bias, which can easily occur when researchers overly identify with their participants. By taking the position of an 'outsider within' as discussed in section 4.2.1, I remained aware of the potential influence of my own background and experiences on the research. This awareness was crucial in multicultural settings, where cultural differences needed careful consideration, especially when obtaining informed consent.

Building rapport was an ongoing process, and I adapted my approach based on each participant's age, ethnicity, and other characteristics. For example, I often began interviews with small talk, sharing personal stories to create a more relaxed and friendly atmosphere, which proved effective in encouraging participants to open up about their own experiences. There were instances where a participant's experience resonated deeply with me, and in those moments, I felt it necessary to share a similar personal experience. This not only helped to establish a stronger connection but also fostered a sense of mutual trust, showing that I was not just a detached researcher but someone who could genuinely relate to their experiences. Honan et al.(2013) emphasise the importance of honesty in negotiating the researcher-participant relationship, and I adhered to this by being transparent and respectful in all interactions. Sharing these personal connections was part of my commitment to building a sincere and empathetic dialogue, ultimately enriching the depth and quality of the data generated.

Reflecting back on the interviews, I found that the relationship with participants was dynamic and non-linear, influenced by factors such as age and ethnic background. For instance, with older participants like Leila (40-49 years) and Elham (50-59 years), the interviews felt more like learning experiences for me, as they shared their wisdom and life stories in a calm and reflective manner. Similarly, Arabic-speaking participants were comfortable using Arabic terms and cultural references, assuming my familiarity due to our shared cultural background. This shared identity also made participants feel safer in expressing their political views, knowing I would understand and not misinterpret their perspectives as an outsider might.

At the early stages of the research process, I conducted two pilot interviews, which were included in the final dataset and counted in the total number of interviews. These pilots were instrumental in shaping the direction of the research. They helped me refine both the

interview schedule and the phrasing of my research questions, revealing the importance of making the questions more conversational and less rigid. Based on this experience, I adjusted the structure of subsequent interviews to allow for more fluid, participant-led discussions. The interview schedule (Appendix 1) was therefore used as a guide rather than a fixed script; interviews flowed naturally and were shaped by the unique perspectives and insights offered by each participant. In several cases, I adapted the questions on the spot, following the direction of the participant's narrative or allowing their reflections to bring forward themes or angles I had not previously considered.

Another important insight gained from the pilot interviews was the value of paying close attention to emotional cues such as vocal tone, pauses, facial expressions, and body language. These non-verbal signals provided essential context for interpreting participants' narratives, especially when discussing emotionally charged topics such as discrimination, fear, or resistance. I began taking more detailed field notes during interviews to capture these nuances, which later played a significant role in the thematic analysis. These notes often helped me interpret moments where spoken words alone did not fully convey the emotional intensity of the experience being described.

After the interviews, I developed a strong sense of responsibility toward my participants, wanting to protect their privacy and anonymity, even when they chose not to use pseudonyms, I assigned one to ensure their confidentiality. The trust they placed in me, often stemming from our shared ethnic and religious identities, reinforced my commitment to ethical research practices. This trust also allowed for deeper, more authentic conversations, particularly around sensitive political topics, which might not have been as freely discussed if I were perceived purely as an outsider.

4.7 Procedure

This research followed a multi-stage procedure that began with ethical approval, followed by participant recruitment, data generation, and analysis. Ethical approval (Appendix 3) was granted by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at Cardiff University. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods via social media, Muslim community organisations, and academic networks. Once potential participants expressed interest, they were sent an information sheet and consent form. Interviews were scheduled following receipt of signed consent forms, and all participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage.

Interviews were conducted online using Zoom, in accordance with COVID-19 safety measures and participant preferences. Each session was semi-structured and incorporated photo-elicitation to facilitate deeper engagement with the topics of media representation and identity. Interviews typically lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. One interview was conducted via email at the participant's request. In another instance, two participants chose to be interviewed together due to their close personal relationship; this joint interview was conducted and transcribed as a single session.

Throughout the interviews, I kept field notes documenting visible non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. Where relevant, I also noted whether participants wore the hijab during the interview and whether they mentioned their reasons for doing so. Immediately following each interview, I recorded reflective notes capturing my initial interpretations, emotional impressions, and observations about the interview dynamics. These reflections supported later stages of analysis.

All interviews (except the one via email) were audio-recorded and transcribed. The initial transcription was supported by Word 365, followed by a manual review to ensure accuracy and immersion in the data. Data were analysed using thematic analysis with the assistance of NVivo 12 software. While most codes and themes emerged inductively from the participants' narratives, some were informed by the research questions and interview prompts. Data saturation was reached when new interviews no longer yielded substantially novel themes and when thematic consistency began to emerge across the dataset.

4.8 Framework of Analysis

The combination of qualitative interviews and the photo-elicitation technique generated a rich and diverse dataset, including interview transcripts, field notes, and visual materials.

Organising and making sense of this material required a structured yet flexible approach. The analytical process was both iterative and cyclical, involving constant movement between data generation, interpretation, and thematic development. Throughout this process, I sought to remain responsive to the participants' narratives while also drawing connections across the dataset to illuminate patterns and complexities.

The method of analysis employed was thematic analysis, facilitated by the use of NVivo 12. This approach allowed for a systematic engagement with the data, enabling the identification and refinement of recurring ideas, emotions, and experiences. While the coding process was primarily inductive; emerging organically from the participants' accounts, some initial themes were informed by the broader research aims and the structure of the interview questions. These deductive elements functioned as sensitising concepts rather than rigid categories, offering a loose framework through which to begin exploring the data, but remaining open to reconfiguration as new meanings surfaced.

The flexibility of thematic analysis was particularly valuable in capturing the emotional, social, and representational dimensions of Muslim women's experiences. It also aligned with the study's interpretivist orientation, foregrounding the subjective, affective, and relational nature of knowledge production. The integration of field notes and visual reflections further enriched the analysis, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of both what was said and how it was expressed.

4.8.1 Verbatim Transcription

A total of 28 interviews were conducted for this study, with 27 of them transcribed, as one interview was conducted via email. In one case, two participants requested to be interviewed together, preferring a joint conversation due to their close relationship and shared experiences; this interview was conducted as a paired interview and transcribed as such. The combined duration of all interviews was approximately 41 hours, with each interview lasting an average of 90 minutes.

While the sample size may appear relatively modest, it is consistent with the aims of in-depth qualitative inquiry, which prioritises depth of insight over breadth of generalisability. The richness and complexity of the data generated allowed for a detailed exploration of participants' lived experiences. Data saturation was reached when no substantially new themes or concepts were emerging from subsequent interviews, and participant narratives began to converge around core patterns, particularly in relation to emotions, identity negotiation, and perceptions of media representation. Saturation was assessed iteratively during the coding and analysis process and was further supported by the thematic consistency observed across diverse participant backgrounds.

The transcription process was initially supported by Word 365, which converted the audio recordings into text. However, this automated transcription was followed by a thorough manual process to correct, reorder, and refine the transcribed text. While transcription is often viewed as a technical task of converting audible and visual data into written form, it is, in fact, an interpretive process and represents the first critical step in analysing the generated data (Bailey 2008). Engaging with the transcription manually allowed me to become deeply familiar with and immersed in the text. Revisiting the participants' responses multiple times often provoked a deeper level of reflection, enabling me to perceive the data from various perspectives. This iterative process reinforced my understanding that this project is the product of my interaction with the participants and the data generated from the interviews; it has been shaped and formed primarily by their accounts and experiences.

Moreover, the process of editing the text, deciding on the appropriate level of detail, and determining how best to represent the data required careful consideration and critical thinking. These decisions were frequently guided by the methodological assumptions that underpin this study, ensuring that the analysis remained true to the study's objectives and theoretical framework.

4.8.2 Research Diary and Field Notes

Following my first pilot interview, I quickly recognised the importance of taking detailed notes to supplement the audio recordings. This early experience made it clear that much of the richness and nuance of participants' responses extended beyond their words. During subsequent interviews, I developed a practice of noting participants' facial expressions, vocal tone, pauses, and other significant participant behaviours. Although the interviews were

conducted online, many visual cues were still observable and contributed meaningfully to the interpretive process.

In addition to these observations, I paid attention to whether participants wore the hijab during the interview and, when it came up in conversation, whether this choice was deliberate. These visual markers often offered valuable context for understanding their perspectives on representation, visibility, and identity. I also recorded spontaneous reflections that emerged during or immediately after the interviews, noting moments that stood out emotionally, instances of silence or hesitation, and shifts in tone that could indicate discomfort, confidence, or resistance.

While I did not formally code these notes in NVivo, they played a significant role in enriching my analysis. They served as interpretive anchors, helping me revisit the interviews with greater sensitivity to the unspoken, embodied, and affective dimensions of participants' experiences. This reflective practice also allowed me to remain attuned to the relational dynamics of the interviews and to acknowledge the impact of my own positionality on the knowledge produced.

4.8.3 NVivo

I utilised NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software, to systematically code and categorise the data. The software allowed me to efficiently organise the diverse range of responses by assigning specific codes to segments of the data, which helped in identifying recurring patterns and insights. Once the data was coded, I used NVivo's features to group related codes into broader themes, facilitating a deeper analysis of the underlying trends and relationships within the data. This process of categorisation not only streamlined the analysis but also enabled a more structured exploration of complex themes, ensuring that the richness

of the participants' experiences was thoroughly captured and understood. NVivo 12 was instrumental in managing the large volume of qualitative data, allowing me to maintain a clear and organised workflow throughout the research process.

Thematic analysis of the coded data in NVivo led to the development of six overarching themes that reflect the emotional, social, and representational dimensions of Muslim women's experiences. These included: **1) Media Representations and Stereotypes**, which encompassed codes related to biased portrayals, the erasure or flattening of Muslim identities, and orientalist tropes; **2) Emotional Impact and Psychological Responses**, covering emotions such as anger, fear, shame, and frustration, often triggered by misrecognition or public scrutiny; **3) Hijab, Choice, and Visibility**, which explored tensions around veiling, secularisation, and the politicisation of Muslim women's appearance; **4) Agency, Resistance, and Positive Representation**, capturing acts of self-representation, activism, spiritual empowerment, and content creation; **5) Discrimination and Lived Experiences**, which included both direct and systemic forms of Islamophobia encountered in daily life, work, and public discourse; and **6) Identity, Intersectionality, and Generational/Geographical Nuances**, reflecting the complex ways in which ethnicity, age, locality, and personal history shaped participants' experiences. These themes were grounded in an inductive approach, ensuring that participants' voices remained central throughout the analysis and informed the structure of the findings chapters that follow.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the methodological approach used in this research, detailing the qualitative methods employed to explore the emotional and social experiences of Muslim women in Britain (MWB) in response to media portrayals. Through semi-structured

interviews and thematic analysis, I have aimed to uncover how MWB navigate and interpret their identity in a media landscape that often misrepresents them. The choice of a qualitative methodology allowed for a deep engagement with participants' lived experiences, providing rich, nuanced data that foregrounds their voices in the discussion of media representation.

The coming chapters will present the findings of this research, delving into the complex interactions between MWB and media representation. First, chapter 5, *Navigating Media Representation: Trust, Misrepresentation and exclusion in Muslim Women's Experiences*, will explore how MWB engage with and interpret their portrayal in the media. chapter 6, *Muslim Women's Emotional Journeys in Response to Media Representations*, will focus on the emotional impact of media misrecognition, examining both individual and collective emotional responses. Finally, chapter 7, *Resisting Media Bias: Coping Mechanisms and Strategies Adopted by Muslim Women*, will investigate the various strategies MWB employ to cope with and challenge media bias. Together, these chapters aim to provide a detailed and comprehensive understanding of how media portrayals affect MWB's sense of identity, emotional wellbeing, and agency in contemporary Britain.

5 Navigating Media Representation: Trust, Misrepresentation and Exclusion in Muslim Women's Experiences

5.1 *Introduction*

The portrayal of Muslims in Western media often falls into negative stereotypes and essentialist views, a topic extensively studied over decades by recent scholars (Poole 2002b; Richardson 2004; Moore et al. 2008; Morey and Yaqin 2011; Alsultany 2012b; Baker et al. 2013). These studies have been instrumental in examining the central role of media in shaping perceptions of Muslims and laying the groundwork for sociological research on Muslim populations in Western media. They have highlighted how media representations often marginalise and exclude Muslims, framing them in stereotyped and reductive ways.

Elizabeth Poole (2004) noted that, in the UK, the increased visibility of Muslims has led to a 'crisis of national identity', with national narratives often excluding Muslims from being seen as fully British. This scholarship has predominantly focused on the passive aspects of the Muslim-media relationship, overlooking the active roles that Muslims play in navigating and shaping media portrayals. However, other studies have recognised the agency of Muslim population in their relationship with media as sources of news and Muslim participation in the making of Muslim media platforms (Meer et al. 2010; Munnik 2017; Munnik 2018).

This chapter contributes to this literature base by examining the multifaceted relationships between Muslim women in Britain (MWB) and the various media platforms discussed by my research participants. It will examine how these women engaged with and navigated their interactions with different media forms, including films, television, news coverage, and

online streaming platforms. In discussing these processes, the chapter will attend to the following research questions:

RQ1. How do Muslim women perceive and engage with and navigate different media portrayals of their identity?

RQ2. How do Muslim women think they should be represented?

The chapter will initially focus on issues of trust. During the interviews with MWB, a recurring theme of media distrust emerged, reflecting participants' concerns about media representations based on their personal experiences and backgrounds. This distrust was not merely a matter of critique, rather it was deeply rooted in emotional responses to the ways in which media either marginalises Muslim women through erasure or produces oversimplified and inaccurate portrayals of them.

Following this, the chapter will unpack the processes through which Muslim women are misrecognised and dehumanised, particularly in relation to their hijab. It will then address the concepts of the 'diluted' and 'good' Muslim in some media representations of MWB, examining how well-known Muslim female figures are situated within these frameworks. Finally, the chapter will explore the notion of 'positive representation' from within a diverse, heterogenous Muslim community, investigating how representation from within impacted on my participants' experiences.

5.2 *Issues of Trust*

In the context of this section, I use the word *Trust* to refer to the confidence individuals have in the reliability, fairness, and accuracy of information presented by media outlets. In their interviews, 18 out of the 27 women in the present study directly referred to issues of trust in relation to mainstream media. The participants positioned mainstream media as not as trustworthy as it appears to be. Discussions of trust emerged when I asked the participants directly about their relationship with media and how they select what to consume; however, issues of trust also came up at multiple points of the interviews; emphasising the lack of trust that some participants had in media outlets.

It is worth mentioning that my questions about media were not limited to one type of media such as news media; rather they extended to all types of media including entertainment, films, TV shows, newspapers and even social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram and streaming platforms such as Netflix. I enabled the conversation to be led by the participants and purposefully asked open-ended question about their relationship with media inviting them to choose what type of media according to their personal experiences, then I followed up with probing questions accordingly to gain a more nuanced understanding of participants' experiences.

Swart and Boersma (2022) have explored the ways in which viewing publics are no longer convinced by accounts in both traditional (legacy) media and social media²⁰ as a form of objective ‘truth’; and polls demonstrate a noticeable decrease in trust in traditional media institutions. For instance, the 22nd annual trust and credibility survey *The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer*, which consisted of 30 minutes online interviews conducted in 28 countries with over 36000 respondents, showed that government and media institutions are the least trusted institutions with scores of 52% and 50% respectively for being trusted to do what is right and 46% of the respondents viewed the media as a dividing force. Additionally, journalists along with government leaders were categorised as the least trusted societal leaders, with less than half of respondents trusting either government leaders at 42% and journalists at 46% (Edelman Trust Barometer 2022).

Similarly, the women I interviewed in this study expressed their lack of trust in mainstream media; however, the level of their distrust varied depending on their educational and socio-economical background. The women who had studied journalism, sociology, and politics or who worked in related disciplines expressed lower levels of trust in the media and expressed stronger and more critical views on whether media can be considered objective and trustworthy compared to other participants.

These women predominantly came from academic backgrounds, with many having studied subjects related to media, communication, or cultural studies. Their education, professions,

²⁰ Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube and independent online websites and blogs such as ‘Amaliah’, which was mentioned by several participants.

and skills enabled them to critically identify and discuss the stereotypical representation of Muslim women in some British media outlets. This aligned with some of the representations discussed in section 2.2 (see Yegenoglu 1998; Shaheen 2000; Kabir 2008; Nazeer 2018).

Participants who had not studied related subjects at university also expressed their distrust as well in mainstream media, however, with less engagement and background knowledge of the topic. Most of their distrust was based on common sense and their everyday experiences with forms of media that led them to the conclusion that the media is not independent of politics and cannot be considered as an accurate source of knowledge.

The availability of different media programs such as news broadcasts, TV shows and films, from different geographical contexts further enabled my participants to question the objectivity of the media. For example, with the growing use of digital media and the online availability of and access to multiple channels and outlets, Leila who is of South Asian background, had lived all her life in UK, explained that she is more likely to challenge accounts from mainstream traditional media. Leila linked her distrust in British print media to her exposure to news from different geographical and cultural contexts such as news from India and Africa. Leila considered some international sources as inaccurate and unrepresentative of the diversity and multi-ethnicity that characterises Muslim communities in Britain but also began to question the British reporting of global and local news.

“In this country, we have a misconception that the media is unbiased, and we have a really respectable media. We are used to have the broadsheets like *The Times* and the *Telegraph*; and the tabloids like *the Mirror* and *the Express*. And growing up, they were considered respectable and reliable, but because we're a minority when we see ourselves reported, our communities are multiethnic; we get news from back home,

we get news from Africa, we get news from India, we understand it's not unbiased, and we understand it's not reliable." (Leila, 40-49).

Indeed, Leila's experience resonates with broader concerns raised by Nouredine Miladi (2006) in his study on Arab diasporic audiences in Britain, which highlights similar scepticism toward Western media, particularly in relation to coverage of Middle Eastern affairs. Miladi's research highlights how Arab audiences, especially after 9/11, turned to satellite channels like Al-Jazeera for more 'accurate' reporting on conflicts like the Palestinian Intifada, while Western outlets such as the BBC and CNN were perceived as biased or incomplete in their reporting. Similarly, Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2007) explored how different media outlets framed the Iraq War, finding that while Arab media focused on destruction and violence, U.S. and U.K. media emphasised the 'greater good' and future rebuilding. This difference in framing, they argue, contributed to a significant divide in public opinion between Arab and Western audiences. Leila's awareness of media bias reflects this divide, as she, like Miladi's participants, engages critically with various media sources to gain a more nuanced understanding of global events.

This mirrors Leila's distrust of British media, which she attributes to her exposure to news from diverse cultural contexts, revealing the global scope of concerns over media objectivity and the increasing tendency to seek alternative sources of information. Leila stated that Muslims in Britain "know the truth, but they do not see the truth in media" (Leila, 40-49).

Six more participants connected their distrust in media to reporting on Palestine, and to the labelling of 'moderate' and 'extremist' Muslims and linked publicly showing their support to the Palestinian case to rejection in media and labelling the Muslim community as 'extremist'.

For example, this mistrust was discussed by Hasna, born and raised in UK from mixed, Middle Eastern heritage. Hasna worked on multiple projects related to the Middle East and the Israeli colonialism of Palestine, which gave her an insider's perspective to the struggle of people from the region and to how media is reporting this situation. Hasna believed that the media overlooked relevant news on purpose or distorted news items by sharing them without a context, although I could not see Hasna's facial expressions as she was careful not to use her camera, I could distinguish a strong tone of disdain in her voice when she said:

“I don't really like the media at all. I think it's garbage. There's so much lies; I've very rarely followed the media, I really find it disgusting, I think because when you're not English, and you read the media, it's got a very different narrative to what actually happens in real life...” (Hasna, 30-39 years).

I interviewed Hasna during the 2021 Palestine crisis, a period that significantly influenced her views on media trust. Hasna, who has personal connections to people living in the region and gains direct insights through her work, expressed profound scepticism towards mainstream media coverage. Her intimate knowledge of the situation in Palestine enabled her to critically evaluate what she presented as the often superficial and biased reporting from Western and British media. For Hasna, the media's portrayal of Palestine lacked both depth and impartiality.

“When you look at how they report on Palestine (for example), there is no context, no history, there's no contextualising people's experiences, even when people are killed it's not even reported in the media. There are certain narratives that are given more emphasis, certain stories don't get space” (Hasna, 30-39 years).

Hasna's perspective aligns with scholarly research on media bias in reporting the Palestinian struggle, which suggested significant partiality in Western media. Studies have consistently documented a pro-Israeli bias in Western media, portraying the situation as a symmetrical conflict rather than an imbalanced war waged by Israel against Palestinian civilians (Philo and Berry 2004; Loughborough University 2006; Gaber and Thomas 2009; Sirhan 2021). The authors argue that this bias is reflected in the language used and the narratives prioritised, often marginalising Palestinian perspectives and failing to accurately represent the violence and injustices experienced.

Hasna expressed a consistent need to be cautious about publicly sharing her political views on Palestine, fearing that doing so could lead to her and her work being labelled as 'extremist.' She was particularly adamant about not having her video recorded during the interview, despite having been informed about this aspect in the consent process. This caution reflects a broader anxiety about the potential repercussions of expressing political opinions in a media environment that may stigmatise or distort these opinions. Kundnani (2016) argues that

"Islamophobia displaces and racialises crisis events linked to resistance to empire, from the Palestinian struggle to the Iranian revolution, it forces on every Muslim the question of whether they are 'moderates' who detach themselves from their connections to zones of resistance or 'extremists' who channel that resistance in the society where they live" (p. 17).

Hasna's reluctance to be captured on video embodies this broader fear of misrepresentation, highlighting the pervasive anxieties potentially faced by MWB when engaging in political discourse. Additionally, seven other participants echoed Hasna's sentiment, expressing a

deep-seated distrust of mainstream media as both consumers and sources. This distrust stemmed from a belief that their political views are likely to be dismissed or, worse, labelled as ‘extremist’ or ‘radical’.

As noted earlier, the majority of participants were studying or had a career related to media, journalism, sociology and psychology (23 out of 28). This seemed to have an influence on their opinion of media, and their accounts communicated a nuanced understanding, in-depth knowledge and strong awareness concerning the representation politics and the contentious relationship between media and Muslim communities. Participants with this academic background employed emotive language to convey their distrust in the media, with noticeable shifts in tone during the interviews that revealed moments of disappointment and anger.

For example, Karima, a British professional of South Asian heritage, exhibited a marked change in her vocal tone and facial expressions when discussing her relationship with the media. Her disdain for British media was evident in her intense and fervent language. She described her feelings with a palpable sense of frustration and anger, stating:

“To put it very simply, I hate, hate the British media. I don’t even want to call it a complicated relationship with the Muslim community in Britain. It’s just very antagonistic towards Muslims. It almost struggles to just comprehend that this community is capable of good” (Karima, 30-39 years).

Similarly, Amel, a student in higher education, shared her growing awareness of bias in news reporting and mainstream media. She expressed a deep sense of disillusionment with the media’s reliability, describing it as untrustworthy, partial, and often inaccurate. Amel’s tone conveyed a mix of frustration and insight as she explained:

“There tends to be a kind of unspoken bias and people tend to trust journalism as being kind of unbiased and without prejudice, but when you start to kind of dissect news stories and how stories are presented, and the kind of angles that they'll take to present a story, you start to see certain patterns emerge, and you can kind of discern that this is not objective reporting” (Amel, 20-29 years).

Even the five participants who did not have a direct relationship to academic subjects linked to media, demonstrated a high level of media awareness, with informed attitudes towards representations of Muslims and Muslim women. For instance, Serena, a professional working in a large city, described media as “Islamophobic and can’t be trusted for factual news” and said that she “accepted it as a fact of life that Muslims won’t get fair presentation in the media” (Serena, 40-49 years).

These accounts suggest that media representation of Muslim women has an immense and noticeable impact on my participants’ daily lives, and it is particularly apparent in the lives and career choices of some of the participants in my sample, who illustrated a critical awareness and familiarity with media’s fundamental processes. For example, when I asked how the media affected the participants’ day-to-day life, some participants who had studied or were studying in related academic disciplines said that media had led them to choose a certain discipline of study or to pursue a particular career. Amel drew my attention to a point that I had not considered prior to my interview with her concerning the impact of media on Muslim women:

Radja: In what way do those representations -if they do- affect your daily life?

Amel: “I guess my mind in public seems more occupied with these representations.

I’m pursuing a professional career to do with this because it impacts me so much, and

it has such an effect on me. I mean, take yourself for an example. You're doing your PhD and it's about this. You're literally revolving your career prospects around this whole thing, because it's affected you, I imagine, in such a way that you want to come back? ... I'm doing my degree, and the things that I'm writing about and researching are to do with colonialism and Orientalism and anti-Muslim or anti-Islamic racism, like my mind is so occupied with these things, that it's shaping how I actually spend my time, in the sense that, look, I know, I'm researching all these things, and I'm trying to undo them and to understand and so on. I guess that's how it affects me, I guess you could call that positive in a way.” (Amel, 20- 29 years)

Reflecting on Amel’s statement, I realised that one of the main motivations for conducting this research was precisely what she described: a constant preoccupation with media representations. This led me to conclude that the relationship between media awareness and Muslim women’s career choices is both complex and reciprocal, with each factor influencing the other. This dynamic highlights the Muslim communities, especially women’s, recognition of the critical need for positive and inclusive representation in fields such as media and education.

Many participants demonstrated a readiness to pursue careers related to representation, including roles in politics, academia education, and journalism, with the goal of challenging stereotypes and amplifying their voices. For instance, Naima (30-39 years), a professional of South Asian descent working with a high-pressured role, was only available for a brief 30-minute interview due to her busy schedule. Despite the short time, she was eager to contribute and displayed great enthusiasm about the topic of representation. Naima expressed her frustration with stereotypical portrayals of Muslim women:

“it makes me feel annoyed, and it makes me feel so inclined to challenge it, I feel as though it’s a very narrow-minded conception that needs to be just taken out of the window and altered, and those people need to be challenged and educated on.”

(Naima, 30-39 years)

However, Naima also highlighted an example of positive representation in the media, Halima Aden²¹. Naima praised Aden’s presence in the modelling and fashion industry, noting that it demonstrates how Muslim women can be portrayed in a positive and empowering light. Additionally, Naima showed a strong interest in the Muslim fashion and makeup industry, although she was not directly involved in this sector. This interest adds depth to her perspective, her lively, trend-conscious personality reflected her enthusiasm for seeing more diverse and inclusive representations in fashion; however, she acknowledged the risk of reproducing stereotypes within self-representation.

Despite the general feeling of distrust in all types of media; participants showed a knowledgeable awareness of media outlets in Britain and in the world, distinguishing the diversity within media itself. Eleven of my participants expressed that British media cannot be grouped together in one category and the media background is crucial to decide whether to trust its coverage or not, depending on whether that media is a broadsheet or tabloid, private or public funded, traditional (legacy) media or new media (social media). Aseel, a British South Asian, commented that the “BBC for example is supposed to be impartial and neutral, (because) taxpayer pays for this news service” compared to other media outlets such as Sky

²¹ A Somali American model renowned for wearing hijab and burkini in the Miss Minnesota USA pageant and in her subsequent fashion career. Halima is recognised for breaking barriers and promoting diverse, inclusive representations of Muslim women in the fashion industry.

news. A further four participants shared the same opinion with Aseel that channels like BBC are supposed to have an impartial coverage, nevertheless they still positioned them as biased and as serving power. For example, Leila considered these media outlets as a “spokesperson for the government or the ruling class”, and Hasna shared the opinion that “they're pursuing a particular agenda, and it serves them serving power”.

The data in the present study aligns with a 2017 report²² that explored the underlying reasons for low trust in the news media and social media across nine countries (United States, UK, Ireland, Spain, Germany, Denmark, Australia, France and Greece) with around 2000 respondent in each country. 67% of the respondents who reported distrust media (n=1657) related this to bias, spin and agendas. Therefore, a significant proportion of the respondents felt that media is serving powerful people to push their own political and economic interests, rather that it is representing readers or viewers (Newman and Fletcher 2017).

Of the 11 participants discussed above who made distinctions between UK media outlets, only one did not distinguish BBC as serving a certain agenda, but they did question the extent to which the institution is representative. Lina, a British woman from an Asian background, explained that BBC “is a bunch of public school, white people who maybe have the best intentions. Most of prestigious Institutes have the best intentions but really have no idea about other people’s lived experiences, because they all come from the same experiences”. This statement was made in comparison to tabloid press such as the Daily Mail, which she described as “disgusting”. Lina’s opinion did not align with the rest of the participants, as she

²² Data comes from the 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report survey (Newman et al., 2017). This is an annual online survey of news users in 36 markets. Polling was conducted by YouGov, with around 2,000 people surveyed in each country.

positioned much of the reporting as a lack of understanding, rather than an intentional misreporting. I interpret her position as influenced by her professional career, as she was employed in a senior role within a large organisation at the time of our interview, where she worked closely with individuals in the media industry.

This section has established that the majority of participants demonstrated a level of distrust towards the media. According to the participants' accounts, three major factors contributed to their general distrust towards media; a) Media tends to silence Muslim women even while representing them; b) Media dehumanises and misrecognises Muslim women; and c) some 'positive' representation might not be as positive as it appears and can be more damaging. These three factors will be discussed in more detail in the following sections.

5.2.1 Silencing Muslim Women in Media

The women I interviewed expressed a deep distrust in British media, which they attributed to several factors: the spread of 'fake news,' unreliable sources, and a belief that the media functions as an extension of the government, serving its interests. However, for many participants, this distrust was rooted in the media's longstanding negative portrayal of the Muslim community, particularly Muslim women, who are often inaccurately stereotyped.

Through these interviews, I learned that several women had direct negative experiences with the media and journalism industry, primarily due to their visibility as Muslim women and their religious identity. They identified two main reasons for this distrust: (a) the under-representation of Muslim women in the media industry, and (b) the inclusion of Muslim women only to fulfil diversity quotas without offering meaningful representation. To begin, I will explore how participants viewed and reflected on the under-representation of Muslim women in the media industry as a form of silencing.

When asked how Muslim women could improve their representation, four participants pointed to a systemic exclusion from newsrooms and media production roles. Ferial, a Student in higher education, highlighted the industry's gender gap, emphasising that not only women in general but also Muslim women, in particular, are systematically left out of key decision-making roles. Ferial's frustration was palpable when she explained in an assertive tone:

“I think it's the fault of the industry; I think it's the fault of ignorance. I feel like you can fight, and you can shout for a seat at the table, but if they don't give it to you, if somebody has made up their mind that you don't belong, it's very hard to push through and convince them otherwise” (Ferial, 20-29 years).

When Ferial was explaining this point her voice and facial expression suggested that she was deeply affected by this exclusion, and later in our interview, she explained that she had faced minor incidents of discrimination in her work.

Aseel's perspective added another layer to this analysis, illustrating how journalism as a profession is often inaccessible to Muslims due to its elitist and exclusionary nature.

“Journalism isn't really seen as a go-to career for Muslims, especially because it's probably a very toxic industry, very hard to break into. It's usually reserved for the middle classes and people with the right contacts, people who are already close to politicians. It's already hard to get into journalism, but as a Muslim woman, it's ten times harder. There's a lack of connections, and the media world isn't exactly full of Muslim women” (Aseel, 20-29 years).

Additionally, Aseel commented on the limited agency afforded to Muslim women who do manage to enter the industry,

“Even beyond that, why would a British Muslim woman want to enter that space, given the current representation? I’ve read about and heard from British Muslim women journalists who make it into places like The Guardian, but they’re often working on the terms of the institution. They don’t have the agency to report on what they truly want. It’s like, ‘We’ll call you when we need a piece on Ramadan or diversity, or what it means to be a British Muslim, but don’t bother with reporting on crime or foreign policy, that’s not your space’. That’s why so many British Muslim women are going independent and doing their own thing”. (Aseel, 20-29 years).

Together, these quotes suggest a critical issue: for these women, the media’s lack of diversity is not merely a consequence of oversight but a reflection of deeper, systemic inequalities that actively hinder the inclusion of Muslim women. However, when discussing the challenges Muslim women face in improving their representation in media, it is crucial to consider the broader structural issues that contribute to their exclusion. Previous research has highlighted the significant role that journalists and editors in newsrooms play in shaping both the content and the reception of news (Griffin 2014; Duffy 2021). This is particularly pertinent when examining the representation of Muslims in the UK media. Despite Muslims making up 4.8% of the UK population (Census 2011)²³, they are the most under-represented religious group in

²³ According to the 2021 Census, Muslims constitute 6.5% of the population in England and Wales, an increase from 4.9% in 2011. This rise reflects a growing Muslim community over the past decade.

the population of UK journalists, with only 0.4% of journalists identifying as Muslim (Thurman et al. 2016).

The Reuters Institute report (2016) highlights that ethnicity can discourage ethnic minorities from pursuing careers in journalism, with systemic barriers particularly affecting Muslims. Despite varied opinions on discrimination within the industry, the general consensus indicates these barriers persist. Additionally, gender inequality remains a significant issue in media, as shown by Kirsten et al. (2022), who found that only 21% of top editors in major news outlets are women, despite women representing 40% of journalists. These findings emphasise the systemic challenges that Muslim women like Ferial and Aseel face in the media industry.

Muslim women often find themselves at the intersection of multiple minority statuses, which can expose them to various forms of discrimination beyond just gender-based bias (Hosang and Bhui 2018). This intersectionality involves their gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and often their socioeconomic status, particularly for Muslims in Britain. As a result, they may face discrimination “towards multiple attributes of their identity” (Laird et al. 2007, p.924).

The participants in my study echoed these challenges, noting that beyond these intersecting identities, cultural expectations within Muslim communities, which often prioritise traditional and well-established careers such as those in the medical field, further limit their opportunities. Additionally, the lack of social connections within the media industry as explained by Aseel, also serves as a significant barrier, discouraging Muslim women from pursuing careers in journalism.

These findings indicate that the ‘stressful’ nature of the media industry is a significant barrier for Muslim women, as confirmed by five participants who discussed the emotional toll it

takes. For example, Karima expressed that simply being a consumer of media as a Muslim woman causes her “anxiety” and brings up “all these thoughts and fear”, leading her to believe that working within the industry would be even more distressing. Similarly, Elham, a British woman of South Asian descent, described the media industry as “very competitive and stressful”, noting that a practicing Muslim woman needs to be “very thick-skinned” to survive, whether as an actress or in a production role. This sentiment was echoed by Ferial, who linked the underrepresentation of Muslim women in media production roles with the increased stress and pressure they face. Ferial pointed out that even when Muslim women manage to secure jobs in media production, their ability to effect meaningful change remains limited.

“Even when they’re (Muslim women) at the table and there's only one of them because they (media) needed a diversity check, it can still be hard to raise your voice and say your points and then be accepted when there’s so many other people at the table who might just think the same thing” (Ferial, 20-29 years).

Ferial’s words are indicative of the isolation that Muslim women often endure due to both their underrepresentation in the industry and the tokenistic nature of their presence, even when they do manage to break into the field. This links to the second way in which the media silences Muslim women, as described by my participants: the practice of ‘box ticking’ or ‘diversity checks’. This approach involves including Muslim characters in shows merely to satisfy diversity quotas, resulting in limited and superficial representation. Consequently, Muslim women are granted minimal visibility across various media outlets, leading to their near invisibility on TV screens, despite Muslims making up at least 25% of the global population.

According to the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative (2022), Muslims comprise only 1.1% of speaking characters - 98 out of 8,885- across the TV shows analysed. Even more strikingly, 87% of the 200 series included in the study did not feature a single Muslim speaking character, and only 8% of the series included just one Muslim character. This stark disparity highlights the pervasive issue of tokenism, where the presence of Muslim characters is not only rare but often fails to provide meaningful or authentic representation.

Six of my participants emphasised that tokenistic representation severely limits Muslim women's opportunities to pursue careers in the media. Monica, a Welsh woman of South Asian background and a student in higher education, highlighted this issue.

“They’ll (media) try to make the character appear as minimally visibly Muslim as possible, but still just enough to maintain a slight Muslim identity. This way, they can check off the diversity box and claim, ‘Look, we are representing Muslims’” (Monica, 20-29 years).

Lina further critiqued this approach, implying that the media frequently opts for a representation that serves a dual purpose to tick two inclusivity boxes at once, addressing both racial and religious diversity.

“it’s always a black, beautiful woman with a headscarf, so it’s two in one. To me, it’s like, are you genuinely trying to understand, or are you just trying to tick a box by having somebody who looks a certain way? Because now diversity is cool, right? We have Chinese Muslims, for example, so why does the representation always have to be a Somali woman with high cheekbones and a headscarf?” (Lina, 40-49 years).

For Lina, this approach can lead to a superficial representation, where the focus is on meeting diversity quotas rather than on genuinely understanding and portraying the complexities of MWB identities. Ferial also discussed these challenges.

“...if there is only one role for a hijabi character, and ten other very talented women apply for the role, they won’t be considered anyway because they need only one hijabi, and they will be competing against each other for that single role...” (Ferial, 20-29 years).

This scenario not only perpetuates the marginalisation of Muslim women in media but also fosters a competitive environment where limited opportunities force Muslim women to compete against one another, further reducing their chances for meaningful representation and making it even more difficult for them to pursue sustainable careers in media.

When I asked Ferial whether she believed the representation of Muslim women in media had improved, she enthusiastically acknowledged that it is “slowly changing”. Ferial spoke with an animated expression and cheerful voice that reflected her genuine belief in the progress being made. She eagerly pointed to the increasing visibility of Muslim figures in the media, citing examples such as Nadiya Hussain winning the Great British Bake Off, Imen Siar participating in Britain’s Got Talent 2020 while wearing a turban, and Mennel competing in both The Voice France 2018 and America’s Got Talent 2019, also donning a turban.

However, when Ferial mentioned Mennel’s story, she retreated from the positive assessment of representation she expressed initially to explain that Muslim women are often used “like a little diversity check”, her voice shifted noticeably. The excitement in her tone and face gave way to a sense of disappointment. Ferial explained that this tokenistic approach “makes you

feel like you're almost second class in terms of you're not a first choice, you're a choice because you're a hijabi and you can serve them well" (Ferial, 20-29 years).

Mennel is a young French woman of Syrian background who advanced to the late stages of The Voice France in 2018, nearly winning the TV talent show. However, she was pressured to quit after facing backlash for social media posts where she expressed support for Palestine and criticised the French government for the attacks in Paris and Nice. In 2019, Mennel also participated in America's Got Talent, but she exited the show after the first auditions round. Her performance video was edited to portray her as struggling, and she was shown not making it to the next round.

Ferial had a personal connection to Mennel's story, having spoken with Mennel in person. Mennel had encouraged Ferial to participate in such shows, but Ferial was initially hesitant. She felt that the producers were more interested in finding a hijabi woman to make the competition appear more diverse, seeking someone who fit the stereotypical narrative of Muslim women as "shy, quiet, and oppressed". After learning the full details of Mennel's experiences on The Voice France and America's Got Talent, Ferial ultimately decided to reject the offer to participate in the singing competition. This decision was influenced by her growing awareness of how Muslim women are often tokenised and subjected to negative portrayals in the media.

In fact, three of my participants specifically cited Mennel's story as a prime example of how the media uses Muslim women for diversity checks while simultaneously exerting pressure on them because of their appearance. These participants suggested that Mennel's decision to remove her turban was directly linked to the negative experiences she endured on various singing shows. They believed that the media's focus on her looks and the subsequent

backlash she faced highlighted the superficial and often exploitative nature of how Muslim women are represented in the entertainment industry.

For example, Soumaya, a French citizen of North African descent, who studied in Wales, commented “I still don't know if she wasn't [visibly] Muslim, would she have this kind of backlash or not?” implying that Mennel's visible Muslim identity played a significant role in the media's treatment of her. However, Alaa, a north African woman, who was born in France and had been living in the UK for over 20 years at the time of the interview, offered a different perspective on Mennel's decision to remove her hijab. Alaa believed that this decision was not influenced by the media but was instead a reflection of “personal journey with her faith”. Nonetheless, Alaa agreed that Mennel was used merely to tick the diversity box for the TV talent show by including a Muslim woman who wore a form of hijab at the time.

These accounts illustrate how Muslim women often find themselves navigating the tensions between their individual identities and the societal expectations imposed upon them. When I asked Amel whether including more Muslims in the media industry would help address issues of representation, she explained that the solution is not as straightforward as merely increasing Muslim participation. Amel noted that Muslims

“aren't immune to representing other Muslims in stereotypical or negative light. It's not as simple as just involving Muslims to fulfil some kind of representation quota it's more complicated than that.” (Amel, 20-29 years).

The participants' accounts in this section offer a significant critique of Western media's ability to offer genuine portrayals of Muslims, particularly Muslim women. Instead, participants felt that much of the existing representation appeared to be little more than a box-

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ticking exercise aimed at superficially meeting diversity requirements. This approach not only leads to inaccurate and overly simplistic portrayals but also fails to capture the diverse and nuanced identities of MWB. These reductive depictions can perpetuate stereotypes, tokenise visibly Muslim women, and overlook the rich complexities of their lived experiences as evidenced by examples like Mennel's treatment on talent shows and Ferial's critique of tokenism.

As I move into the next section, it becomes essential to explore how these issues of recognition further complicate the representation of Muslim women in media, potentially contributing to their marginalisation and reinforcing societal biases.

5.3 Problems of Recognition

In this section, I connect my participants' accounts with the theory of misrecognition discussed in section 3.3. Participants in this study consistently expressed that they do not feel represented or recognised by mainstream media. Many described feeling invisible and marginalised due to the lack of genuine representation. This section will explore the concepts of misrecognition and the dehumanisation of Muslim women in media, focusing on how my participants articulated their relationship with Western media.

Drawing on Medina's (2018) analogy of the two distinct types of recognition problems (see section 3.3) and applying this framework to the media portrayals of Muslim women in Britain (MWB), I have identified two primary issues. The first is the underrepresentation of Muslim women in British media, which can be addressed by advocating for more recognition and creating greater opportunities for Muslim women in both media production and representation. This was a key theme in the previous section.

The second issue, which will be the focus of this section, involves the prevalence of misleading, simplistic, and inaccurate portrayals of MWB, leading to their misrecognition. This misrecognition perpetuates stereotypes and fails to acknowledge the diverse and complex identities of Muslim women. Correcting this issue requires a fundamental shift in how British media approaches the representation of Muslim women, moving away from outdated and reductive perspectives toward a more nuanced and accurate understanding.

All the women I spoke to in this study agreed that the portrayal of Muslim women in Western media is often inaccurate and overly simplistic, reducing their representation to just two stereotypes: the “submissive woman who needs saving” or “a ticking bomb, and a threat”. Participants believe that these portrayals serve the media’s agenda by perpetuating existing stereotypes, making them feel unrecognised.

My participants emphasised that simply increasing the quantity of representation would not address the deeper issues. For example, Serena argued that the focus should be on transforming the quality of representation, with a genuine commitment to achieving nuanced and in-depth portrayals of Muslim women. Serena expressed her belief that achieving better representation of Muslim women requires a fundamental shift in the media’s approach,

“The media needs to change its stance completely, but they have political reasons not to, it sells and serves the global purpose to vilify Muslims. Every century needs a villain. This one is for Islam, it’s easy for the media to accuse all Muslims of being outdated and extreme, having no real morals” (Serena, 40-49 years).

However, Serena criticised the Muslim community itself for not being united against biased representations.

“Muslims need to stop proving themselves as backwards and hypocritical. The Muslim community is not united and everyone judges each other. If we spoke as one community, we could stand up against bias together.” (Serena, 40-49 years).

Similarly, Hasna commented “Until the media is willing to present us as complex and diverse, any increase in representation is just superficial.”

Leila offered a critical perspective on these types of portrayals, questioning whether they can even be considered representational. She argued that such depictions are overly simplistic, grounded in Western assumptions that Muslim women are subjugated by Muslim men. This misrepresentation leaves her feeling unknown and unrecognised by the media, as she articulated: “they (media) don’t know me. I have four daughters; they don’t know my daughters. We are not oppressed by our faith; we are oppressed by the patriarchy”. Leila’s comment highlights a crucial distinction: neither she nor her daughters are oppressed by Muslim men or Islamic teachings, as is often portrayed in the media. Instead, she identifies patriarchy as the true oppressor, a force that they share in common with women worldwide. This perspective challenges the reductive media narrative that often confines Muslim women to a singular, oppressed identity.

Similarly, Karima expressed her frustration with the media’s simplistic portrayal of Muslim women, stating, “no one wants to understand that we come with complications and thoughts and processes and our own community issues”. Karima’s voice carried a tone of exasperation, and her facial expression revealed a blend of disappointment and impatience, suggesting a growing weariness from repeatedly articulating a truth that seemed persistently ignored.

Furthermore, Amel's reflection highlights a powerful critique of how Western media representations of Muslim women contribute not only to their invisibility but also to their dehumanisation. When asked about portrayals of Muslim women, she articulated a profound sense of alienation, with a heavy tone tinged with frustration, explaining how these representations make her feel "less humanised because I don't see myself in those Muslim characters", "misrecognised" and "invisible-ised". For Amel, media depictions impose a narrow definition of what it means to be both "normal" and "human" associating these qualities with Western cultural practices such as drinking alcohol, engaging in premarital relationships, and aspiring to a liberal, Western lifestyle. She explained that these portrayals exclude her identity and the identities of many Muslim women who do not conform to these social norms, effectively "erasing" her and others like her from the narrative because, as she states, "I'm not like that".

Amel's statement hinges on the idea that Western media has set the parameters for what is considered "human" by presenting only a certain type of Muslim as worthy of positive recognition. She points out that "it's so limited, the only positive representation we get are the liberal, westernised Muslims who aspire to liberal ideals and Western culture". This narrow framing not only erases Amel's identity but also highlights the failure of media to accommodate the diversity within Muslim identities, instead pushing a singular, assimilated image of what a "good Muslim" looks like.

Amel's observation also links this erasure to a deeper process of dehumanisation. Amel argues that the media subtly defines humanity itself through Western ideals, suggesting that to be fully human, one must desire and chase the same things that Westerners do:

“when they (media) show Muslims as, you know, oh, we like to drink as well and get into relationships, and we desire all the things that Westerners desire. That is what it means to be human.”

By limiting what it means to be human to these cultural practices, Amel contends that Muslims who do not share these desires are rendered subhuman:

“If I'm not like that, and I'm not like everyone else, **then what am I?** You know, **I'm not human.** I'm some kind of **subhuman.**” (Amel, 20-29 years) [Amel's emphasis].

Amel's heavy tone underlined how the lack of meaningful recognition in media has a dehumanising effect, rendering her and others invisible. Hopkins and Blackwood (2011) define recognition as the validation of one's identity by others, Amel's experience illustrates how mainstream Western media denies her that recognition. The media's consistent portrayals of Muslim women who integrate seamlessly into Western culture implies that those who resist or deviate from these norms are less valid, less visible, and less human.

Amel's emotional response reflects a deep frustration with how media constructs the “ideal Muslim woman” as someone who is palatable to Western audiences. For Amel, this ideal strips away the complexities and diverse lived experiences of Muslim women like her, rendering them invisible. In this erasure, Amel and others who do not conform to these narrow standards are positioned outside of the definition of humanity, leaving them feeling dehumanised and marginalised. By setting the terms of “humanity” through Western lenses, the media excludes those who reject these terms, further compounding the emotional toll on women like Amel, whose sense of self is not reflected in mainstream portrayals.

Moreover, Hasna concluded that the Muslim community is generally dehumanised as their “suffering is never acknowledged” in media; and for her this was one of the main reasons she detached herself completely from media as she does not “feel seen or heard at all”.

Another key concept of dehumanisation as related to media, is how media portrays the struggles and suffering of that group. When media purposefully or accidentally overlooks Muslim struggles either in wars or different situation, it fails to recognise those people’s human subjectivity and can be seen as a mechanism to justify their abuse (de Ruiter 2022, p.2).

Participants consistently reflected on news coverage about different geographical areas such as Middle East, North Africa and Asia, where it is majority Muslim population; and considered media not only as biased but also justifying acts of violence and wars against Muslims (such as war against Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine). Arguably this process, acts to deprecate Muslim women’s value as humans who are worthy of respect and empathy and denies them the most basic characteristics of their humanity. As Hasna reflected in a disheartened tone:

“when you think about how the Middle East or North Africa is reported on, it literally feels like we’re **numbers, we’re killed** or when we were subjected to state violence or someone is waging war. **You’re lucky if you’re counted in a statistic**, you’re just **disposable**” (Hasna, 30-39 years) [Hasna’s emphasis].

Further, when Mouna, a North African woman living and studying in the UK, was asked to describe how positive portrayal of MWB looks like, she noted as being “represented humanly” and mentioned a movie, the title of which she could not recall. The Muslim character caught her attention as she was portrayed as “an average Muslim woman who is not

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really trying to escape or being oppressed or hating her religion and hating the fact that she was born a Muslim or anything”, this, for Mouna, was an accurate portrayal as it presented the Muslim woman as any other character. Despite this positive example, she considered how wider media was limiting the representation of Muslim women to being oppressed and needing to be saved or as terrorists, with both of these positions being “dehumanising and humiliating”.

Additionally, Amina, born and raised in Britain from Middle Eastern heritage parents and who was at the time of the interview finishing her studies in higher education, thought that Muslim women are dehumanised in different and specific manners from the rest of the Muslim community. According to Amina, Muslim women can hold one or multiple positions of being dehumanised and reduced to be an object within the stereotypical images of a ‘threat’, a ‘victim’ or a ‘sexual object’ and nothing more.

“I think Muslim women are often dehumanised in very specific ways, different from the rest of the Muslim community. With Muslim men typically seen as dangerous, but with Muslim women, they might be dangerous, but they are also seen as oppressed, and people think ‘oh I could be the one to free them. And I’m going to be really interested in my conversations, and I’m going to assume that all of their problems are because they’re a Muslim woman’”. (Amina, 20-29 years).

Amina further highlighted the issue of “sexualisation”, noting that it is a significant challenge MWB face, “there’s this curiosity like ‘oh what’s under the hijab? I want to see your hair’ they want to see their bodies, their hair, and ask why they wear modest clothing”. This suggests that from Amina’s perspective, people often want to see Muslim women’s bodies and question why they wear modest clothing. According to Amina, both media and society

struggle to accept that a Muslim woman might choose to wear the hijab of her own volition. Instead, it is assumed that she is oppressed, and therefore, others feel entitled to see her in a way that denies her agency, “and it’s **really dehumanising** to see that kind of, you know, agency is denied to Muslim women” (Amina, 20-29 years) [Amina’s emphasis]

This takes me to the next concept that participants explored during interviews, that is objectifying MWB as an act of dehumanisation. Objectification occurs by depriving individuals of human qualities such as having feelings and emotions and perceiving them as ‘objects’, which aligns with Bandura’s definition of dehumanisation (de Ruiter 2022). The women I spoke to in this research highlighted their concern around the objectification of Muslim women in Britain (MWB), particularly when discussing some of the existing ‘positive’ images of Muslim women. Eighteen of them specifically connected this objectification to narratives around the hijab and reported feeling that Muslim women are objectified in media in connection to the hijab; not only in British and Western media, but also in Arab, Middle Eastern, and Asian (including Bollywood) media.

It is well-established that media narratives about Muslims is mostly negative and especially critical of the hijab (Poole 2002b; Morey and Yaqin 2011; Ahmed and Matthes 2017) (see section 2.2 and 2.3). When it comes to discussions about hijab and objectifications, we often find two different opposing narratives. The first one considers hijab as a mechanism of controlling women’s sexuality and perpetuating patriarchy that denies women presence in the public sphere. This view was established as early as the 1870s, and scholars, including Muslim feminists such as Fatima Mernissi, have debated these historical narratives and their ramifications for wearers of the hijab (El Guindi 1990; Mernissi 1991). The second narrative about hijab is the one that identifies hijab as a symbol that enables Muslim women to assert themselves as human beings instead of sexual objects. According to this view, hijab is

emancipating and enables women to “claim the gaze and become the ones who observe the world” (Afshar et al. 2005, p.531).

Despite this conceptual debate, participants in the present study did not consider the hijab as their main focus when seeking positive representation. Instead, wearing the hijab was seen as a personal choice and a ‘journey’ for Muslim women. The participants felt that by centering Muslim characters’ identities solely around being Muslim or emphasising ‘Muslimness’, the media was objectifying these characters and erasing their individuality and complexity.

Additionally, participants discussed the visible /invisible Muslim dichotomy in relation to hijab and its connection to objectification. By focusing mainly on portraying highly visible Muslims (those wearing hijab), media renders those who do not wear hijab invisible.

Souheila expressed that women who do not wear the hijab were often “forgotten and dismissed” while Serena added that these women are frequently “reduced to stereotypes” as being less practicing and more westernised than women who wear the hijab.

According to these participants, the media’s focus on hijabi women as the primary representation of Muslim women is a form of objectification as Muslim women are reduced and simplified to be only those women who cover their hair, and making the Muslim women’s Muslimness “...their main trait, and nothing more” as described in Soumaya’s words. According to Ferial, this makes Muslim women feel objectified “where you don’t see anything past the hijab that I’m wearing”.

It is worth mentioning that both Soumaya and Ferial wear hijab, but their views aligned with Souhaila and Serena who do not wear hijab and considered representing MWB as just a hijabi to be limiting and objectifying.

Moreover, four out of the 18 participants in this section, who did not wear the hijab, expressed that they do not feel adequately represented in the media. Lina, one of these participants, remarked “I would never see a picture of myself described as a Muslim woman”, highlighting the narrow and exclusionary nature of current media portrayals. The discussion revealed that the issue is not the hijab itself, but rather the way Muslim women are represented as lacking agency. The problem arises when media portrayals suggest that Muslim women have no free will in choosing whether to wear the hijab or not, reducing them to mere symbols rather than recognising them as individuals with autonomy and diverse experiences. For example, when I asked Aseel about her opinion on the typical representation of Muslim women in the media, she pointed out figures including Zara Mohammed²⁴ and Nadiya Hussain or “any woman covering her hair”, even though she does not wear the hijab herself. Aseel emphasised that the decision to wear the hijab should be seen as a personal choice for Muslim women; however, she noted that what these representations often lack is a sense of agency. She remarked that Muslim women are “nearly always covered. It’s just like an assumption that the Muslim woman would be covering her hair. It’s never portrayed as someone with agency”. This observation is not to suggest that Nadiya Hussain or Zara Mohammed lack agency in their decision to cover as they do. Rather, it highlights the

²⁴ Zara Mohammed is a Pakistani Scottish faith leader currently serving as Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) since 2021. Zara Mohammed is the first female and youngest Secretary-General of the Muslim Council of Britain, elected in 2021. A human rights law graduate, she advocates for diversity and better representation of Muslims in the UK. Zara finished her term in 2025 - a new secretary general has been elected.

scarcity of portrayals of Muslim women who do not wear the hijab, which can lead to non-hijabi MWB feeling unrecognised and invisible.

Although there are no existing statistics on the number of Muslim women who wear hijab versus those who do not, both Lina and Serena suggested, respectively, that “most Muslim women in the UK are not wearing a headscarf” whereas “whenever the ‘Muslim’ female voice is portrayed on TV and the news, they bring hijabi women.” These accounts reflect participants’ perceptions that the media tends to prioritise the portrayal of hijabi women, which, in their view, does not accurately represent the diversity of the Muslim population in the UK. For these participants, this type of representation can feel objectifying, as it emphasises only one form of Muslim female identity while overlooking others. As a result, they expressed concerns that this focus deprives Muslim women of an essential human characteristic: the free will and agency to make their own choices.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the objectification of Muslim women is not limited to British or Western media. Some participants turn to media from other regions, such as Arab, Asian, or Turkish shows, for entertainment and representation, with these choices often influenced by generational preferences. However, participants with a heightened awareness of representation politics were more critical of these portrayals, regardless of their origin. For example, Mouna highlighted that Muslim women are frequently “sexualised in Arab media, mainly in Egyptian dramas, but Syrian ones as well”. Similarly, Karima expressed her frustration with the portrayal of Muslims in Bollywood, describing it as both Islamophobic and objectifying. She noted, “there are very few women who look like me who are dark skinned like me on TV. Especially in Bollywood. Oh, my God, they're all white. They're all South Asian women who are pasty white; they're all very light skinned women.” Khadija also criticised the authenticity of some South Asian shows, stating “I watch South Asian shows

where they've got like non-Muslim playing Muslim characters. And no single person knows how to wrap hijab properly. It's like, couldn't they have just watched a YouTube tutorial?"

Similarly, Marwa, a student in higher education from south Asian background, also commented on Bollywood's portrayal of Muslims, saying;

“...even in Bollywood, lot of Muslims work in there but still they show Muslims to be the terrorists or the evils ones or the ones that just look just, they just don't make them look good. They make them look weird all the time in Bollywood, and you got Hollywood as well” (Marwa, 20-29 years).

These insights from participants reveal a widespread issue in global media: the objectification, misrepresentation, and marginalisation of Muslim women, which persists across different cultural contexts.

Indeed, empirical studies have consistently found that the portrayal of women in media worldwide is steeped in stereotypes, including in countries such as India, Spain, Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, South Korea, Thailand, and the United States (Collins 2011). Contrary to popular belief, portrayals of women in Arabic TV programs (particularly dramas) are not significantly different from the stereotypical depictions seen in global media. These programs, especially those found on transnational Arab television, often perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes in the Arab region rather than challenging or changing them (Kharroub and Weaver 2014).

Transitioning to the next section, it is important to consider how these misrepresentations are sometimes countered by what appears to be positive portrayals. However, these so-called positive representations can also be problematic, as they often offer a superficial or tokenistic

view of Muslim women, further complicating the narrative rather than truly addressing the issues of misrepresentation and marginalisation.

5.3.1 The ‘Diluted Muslim’ Representations

Over the years there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of more inclusive and diverse media landscapes. Some media outlets understood the value of appearing diverse and incorporated more Muslims in their programs. However, such images received criticism for lacking genuineness and for exercising pressure on Muslims to assimilate and display patriotism in order to be accepted by the wider community.

Participants used the terms “*Good Muslim*” and “*Invisible Muslim*” to discuss the ways in which some media portray Muslims, often create the impression that being a visibly practicing Muslim is incompatible with being British. One participant, Ferial, introduced the particularly evocative term “*Diluted Muslim*” to describe this phenomenon. Although it emerged from Ferial’s reflections, the term encapsulates a broader critique shared by several participants about how the media often sanitises or modifies representations of Muslims. This “*dilution*” involves depicting Muslims in ways that downplay their religious practices or cultural identities, framing them through a lens of acceptability shaped by Western norms. The term “*Diluted Muslim*” is especially powerful, capturing the situation in a novel and insightful way, which is why it serves as the title for this section.

In this section, I will provide some participants’ accounts analysing the rigid dichotomy of good/bad, moderate/extremist with which Muslims are identified, and locate it within the wider literature of multiculturalism in Britain. Additionally, I will explore the concept of ‘diluted’ Muslim as it is perceived by the participants in this study in terms of representations

found in British and Western media, including some of the participants' analysis of well-known Muslim figures such Nadiya Hussain and Halima Aden.

I argue, therefore, that in some cases the representation may appear to be positive on the surface only to subtly reinforce inequitable expectations of Muslims, or to perpetuate existing negative stereotypes. In the coming paragraphs I talk about the notion of good/ bad Muslims as experienced and identified by my research participants. Hasna, captured this sentiment, saying:

“I don't know if you see some of the Muslim women, but I don't identify with them at all. They've got very weird political positioning, but they're given mainstream spaces, and they don't represent us or don't speak on our behalf. But they'll never give space to people who've got anything real to say” (Hasna, 30-39 years).

Terms such as 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslim' have been widely referred to in academic, political and public narratives concerning Muslims and Islam. 'Good Muslim' often utilised to describe 'moderate' Muslims, which infers that there is an 'extremist' Muslim. This expression has been extensively used by Western politician and the political alliance of antiterrorism. For example, both Tony Blair and George Bush expressed a need to distinguish between 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims' (Mamdani 2002). For this reason, the term is often rejected by Muslims even though it meets the criteria of what defines a 'moderate Muslim' (Modood and Ahmad 2007). Mamdani argues that 'good Muslim' is a divisive term that categorises Muslims into 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, with an essentialist dividing line that is invented by Western media and politicians (Mamdani 2002)

My participants showed a rejection of this categorisation and of the term 'good Muslim'.

Amel identified the term as only a label to whitewash stereotypes and perpetuate them. The

‘good Muslim’ woman is the one who is made to be “Palatable to the white liberal west”. The ‘good Muslim’ woman can be in hijab or in no hijab, but;

“The most Muslim she can be is looking like one...You can’t actually act distinctly Muslim or in a distinctly Islamic way, you have to be the same in substance, but in the way that you’re dressed, how it’s packaged, you can look as exotic as you want and look foreign, it’s fine”. (Amel, 20-29 years).

Four other participants had similar opinion that the way a Muslim woman is dressed is not an important factor to be represented as ‘good Muslim’, Instead, what matters is how vocal she is about her political views and whether they align with the dominant perspectives promoted by the media outlet.

Basma referred to the example of British model Amena Khan who became the first model wearing hijab in a mainstream hair advert by L’Oréal in 2018. Amena had to resign after receiving backlash from an earlier ‘anti-Israel’ tweet she made in 2014, in which Khan criticised Israel’s military actions in Gaza, referring to Israel as an “illegal” and “sinister” state (Aljazeera 2018).

Basma commented that although Amena Khan was a famous and influential Instagram figure, she was not welcomed by the media due to this old tweet. For Basma, being a ‘good Muslim’ in the eyes of media is not about one’s appearance but, as she puts it:

“it’s about your opinions; you can only speak when your voice conforms to what we want you to say exactly. You cannot say anything that goes against the accepted opinion, now we have that Prevent. So even in universities now I do have to be

politically correct, because then if anything happened, my name would come on the Prevent list.” (Basma, 30-39 years).

This sentiment reflects the broader narrative of the ‘moderate’ or ‘good’ Muslim as one who avoids overt political expression or dissent against Western imperialism, since “Muslim dissent against empire is never heard as dissent but only as extremism” (Kundnani 2016, p.17). For instance, Elham, who does not wear the hijab herself, believes that in British media, a ‘good Muslim’ is typically portrayed as someone who wears a form of hijab, is often dark-skinned, and avoids being too politically outspoken. Elham suggests that Nadiya Hussain exemplifies this image of a British ‘good Muslim’. According to Elham, Nadiya was “given the opportunity to show a different side of Muslim women, she was used as an example to show why not? You can get involved in British institutions and still wear your headscarf,” as long as she refrains from discussing political issues like “Palestine or Muslims in China (Uighurs), for example”.

Similarly, Halimah, a British professional with a mixed North African background (20-29 years), had a loud, confident vocal tone and expressed her opinions with assertiveness. She clearly conveyed her strong views without hesitation during the interview. When I showed Halimah an image of Nadiya Hussain wearing a turban instead of the traditional hijab (see Figure 1), she remarked that Nadiya is made to look “much more light-skinned, the makeup, the turban style, some of the hair sticking out. It’s like a more palatable version of hijab”. Halimah explained that although media has made Nadiya as a representative figure for a ‘good Muslim’, she does not view her as a genuine representation of Muslim women not because the “scarf style she started wearing” but because “she never alludes to her Muslimness” in public conversations and avoids expressing her views on political issues that matter to the Muslim community.

Karima also shared a similar opinion about Nadiya Hussain. She believes Nadiya's success in the media is due to the fact that:

“she **makes people comfortable**. She's a **palatable, safe** Muslim because she fits into the good Muslim manufactured image that the media has constructed. She's the good Muslim who bakes things for our queen, she wears the poppy, she's not naughty”
(Karima, 30-39 years)[Karima's emphasis].

With a sarcastic, yet calm tone and a knowing smile, Karima explained that Nadiya is accepted and celebrated by the wider British community because she avoids being “problematic” and “did not agitate too much”. Karima pointed out that Nadiya even embraced political acts like wearing the poppy headscarf to support military veterans, which Karima found “very troublesome” due to its implied support for the military's role in wars in Afghanistan and other Muslim-majority countries. She concluded that it was “the ultimate test to see if she was one of those - problematic - Muslims”. Additionally, Aseel and Amel, a both of South Asian heritage (20-29 years), shared similar opinions about Nadiya Hussain, believing she represents the “acceptable” Muslim woman in Britain.

These accounts demonstrate a shared perception that the portrayal of a ‘good Muslim’ woman in British media, as embodied by Nadiya, is less about appearance and more about silence on contentious political issues. Whether she wears a hijab, a turban, or another form of Muslim dress, Nadiya is considered ‘good’ so long as she avoids engaging in politically sensitive topics, particularly those impacting the Muslim community. Amel also noted that Nadiya's shift from wearing a full hijab to a turban could represent a cultural transition: “She's still a Muslim, she's still covering her hair, but she's shifted away from her Bengali

culture, which is usually more orthodox, to something more acceptable to the British public” (Amel, 20-29 years).

It is worth noting that 17 participants who mentioned Nadiya Hussain during the interviews did so positively, viewing her as a key figure in shifting the portrayal of Muslim women in British media. Nura (20-29 years) from Central Asian background, considered her a catalyst for change, remarking “before 2010, there were a lot of images in the media attached to Muslim women dressed all in black. Then I think slowly that trend changed, especially when Nadiya from The Bake Off came along. A lot of changes happened.”

Dhikra, a participant of mixed Middle Eastern background, also appreciated Nadiya’s success and charm. She recalled how Nadiya’s win on BBC’s baking show resonated with her, particularly her statement, “I will never doubt myself ever again”. However, Dhikra personally finds more spiritual and intellectual fulfilment through education and her future studies plans. She noted, “I feel more comfortable and more of substance with something related to education”. For her, Zara Mohammed better represents her own ambitions because Zara’s focus on education and intellectual growth aligns with her values.

In addition to Nadiya, Halima Aden, the fashion model who quit the industry in 2021 around the same time I conducted these interviews, was another frequently discussed figure.

Conversations around Halima’s decision and her representation of Muslim women sparked rich and diverse opinions. Dhikra felt that Halima was celebrated for being “the first Muslim fashion supermodel” but she did not feel represented by her. According to Dhikra, neither she nor the Muslim women she knows, “who are more about intellectual education” could relate to Halima. She believed Halima was celebrated because she “embraced Western norms” and embodied “what is familiar to Western society” by introducing “modern versions of hijab.”

These accounts illustrate how my predominantly academic and professional sample, many of whom had backgrounds in media, journalism, sociology, or psychology, gravitated toward representations of Muslim women that resonated with their critical and analytical perspectives. It is important to note that if my sample had included more individuals outside of this academic or professional background, perspectives on public figures like Nadiya, Zara, and Halima may have differed significantly.

Another example of disapproval from participants with academic or professional backgrounds in media-related fields regarding the ‘good Muslim’ representation is their attitude toward Sara Khan, who was appointed to lead the Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE) between the years 2018 and 2021. For Karima, Sara Khan “is presented as the good Muslim woman, she’s the one who’s going to liberate everyone else [...], and that’s seen as the good Muslim woman who knows her place, who knows that you shouldn’t be in a hijab, you shouldn’t be doing this doing that. [...] That’s the media’s fatwa (religious ruling) of who is the good Muslim woman” (Karima, 30-39 years).

Karima delivered this critique with a sarcastic tone, almost as if she did not take this type of portrayal seriously. I interpreted her tone as carrying a hint of anger and disapproval, reflecting her frustration with the reductive and prescriptive nature of such representations. Karima’s disapproval of Sara Khan was largely rooted in her political agenda. She viewed her work as aligned with government policies that “targets Muslim communities, this ‘counter-extremism measures’ only shows Muslims as inherently problematic” (Karima, 30-39 years).

It is worth noting that Sara Khan is a public Muslim figure who is often represented without covering her hair, contrasting with the media’s frequent focus on hijab-wearing women when

representing Muslim identity. This difference raises interesting questions about the intersections of representation and acceptability: while participants criticised the overemphasis on hijab in media portrayals, they also disapproved of portrayals that seemingly detach Muslim identity from religious or cultural practices, such as wearing hijab. This suggests that for some participants, the issue is not merely about whether hijab is present or absent, but about how the media uses these symbols to frame narratives about ‘acceptable’ Muslim identities.

For example, Sara Khan’s portrayal as a progressive, uncovered Muslim woman contrasts sharply with the representation of Nadiya Hussain, a hijab-wearing public figure who is celebrated for embodying an acceptable form of Muslim identity. This tension highlights the complexity of participants’ critiques, as they navigated the fine line between rejecting reductive portrayals tied to hijab and challenging portrayals that seem to sideline religious symbols entirely. These nuanced perspectives reveal the participants’ broader frustration with the media’s tendency to essentialise Muslim identity, whether through visible markers like the hijab or through their absence.

Ferial’s experience further illustrates this point; she felt that acceptance in society required her to align more closely with Western values, a sentiment she saw reflected in media portrayals. As she noted, “when **they** represent Islam, they try to **dilute it**, maybe the industry prefers **diluted Muslims** they don't really like the full hijab thing. They prefer a turban, or whatever they prefer” [Ferial’s emphasis]. Ferial sounded disappointed, her voice lowering as she explained how she believed that media and societal expectations shape the definition of ‘good’ Muslims, reinforcing the notion that acceptance is often contingent upon conforming to Western norms.

Ferial discussed a recurrent portrayal of Muslim women found on popular media platforms such as the Spanish show *Elite* on Netflix, where the young Muslim woman ‘Nadia Shano’ who wears hijab but eventually takes it off, walks into a pub and starts drinking alcoholic drink and she finally gets the courage to have a romantic relationship with the rich, white boy, or her saviour, as a form of liberation. Ferial interprets this representation as a form of “whitewashing” where Muslims are “only welcome in our shows when we're diluting them”. Notably six participants: Rewan, Basma, Dhikra, Mouna, Amel, and Amina, denounced similar portrayals, while four others pointed out scenes in another Netflix show, *Sex Education*, involving a North African French character teaching teenagers about same-sex relationships. Suheila, a schoolteacher with North African roots, found the scene “unsettling” and questioned, “Why is this specifically the Muslim character teaching teenagers about the topic?”.

Suheila, who was lively and passionate about her job, spoke with a steady voice and confident tone, smiling throughout much of the interview. Her commitment to fostering positive representations of diverse ethnic backgrounds was clear as she introduced her young students to inspiring figures from various cultures. Among the images she selected to exemplify a positive portrayal of Muslim women was that of the renowned architect Zaha Hadid²⁵, reflecting her dedication to showcasing role models who defy stereotypes. Suheila believed that if the show *Sex Education* aimed to be inclusive, “there are better ways to do it; no need to impose something on us. I show very inclusive and diverse images to my students”.

²⁵ Iraqi British female Architect and artist

For participants such as Suheila, these portrayals suggest that the media attempts to reconfigure Muslims and “change” them to better align with Western ideals. Suheila commented “when Muslims are represented it’s done in a way where it tries to **change Islam and Muslims**, yes, there are Muslim gay men out there in the world. But why are we looking at this?” [Suheila’s emphasis]. After a brief moment of silence, during which Suheila seemed to be collecting her thoughts and reflecting on this idea for the first time, she further argued that the media might even impose these ideals as a way to encourage integration and social acceptance, adding “they [media] maybe do that to make Muslims more acceptable in society, I don’t really know” (Suheila, 30-39 years).

Suheila compared these types of portrayals to the French model of assimilation discussed in section 2.2. The participants discussed how in France, Muslims are often expected to conform fully to French cultural norms to be accepted as citizens, with refusal seen as a rejection of integration, noting “France makes me feel sick [...] I don't think Britain is perfect, but I think in comparison to France, that the opportunities here are far greater, I think racism here looks different. Islamophobia looks different here”. Similarly, Soumaya explained that only “invisible Muslims”, those who do not visibly appear Muslim, such as women without hijabs, are welcomed in French media, as they are seen as easier to integrate. For Soumaya, there is a slim chance of having a career in any public sector or industry with public exposure in France, compared to her chances in the UK, where she finds the environment more inclusive for hijabi women.

Two participants had lived in France, and one was exposed to French culture. All three agreed that, while British and French media share similarities in representing Muslims, British media is generally less hostile, with more tolerant and inclusive politics. Soumaya,

intrigued by the UK's more inclusive environment for hijab-wearing women, expressed interest in staying in the UK to advance her career.

Whiteness remains central to the UK's multicultural policy, with figures like Nadiya Hussain and Sara Khan celebrated as the face of the 'moderate' Muslim. They are praised for attaining a degree of whiteness- each in their own relevance- as noted by Abdel-Fattah and Krayem (2018), which ultimately enables them to integrate into Western society, positioning them as non-threatening. As Abdel-Fattah and Krayem argue,

“The celebritisation of the moderate Muslim becomes a perverse attempt at silencing dissenting voices and controlling the way acceptable forms of Islam are expressed and discussed. The celeb-ritised moderate seldom speak on their own terms; instead, their very presence is a response to White anxiety. Their purpose is to assure the mainstream that the ostensible Muslim problem is under control” (2018, p.430).

In line with these observations, participants in this study defined the 'good Muslim' as one who aligns with the expectations set by the state and media, perpetuating what is deemed acceptable by Western standards. As Dhikra put it, they are “perpetuating and regurgitating” these norms. The 'good' or 'moderate' Muslim is frequently associated with accepting Western values and engaging in cultural practices deemed appropriate, while those who reject these values are labelled as 'bad Muslims' or extremists.

This understanding was evident in participants' critiques of public figures like Nadiya Hussain, Halima Aden, and Sara Khan. Nadiya, while admired for her success, is seen as a media-friendly 'good Muslim' for avoiding contentious political topics. Halima Aden is critiqued for adopting Western norms, including modern interpretations of the hijab.

Meanwhile, Sara Khan, aligned with counter-extremism policies, represents the 'good

Muslim' compliant with government agendas. Although these women occupy different social spaces, each represents a facet of the 'good Muslim' archetype, reinforcing an underlying narrative of what is considered acceptable within British society.

This critique of the 'good Muslim' archetype sets the stage for the next section, where I look at the more empowering portrayals of MWB as discussed by my participants and the importance of representation that comes from within their own communities.

5.4 Positive Representation and Representation 'from within'

For decades, particularly after 9/11, Muslim identity has largely been shaped through the lens of Western media. As a result, many Western citizens' understanding of Muslims is informed by these portrayals (Pool 2002). However, with the significant growth of Muslim populations in Western countries like the UK, the US, and major European nations such as Germany and France, the demand for more positive and diverse representations has increased.

Participants in this study echoed this call for diversity, emphasising the importance of reflecting the multifaceted identities of Muslim women. As Ferial explained:

"Muslim women aren't just one thing. Muslim women are doctors, they're artists. They're creatives. They're hijabis. They're niqabis. They are people who do not wear hijab or niqab; and seeing them just like one image of what it means to be Muslim... it doesn't feel representative, really." (Ferial, 20-29 years).

In response, both Western and Muslim media platforms are working to challenge stereotypes and offer more nuanced portrayals of Muslims. In this section, I examine how participants

define and recognise positive representations of Muslim women, as well as the criteria they use to distinguish between positive and negative portrayals. I also explore how participants engage with representations created by and for Muslims, which I refer to as representation from within, such as the TV show *Ramy*.

As discussed in the previous section, the majority of my participants demonstrated a critical awareness of the politics of representation. While their opinions on the current portrayals of Muslim women in the media varied, they unanimously agreed on one thing: there is a lack of genuinely positive representations across all types of media.

However, the participants did point to some examples of positive representation, all of which shared a common characteristic: these portrayals did not emphasise the character's hijab or Muslim faith as the defining aspect of her identity. For instance, when asked for an example, Basma highlighted a scene from *Grey's Anatomy*²⁶ (Season 14, Episode 13), featuring a veiled medical intern of Pakistani descent, Dr. Dahlia Qadri. In this episode, Dahlia removes her hijab to use it as a tourniquet to save a patient's life. When asked about it, Basma explained that Dahlia's "hijab is a symbol of her faith, but her faith is about service and compassion". Basma selected this character because she was not confined to the stereotypical roles of an oppressed victim or extremist; instead, her hijab was secondary to her complex character. As Basma noted, "She's Muslim, she wears a hijab, but it's not the prominent factor of who she is; she has a complex character, she had a crush on another doctor, and nothing about her is solely tied to her Muslim identity."

²⁶ *Grey's Anatomy* is a long-running American medical drama that was first aired in 2005. It follows the personal and professional lives of surgeons at Grey Sloan Memorial Hospital.

Similarly, Amel pointed to an episode of *Black Mirror*²⁷ (Season 4, Episode 3, *Crocodile*), where the character Shazia, a Muslim woman in hijab, is central to the plot, but her religion is not the focus. Instead, her role in the storyline is tied to her profession. As Amel reflected on this portrayal, her voice became quieter, and she slowed down, clearly processing her emotions before explaining how this portrayal resonated with her:

“To me[silence] that was probably the only positive representation of a Muslim woman that I’ve ever seen. She’s a Muslim, and there’s nothing political about it. She practices her faith, and it’s really not a big deal, and it’s nobody’s business. That, to me, was just brilliant. That’s not catering to liberal politics or racist stereotypes; it moves beyond that to just allow Muslims to exist as themselves without whitewashing or anything like that” (Amel, 20-29 years).

Amel also felt deeply affected when Shazia died in the episode, especially because of the character’s use of the phrase “Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji’un²⁸” typically recited when someone passes away or a tragedy occurs in someone’s life. Amel noted that for Muslim viewers, the use of this phrase instead of “Shahada²⁹” carried profound meaning, as it signified that Shazia was saying it “as she knew that her child and husband are murdered”. The relevance and precision of this phrase made the scene even more impactful for Amel and

²⁷ *Black Mirror* is a British anthology series exploring the dark side of technology and modern society. Each episode is a standalone story with dark, often dystopian undertones.

²⁸ An Islamic phrase in Arabic meaning “Indeed, we belong to Allah, and indeed, to Him we will return” It is commonly recited by Muslims when someone passes away, expressing the belief in life’s temporary nature and submission to God’s will.

²⁹ The Shahada is the Islamic declaration of faith, affirming belief in the oneness of God and Muhammad as His Messenger. It is often recited at significant moments, including before death, as a final affirmation of faith.

other Muslim audiences. Reviews on platforms such as Reddit (Reddit 2018), suggest that other Muslim viewers shared similar sentiments, highlighting the emotional resonance of this scene within the community.

These examples demonstrate that what makes a portrayal positive - like those of Shazia and Dahlia - is when the character's Muslim identity is not the focal point of the story. Instead of being reduced to the usual dichotomies, such portrayals allow Muslim characters to be complex and multifaceted, which resonates more authentically with Muslim audiences. As Amel described, these portrayals offer "a little shout out to Muslims" and reflect the "Muslim gaze" rather than catering to the "white gaze and white audience."

Five participants including Amel and Basma emphasised the importance of including more Muslims in the process, from writing scripts to working in newsrooms to improve the representation of Muslims in media and suggested that media producers consult with Muslim voices when developing Muslim characters. This, they believed, would help ensure more accurate, authentic, and well-rounded portrayals.

For instance, Amel attributed the complexity of the character 'Shazia' in *Black Mirror* to the fact that the show's producer, Charlie Brooker, is married to someone of Muslim heritage³⁰. However, I could not find any direct statements from Brooker to substantiate this link between his personal life and its influence on the character's development.

These participants advocated for representation 'from within' the Muslim community, meaning media created by Muslims for Muslims. This approach allows them to shape

³⁰ Konnie Huq, a prominent figure in British television.

positive and more accurate portrayals of themselves. However, the power of this ‘from within’ perspective comes with its challenges. Given that Muslim communities are inherently diverse - spanning various ethnicities, cultures, and ideologies- it becomes difficult to capture a single, all-encompassing image that represents everyone. My interviews clearly reveal that this heterogeneity makes it nearly impossible to create a unified, representative portrayal of Muslims in media.

For example, the 2019 American comedy-drama TV show *Ramy* is based on the life of American Egyptian stand-up comedian Ramy Youssef. *Ramy* was groundbreaking as the first Muslim-American TV show to win a Golden Globe for Best Actor in a Television Series, Musical, or Comedy. Premiering on Hulu in the US on April 19, 2019, the show was created by Ramy Youssef, one of its three directors. It draws on his personal experiences as a first-generation Muslim American navigating the intersection of faith, community, and Western society.

Four of the participants criticised this TV show and the way it approached Muslim, Arab characters. Amina, for example, believes that although the show *Ramy* is about the comedian’s life, “his life coincidentally, feeds into a lot of stereotypes about Muslims” and most of the characters including Ramy’s parents are “culturally insensitive, caricature versions”. Amina considered the Show *Ramy* to be “very worrying, because although he’s a Muslim guy, and majority of the actors and actresses are Muslim as well on the show, but a lot of it I guess, you can never move away from the gaze of how Muslims are looked at”. Similarly, Karima felt that *Ramy* places “unwanted attention on Muslim parents and families”, making them an object for scrutiny. She noted that the show emphasises certain traits of older Muslim generations, such as their cultural attire and traditional practices, which may appear unfamiliar or problematic to Western audiences. Karima criticised the portrayal

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of Ramy's parents as stereotypical, highlighting outdated attitudes, such as gender-specific restrictions, that are no longer acceptable in Western societies. She remarked:

“whether you're Bangladeshi, Algerian, Moroccan or Nigerian, we know our families are a bit...[pauses thoughtfully] you know, but does that need to be shown to the world is my question, because we have enough attention as adults, I don't need people to put attention on my parents, my family, I just find that really strange in the show” (Karima, 30-39 years).

Karima paused, seemingly struggling to find the right words to describe “our families” and I believe she assumed that I, being a Muslim Algerian, would understand what she meant.

Karima concluded that the TV show *Ramy* is an example of how complicated the representation politics and that is “you can't please everyone, it's just not possible, because we (Muslims) have created our own manufactured idea of how a Muslim should be represented to us, even though we're not the main consumer.”

Further, three participants noted that representation can be particularly “damaging” when individuals who identify as Muslims but hold controversial beliefs about Islam and fundamental practices, such as wearing the hijab, are tasked with creating portrayals for all Muslims. Halimah, for instance, finds the book *It's not about the Burqa*³¹ problematic and controversial, and she refuses to read it. She argued that some authors in the book, who identify as Muslims, are either too Westernised or hold differing beliefs from orthodox Islam to accurately represent Muslim women. Speaking in a strong, sharp, and assertive tone, with

³¹ A 2016 collection of essays aimed at a popular audience rather than a scholarly one that deliberately take the representation of Muslim women from those same Muslim women.

her voice loud and her words deliberately stressed and tinged with a sense of subtle anger, Halima commented:

“the author Mona Eltahawi³², she makes some good points, but other times, she’s just very **annoying**. There’s also this really **crazy, crazy** Egyptian woman Salma El Wardany³³ she’s **insane**, and because she adopts that Muslim identity to make herself a spokesperson, as somebody from the Muslim community, which I find is very **damaging**. And a lot of people who wrote in that book, they don’t wear hijab **Aslan**³⁴ or they took it off afterwards **Subhan Allah**³⁵!” (Halimah, 20- 29 years) [Halimah’s emphasis].

It is important to note that the book *It’s Not About the Burqa* aim, according to its editor Mariam Khan in the introduction (Khan 2019), was not to represent Muslim women; but instead to give Muslim women from different backgrounds the opportunity to produce their own narrative and challenge the pre-existing ones.

³² Mona Eltahawy is an Egyptian American journalist, author, and activist known for her outspoken views on feminism, gender equality, and the intersection of religion and politics in the Arab world. Eltahawy’s work often challenges cultural and societal norms, sparking significant debate and discussion.

³³ Salma El-Wardany is an Egyptian British writer, poet, and speaker who explores themes of identity, feminism, and the experiences of Muslim women, often addressing societal expectations and cultural complexities.

³⁴ Aslan is an Arabic term meaning ‘originally’ or ‘in the first place’. In this context, it implies that the people mentioned never wore hijab to begin with.

³⁵ Subhan Allah (سبحان الله) is an Arabic phrase meaning ‘Glory be to God’ or ‘God is perfect’ Halima used it to express amazement or astonishment, as it is in this context.

The perspectives explored in this section highlight significant diversity among participants' views, reflecting the broader variation within the Muslim population. This diversity makes it challenging to establish a singular definition of representation, whether positive or negative, that everyone can agree on. While some participants supported representation from within the Muslim community to better capture its diversity and nuances, others viewed this diverse portrayal as unhelpful or even damaging in certain instances. The conflicting opinions on what constitutes positive versus negative representation stem from the varied and heterogeneous nature of the Muslim community in the UK and the West. The examples discussed illustrate the range of opinions my participants have on portrayals of Muslim women.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has critically examined the dynamic interactions between Muslim women in Britain (MWB) and various media platforms, focusing on how these women experience and navigate their portrayals. It has directly addressed my research questions:

RQ1. How do Muslim women perceive and engage with and navigate different media portrayals of their identity?

RQ2. How do Muslim women think they should be represented?

The analysis has emphasised the prevalent issue of media distrust among participants, reflecting deep-seated concerns about the marginalisation and misrepresentation of Muslim women. This distrust is not merely a critique but is intimately connected to personal and emotional responses to media portrayals that either erase or distort their identities. The exploration of issues such as silencing, misrecognition, and problematic portrayals has

revealed how the media often enforces rigid stereotypes, casting Muslim women in reductive roles that fail to capture their complexity.

A key finding in this chapter is how participants with academic and professional backgrounds in fields such as media, journalism, sociology, and psychology exhibited a particularly nuanced and in-depth understanding of the politics of representation. These participants demonstrated a heightened awareness of how the media perpetuates stereotypes and enforces reductive narratives about Muslim women. Their accounts often employed emotive language, with noticeable shifts in tone during interviews that revealed moments of disappointment, frustration, and anger. These emotional responses accentuate the deeply personal and professional stakes they felt in challenging problematic portrayals, highlighting the intersection of their lived experiences and their critical expertise.

Furthermore, even so-called ‘positive’ representations can be problematic, as they often impose a narrow ideal of what a ‘good’ Muslim woman should be, ignoring the diversity within the community. The complexities of representations created from within the Muslim community itself also emerged, highlighting tensions between authenticity, representation, and the risk of reinforcing stereotypes.

This nuanced critique was not limited to participants with formal academic training; those without related educational backgrounds contributed equally valuable perspectives based on lived experiences, particularly in identifying the everyday emotional toll of reductive or misrepresentative portrayals. Together, these diverse accounts revealed how media representations impact Muslim women on both intellectual and emotional levels.

Additionally, the chapter has shed light on the difficulty in achieving a singular representation of Muslim women due to the diversity of their identities and experiences.

While there is no universal way to represent all Muslim women, participants identified certain aspects of positive representation that resonated across different experiences. These included portrayals that depicted Muslim women as active members of society, engaging in professional roles, family life and everyday activities: representations that emphasised their multifaceted identities beyond just their religious affiliation. This highlights the importance of moving beyond monolithic and often stereotypical representations, instead fostering a broader, more inclusive portrayal that acknowledges the complexity of Muslim women's lives.

In the following chapter, I will delve into the emotional experiences of Muslim women in relation to these media portrayals, analysing how media narratives construct and shape their attitudes and personal experiences amidst often biased and reductive portrayals.

6 Muslim Women's Emotional Journeys in Response to Media Representations

6.1 *Introduction*

In the previous chapter, I examined the multifaceted relationship between media and Muslim women in Britain (MWB) as perceived and discussed by participants, drawing from a Social Identity Approach, with a particular focus on the dynamics of recognition and misrecognition in shaping their experiences and representation. This complex relationship was characterised by lack of trust and a sense of misrecognition of Muslim women, which have diverse effects on Muslim women both as individuals and members of the Muslim community in Britain. The chapter highlighted the intersection of their gender, social and religious identities and how it is impacted by media. There was a noticeable emotional aspect to the participants' accounts describing their relationship with media. This aspect will be addressed in more detail in this chapter, where I discuss the emotional experiences of Muslim women in relation to media portrayals.

Previous studies have explored the agenda setting and framing of Muslims and Islam in Western and British mainstream media (Morey and Yaqin 2011; Sian et al. 2012; Ahmed and Matthes 2017) and their impact on audience attitudes towards ethnic minorities (Ittefaq et al. 2018; Schmuck et al. 2020) (see section 2.2). This chapter takes a complementary perspective by analysing how media narratives construct and shape the attitudes and personal experiences of Muslim women, who are often at the centre of biased portrayals in the media.

Emotions play a prominent and pervasive role in the interactions between individuals and groups, and involve various dimensions that contribute to the richness, diversity, and

complexity of emotional experiences. Emphasising the multidimensional nature of emotions has a significant role for conducting a comprehensive study on emotions and their impact on individuals' thoughts, behaviours, and social interactions, these dimensions include physiological changes, cognitive appraisals, expressive behaviours, motivational tendencies, subjective experience and social and cultural context (Riis and Woodhead 2010). However, in the present study, I approached emotions as both social and individual concepts rather than reducing emotions to only one of those intersecting aspects to achieve an exhaustive understanding of my participants' emotional experiences.

Pioneering research (Ekman and Friesen 1971, Izard 1971, 1991 cited in Cherbonnier and Michinov 2021) provided an early typology of emotions and identified six basic universal emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise, which are recognisable through specific facial expression. For instance, anger is expressed through facial cues like furrowed brows and tense jaw muscles that signifies frustration or displeasure, and fear is associated with wide-open eyes, raised eyebrows, and a tensed face, which is triggered by perceived threats or danger. Those cues align with some of the facial expressions displayed by participants when expressing their emotions of anger, frustration and fear.

Multiple questions were designed to elicit a descriptive response of the participants' emotions, as participants were encouraged to describe what emotions were triggered by certain portrayals and in certain incidents using their own words to label and describe their emotions. There was an attempt to categorise distinct emotional sets, despite the vague boundaries between some emotions which can have similar and indistinguishable facial and vocal cues like anger, frustration, and fear. However, drawing clear boundaries between different sections of this chapter became a complex endeavour due to the overlapping nature of these emotions and the inherent subjectivity of their articulation by the participants.

Subsequently, I have implemented an integrated conceptual framework that draws upon two theories from the field of social psychology to achieve a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of my participants' collective and individual emotions evoked by media portrayals. Integrating relevant concepts from the Social Identity Approach (SIA) and Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET) allowed me to contextualise the data within the wider literature and provide a foundation to understand the impact of negative media portrayals of MWB as a factor of devaluation and marginalising on their emotional health.

The Social Identity Approach was applied to explore the participants' self-categorisations, and it provided a frame to interpret both the social and collective dimensions of the participants' emotions as members of the Muslim community in Britain as well as their individual experiences as women. In this chapter, I will emphasise the social identity of the MWB, highlighting the concept that individuals think, feel, and behave not only as individuals but also as members of social groups. According to Henry Tajfel's (1981) definition, social identity refers to the aspect of an individual's self-concept that is based on their membership in a particular social group and the emotional and personal significance attached to that membership. Tajfel and Turner describe how group membership emerges from the processes of social categorisation (categorising individuals into social groups) and self-categorisation (recognising oneself as a member of a social group) (Tajfel and Turner 1986; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell 1987).

In this context, it is essential to recognise that Islamic teachings place a strong emphasis on collective identity over individual identity, in contrast to the individualistic focus often observed in Western cultures (Hassan 2006, p.315). Muslims are encouraged to identify as members of the global Muslim '*ummah*' (universal community), fostering a sense of collective responsibility and solidarity. As the prophet Muhammed's hadith indicates:

“A believer to another believer is like a building whose different parts support each other.” The Prophet then clasped his hands with the fingers interlaced while saying that.” (Bukhari nd, p 6011). He also said: “The believers in their mutual kindness, compassion and sympathy are just like one body. When one of the limbs suffers, the whole body responds to it with wakefulness and fever.” (Bukhari and Muslim nd, p 2585)

This concept of '*ummah*' founded in Quranic revelations and collective memories of Islamic history embodies the concept of one universal, transnational Muslim community and it became a means of constructing and establishing a religious and cultural identity beyond any other ethnic, geographical or linguistic identity (Hassan 2006). This Islamic perspective on social identity aligns closely with the participants' experiences and views, as they perceive themselves not only as individuals but also as integral members of the Muslim community in Britain.

This social categorisation and psychological group membership can make ingroup members subject to social identity threats, which can arise from various factors, such as negative stereotypes found in media, discrimination, prejudice, or exclusion based on one's social group. This in turn can lead to the experience of negative intergroup or collective emotions for the group members. For instance, in the case of MWB media portrayals that reinforce negative stereotypes and biases can impact their sense of identity and belonging, and therefore lead to collective emotions of anger, fear, isolation, or self-doubt. This was discussed in my participants' accounts through their own lived experiences of either witnessing biased, stereotypical portrayals of Muslims in certain media platforms, or experiencing discrimination first-hand in their daily lives and workplace.

To understand those collective emotions, I drew on concepts from Intergroup Emotion Theory (IET) (Mackie, Devos and Smith 2000; Smith 1993), which combines the cognitive approach to understanding emotions with fundamental aspects of the Social Identity Approach, notably those outlined by Tajfel and Turner (1986) and Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell (1987).

IET provides a framework to understand the collective emotions expressed by Muslim women who took part in this research as members of their social group. The experience of group-based emotions relies on individuals' psychological membership to a group, as one cannot feel these emotions unless they perceive themselves as group members. This sense of group membership provides the group with psychological significance; therefore, appraisals might be based on collective concerns rather than personal concerns as it is suggested by traditional appraisal models. Furthermore, IET argues that when group membership becomes salient part of the identity, the individual might experience emotions on behalf of the group rather than just an individual (van Kleef and Fischer 2016). This was the case for the Muslim women who participated in this study as their membership to the Muslim community was one of the important criteria to recruit participants, specifically, the participants who showed strong group identification with the wider Muslim community in the world³⁶.

Although intergroup emotions may differ from individual emotions and they can result in distinct behavioural consequences (Smith, Seger and Mackie 2007; Van Zomeren, Spears,

³⁶ Participants were recruited on the fundamental sampling criteria of identifying as Muslim, but this does not imply a uniform set of characteristics; indeed, participants self-selected as Muslim for the study, and there was diversity in their characteristics, such as dress or social behaviour. This made it easier for some in my sample to integrate and assimilate into the British societies in which they live.

Fischer and Leach 2004), and evidence suggests that they share similar physiological, embodied, and motivational properties (Rydell et al. 2008; Seger, Smith and Mackie 2009; Weisbuch and Ambady 2008; Wohl, Porat, and Halperin 2016). This aligned with the accounts of participants in this study who experienced group-based anger, anxiety, or sadness expressed it with a change in their vocal tone, risk perception, and information seeking in a similar manner to individual experiences of anger, frustration and sadness.

This study utilised aspects of the Social Identity Approach, which defines social identity as ‘that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’ (Tajfel 1981, p. 25). This enabled a deeper understanding of how MWB who participated in this research could activate their social identity by strongly identifying as members of the wider Muslim community in Britain and the world and therefore share their emotional responses to negative media portrayals with fellow group members. This strong affiliation to the Muslim social group was evident in the participants’ word choice, facial expressions, voice tone and body language, which led me to examine and discuss the emerging emotional responses in two major categories: individual emotions and collective emotions, which are experienced as a group. Thus, this chapter emphasises the collective aspect of the participants’ emotional responses as it was a recurrent theme in the interviews, which I will elaborate on in the first section.

Next, I will explore the prevalence of negative emotions such as anger, frustration, fear, and anxiety, which loom large in the participants’ narratives. These negative emotions will be discussed in the following sections, allowing a dissection of their various dimensions, including fear of hate crimes, anxiety in the workplace, and the burden of improving

representation. Finally, I will conclude this chapter by synthesising the key findings and insights drawn from these emotional experiences.

The research question I am addressing in this chapter is:

RQ3. How does media stigmatising visible Muslim women affect their emotional wellbeing?

6.2 Collective and Individual Emotions

This section examines the various emotions displayed by the women who took part in this study and categorises them into collective emotions based on participants' social group membership or individual based on personal experiences, by examining the possible reasons behind each emotion.

To begin with, it is important to highlight that the focus of this research was to shed light on the participants' experiences as Muslim women in relation to media stereotypes of Muslim women. The interview questions were intended to explore participants' individual experiences; however, a theme of collective emotions emerged from the participants' responses as they used terms like 'us' and 'we' to emphasise their social and collective identity as active members of the Muslim community in Britain and in the wider transnational community. Through their use of these pronouns, the participants' self-categorisation as members of a social group rather than individuals manifested itself. Self- Categorisation Theory (Turner et al. 1987) recognises personal and social identity as two distinct levels of self-categorisation: personal identity is the individual's sense of their unique self and its traits and characteristics, while social identity is individual's sense of membership to a collective

group with shared traits and characteristics with fellow group members (Turner, Oakes, Haslam and McGarty 1994).

This emerging theme introduced a task of distinguishing and categorising individual and collective emotions in the participants' narratives in the analysis process. I paid special attention to the triggers behind different emotions; as individual emotions arose from events related to one's personal identity, while group-based emotions were evoked by events related to one's social identity within a specific group (Kessler and Hollbach 2005; Smith and Mackie 2016).

Notably, the women I spoke to displayed strong collective emotions or group-based emotions in response to media portrayals, which emerged when their social identity as members of the Muslim community became more prominent than their individual identity; this occurred through the mediation of Muslims as one homogenous, monolithic group of people (see section 2.2). The salience of social identity caused individuals to view themselves as interchangeable group members, which engendered group-based emotions (Smith and Mackie 2016), and led to the emergence of collective emotions on issues related to the social group, that is Muslims in this case.

In the present study, although all participants recruited were Muslims; 24 of them identified strongly in terms of their membership to the wider and the British Muslim community, and 19 showed strong emotions related to the way Muslim community around the world is treated or portrayed by media, even if this was not related or projected at them personally.

Social Identity Approach posits that individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups, and the salience of this social identity plays a significant role in shaping perceptions and emotional responses; a central cognitive process that is identified in SIT is that self -

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categorisation depersonalises individuals' perception and behaviour that self is processed as an embodiment of the salient perceived group prototype³⁷ rather than a complex, multidimensional person (Hogg and Hains 1996).

An instance of this was the case of Khadija, a student in higher education of South Asian descent, who wears the Niqab, reflected on her emotional response to biased portrayals of Muslim women in various shows. Khadija mentioned the 2010 TV show *Sex and the City 2*, which featured a scene with Muslim women wearing the Burqa. In this scene, the American characters fixated on the Muslim women and made comments about their attire; one of the American female lead characters commented: "I can't get on board with the veil covering the mouth. It makes it feel like they don't want them to have a voice" while watching a woman wearing Niqab eating chips. The similarity between the described character in this show and Khadija was limited to religious affiliation and dress code, however; it was sufficient to trigger negative emotions and make Khadija feel uncomfortable and offended while watching these portrayals, as she identified with the Muslim woman character on a personal level, which intensified her emotional response.

"...I think it's more how can we get someone that is so covered up and has such a clear boundary over what they do and do not show you, how can we hyper sexualised this? It makes me uncomfortable, like the whole, like the whole unveiling kind of

³⁷ A cognitive representation of the social category containing the meanings and norm that the person associates with the social category (Hogg et al. 1995).

thing. And I'm just like, I've never seen this show (Sex and the City), but I saw this floating around on Twitter, it's quiet offensive" (Khadija, 20-29 years).

Additionally, Khadija commented on another scene from this same show where women who wear abayas take off their hijab to show how they are dressed and she felt that this "unveiling scene" is dehumanising and that she did not feel it was necessary to unveil to be considered as a 'normal person'.

"...I don't need to express my humanity to you like that. Like I'm into. Yeah, like this. You don't need to know what's going on under here. Right? It's another one of those. Look at me. I am a normal person. I think I'm not gonna beg it to anyone like that." (Khadija, 20-29 years).

This indicates that the emotional experience is not solely determined by the act of identification with the social group; it is also affected by how one perceives their similarity or dissimilarity to other members of their group (van Kleef and Fischer 2016). Khadija's account demonstrated that similarities between the participants themselves and the stereotyped portrayals found on different media platforms can result in greater negative emotional response.

Moreover, Khadija displayed noticeable cues of negative emotions such as deep disappointment and growing frustration through her sharply altered vocal tone and tense, disapproving facial expressions. I could instantly tell that Khadija was not happy with this stereotypical portrayal of Muslim women in the specific show she mentioned and in some Western media in general. However, when I probed with more question to trace back the triggers it became evident that this emotional response was a collective rather than an

individual one as it was based on Khadija's identity as a Muslim and on her seeing herself as interchangeable with the Muslim female character in the discussed *Sex and the City 2* show.

Radja: ... is this because maybe you see yourself in that Muslim character?

Khadija: "Um, do you know what maybe I think, yeah, actually to be more specific, it (negative portrayals) harms particularly for Muslim women, yes, I think harm would be the right word [...] you know, actually, it does do stuff to harm people (Muslims) as well. I watched the film *Sicario* is like an action film. in the second one, it starts like with people and the camera pans away to like these three people who have like prayer mats out and they're praying Yeah, on these prayer mats and I was bit like now I know this is going to go terroristic very soon. And then what happens is like the police come to something and these people are like, running away. And they were basically terrorists or something like that. How they use something very basic to us, to being Muslims such as Salah (prayer) to villainise us, and the crazy part in that scene two of the prayer mats are facing in a different direction³⁸ (laughs loudly)" (Khadija, 20-29 years).

Likewise, Rewan, a British teacher with mixed Middle Eastern background, shared her experience regarding portrayals of Muslim characters in the British high school drama *Waterloo Road*. Rewan found one specific portrayal triggering, where a Muslim girl removed her hijab in front of her white boyfriend, justifying it by claiming that they were in love, and

³⁸ Typically, prayer mats are designed with a distinct pattern that indicates the correct orientation - one side for the feet and the other for the head during prostration- aligned towards Mecca. However, in this scene, the two prayer mats were placed in opposite directions. This subtle detail was something Khadija keenly noticed.

she could do so in front of loved ones and family members. Rewan perceived this depiction as “disrespectful and offensive”, not just to herself but “to the entire Muslim community”.

This portrayal was deemed problematic for Rewan for two possible reasons: first, as a Muslim woman herself, Rewan did not feel represented or familiar with such a behaviour; she also emphasised that she had never met a Muslim girl/woman who would remove her hijab as a result of a romantic relationship with a non- Muslim “white guy”.

This portrayal can be considered problematic because these kinds of romantic relationships are frowned upon in Islamic teachings and practices and not accepted by majority of practising Muslims. It should also be noted that although Rewan uses the term “white guy”, this categorisation goes beyond race or ethnicity to include his religious affiliation and cultural background, and it would go against Islamic teachings whoever the man was.

In this case, Rewan’s negative emotions towards this specific portrayal came from her self-categorisation as a Muslim woman, which could be interpreted as collective emotional response. Furthermore, Rewan’s professional role might have had an impact on her response to this portrayal of a Muslim school girl. Although Rewan did not discuss this in her interview, it could be possible that as a teacher, Rewan is likely to be more attuned to the educational and social dynamics within a school setting. Rewan was more exposed to Muslim school girls and may have had a better understanding of how school environments influence young schoolgirls’ behaviours and choices, including the portrayal of a Muslim schoolgirl.

Additionally, several participants expressed their anger towards media portrayals of Muslim women when they perceived these portrayals to be unrealistic and unacceptable. For instance, Dhikra, a British Middle Eastern teacher and a student in higher education, voiced her anger

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explicitly³⁹ in response to portrayals like Nadia in the Netflix show *Elite*, saying “this (portrayal) makes me feel really angry, because that might well be her story but it doesn’t mean hijab is oppressive or all our parents are oppressive”. Dhikra stated that although it might be Nadia’s story, it does not represent Muslim women accurately. This example suggests that Dhikra was unable to connect with the portrayals she encountered, which led her to believe that other Muslim women within the same social group would also feel disconnected from such representations.

The salience of a social identity reinforces the perception of individuals within that social group as interchangeable, sharing common characteristics and experiences (Mackie and Smith 2018). This aligns with the principles of self-categorisation within Social Identity Theory, where individuals categorise themselves within a social group and perceive shared attributes and experiences with others in that group. When media portrayals did not align with their identities as Muslim women, participants often used collective pronouns like “us” and “we” instead of “I”. This language choice suggested that they believed these portrayals would not only misrepresent them individually but also fail to represent or even offend other Muslim women who shared their social identity.

Unlike Dhikra and Rewan, Khadija perceived herself as interchangeable with the Muslim character in the show (*Sex in the City 2*) and consequently felt offended and frustrated by the stares and remarks directed at the character, as they both shared the identity of being Muslims and both wear a form of a niqab. This phenomenon arises due to the significant influence of social identity in shaping individuals' perceptions and interpretations of media portrayals,

³⁹ Examples will be detailed in following sections

reinforcing the notion that the experiences of group members are interrelated and linked to their shared social identity.

The aforementioned cases show an emergent pattern of the two mechanisms through which media can trigger negative emotional responses in the Muslim women participating in this research. The first one involves media portraying Muslims in ways that plainly contrast with the participants' self-categorisation and their perception of their own identity. This dissonance becomes offensive to the participants as the depicted character does not align with their self-identified image of Muslim women, and instead often reinforces pre-existing negative stereotypes.

The second mechanism by which media provokes negative emotions is by featuring a Muslim character who closely resonates with the participants' self-perception and identity. However, this character's actions and behaviours are consistently subjected to criticism and scrutiny, which can make the participants feel as though they themselves are under examination and criticism, thereby evoking negative emotions.

Furthermore, this concept of collective identities expressed by my participants extends beyond media portrayals, as there are instances unrelated to the media where this concept is strongly supported. For example, three participants exhibited anger when other members of their social group (Muslim women) faced discrimination, whether in media portrayals or real-life scenarios; and felt compelled to take action on behalf of other Muslim women, reflecting a strong sense of membership to their social group and solidarity within the group.

For example, Salma, a British professional of Central Asian heritage (30-39 years); recounted instances of her personal experiences of standing up for other Muslim women who were not able to defend themselves against discrimination due to language barrier or other factors. In

such cases, Salma believed that her actions represented standing up for all Muslim women, as she remarked, “I considered it my responsibility to do that because I think if I just let the person get away with it, someone like my mom, she cannot defend herself.”

This example, while not related to the media directly, serves as a valuable illustration of the mechanisms behind collective identities and emotional responses in my participants. Multiple studies have established that perceiving a victim of harmful behaviour, such as discrimination or verbal and physical aggression, as part of one's in-group increases the likelihood of experiencing strong emotions and taking corresponding actions on behalf of the victim (Smith and Mackie 2016). Therefore, Salma’s statement reflects a strong sense of membership to the social group of Muslim women and the inner motive to take actions on behalf of another vulnerable member. It also highlights a sense of agency and solidarity in Salma’s words, which might be a direct result of her professional background.

It is noteworthy that only two of my participants did not demonstrate a strong sense of social identity, instead they displayed a noticeable sense of individualism. Their responses to negative media portrayals did not seem to be as embedded in emotion as those of the majority of the participants. For instance, Lina appeared less concerned about those portrayals and described them as “not specific to Muslim women” but as “a broader stereotype for Asian women regardless of their religious background”. Lina’s response to negative portrayals was distinguished from that of other participants, as she expressed fewer emotional reactions and approached the portrayals with a more analytical perspective. Additionally, Lina frequently discussed herself as an individual rather than emphasising her membership within a social group, unlike other interviewees who commonly used phrases like ‘us’ and ‘we’ or referring to themselves as ‘Muslim women’.

Notably, Lina's Muslim identity was not immediately apparent as she did not wear a headscarf in our interview. Additionally, Lina expressed her integration within the British community, noting how she aimed for her children to interact more with non-Muslim children by attending private schools, and she criticised Muslim families who isolate their children from the broader community (see section 7.2.1 for further details).

This data could be an indicator that the participants' emotional engagement with media portrayals of MWB can be linked to their sense of affiliation to their social group as Muslim women. Therefore, a stronger sense of membership could lead to more intense and profound emotional responses, in addition to greater impact on the participants' personal experiences and daily lives.

In the next sections I present instances of emotional responses to biased and stereotyped media representations of MWB. First, I will explore the recurrent emotions of anger and frustration as experienced by my participants, exploring their triggers in media portrayals and its impact on their lives. Following that, I will examine the emotions of fear, specifically concerning threats and hate crimes, as perceived by the participants.

6.3 Anger and Frustration

In my interviews with Muslim women, it became apparent that the predominant emotion that they communicated with me was anger. Specifically, 16 of the women that I spoke to convey their anger in response to negative, stereotypical, and inaccurate representations of Muslims through word choice, voice tone and body language. This anger stemmed from the participants' exposure to stereotypical portrayals across various mediums, including television, newspapers, and social media. Furthermore, these stereotypes were reinforced in

their daily lives through experiences of discrimination against themselves, their family members, or other Muslim women who wear hijab.

Moreover, 13 other participants were particularly outraged by a specific type of portrayal of Muslim women, which involved the image of an oppressed Muslim woman who is ‘liberated’ by adopting certain Western cultural practices that are not accepted by the participants or their wider Muslim communities, such as removing her hijab and dating a non-Muslim man. These acts carry deep religious and social significance; the hijab, for example, is not merely a piece of clothing but a symbol of faith, modesty, and identity for many Muslim women, its removal can be seen as an act of cultural and religious erasure. Similarly, dating a non-Muslim man can conflict with religious beliefs regarding relationships and marriage, which emphasise maintaining Islamic values and community integrity. The anger expressed by participants likely stems not just from the portrayal of these acts, but from the perceived attempt to undermine their religious identity and community norms. The offense is thus rooted in a combination of religious identity, the specific acts being portrayed, and the broader cultural implications of these portrayals.

As a result of these negative portrayals, some of the participants chose to distance themselves from media or avoid it altogether. For instance, when I asked Hasna about her preferred television programs and shows, she stated that she avoids all types of media because they all contain problematic and inaccurate portrayals of Muslims, which in turn, causes her to feel angry and stressed out.

Hasna expressed her feelings of frustration and anger in a composed yet assertive manner, using both strong language such as ‘angry’, ‘pissed off’ and ‘stressed out’, and used sarcasm

to show her frustration and disapproval with such portrayals. Hasna noted that most of those programmes are not in line with her religious beliefs and described them as ‘not halal’:

“...I get **angry!** you watch something, and then how they depict Muslim women. Well, some of it is not really halal, a lot of the programmes are not; but also, even when you find a good programme there's always sort of narratives to do with how they depict Muslim women. So, I used to watch this show, I can't remember what it's called. And they had this sort of image of this Pakistani woman, liberating herself, and of course, what they do is they strip her off her hijab, put her in some cocktail dress and she sleeps with some random man, apparently, now she's found herself. And I'm like, is that liberation? (laughs) I don't know, if they think it is. But it's just always having that connotation to it, I just don't really like watching media, whether it's shows whether it's news, sometimes I read newspapers, but it **pisses me off**, I get **stressed out**. So just kind of switch off.” (Hasna, 30-39 years) [my emphasis].

I observed that while making this statement, Hasna's passionate voice tone suddenly changed to a dispassionate and a monotone one, reflecting her disengagement with media and her diminished optimism towards the industry. Hasna emphasised that those portrayals are not only misrepresenting Muslim women like herself because it did not resonate with her self-perception or her perception of other Muslim women; but also, it negates completely with her religious beliefs as a practicing Muslim. This combination could be a recipe that results in negative emotions for Hasna such as anger and frustration; thereby resulting in a chain of negative emotional responses like stress and lack of trust in media institutions.

This example from Hasna emphasises the media's perceptible role in eliciting and provoking negative emotions in MWB by producing negative or misleading portrayals of Muslim

women, which could have a detrimental impact on their emotional wellbeing. These emotional responses can shape MWB's media consumption behaviours as they may alter their habits in response to the negative impact on their emotional states either by avoiding and distancing themselves from Western media completely like Hasna explained; or by avoiding certain portrayals. For example, Khadija described avoiding any and all Western media portrayals that include a Muslim female figure:

“I realised that if I see a Muslim woman in a show or something, like I know it's going to be a bit of a red flag and I know not to watch that show. Yeah, and I'm sure that's not what they want you to do. They want you to watch because they're like, Oh look, we put but you know we've put a scarf on someone or something and I'm just like now I know this is gonna be messed up” (Kahdija, 20-29 years).

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), individuals strive to achieve and maintain a positive social identity. However, stereotyped and stigmatised portrayals that devalue certain aspects of one's identity acts as social identity threat for the stigmatised individuals (Major and O'Brien 2005), leading to multiple different responses and reactions. Some of the participants such as Khadija and Hasna pursued avoidant behavioural strategies by avoiding and distancing themselves from portrayals that they suspect are biased, aiming to reduce encounters with future threats (Saleem and Ramasubramanian 2019).

Similarly, Amina expressed her frustration with the negative portrayals of Muslim women as oppressed and she considered the portrayal of the Muslim character in the Spanish Netflix show *Elite* as repetitive,

“one of those really, really obvious ones, and I remember it really annoyed me at the time because I just thought it's 2020 and we're still getting the exact same

representation that we always have, a Muslim woman taking the hijab off for a boy, and her family is always oppressive” (Amina, 20- 29 years)

The 2014 Netflix show *Elite* depicts a Muslim young woman from Palestinian roots, Nadia Shano, entering a private school in Spain wearing hijab in Season one. On her first day of school, Nadia was threatened with expulsion if she continues to wear hijab, which makes her wear it only to and from school. However, in season two Nadia is shown without her hijab after she gradually changed it from a turban; in a fierce look walking inside a bar, drinking alcohol and finally having the courage to defy her Palestinian ‘oppressive’ father - a character who is portrayed as oppressive and backwards in the series - and be with her ‘white saviour’⁴⁰, Guzman.

When describing this scene, I could see Amina’s relaxed face tightening and her calm voice showing frustration and how triggering this portrayal was for her. Amina used strong emotive language by stressing words such ‘annoyed’ to explain how disappointed she was with Nadia’s character in *Elite* and how she hoped this time the representation will be different. Amina described her feelings when watching this kind of portrayal as anger, labelling media producing it as ‘lazy’ for not researching Muslims properly and broad-brushing Muslims in a stereotypical lens.

⁴⁰ The term ‘white saviour’ here is used to describe a trope where a white character is depicted as rescuing or liberating a person of colour from their circumstances, often implying that the white character's culture or values are superior

“they make me **angry** because it's so **lazy**. And if you spoke to Muslim women, more Muslim women, you would know that of course oppression exists, but a lot of Muslim women wear the hijab because they want to” [my emphasis] (Amina, 20-29 years)

Amina's displeasure and frustration with these portrayals stem from her belief that they are misleading and fail to reflect the truth she knows about many Muslim women. While she acknowledges that some Muslim women might face oppression or be coerced into wearing the hijab, she emphasises that this is not the prevailing experience. In Amina's own experience, the majority of Muslim women she knows in Britain wear the hijab by choice. Similarly, Rewan, who has lived over 20 years within her Muslim community, shared that she has never encountered or heard of a Muslim girl removing her hijab because of a relationship with a non-Muslim boy. For Rewan, these portrayals felt disconnected from the everyday realities and values of the Muslim community she grew up in.

Furthermore, the impact of portrayals such as Nadia from *Elite* does not only affect Amina by provoking negative emotions while watching it, but it extends to affect her personal and day-to-day life. Amina expressed that she felt compelled to demonstrate she is not oppressed into wearing hijab herself; in addition to her concerns of how this affects other Muslim women and her Muslim family and religion by depicting them in a negative light as Nadia's family in *Elite*:

“you know, many people in my life have asked me if I'm forced to wear my hijab, and these kind of programmes are the reason because they see it all the time, like all those Muslim girls are all oppressed and everyone thinks that about us anyway. And these programmes write a whole TV programme about it. It's just **so so lazy and offensive...and it's so annoying** because it's not just a TV programme, it translates to

real life encounters, it translates to people thinking badly about not just me, but about my family and my religion as well and **it makes me really angry, and it's just tiring as well, because it's the same all the time**" (Amina, 20-29 years)

My interpretation of Amina's quote can be divided in two parts: first, those negative media portrayals affected Amina's emotions on an individual level, as she felt that her identity is threatened by constantly questioning her agency in her decision of wearing hijab. This resulted in anger and annoyance as reactions to the perceived damage to her identity as an individual.

Secondly, these negative representations affect Amina's social group and collective identity by portraying Muslim women as oppressed. Amina expressed her concern around the impact of those portrayals on how the wider society perceives Muslim women. In this quote, Amina's emotions are not merely individual or personal concerns, instead they are emotional responses associated with group concerns, and can be another example of the emergence of collective emotions in my participants' experiences.

It is important to mention that Amina's emotions are not simply fleeting emotions experienced only in the moment of exposure to media, but they endure and have a lasting impact and translate into her real-life encounters. Amina perceives that these portrayals contribute to a widespread misperception that Muslim women are oppressed, resulting in prejudiced beliefs about her, her family, and her religion. This ongoing misrepresentation puts Amina in a position where she must repeatedly defend herself against misconceptions and negative judgments based on these media narratives, and repeated exposure to such portrayals might generate long-lasting emotions of anger, annoyance, and exhaustion. As discussed in more detail in Literature review chapter, these strategies of defence against

stereotyping have been reported in earlier studies (Eijberts and Roggeband 2016); and it will be discussed in further detail in chapter 7 along with other emerging coping mechanisms .

The Social Identity Approach provides insight into Amina's emotional experience that extends beyond the immediate media exposure, influencing her thoughts and experiences in other aspects of her life; suggesting that individuals derive a part of their self-concept and emotional experiences from their affiliation with social groups. The data generated in this study indicates that misrepresenting or negatively stereotyping these social groups can evoke emotional reactions such as anger, frustration, and a sense of injustice, as reported by Amina, Hasna and Leila.

Similar to Amina, three other participants expressed their concern for their parents and family members from such negative portrayals; an example of this was discussed in the first analysis chapter when Karima showed her concern for her parents being negatively stereotyped after the portrayal of Ramy's parents in a stereotypical way in the show *Ramy* (see section 5.3).

In addition to concerns about parents, four other participants expressed anxiety about their children being exposed to such portrayals. Leila, a volunteer active in multiple charities and a mother of three, highlighted her distress over her children encountering biased and inaccurate media representations. This concern prompted Leila to avoid media altogether to shield herself and her children from misinformation and partial content. She shared how certain biased portrayals could provoke such intense anger in her that she struggled to maintain composure in front of her children. Leila explained her frustration by stating:

“I found myself shouting at the TV screen, they were (her children) watching the children's news programme, or Newsround, which is on BBC and I didn't want them to just accept everything that was being said so I started explaining it. I was shocked,

because they were implying about some African country that people there were poor and uneducated and it's awkward, and in the end, I started shouting at the screen. I would say things and then I would upset the children, so I stopped watching the news on television and stopped listening to it on the radio. If I was in the car, I will switch off the radio when the news came on. **It upset me too much, it made me very sad and angry**" (Leila, 40-49 years) [my emphasis].

Her statement reflects her broader dissatisfaction with news coverage, which she perceived as distorting reality. This general frustration was heightened when the media reported on issues involving the Muslim community. In such cases, her anger was not only directed at the media for its biased portrayals but also at the local community for its apparent lack of solidarity and support (see also the excerpt from Leila's interview section 5.2).

This frustration was shared by four other participants, including Amina, Hasna, Rewan, and Suheila, who also described how biased media portrayals frequently led to feelings of discomfort, discrimination, and the compulsion to defend or justify their choices. These experiences align with existing research, which highlights how negative media representations contribute to real-life discrimination, micro-aggressions, and hate crimes, both online and offline (McKenzie and Chakraborty 2003; Ahmad 2006; Zempi and Chakraborti 2015) (see Section 2.5).

Leila's emotions were further illustrated during the interview when she recounted her efforts to gather signed messages for support from her local community for the families of victims of the 2019 terrorist attack on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand. Despite her composed tone for most of the interview, her distress became evident through her furrowed brows and intense gaze as she described the lack of support she received from her geographical

community. With her sister living in New Zealand at the time, the incident felt deeply personal, magnifying her sense of abandonment and disappointment. As an activist who often took the lead in raising awareness, Leila felt abandoned by the wider community, receiving no support during this challenging time. She expressed deep frustration and disappointment at the lack of solidarity extended to the Muslim community in their moment of need. This sentiment was captured in her reflection:

“I actually felt other people should be doing this for me. I'm the activist in my area so I organise this thing when this happens for other people. How come when this is happening to Muslims, nobody else is doing it for us... that is what I'm the **most angry** about. **The most angry** that I need to give solidarity to my Muslim sisters who are actually being attacked, because I identified as Muslim. **That makes me very angry**, I started to think this is too much. There should be other people coming in saying to me, I'm really sorry for what happened, yet the first person that comes up to me, tries to have an argument” (Leila, 40-49 years) [Leila's emphasis].

Leila's words indicate her anger and sense of injustice, as she felt compelled to take the responsibility of supporting others while receiving no reciprocal acknowledgment or empathy for her own community's suffering. This emotional burden was exacerbated by an incident she described, where she was confronted by a man while collecting signed messages for the Christchurch massacre victims. Leila recounted her shock and disbelief as the man brought up the topic of Muslim terrorists on such a sombre occasion:

“we're on the store. And a man came over, he saw what we were doing. He said, What about Muslim terrorists? And I was so shocked. We've had families killed while they were sitting worshipping and you're talking to me about Muslim terrorists? Like,

where is that? Like, there isn't any around me? What are you talking about? This has actually happened so I started to say to him, you know, that's not the issue We're signing this, and he carried on and I just shouted at him, and I swore at him and he was really shocked, he didn't expect the Muslim woman to shout and swear at him, He thought he could come over and tell me like a Patriot, you know" (Leila, 40-49 years).

This confrontation left Leila with conflicting emotions about her reaction. On one hand, she felt guilty for losing her composure, but on the other, she recognised the necessity of standing up for herself and her community: "**I felt bad.** I thought I'm losing my calm, I can't actually keep my temper and engage with this person, but on the other hand, I thought, well, he needs to see that what he said is upsetting to me" [Leila's emphasis]

Leila's emotional experience reflects a complex interplay of anger and frustration, directed not only at the man's aggression but also at the media and the broader local community for their lack of empathy and understanding. Negative portrayals of Muslims in the media, which often perpetuate stereotypes, have far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the media itself. These portrayals influence societal attitudes, fostering a lack of empathy and potentially contributing to acts of aggression and hate crimes, as seen in Leila's experience.

Her accumulated emotions eventually led to an assertive response, transforming her anger into action. This incident highlights how her emotions are part of a larger chain reaction, triggered by the interconnected dynamics of media misrepresentation, community neglect, personal encounters, and their subsequent outcomes. Similar to Amina, Leila's story illustrates the emotional toll of constantly having to defend her identity and community against stereotypes and hostility.

Leila's statement, along with those of other participants, highlights the persistent challenges that many Muslim women face in defending themselves against aggression and discrimination in their everyday lives. Negative media portrayals of Muslim women significantly contribute to these experiences, portraying them as shy, quiet, and vulnerable; characteristics that make them easy targets for discrimination and aggression. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these challenges are also shaped by broader societal structures and factors beyond media representations.

These portrayals impose limiting stereotypes on Muslim women, fostering societal expectations that confine their behaviours and self-expression. As a result, many Muslim women feel disempowered and subjected to undue pressure to conform to these rigid perceptions, which deeply influence their real-life experiences and interactions. This dynamic creates a cycle where Muslim women are compelled to take defensive actions to protect themselves, further emphasising the media's role in perpetuating restrictive cultural and societal norms.

Leila's frustration was powerfully expressed in her rhetorical question during the interview: "Why are we supposed to take it? Why are we supposed to take it at every level, we have to defend, we have to keep our head down, we have to behave ourselves, we aren't allowed to get angry" (Leila, 40-49 years).

Leila's voice was lowered and calm as she posed the question, her tone added depth to her words, reflecting her weariness and the sense of inevitability she felt regarding the struggles faced by Muslim women in navigating societal and media-imposed stereotypes.

In this section, the Muslim women I interviewed provided detailed insights into their lived experiences with negative and inaccurate portrayals in Western and British media,

highlighting the specific emotional impacts of such portrayals, particularly anger and frustration. Additionally, this section explored how these portrayals affected some participants not only emotionally but also in their daily lives and interactions. The findings resonate with existing literature on the impact of media on Muslim communities, showing that media representations can be closely tied to broader social dynamics and can contribute to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes about Muslims and Islam (Holman et al. 2014; Saleem and Ramasubramanian 2019; Bi 2020; Abu Khalaf et al. 2022).

However, the accounts of participants in this study suggest that the media's impact is not always confined to the moment of exposure. For some participants, media portrayals triggered immediate negative emotional responses, such as anger, but also appeared to influence their longer-term attitudes and behaviours. Examples include altered media consumption habits, reduced trust in media institutions, and an increased sense of defensiveness in daily interactions. Furthermore, participants expressed concerns about how these portrayals influence public opinion about Muslims negatively, perpetuating misconceptions and reinforcing biases that contribute to discrimination and stereotyping in broader society. These findings indicate that while not all participants experienced lasting effects, for some, the media's influence extended beyond the screen into their broader emotional and social lives, as well as shaping others' perceptions of Muslim communities.

The emotional responses of the participants to media portrayals not only included anger and frustration but also extended into other complex emotions, such as fear. While anger was often the immediate reaction to negative portrayals and their tangible impacts on daily life, this anger sometimes intersected with or gave way to fear, creating a layered emotional experience. For instance, Leila's account, though primarily centred on frustration, also

showed a subtle undercurrent of self-censorship and heightened self-awareness as a Muslim

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woman. This sense of self-policing, as Leila and other participants described, could result in a sense of fear of being judged, misinterpreted, or subjected to discrimination and hate crimes.

This transition from anger to fear highlights the intricate interplay between these emotions, as the participants navigated their identities in a media landscape that often misrepresents them. In the following section, I explore instances where fear emerged more prominently in the participants' narratives.

It is important to note that the participants themselves sometimes struggled to distinguish between anger and fear, which created overlapping emotional expressions and blurred boundaries between these emotions. This posed a challenge for me in creating a clear separation between different sections in this chapter dedicated to the discussion of these two emotions. Consequently, the subsections may appear interconnected, reflecting the participants' own experiences of navigating these complex emotional landscapes.

6.4 Emotions of Fear

This section considers the emotions of fear experienced by the participants. In the interviews, there was no clear boundaries between fear and anger and often participants would move quickly between the two emotions when recounting instances in their lives. For example, when some participants expressed their anger about biased and negative portrayals, they would create a link between this felt anger and emotions of fear of discriminations and hate crimes caused by the spread of stigmatising portrayals.

Fear as I talk about it in this research is defined as an emotional response that is often characterised by an intense feeling of apprehension, worry or distress towards a perceived threat or danger. Fear is often identified by specific facial cues such as widened eyes, raised

eyebrows and a tensed mouth; in addition to physiological indicators like increased heart rate, rapid breathing and a heightened state of alertness are associated with the experience of fear, as proposed in Ekman's theory of basic emotions (Ekman and Friesen 1971; Friesen et al. 1972; Ekman 1992). However, for the purpose of this research, I have relied mainly on the participants' self-reported and self-identified emotions of fear rather than being dependent solely on the aforementioned cues. I took this decision because participants were narrating past lived experiences during the interviews. While they experienced feelings of fear at the time of the recounted events, it does not necessarily mean they would relive those emotions when describing their experiences to me in their interviews. Nevertheless, there were occasions when the participants' vocal tone and facial expressions mirrored the emotions tied to the events that evoked fear in them. This suggests that this emotion might not have been transient or confined to a single event but persisted with them until the time of our interview. Moreover, participants who conveyed feelings of fear associated them with perceived threats to the wellbeing and safety of not only themselves but also their social group of fellow Muslims and the broader Muslim community. This led me to approach fear in this chapter not only as an individual emotion but also as a collective or group-based experience.

Discussions of the emotion of fear took different places in the interviews and was tied to multiple factors. In the following sections, I talk about the different contexts where fear was discussed including fear related to judgment, fear related to government policies, fear related to safety concerns and fear as a factor of anxiety in workplace and other settings.

6.4.1 Fear of Judgment and Self-censorship

As reported in previous studies with Black women (Smith 2022; Jones 2024), the fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes might also lead to a sense of self-censorship and self-

policing, which can be detrimental to one's emotional wellbeing and sense of agency. Jones (2024) discusses this phenomenon through the lens of "stereotype threat"⁴¹, which occurs when individuals fear confirming a negative stereotype about their group, leading to heightened self-monitoring and altered behaviour.

For example, Basma, a professional of British South Asian origin, believes that there is a constant expectation for Muslim women to counter negative media representations and prove them wrong by acting in ways that reflect positively on the entire Muslim community. Basma stated that this expectation hinders Muslim women from expressing basic emotions, such as anger in public situations, and from engaging in actions that would be considered normal for others but need to be justified when done by Muslim women.

"if you're in the supermarket, and you're **getting angry about whatever**, you have any human experience, human emotion, you always think if anybody sees me the first attribute that Oh, the **Muslim woman was misbehaving, the Muslim woman was irritable, the Muslim shouted at her kids**, etc, right? It's never just you, **you have to constantly carry that identity**. And that pressure of kind of speaking for one billion Muslims for only one Muslim to bear that, that's difficult." (Basma, 30-39 years) [my emphasis].

Basma connected this to their belief that Muslim women are racialised through their Muslim identity (see section 2.2), which positions them as representatives of Islam. Consequently,

⁴¹ Stereotype threat occurs, "whenever there is a negative group stereotype, a person to whom it could be applied, and a performance that can confirm the applicability of the one to the other" (Steele et al. 2002, p.387).

any negative behaviour by a Muslim woman is often attributed to her identity as a Muslim rather than perceived as typical human behaviour. SIT outlines that individuals tend to categorise themselves and others as ‘outgroups’ and ‘ingroups’ (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Such social categorisation can lead to the perception and portrayal of Muslims as a singular social group with common attributes such as religion, race, or culture. Basma’s experience illustrates how this categorisation reinforces the expectation for Muslim women to uphold the reputation of the entire group, placing an additional emotional and psychological burden on them to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

Moreover, six of my participants who were visibly identifiable as Muslim, either through their dress code (hijab and/or ethnic clothes) or physical appearance even when not wearing hijab, reported experiencing a persistent fear of being watched and judged by others. This often led to feelings of caution and self-awareness in public spaces. Such fear frequently manifested as a sense of self-censorship, embodying a perceived responsibility to counteract negative portrayals or to present a positive image of Muslims by striving to be the ‘good Muslim’.

For instance, Nabila, a student in higher education who moved to the UK for studies, recalled feeling highly conscious of her actions during her early years in the country, even in seemingly trivial situations. Nabila explained, “I was always aware of how people look at me, even for something as simple as crossing the road. It felt like I needed to be extra mindful just to show **we are normal**.” [my emphasis]. This aligns with Ryan’s (2011) concept of ‘claiming the Muslim normality’ and embodies the notion of the ‘Supernormal and heroes of adjustment’ (Harris and Karimshah 2019). Similarly, Ferial reflected on her younger years, saying, “I used to feel like I had to smile at everyone because I wanted to show that **Muslims are friendly and normal**” [my emphasis]. This heightened self-awareness caused her to

carefully police her actions and appearance in public to avoid any potential misconceptions or negative attention.

Both Nabila and Ferial emphasised that their attitudes shifted over time. Ferial stated; “as I got older, I was like, you know what, think whatever you want to think, **it’s not my problem. It’s not my job to change your ignorance**” (Ferial, 20-29 years) [my emphasis]. This transition reflects how the initial sense of responsibility to challenge stereotypes can become emotionally taxing, a theme that will be explored further in the context of the burden of representation (see Section 6.5).

As these participants gained more experience in the UK and grew more confident in their identities, they became increasingly indifferent to the judgments of others, reflecting a sense of resilience built through lived experience. This suggests that the felt fear of judgment and self-censorship described by participants may be more pronounced in those who are younger or new to such environments, where cohabitation with non-Muslims and public scrutiny of their visible Muslim identity are unfamiliar challenges.

Building on this discussion of fear of judgment, the next section explores how government policies like Prevent amplify these fears, fostering a culture of suspicion and self-policing within the Muslim community.

6.4.2 Fear and the Prevent Policy

This fear of judgment and self-censorship was a recurrent theme when some participants discussed the *Prevent* policy, which was introduced as part of the UK’s broader counter-terrorism strategy to prevent radicalisation and terrorism (as discussed in Section 2.3). It is worth noting that, although the *Prevent* is a government policy, it received significant media

attention, shaping public discourse around it. Participants likely became aware of the policy through media narratives rather than direct engagement with the policy papers. This highlights how media coverage can amplify the fear generated by structural policies such as *Prevent*.

While *Prevent* was not a specific topic in my interview questions, six participants brought it up themselves, linking their experiences of fear and self-censorship to the policy and its portrayal in the media and the role media representations played in shaping how participants understood and navigated the effects of the policy. For example, Leila observed the impact of both media narratives and government policies on public attitudes toward the Muslim community in Britain. Specifically, Leila described how the implementation of the *Prevent* policy, coupled with negative media portrayals of Muslims, has created a culture of fear and suspicion. In her opinion, this dynamic has led individuals to self-police their behaviour to avoid suspicion and even to make changes to their dress and appearance to avoid being judged or discriminated against. Reflecting on her experiences, Leila told me:

“Over the years, I saw it bit by bit. **Fear and suspicion**, the rolling out of the **Prevent and people having to self-police**. Women I knew who did wear scarves who were professionals deciding not to wear the scarf anymore, she was a dentist, and she couldn’t get patients if she was being judged... **media only made it worst**” (Leila, 40-49 years) [my emphasis].

This example illustrates how media representations, when combined with structural policies like *Prevent*, reinforce the stigmatisation of Muslim women, portraying them as “abnormal” or as symbols of oppression. These representations often compel individuals to conform to a version of “normality” that aligns with societal expectations shaped by media narratives.

Although Leila's example of the *Prevent* policy was related to biased and negative media portrayals of Muslims in general, five other participants mentioned *the Prevent* policy as a source of fear and anger among the Muslim community in Britain. Dhikra commented on the complicated and often confusing nature of the Prevent policy in the UK during her career as a schoolteacher in a large city prior to starting her studies in higher education. Teachers were encouraged to report any student who expressed controversial views; however, Dhikra had concerns about potential biases in the implementation of this policy, and believed that if she reported a non-Muslim student, it would likely be dismissed:

“one of my students, who is a middle-class mixed race boy, said something like, well, they shouldn't have made those mockery pictures of Muslims and their prophet because of course they're gonna have a reaction; and that was not my view, it was a 14-year-old child, not Muslim who said that; and I just thought, okay, what on earth would happen if I reported him? I don't think anyone would care, but if it was Mohammed, who said something like that? I think, yeah, the school would get so excited.” (Dhikra, 30-39 years).

Dhikra's experience reflects the broader implications discussed by Younis and Jadhav (2019) where *Prevent* disproportionately targets Muslims, framing their cultural and religious expressions as potential indicators of extremism. This dynamic, exacerbated by the media's portrayal of the *Prevent* and Muslims, contributes to a culture of racialised fear and self-censorship. The policy, as implemented and mediated, not only perpetuates structural inequalities but also imposes a psychological burden on those directly affected, compelling them to navigate their identities within a system that views them with suspicion. Tarek Younis (2021) argues that the *Prevent* policy pathologises Muslim identity by framing Muslims as psychological subjects who are at risk of radicalisation. This approach promotes a

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form of ‘psychologisation,’ which turns religious and cultural practices into potential indicators of extremism.

The implementation of such marginalising policies, coupled with the media coverage and framing of these policies caused heightened fear and self-policing among these participants. Media narratives around policies like *Prevent* amplify their impact, portraying Muslims as inherently suspicious and reinforcing stereotypes that contribute to a culture of surveillance and self-regulation within the Muslim community (Choudhury and Fenwick 2011).

Another significant source of fear is the surge in anti-Muslim rhetoric that frequently follows terrorist attacks in various European countries. Such rhetoric not only intensifies negative public attitudes toward Muslims but also makes them increasingly vulnerable to discrimination and prejudice. This creates a pervasive sense of insecurity and concern for personal safety in public spaces (Tellmama 2018b).

In the following section, I delve deeper into participants’ fears of discrimination and hate crimes, exploring how these fears are intricately linked to the negative mediation of Muslims in Britain and the broader societal impact of such representations.

6.4.3 Fear of Hate Crimes

The majority of women I spoke to in this study (n=18), voiced their heightened apprehension following terrorist incidents in Western countries, including events like the 9/11 attack in the USA, the Charlie Hebdo incident in France, as well as the 7/7, Westminster, and London Bridge attacks in the UK. Although these women did not report personal experience of hate crime, they experienced an escalated sense of fear regarding their personal safety, being concerned about potential hate crimes and acts of aggression; this fear was especially

pronounced after media coverage highlighted Muslims as the main perpetrators of these attacks (most of which were claimed by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)), suggesting a focus on their religious identity. Similar instances of how the portrayal of these events negatively affected the identities and social interactions of Muslim children in Wales were discussed in Hayat Benkorichi Graoui's (2019) doctoral thesis. In her interviews with Muslim students at a Welsh high school, Benkorichi Graoui observed that the rhetoric surrounding terrorism has led to increased bullying, especially following the Charlie Hebdo incident. This environment has made it difficult for Muslim students to maintain their identity and self-esteem, leaving them feeling marginalised, disempowered, and experiencing distress and social isolation (Benkorichi Graoui 2019).

In my study, Kathy, a Middle Eastern woman who lived in the UK with her family since she was three years old, considered the UK her only home. When I asked Kathy about how negative portrayals of MWB had affected her daily life, she noted that she had a fear of public interaction and was constantly anxious of being judged or blamed for terrorist attacks. Kathy also mentioned feeling apprehensive about being questioned or stared at and how worried she was about being seen as a potential terrorist.

“I used to not like going out, especially when ISIS thing happened, I just felt they're going to ask me about things, or someone who's staring at me I'm thinking oh, she's probably thinking I'm a terrorist or something. **I remember I didn't feel good. I remember it just put me down. I thought that this is it,** this is going to be a big thing against Muslims, **like what happened in Bosnia and they massacred the Muslim community, I thought, this is what's going to happen in England. it was scary stuff on the news.** It did make me feel low. And like I said, it made me move country.” (Kathy, 40-49 years) [Kathy's emphasis].

This experience pushed Kathy to move from the UK to a Muslim majority country, where she did not feel judged or stared at because of her attire or religion. However, soon after moving Kathy missed the British culture that she grew up with and could not relate to the other culture despite the factors of shared language and religion, which eventually led her to return to England with her children and husband.

Kathy's story highlights the emotional dilemma that some of the Muslim women I spoke to are facing, torn between their identification as British and a practicing Muslim woman. Kathy spoke eagerly and proudly about the British culture that she missed in her time outside the UK and described how this experience made it clear for her that she is as British as any other person who was born in the UK despite her constant fear of being misjudged or discriminated against.

This sheds lights on the complexity of identifying as a practicing Muslim woman in Britain; Kathy's experience challenged the notion of a homogenous Muslim woman and highlighted the nuances in identifying as Muslim woman based on cultural and geographical differences. Moreover, Kathy linked the significant emotional burden that she experiences as a Muslim woman in the UK to negative and biased media influence on the public opinion, and she mentioned that:

“They want to incite hatred; media was so negative and people obviously believed it. I don't blame the people, you believe the news you believe your government, so if the government or the media said something, people are going to believe it, and they're going to obviously be scared.” (Kathy, 40-49 years)

Similarly, Dhikra shared this sense of fear of being attacked or discriminated against and mentioned her heightened fear and stress to potential threat of violence against the Muslim community after London Bridge terrorist attack in 2017:

“on that week, my mom didn’t want me to use the car because it was really unsafe when Muslims were subjects to acid attacks⁴², so **I was really scared**, I used to always keep my window rolled up and **I always had water right next to me, in case somebody attacked me with acid; it was horrible**, and when I used to get the train, people **were just so scared**, any movement I did on the train, if I get my phone out of my pocket people would stare at me, if I’m going through my bag to get my reading book out, they’ll think what if she’s about to get a bomb out or something. **it was horrible**. I come to school; I teach children who may be children of those adults on the train that I was just on. **it was just horrible**, because my role was supposed to give me that safety that you’re one of us, but then I go out into the street and it’s different” (Dhikra, 30- 39 years) [Dhikra’s emphasis].

Dhikra’s fear for her personal and her students’ safety became stronger after the spread of messages announcing, ‘punish a Muslim day’, which was anonymous letters circulated in the UK in 2018 encouraging people to commit violent acts against Muslims on April 3rd of that year. The letters offered ideas for carrying out specific violent acts against Muslims such as

⁴² Acid Attacks on two Muslim cousins in London in 21st June 2017 as documented here -

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/east-london-acid-attack-terrorism-islamophobia-a7817466.html>

throwing acid in their faces, pulling off women's headscarves and bombing mosques, which was causing fear among Dhikra's Muslim students and the wider Muslim community at that time. Dhikra attempted voicing her students' concerns and reported it as part of the *Prevent* policy, but it was not taken seriously by the school administration:

“I reported it because it matches the criteria. It's terrorism, it's violence, my students were very scared and we needed to do something about it. The response I had was such a joke, it was like ‘this is not serious, this is a prank, the Black community had a similar experience in the 80s, where somebody put an advert for like kill a black person day back in the 80s and nothing ever happened’ and I just thought look at the hypocrisy, because if I reported something like my Muslim students said Charlie Hebdo was justified or something radical like that, I think the school would have really gotten so excited” (Dhikra, 30-39 years).

The accounts from Kathy, Leila and Dhikra reflected the impact of negative media coverage of Muslims and policies that target the Muslim community in Britain such as the *Prevent* on MWB. They conveyed the complex and sometimes conflicting emotions that can arise from being part of a minority group during a time of social and political upheaval, and their contentious relationship with the UK, between fear of discrimination and considering the UK their sole home and not being able to adjust to lifestyle elsewhere.

Leila, Kathy and Dhikra's experience with fear in different aspects of their lives was directly or indirectly connected to media portrayals of Muslims and in some cases led them to change some of their life choices. This fear extended to other aspects of the participants' lives such as at workplace, affecting their relationship with colleagues and co-workers.

This section explored the complex emotions of fear among Muslim women in the UK, drawing on interviews that reveal a blurred line between fear and anger in participants' experiences. Drawing from Social Identity Approach, I interpret the participants experienced fear as a collective emotion stemming from their self-categorisation as members of a social group as well as the mediation of Muslims as one homogenous group which can lead to the spread of negative stereotypes and therefore threats towards the Muslim community in Britain.

Additionally, this fear was tied with government policies like the *Prevent*, which were frequently discussed in the media, and acted to radicalise Muslims in the UK, resulting in a culture of suspicion and self-policing within Muslim communities. Subsequently, this fear could lead to safety concerns among some participants, impacting their daily lives, including personal interactions and workplace dynamics. In the following section, I will explore emotions of fear in different settings such as workspaces and how it affected my participant's daily lives at work environment.

6.4.4 Anxiety in the Workplace

Among the 28 participants, only one was not employed or enrolled in an academic program; 11 were students, and 16 were employed. This profile suggests relative privilege compared to the broader population of UK Muslim women, who often face economic disadvantages particularly in employment (Khattab and Hussein 2018; Karlsen et al. 2020; Khan 2024) (see section 2.6.3). This advantage became evident in the participants' narratives regarding their experiences in workplace or academic settings. Notably, some of the most compelling instances of discrimination against Muslim women were encountered in their workplaces, including five participants' accounts where they felt discriminated against in their workplace.

Aseel, a British woman of South Asian background (20-29 years), employed in a professional role, described feeling a persistent undercurrent of discrimination that she linked to her visible ethnic identity and her expressions of faith. Despite not wearing a hijab or headscarf, Aseel recounted the emotional strain caused by her awareness of public perceptions and media narratives about Muslims.

Aseel revealed that she often felt a sense of dread when Muslims became the focus of British media. This feeling was particularly pronounced during the coverage of Shamima Begum's⁴³ case, which coincided with the pandemic restrictions, "because we're in a pandemic, I don't have to go into the office and face the judgments," she shared with palpable relief. Reflecting on previous experiences, she elaborated, "when she [Shamima Begum] was stripped of her citizenship two years ago, I remember **feeling anxious** about going to work and having to hear everybody's hot take on what they think of the situation... having to listen to it and then **also having to control myself and my emotions about what they're saying.**" (Aseel, 20-29 years) [my emphasis].

Her voice grew heavier as she described the tension of navigating workplace conversations shaped by biased media narratives. For Aseel, the images of Shamima Begum; often shown in a hijab or niqab, or the CCTV footage of her passing through the airport gates, served as a catalyst for uncomfortable conversations among colleagues. These discussions, shaped by sensationalist media narratives, made Aseel feel scrutinised and emotionally drained. "This

⁴³ Shamima Begum is a British-born woman who left the UK as a teenager in 2015 to join the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. Her case gained significant media attention after she was discovered in a Syrian refugee camp in 2019 and sought to return to the UK. The UK government controversially revoked her citizenship, citing national security concerns, sparking widespread debate on human rights.

week, with the outcome of the Shamima Begum case... it's that classic thing that comes up on BBC app, so everybody will have talked about it; but I'm so glad that I wasn't in the office, and I didn't have to hear that." (Aseel, 20-29 years).

Remote working offered Aseel not just physical distance but emotional rest from the distress that arose when media-fuelled stereotypes entered her professional environment. The weight of these interactions, paired with the need to suppress her own reactions, highlighted the emotional burden Aseel carried. Her experience illustrates how public discourse shaped by the media can infiltrate private spaces, leaving individuals like Aseel to bear the burden of defending or explaining their identity while masking the emotional toll it takes.

Aseel was not the only one to express such feeling related to workplace and Alaa's account highlights a distressing encounter related to media portrayals during Ashura⁴⁴. *The Sun*, a prominent news publication, featured a front-page image of a man engaging in self-flagellation, his back bloodied, during the Shia Muslim celebration of Ashura. Alaa, a practicing Muslim, described feeling disheartened and alienated by this portrayal, which she saw as perpetuating a narrow and negative image of Muslims. The situation escalated when a colleague handed her the newspaper, making a disparaging comment: "Look at what your

⁴⁴ Ashura is an important day for both Sunni and Shia Muslims, but it holds different meanings and is observed in different ways by the two sects:

For Sunni Muslims Ashura is observed as a day of fasting and reflection. It commemorates the day when Moses and the Israelites were saved from Pharaoh by the parting of the Red Sea. Some Sunni Muslims fast on this day to express gratitude for God's deliverance. For Shia Muslims, however, it is a day of mourning and remembrance. It marks the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. Shia Muslims observe this day with mourning rituals, including recitations, reenactments, and in some cases, acts of self-flagellation to express grief over Imam Hussain's death and to commemorate his stand against tyranny and injustice.

people do.” Reflecting on the incident, Alaa said, “I **got really upset. I got really upset**; I filed a complaint; he was given a warning, but nothing really special” [Alaa’s emphasis]. Her voice conveyed frustration and sadness as she described the interaction, emphasising how such moments demonstrated her vulnerability as a visibly Muslim woman in the workplace.

Alaa’s experience vividly illustrates how media depictions can amplify stereotypes, leading to feelings of marginalisation, anxiety, and anger. Her colleague’s comment reduced her identity to a monolithic stereotype, dismissing the diversity within the Muslim community and reinforcing an ‘us versus them’ dynamic. As Alaa explained, “It was horrible; they show first page...an image from back in 2003 or 2004...a guy weeping himself with blood on his back. That’s not me, and it’s not all Muslims”. This moment of misrepresentation felt deeply personal, as Alaa became the target of hostility fuelled by negative media framing.

Social Identity Approach (Tajfel and Turner 1979) helps interpret this encounter, revealing how social categorisation can foster divisions. By associating Alaa with the negatively framed ritual, her colleague placed her in an out-group (Muslims), marked as distinct and inferior to the in-group (non-Muslims). This sense of exclusion, compounded by the media’s negative portrayal, left Alaa feeling isolated and unvalued in her workplace, where she hoped to be treated as an individual rather than a symbol of a misunderstood collective identity.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognise that Dhikra’s frustration with the Prevent Policy, as previously discussed, extended beyond the classroom and infiltrated her relationships with colleagues at her workplace. My interview with Dhikra was one of the most emotional ones. As she narrated her experience with discrimination in her workplace and how the Prevent policy and media portrayals have impacted her daily life and emotional wellbeing, her distress was unmistakable. Her frustration erupted in phrases like, “Why do I have to

represent millions of Muslim women every time I step into a room?” and “I feel like I’m being scrutinised for my every move”. Her tone grew heavier and more deliberate as she recounted how her hijab alone made her an anomaly, she said, “I can’t just teach...I have to prove I’m worthy of being here, over and over”. Reflecting on the subtle but pervasive biases she faced, she added, “it’s exhausting knowing that my colleagues see me as different first, and as a teacher second.” This situation was exacerbated by the fact that she was the only Muslim woman wearing a hijab in her workplace, where most students and staff came from areas with little exposure to Muslims.

This experience highlights how policies and media portrayals can have far-reaching consequences, impacting not only an individual’s professional life but also their interpersonal connections. Dhikra, eventually, felt compelled to resign from her job as a schoolteacher because of the pressure exercised on her to be a different person than who she is and due to the emotional strain that she experienced.

The accounts provided by the three participants, detailing their experiences of workplace discrimination and the fear of societal judgment based on how the media portrays their religious group and their visible religious identity, regardless of whether they wear hijab or not, illustrate how these portrayals can evoke emotions of fear, vulnerability, and anxiety in Muslim women. These feelings can ultimately prompt significant life-altering choices, including changing careers or isolating themselves by avoiding their workplace and colleagues.

In this section, the participants’ stories depict the pervasive nature of discrimination, anxiety, and emotional distress faced in various professional and academic settings. Notably, the

accounts of workplace discrimination and the subsequent fear of societal judgment based on media portrayals illustrate the profound impact on the lives of Muslim women.

This study adds a significant layer to the existing body of research examining anxiety in the workplace for Muslim women. Other scholarly works have highlighted the challenges faced by Muslim women due to discriminatory practices on the basis of wearing hijab (Reeves et al. 2013; Tariq and Syed 2018). However, in the present research I focus on the emotional toll of workplace discrimination directly linked to stereotyped media portrayals of Muslim women. The participants' experiences, ranging from feelings of anxiety during media coverage to the emotional strain leading to career decisions, contribute valuable insights into the multifaceted challenges that Muslim women encounter in their professional lives.

Moreover, the study aligns with prior research emphasising workplace anxiety for Muslim women, reinforcing the need for continued investigation and advocacy in this domain (Cannon 2023). The heightened sense of responsibility observed among some participants to stand up against discrimination and contribute to reshaping the image of Muslim women in the UK reflects resilience and determination within the community.

In the next section, I explore how this heightened sense of responsibility can manifest in different ways, as Muslim women expressed a felt responsibility to enhance the image of Muslims and Islam, showcasing the diverse strategies employed to navigate these challenges.

6.5 Burden of Representation

This section explores the burden of representation carried by the Muslim women who took part in my research, revealing its profound impact on their lives. This often-unnoticed responsibility resulted in feelings of frustration, isolation, and anxiety. Participants,

particularly those with visible religious identities, expressed how they believe they represent Islam to the world - a duty rooted in both Islamic teachings and media portrayals. This sense of responsibility is closely tied to the concept of Da'wah⁴⁵, the obligation to spread the message of Islam through one's actions and behaviours.

I explore how this responsibility influences their daily actions, from mundane tasks like crossing the road to more significant responsibilities aimed at enhancing the image of Islam, and when does it become an emotional burden for them.

While I previously examined the emotional aspects, it is crucial to recognise that negative media portrayals not only evoke these emotions but also give rise to a collective sense of responsibility, which can sometimes become burdensome. This responsibility frequently involves the task of presenting Muslims in a positive light, but it may also give rise to other negative emotions, including self-policing and anxiety.

Furthermore, I argue that this pressure of representation can indeed become a burden, potentially leading to feelings of frustration, isolation, and anxiety; the fear of judgment and the sensation of constant scrutiny prompt Muslim women to engage in self-monitoring and alter their behaviour to avoid being perceived as different or potentially threatening in society.

⁴⁵ Arabic word literally means invitation. Refers to the Islamic practice of inviting others to faith and spreading the teachings of Islam through one's words, actions, and behaviour.

When I asked participants if they perceive themselves as representatives of Islam, 23 participants answered affirmatively, explaining how they feel responsible for upholding the positive image of Muslims and Islam; some even expressed a duty to enhance this image.

SIT elucidates the nuanced relationship between individuals social-categorisation and their perception of self within the social hierarchy; individuals need to enhance and maintain a positive sense of self, including their salient (activated) group identity (Stets and Burke 2000). When individuals feel their current group membership is not providing positive self-esteem, they may either seek to elevate the status of their current group or abandon it in favour of another group that offers a more positive identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Accordingly, participants who activated their group identity and categorised themselves as representatives of their social group might feel burdened by their membership to this social group and may feel compelled to enhance the image of Muslims and Islam.

Significantly, Marta Bolognani's research on British Pakistanis in 2005 revealed that both men and women participating in the study expressed a perceived 'burden' and sense of responsibility, however; the women's perceived responsibility for portraying a positive image of Islam appeared to be more prominently evident (Bolognani 2007). Similarly, the researcher Nadin Abu Khalaf and her colleagues (Abu Khalaf et al. 2022) in a meta-analysis of the impact of Islamophobia on Muslim students used the term 'minority stress' to describe the additional stressors faced by Muslim students discussed in 16 studies, mainly the students felt compelled to denounce acts of terror, defend the true values of their religion, and counteract negative perceptions of radical extremism fuelled by the media. The burden described in the studies aligns with the one expressed by the participants in my research, who expressed a duty to enhance the representation of Muslims, emphasising the weight carried

by individuals within marginalised groups as they navigate the expectations and challenges associated with their identity.

As I reflected on the data generated during my research, combined with my prior understanding of Muslim communities; I concluded that this prevailing sense of responsibility among Muslim women can be attributed to two significant factors, each bearing a profound influence on their lives. Firstly, it aligns closely with the teachings of Islam, where every Muslim is encouraged to exemplify virtuous conduct, effectively becoming a role model for others and serving as an ambassador for their faith spreading its message of high ethical conduct. This was described in the memorable Quranic passage in which Muslims are referred to as ‘the best ummah’(Denny 1975);

“you are now the best people brought forth for (the guidance and reform of) mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in Allah” (3: 110).

This principle is deeply rooted in the Islamic doctrine, creating an inherent sense of responsibility among Muslim community to uphold these values in their daily lives.

The second factor contributing to this sense of responsibility is the media's portrayal of Muslim women as they frequently find themselves put under the spotlight as the face of Islam and Muslims, whether they choose to be or not. This gendered mediation of Islam (see section 2.3) often shaped by negative stereotypes and misconceptions, might place an additional burden on MWB who took part in this research, which compels them to counteract these negative portrayals and showcase the true diversity and richness of their community.

Thus, they bear the weight of correcting misconceptions and challenging stereotypes that persist in the media.

Leila explained this sense of responsibility more clearly when she described her involvement in voluntary work, connecting it to how Islamic teachings encourage Muslims to act as ambassadors for their faith. She emphasised the weight of this duty, asserting:

“Once you step into any kind of public sphere, you are an **ambassador**. And if you can't do a good job, do not do it. **Just keep your head down and run away**. Run away” (Leila, 40-49 years) [Leila's emphasis].

This statement had a powerful impact on me, drawing my attention to the intense pressure that some Muslim women, like Leila, might experience to faithfully embody and represent Islam—both in the eyes of broader society and within their own community. This pressure often exacerbates emotional challenges, resulting in heightened anxiety. For Leila, these struggles were intensified by personal challenges such as going through menopause, which she said affected her confidence and made her “reluctant to be a public speaker because I don't want to mumble my words or get my facts wrong or something. So I've kind of... I'm doing more background admin work” (Leila, 40-49 years).

Similarly, Ferial's experience demonstrates how this sense of responsibility can evolve into a burden. She reflected on her changing perspective, from someone who once made extra efforts to compensate for her identity as a Muslim, to someone who no longer sees it as her duty to change people's perceptions. She stated,

“I used to walk around in [local area] being extra smiley to people and making sure I say hello because I wanted them to know that Muslims were friendly, and that

Muslims are nice and normal... But as I got older, I just felt like it was almost a **burden**. And I was like, you know what, think whatever you want to think, **it's not my problem. It's not my job to change your ignorance**". (Ferial, 20-29 years) [my emphasis].

It is worth mentioning that Ferial grew up in white majority town where Muslims were a small minority and she commented on how media coverage of the 2015 terrorist attack in Paris impacted her and her community saying, "I felt like the spotlight was on us as the Muslim community especially in this white town where there weren't many Muslims"

This experience illustrates how the negative spotlight intensifies the burden, aligning with the SIT's concept of out-group dynamics, where individuals within minority communities may feel heightened awareness and added responsibility when their social group is positioned as an out-group, particularly in the context of negative media portrayal.

Similarly, Basma's reflections on beauty standards and hijab-wearing further amplify the complexity of this responsibility. Basma expressed the internal conflicts as she struggles to align with her desire to look beautiful according to Western beauty and fashion standards and her obligations as a practicing Muslim and highlights the role negative media portrayals play in putting Muslim women under pressure and its impact on their personal identity and self-image. Basma stated,

"it can be quite difficult...because I think innately as women, you want to look good, and you want to kind of be...beautiful, but because the representation of a woman is so quite negative, and somebody who cannot be trusted under any circumstances. You're constantly having to prove yourself" (Basma, 30- 39 years).

This statement foregrounds the challenges Basma faces in her daily life as a Muslim woman who wants to be a practicing Muslim who dresses modestly but at the same time keeps up with modern Western beauty standards. Basma believed that media biased images of Muslims made it more challenging as they set a certain expectation from Muslim women in the West, which made them feel the need to constantly prove themselves as trustworthy and respectable individuals.

Moreover, Alaa shared her struggle with this burdensome sense of responsibility of enhancing the representation, partially because she believes that her visibility as a Muslim makes her a face for Islam, stating

“Because we are ambassadors, we wear the hijab so we have to have this certain kind of behaviour. Because, you know, if you do something wrong you would be that Muslim girl, you wouldn't be that woman, you would be that Muslim” (Salma, 30-39 years).

However, Alaa changed this belief and asserted that she should not have to change herself or her behaviour to be acceptable and she stated firmly

“but no, I'm not here to please any anybody, and I don't want anything from them. And you know, I'm working, I pay my taxes and I should be respected as much as the others. If you're close minded, that's your problem. If you want to open up and come and talk to me, I'd be happy to talk to you” (Alaa, 40-49 years).

Similarly, Kathy said she does not feel responsible anymore for enhancing the image of Islam in the opinion of non-Muslim members of the community. Kathy interpreted this as a sign of

personal growth and maturity as previously this burden was troubling her and causing her to over think her actions and to self-police.

Additionally, MWB in this study highlighted the importance of speaking up against discrimination and standing up for oneself and other Muslim women who may be facing similar experiences, exemplifying a strong sense of community and social identity. This could be traced to the Islamic teachings emphasising communities as opposed to Western culture of individualism. An example of that would be Salma experience in standing up for other Muslim women. Salma (30-39 years) who works in a large city, had to face instances of discrimination because she wears hijab. Salma's determination to stand her ground and challenge discrimination aligns with this principle, as she actively defends her right to wear a hijab, ensuring that others do not face similar discrimination. She states:

“I stood for myself because I have the ability to argue...I considered it my responsibility to do that. So I think me doing that that guy will not do something similar to another Muslim woman, or anyone wearing hijab” (Salma, 30-39 years).

Salma recognises the need to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions perpetuated by media portrayals and by not allowing discrimination to go unchecked, she aims to change the narrative surrounding Muslim women. She emphasises that she defends herself “because of people like my mom” highlighting her role as not just an individual but also as a representative and active member of her community.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to explore the emotional experiences of Muslim women in relation to media portrayals, drawing on aspects from two interconnected theories: Social Identity

Theory and social Categorisation Theory; within the broader framework of the Social Identity Approach.

This chapter has addressed the following research question: RQ3. How does media stigmatising visible Muslim women affect their emotional wellbeing?

Participants consistently expressed emotions such as anger and frustration, often triggered by negative and stereotypical media portrayals. This anger, when combined with fear; particularly regarding discrimination and hate crimes, emerged as a significant contributor to a cycle of apprehension and self-censorship. This cycle negatively impacted the emotional wellbeing and agency of some participants, limiting their ability to fully express themselves in daily life.

The emotional engagement of participants with media representations of Muslim women was predominantly collective in nature. Their self-categorisation as members of a social group, rather than as individuals, highlighted perceived similarities with other group members. This collective identity often led participants to view themselves as interchangeable with others in their group, intensifying emotional responses to the stereotypes and negative portrayals of Muslims in Britain and beyond.

These intense emotional responses, combined with the weight of self-categorisation and the associated perceived similarities with their social group, created a sense of burden. This burden further influenced participants' emotional experiences, contributing to heightened feelings of frustration, isolation, and anxiety.

The cumulative and multifaceted impact of media portrayals on the emotional wellbeing and daily lives of Muslim women highlights the importance of further investigation into coping

mechanisms and strategies. These mechanisms could either mitigate the adverse effects of such portrayals or transform their impact into a more positive one; a focus that will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

7 Resisting Media Bias: Coping Mechanism and Strategies Adopted by Muslim Women

7.1 *Introduction*

In the previous chapter, I discussed Muslim women's lived experiences of being negatively portrayed in media in Britain and how these representations impact on their emotional experiences and daily lives. The data generated in this study suggests that participants with strong affiliation to their social group, in terms of the Muslim community, experienced intense emotional response to negative or stereotypical portrayals of Muslims, resulting in emotions such as anger, frustration and fear. As documented in chapter 6 the impact of these negative emotions was cumulative and multidimensional, affecting the participants' lives in different settings, including social interactions with the wider community and in workplace, leading to further challenges in the participants' lives even to the point of considering leaving the country.

Moreover, in chapter 5 I set the scene by discussing the different variations of negative portrayals from the participants' unique perspectives and personal experiences. The participants identified negative portrayals as not only what is recognised generally as negative but extended the definition to some 'positive' portrayals that had a negative impact on their lives. This highlighted the diversity of the Muslim community in Britain and the difficulty in producing a single representation that would be relevant and acceptable all Muslims.

In the present chapter, I focus on the coping mechanisms that the Muslim women in Britain (MWB) who took part in this research project used to alleviate the invasive impact of negative media representation of Muslims, drawing from Social Identity Theory. The chapter focuses on how participants responded to social identity threats and takes into consideration the participants' self-categorisation as members of a social group rather than individuals in the context of this research.

It is worth noting that in this chapter, I adopt a broader perspective by examining the coping strategies that Muslim women in Britain (MWB) use in the wider societal context, rather than focusing exclusively on media representations. While negative portrayals in the media are significant, they do not exist in isolation. Media is deeply entangled with other social aspects, and the stereotypes it produces often extend far beyond media alone, affecting broader societal attitudes, workplace dynamics, and interpersonal relationships. By taking this wider perspective, the chapter explores how media stereotypes intersect with and influence various areas of participants' lives, shaping the challenges they face and the strategies they adopt to cope with identity threats.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner 1979) suggests that the perception that one's group is being devalued or marginalised culminates in an identity threat (Branscombe et al 1999; Major and O'Brien 2005). Accordingly, the negative portrayals and derogation of Muslims in various British and Western media can be interpreted as a threat to the participants' religious social identity (as members of the same religious group - that is, Muslims in Britain) in addition to threats to other social identifications for the participants such as gender and ethnic identity. Multiple instances of threats to different social identifications were mentioned by the participants; however, the focus in this research was on their religious identity as Muslims living in a non-Muslim majority social setting.

To effectively address threats to their identity, individuals within minority groups often develop coping strategies aimed at maintaining a positive self-image and protecting their collective and individual self-esteem (Major and O'Brien 2005). These strategies can be categorised into individual and collective responses, as outlined by SIT, which also identifies three primary coping strategies used by minority groups: individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition.

Individual mobility involves personal strategies such as disidentifying from one's social or religious identity, concealing one's identity, or avoiding triggering situations in order to enhance individual self-esteem. Social creativity, though often employed individually, involves accepting stigma and reframing negative perceptions of one's group. This can manifest in actions such as resisting change opportunities or choosing to leave certain environments. Social competition is a collective strategy where group members seek to improve their image relative to higher status groups. This can be achieved through maintaining strong group membership, accessing religious coping mechanisms like spiritual and community support, or actively seeking social change by confronting negative narratives and participating in media representation efforts. These efforts may include choosing careers or courses related to positive group representation, engaging in activism, or enhancing social and human capital skills to positively influence perceptions of their group. Drawing from this model, the participants' coping strategies could be divided to two main categories: individual and collective, which will be discussed in the following sections.

This chapter will address RQ4: What strategies do Muslim women use to cope with negative representations?

The distinction between individual and collective coping strategies will serve as a guiding framework for examining how participants navigated and responded to negative portrayals, exploring both individual and collective approaches to mitigating the emotional and social impacts of such representations.

7.2 Individual Coping Strategies

As explained in the introductory section of this chapter, individual coping strategies occur at the individual level, specifically, if the group membership is not activated and is not salient for that member. This allows the individual to overcome group devaluation either by attempting individual mobility or by undertaking the process of social creativity. In this section, I will discuss those strategies starting with individual mobility and moving next to different manifestations of social creativity mechanism among participants in this research.

7.2.1 Individual (Social) Mobility

As its name suggests, individual mobility⁴⁶ occurs at the individual level and means that members of the socially threatened group may strive to improve their social status by distancing themselves and disidentifying with their current group and attempt to identify with a higher status group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). This could be achieved through processes of concealing one's identity and social markers such as (not) wearing hijab, which could make it easier to identify with the higher status group. Individual or social mobility is an individual

⁴⁶ It is important to note that individual mobility within SIT framework is a different concept from the concept of social mobility within sociology.

strategy used mainly when the group identification is low, and it aims to increase an individual's personal wellbeing rather than improve group wellbeing.

Although this strategy was not very common among my participants, two participants expressed a tendency towards individual mobility, as will be discussed in this section.

However, it was not that straightforward to apply the term social mobility in this study, as identities are multifaceted and even the participants who use concealment as a coping mechanism did not fully disidentify with their religious identity but with only certain aspects of it such as wearing the hijab. For example, Elham expressed that she does not wear hijab because she does not consider it as a mandatory component of being a practicing Muslim and instead it is only an aspect of the Arabic dressing style that is promoted by certain movements (Wahabis⁴⁷), which she feels young Muslim South Asians are imitating at the cost of their own cultural (Punjabi) clothing style.

“Now I see that there is a move within the South Asian community (I can only speak for my community) there is a move now to wear the Arabic style of dress, you know, we are not - I am not an Arab, why should I dress the Arabic way? My parents came from the Punjab and I'm quite happy to dress in the Punjabi style, but then this new generation of Muslims, South Asian Muslims, I don't see them as a as having any

⁴⁷ Wahhabis: Adherents of an Islamic reform movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the 18th century, advocating a return to the pure practices of early Islam based on a strict interpretation of the Quran and Hadith, often associated with the Hanbali school of thought and prevalent in Saudi Arabia. The term 'Wahhabism' is primarily an exonym; it was not used by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab himself or his followers, who typically refer themselves as 'Salafi', 'Sunni' or 'Muwahhidun'. The term is often used with negative connotation.

affinity towards the Punjab. I mean, I think the Wahhabis sort of pushed us, made people dress in a particular way” (Elham, 50-59 years).

Elahm’s statement embodies the complex interplay between cultural and religious identities, particularly in the context of her Punjabi heritage and Muslim faith. Her decision to wear Punjabi attire instead of the hijab illustrates a deliberate disidentification with certain cultural practices associated with her religious identity. This nuanced account suggests a rejection not of religious identity in its entirety but rather a specific interpretation influenced by Arab practices.

During our interview, Elham displayed a profound sense of pride in both her religious and ethnic heritage, manifesting a robust attachment to her beliefs. One poignant example she recounted was her journey to Hajj⁴⁸ with her husband, a pilgrimage representing the fifth pillar of Islam and signifying an immense personal commitment. Elham firmly believed that her Punjabi attire was appropriate for this sacred occasion and intended to wear it; however, her husband persuaded her to don an Abaya⁴⁹, which she perceived as more reflective of Arab culture than Islamic tradition. As Elham recounted this incident, her lingering conviction that

⁴⁸ During the Hajj, women typically wear modest clothing that covers their entire body except for their face and hands, which is known as ihram. For women, the ihram consists of a plain, loose-fitting ankle-length garment that covers the body, accompanied by a headscarf to cover the hair. While it is mandatory for women to dress modestly, there is no specific description of how the attire should look and often women choose to wear a black or white Abaya.

⁴⁹ Abaya is a loose, full-length open dress that can be worn on top of regular clothes and is most popular in areas of the Middle East, gulf countries and parts of North Africa. However, abaya is gaining increased popularity among young Muslim women in different parts of the world.

she should have worn her Punjabi outfit was palpable in her lowered vocal tone, which suggested a sense of regret, demonstrating her deep connection to her cultural roots.

This narrative left a lasting impression on me, highlighting Elham's dedication to both her identity as a practicing Muslim and her cherished Punjabi heritage, by choosing attire that reflects her Punjabi background rather than adopting the Arabic attire typically associated with the hijab, Elham asserted her cultural identity while remaining faithful to her religious beliefs.

During our interview, I asked Elham whether she believed the shift towards Arabic-style attire among Pakistani women could be connected to media portrayals of Muslim women, especially since she observed that this trend gained momentum in the aftermath of pivotal events like 9/11 and the 7/7 attacks. Elham responded that while she could not be certain, she believed it was more of a fashion trend, describing it as "a very materialistic awakening of Islam because of all those Muslim women on Instagram and YouTube, and it has to be an abaya with a label, not any old sack." Elham also reflected on the pressures Muslim women might face within their communities, explaining,

"If you're living in a very Muslim area, and everybody is dressed in a particular way, and you decide to dress differently, it's very difficult to sustain that... because you feel the pressure or the subtle pressure of everybody else because you want to fit in. And then also, maybe there's a feeling that if you dress in a particular way, then people will see that you're more pious" (Elham, 50-59 years).

Drawing from her experience living in Tower Hamlets, Elham noted that many women in the area adopted abayas and face veils, even when these garments seemed impractical for daily life, reflecting the strong communal expectations around modesty and religious identity.

Elham's insights point to the complex interplay of societal expectations, media influences, and individual agency in shaping identity. While she did not explicitly link her decisions to Western media portrayals of Muslim women, her reflections suggest that the global visibility of Muslim influencers and community dynamics play a significant role. These pressures reveal the multifaceted nature of identity negotiation among British Muslim women, who must navigate overlapping cultural, religious, and societal expectations. Elham's choice of attire serves as a material representation of these negotiations, highlighting how expressions of identity can be shaped by both individual values and external pressures.

This example illustrates how individuals can navigate multiple social identities and make choices that reflect their own values, beliefs, and desired social positioning within various groups. Elham's disidentification with the hijab, which she considers to be Arabic rather than Islamic dress, reflects a deliberate attempt to redefine her identity. For Elham, the abaya-style hijab is often associated with stereotypes of materialistic Islam originating from Arab Gulf countries and is perceived as a stigmatised marker in Western contexts. By choosing Punjabi attire, Elham not only distances herself from these associations but also aligns her outward expression of identity with her cultural heritage, which she views as more authentic and less likely to attract controversy.

This choice can be interpreted as a form of individual mobility, where Elham seeks to position herself within a higher-status identity by emphasising her Punjabi roots and detaching from elements of her identity that might carry negative connotations in her social environment. At the same time, this disidentification could also be seen as a way to alter her perception of her religious identity to achieve and maintain a positive social identity. Such actions align with the concept of social creativity, where individuals redefine their identity to

better fit their values and improve their standing within a social hierarchy; a concept that will be further explored in the following section.

Elham's case shows the strategic ways in which MWB negotiate their identities in response to external pressures and stereotypes. Her choice reflects both a resistance to homogenised notions of Muslim identity and an active effort to maintain authenticity and agency in how she is perceived. This process highlights the complexities of identity navigation, where individual mobility and cultural pride intersect with the challenges of external judgment and societal expectations.

An additional instance of social disidentification with a marginalised social group serving as a means of individual mobility, is exemplified in Lina's narrative. Lina's disengagement from the Muslim community in Britain is multifaceted, extending to both her self-perception and identification. Although Lina identifies as Muslim, as evident from her participation in this project, she does not wear the hijab and does not readily appear to be visibly Muslim.

Furthermore, as discussed previously (see section 6.2), Lina explicitly mentions that her children do not attend Islamic schools; instead, she opted to enrol them in private schools to facilitate interaction with children from diverse backgrounds, which enables them to navigate social spaces with greater ease and facilitates their integration into broader social circles.

When I asked Lina whether she is concerned that her children will be exposed and impacted by negative stereotypes about Muslims in some media platforms, she confidently answered that she is not:

“I'm not massively worried about my kids and the reason I say that is because I feel they are part of the institution, that they're going to be probably like Nadiya Hussain,

you know, they go to private schools in England where they learned to have their manners fork and knife, you know, they're very integrated" (Lina, 40-49 years).

Lina emphasised how the situation of other children could be different to her own children when they are not mixed and integrated with the wider society:

"My husband used to work at a school in an area where 95% of the kids in the schools were Bangladeshi, those kids they have their own narrative, right? They're not going to be as integrated as my kids, where there's maybe three Muslim kids out of a class of 30, so I'm not worried about my kids, but I can certainly see just the risk of this sort of isolation, people feeling like they're stereotyped and excluded in other parts the Muslim community". (Lina, 40-49 years).

In SIT, individuals may seek to distance themselves from stigmatised or marginalised social groups to enhance their social identity and mobility. By positioning her children within a more diverse environment, Lina is potentially mitigating the risk of social exclusion and stereotyping, thus promoting their individual mobility to higher-status group which is the non-Muslim broader community in Britain.

This comment from Lina made me reflect on her response to an earlier question in the interview concerning negative portrayals of Muslim in some media platforms. In addition to her disidentification with some aspects of her religious identity, Lina's perspective on the negative portrayal of Muslims also diverges from that of the majority of participants in this study. Due to her profession managerial role in a large company, she closely identified with the academic and career trajectories of certain journalists, which may lead her to believe that negative media coverage stems from lack of knowledge of Muslims rather than deliberate distortion of Muslims' image.

Lina spoke about her choices in naming her children names that “are not recognisably as Muslim” aiming to shield her children from biases associated with more recognisable Islamic names like Mohammed, which she carefully and specifically avoided. Lina believed that highly identifiable Islamic names could limit her children’s social acceptance and job prospects; a concern supported by the findings of previous research (Di Stasio et al. 2021). This decision reflects Lina’s effort to distance her family from the stigma associated with hyper-visible Muslim identities, which can be considered as a form of social disidentification. Additionally, Lina’s emphasis on her family’s middle-class status and professional achievements further highlights her strategic social positioning, and she stated,

“we’re a middle-class family, I’m a professional, my husband's a professional, we know how the system works. My kids are going to go to a good school. hopefully, will go to good university, will have friends from all kinds of races, and so I'm not worried about them” (Lina, 40-49 years).

In this statement Lina aligns her family with a higher social group, distinguishing them from lower-status groups. This alignment is reinforced by her confidence in her children’s future educational and social opportunities, suggesting a belief in meritocratic individual mobility. Lina articulated a clear understanding of social mechanisms, asserting that her children will attend “good” schools and universities and have friends from diverse racial backgrounds, which she perceives as integral to securing and enhancing their social status. This approach shows a sophisticated navigation of social hierarchies aimed at optimising her family’s social identity and prospects.

Despite these differences, Lina still identifies herself as a practicing Muslim, indicating that her disassociation is not from the religious group per se, but rather from the stigma associated

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with it, prompted by societal perceptions (such as negative portrayals endorsed by some media).

In the interview, Lina expressed a greater level of concern about the pervasive influence of societal pressures, particularly regarding body image and beauty standards found in some media images, which she sees as equally impactful for both Muslim and non-Muslim children. However, Lina found solace in the hope that her children's faith would provide them with a strong foundation to navigate these challenges:

“To be honest with you, I'm less worried about the fact that they're Muslim and they're going to have that bias against them. Way more worried about the fact that like they're growing up in a world where images are everything, and that's the same for non-Muslim kids or Muslim kids. And I actually hope that their faith can give them sort of a pillar against that. I'm way more worried about what all these sort of models wearing like, eating disorders..etc” (Lina, 40-49 years).

This suggests that for Lina religious identity can also be an important source of resilience against negative influence. Consequently, Lina's coping mechanism can be interpreted as a form of social creativity (see section 7.2.2), wherein she adjusts her perception of her social group in response to external pressures.

It is important to note that the interpretation provided regarding the examples mentioned earlier does not aim to generalise the experiences of Muslim women who choose not to wear the hijab. Several (n=7) other participants in the study did not wear the hijab at the time of interviews; however, in analysing their accounts, I did not feel that this choice was indicative of individual mobility, as in the case of Elham and Lina; instead, the participants' discussions suggested that these choices reflected their individual preferences in clothing.

In summary, the techniques employed within the coping strategy of social mobility, as illustrated in the examples discussed, involved concealing contentious aspects of one's identity to attain and uphold a positive self-concept, as well as navigating various identities to align oneself favourably in comparison to the higher-status group, such as the broader non-Muslim community in Britain. One of the techniques adopted by Lina can also be understood as a technique of social creativity, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section.

7.2.2 Acceptance and Avoidance

According to SIT, social creativity involves redefining or altering the intergroup relations in a favourable manner (Tajfel and Turner 1979) rather than seeking ways to improve the status of one's own group. This approach enables individuals to establish and maintain positive social identity and positive self-esteem as well as regulate their own emotional responses facing a certain stigma or negative portrayal. Social creativity can manifest on both individual and collective levels, although in my study, the findings were predominantly aligned with the individual level.

I have identified two techniques that can be considered as processes for social creativity in my dataset: acceptance and avoidance. The first can be expanded as accepting the situation that cannot be changed; this coping technique appeared when the participants considered the discussion about representation of Muslims in the media as a problematic topic and chose to not concern themselves with this issue. For instance, Karima had entirely detached herself from what she termed as 'representation politics' demonstrating an acceptance of the situation and a reluctance to alter it, a concept previously identified in research as "conciling" (Eijberts and Roggeband 2016, p.134). Eijberts and Roggeband (2016) define conciling as the acceptance of stigma without actively pursuing opportunities for change. In this instance,

Karima's attitude towards media could be construed as an act of social creativity, as she reshapes her perception of how representation affects her as a Muslim woman by outrightly disregarding it and endeavouring to overlook its significance, recognising it as a contentious issue beyond her ability to change.

A similar opinion was expressed by both Hasna and Amina who also communicated an acceptance of the current situation of how Muslims are misrepresented. For instance, Amina expressed her lack of interest in media saying: "I think for me, media is such a big concept that I don't like to... I don't like to focus on it. I feel like that's not my portion. I don't want to bother with this part of it." (Amina, 20-29 years)

Similarly, Hasna noted; "I really don't watch TV. I actually really dislike everything that comes out of the TV or newspapers, or sometimes just completely don't engage in anything" (Hasna, 30-39 years).

However, soon after expressing their acceptance towards the situation and lack of interest in media, these three participants showed an apparent concern for the situation of Muslims with media. This was discussed in the interviews, in addition to a change in their vocal tone, they expressed a sense of disappointment rather than complete acceptance. This observation led me to conclude that they employed this technique as a means to regulate their own emotions particularly when change is improbable, and to limit the detrimental effects of negative portrayals on their emotional wellbeing and daily lives.

The second technique used as part of social creativity is avoidance, which was labelled as 'circumventing' by Eijberts and colleagues (2016). According to their definition, circumventing involves strategies such as physically withdrawing from situations where stigma might be salient or selectively associating with people who share the stigma or are not

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prejudiced against it. This technique manifested in some participants' attempts to distance themselves completely from the existing portrayal of Muslim women in Western and international media.

Halimah (20-29 years), for example, not only distanced herself from media representations but also expressed a lack of interest and indifference toward them. Her definition of a representative Muslim woman was grounded solely in historical Islamic female figures, particularly those from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

When asked whose image comes to mind when she hears the term "Muslim woman", Halimah responded, "Any women from the time of the Prophet (PBUH) (laughs), like the Sahabiyat⁵⁰" and clarified that she believes very few figures today align with her definition of a Muslim woman. Halimah expressed her opinions in a lively and cheerful manner, tinged with a hint of sarcasm. Despite sounding unimpressed or unsurprised by the media's biased and controversial portrayals of Muslim women, she also conveyed a subtle tone of anger (see Section 5.4).

When questioned about a public figure who could represent Muslim women in British and global media, Halimah's initial response seemed like a joke, especially since she laughed while answering. However, she later confirmed that this is her genuine opinion, asserting that she sees no better representatives for Muslim women than those who lived during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Halimah's opinion likely stems from her rejection of many women who present themselves as Muslims and claim to speak on behalf of Muslim women,

⁵⁰ Female companions of the prophet Muhammed (PBUH)

such as the Egyptian American journalist and social commentator Mona Eltahawy (see section 5.4). Additionally, her awareness of the diversity among Muslims contributes to the complexity of producing representative images; Halimah commented, “we’re tired of being represented by people that don’t represent Muslim women. Basically, you’re never gonna get somebody who is representative of what a Muslim woman is because a Muslim woman is so incredibly diverse...” (Halimah, 20-29 years).

The definition of avoidance can be extended to include instances of physically withdrawing from certain situations such as quitting jobs when faced with stigma. However, this withdrawal is not limited to the physical act of leaving; as it often carries emotional, mental, and financial implications, reflecting the multifaceted impact of such decisions. For example, Dhikra, who used to work as a teacher in a less diverse area, left her job when it became evident to her that she was treated with stigma and discrimination in some instances by either her students, their parents, colleagues, or even governmental policies (see section 6.4.4). Dhikra compared her situation with that of Halima Aden, a Muslim fashion model who wears hijab and at the time of our interview announced she was quitting her job. Although Dhikra was aware that Halima Aden’s stated reasons for leaving the job role were that she did not believe that her job aligned with her religious beliefs and not because of stigma; Dhikra still related to this incident and considered it an example of Muslim women leaving their jobs when their religious and social identity is challenged and discriminated against. This connection was why Dhikra chose a photograph of Halima Aden for the study, as an example of the image of a Muslim woman. This choice was part of the methodology where all participants were asked to select photos that they felt represented Muslim women, as explained in detail in Section 3.3.2.

Another example that suggested the use of avoidance was the case of Kathy, who left the UK and emigrated to a Muslim majority country as a way to keep her family and children protected from negative stereotypes. Kathy said that persistent Islamophobic representations in media “made me move country, because obviously I was thinking about the kids if they will face this”. This instance could be interpreted as a result of Kathy’s reduced identification with her British nationality when facing religious and social identity threats. However, as discussed previously (section 6.4.3), she later returned to the UK, as she struggled to adjust to a different cultural environment despite the fact that it was a Muslim majority culture. This draws attention to the nuances of the Muslim woman’s identity in Britain, which can make it difficult to adjust in other cultures.

Both acceptance and avoidance strategies are employed to effectively manage and regulate one's emotional responses when faced with impending change. These techniques operate on an individual level, involving a shift in mindset. While acceptance and avoidance both involve cognitive changes, they differ in their level of activity. Acceptance, akin to social creativity, entails a passive approach as it primarily involves internal adjustments without necessarily resulting in broader societal changes. Conversely, steps some of my participants took demonstrated avoidance, such as relocating to another country or resigning from a job. These exhibit a more active response, albeit on an individual level. Thus, while both strategies involve personal agency, avoidance entails a more overt and proactive approach compared to the more internally focused acceptance.

It is essential to note that the participants discussed in previous examples, while employing the strategy of social creativity either by accepting or distancing themselves from the prevailing perspective on the representation of Muslim women in Britain, did not rely solely on this approach to cope with negative portrayals. Instead, they utilised other coping

strategies which can be seen as more active and seeking change. These will be explored in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

7.3 Collective Strategies to Maintain a Positive Social Identity

In the following sections, I discuss the coping strategies observed at the collective or group level, which were commonly adopted by multiple participants. While some of these strategies align with the third coping mechanism in SIT, known as social competition, others reflect broader collective approaches that do not necessarily involve direct intergroup comparison. This begins with the premise that social identification is a relational and comparative process, whereby intergroup comparisons provide insights into one's comparative status vis-à-vis members of a relevant outgroup (Tajfel and Turner 1979). The distinction between social creativity and social competition strategies lies in whether positive intergroup differentiation is achieved by reinterpreting the social comparison itself (social creativity), or by endeavouring to enhance the ingroup's status in relation to a relevant outgroup along the comparison dimension that generates the status differential. However, many of the strategies observed in this study centred more on reinforcing group cohesion, shared values, and religious identity as sources of strength and solidarity, rather than direct engagement in status-based competition.

This process materialised through two mechanisms, with the terminology for these mechanisms drawn from a study conducted by Eijberts and Roggeband (2016), whose work resonated with the data generated in the current study. These mechanisms include “consolidating”, which involves reinforcing positive aspects of group identity as a way to cope with and navigate stigma, and “confronting”, which entails directly addressing and engaging with challenging situations or issues.

7.3.1 Group Identification (Consolidating the Muslim Identity):

This section examines how participants consolidated their Muslim identity as a coping mechanism in response to negative portrayals and perceived prejudice. Specifically, it explores how acts like wearing the hijab serve as a means of expressing and reinforcing their social and religious identity. While acknowledging the diverse perspectives and experiences regarding the hijab among participants, the focus remains on its role as part of a broader strategy for identity consolidation.

Building on this focus, Social Identity Theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how individuals respond to identity threats. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), threats to one's self-esteem or wellbeing can be alleviated by increasing identification with a group that offers high levels of status and support. In this study, participants expressed strong group membership, with their religious identity emerging as a salient aspect of their social identity. However, rather than pursuing intergroup comparison or status enhancement, this form of identity reinforcement functioned primarily as a source of emotional resilience and solidarity in the face of marginalisation. This affiliation itself could be interpreted as a coping mechanism to manage the stress arising from negative mediation of Muslims (see Ysseldyk et al. 2010, p. 62).

Furthermore, previous research supports the notion that group identification tends to increase in response to perceived prejudice (Branscombe et al. 1999) and can also influence support to collective action (Fujioka 2005). In this context, the participants' acts of consolidating their Muslim identity; whether through activism, dressing visibly as Muslims, or expressing pride in their faith, can be understood as collective strategies aimed at mitigating the negative

emotional and social impacts of perceived prejudice. These acts of identity reinforcement, including wearing the hijab, abaya, burqa, or niqab, not only serve as visible markers of Muslim identity but also reflect participants' pride in and solidarity with the Muslim community in Britain.

For example, 19 out of the 28 women who took part in this research wore a form of hijab, and three of them expressed how their decision of wearing the hijab was not welcomed by their families and even caused some dispute with their parents. Rewan, for example, had an argument with her mother after she started wearing the hijab, who was concerned for her safety in public. When I asked Rewan if her family supported her decision to wear the hijab, she chuckled and said "it was a big a problem at home, but it it's fine Alhamdoulilah... my family did not like hijab especially my mom". Rewan explained that this was because of her mother's prejudice about the kind of people who wear hijab and that her family and mother were initially disappointed when she decided to wear the headscarf:

"they don't really like it, especially my mom she's got like a specific status back home so there was always that prejudice that girls that wear the headscarf come from poor background and not very educated... it's just ignorance, just the ignorance that led to this unfortunately, especially when one of your three daughters wears it..."
(Rewan, 20-29 years).

Despite her family's initial disapproval, Rewan remained steadfast in public asserting her religious identity, a stance she conveyed with noticeable positivity and pride as she had a bright smile all the time that she was telling me her story of wearing hijab. Eventually, this culminated in acceptance from her family which she again celebrated with a bright smile and

laughter; affirming, “it just became a really big issue when I put on it was a big shock (laughs) but three years later they're all good Alhamdulillah.” (Rewan, 20-29 years).

It is important to recognise that not all participants who wear the hijab do so as a coping mechanism or as a means of identity consolidation, nor does it necessarily represent a form of empowerment for the woman wearing it; instead, for many it was a religious practice and a marker of their faith. Conversely, diverse perspectives emerged among the participants regarding their decision to wear the hijab. Salma spoke passionately about the empowering effect of wearing her hijab, emphasising the confidence it gave her:

“for me, this comes from the bottom of my heart. When I put my scarf on and style it beautifully, the Asian [mentions her specific nationality] way, I feel incredibly empowered and even elegant. It’s not just about the way it looks; it represents pride and connection to my roots. When I wear it with confidence, I don’t care about anyone else’s opinions. It never affects me negatively because I know who I am, and I carry that with me every day” (Salma, 30-39 years).

Similarly, Alaa commented on her decision to wear hijab:

“By wearing my hijab, I feel like saying this is who I am. I'm a Muslim. And I am not going to look like you in any way shape or form, if you’re gonna accept me, you’re gonna have to accept me with my hijab with my religion, with my personality, with my education with everything that I come with... and hijab is a very personal thing as well” (Alaa, 40-49 years).

However, other participants had more complex relationship with the hijab. Ferial, for instance, talked about how she initially struggled to adjusting to different life challenges after

wearing the hijab, such being a target for stereotyping and discrimination. However, her decision empowered her in a different sense as she considered it as a personal journey for her to grow and gain resilience facing prejudice.

“I used to feel not confident in my hijab at all. I used to not like it. I used to think like, Oh my god, I feel so different. And then I grew up and I realised everyone's different anyway, if I'm different from the outside, then khalas⁵¹, I'm doing what I believe is right...”. (Ferial, 20-29 years).

For Ferial, the reason that she was wearing the scarf was to practice her religion, but she was not very confident wearing it in public, especially as she started wearing it at a young age.

“Saraha (honestly) I didn't feel more empowered because I just felt different. I was young at the time. And I was doing it because I felt like khalas (that is it) this is my religion; this is what I have to do. And to be honest, I wish I could say that I did. But I didn't feel empowered until I kind of rediscovered the meaning of hijab for me when I was a little bit older. Now because I've been wearing it for so long, I feel like it's empowering for me to, to wear it, I guess. But it's not really something that I think about because it's just normal...”. (Ferial, 20-29 years).

Ferial stated that she does not usually think about how she feels about the hijab because it became part of who she is as a person, and it is “just normal” but after reflecting for few

⁵¹ Khalas is a word commonly used in Arabic dialect meaning “done, finish, okay, alright”

seconds she recollected her experience visiting Egypt and experimenting with hijab styles which made her more confident and feel “empowered” she smiled and said:

“I feel like it was empowering for me to wear the hijab on my terms, like, for example, in Egypt, and I was experimenting with different styles when I when I feel like hijab is a journey. And sometimes you feel very strongly that other times, maybe you don't, but I feel like when you take it into your hands, and you do what you can and what you feel, what you feel is that you want to do that almost feels empowering in the sense that you're choosing to wear, wear it how you want to wear it, and because it's between you and God and not anybody else, you know.” (Ferial, 20-29 years).

Ferial's journey shows the evolution of her relationship with the hijab from a religious obligation or a marker of her difference from other people to a personal choice, grounded in her faith and convictions. Ferial reclaimed her agency over her appearance and identity and this gave her a boost of confidence and empowerment. This evolution reflects a profound shift in Ferial's mindset where wearing the hijab became a deliberate expression of her beliefs and values, rather than a response to external pressures such as discrimination or religious and cultural expectations; emphasising that wearing hijab can be empowering without it being a direct result of media negative portrayals of Muslims or a coping mechanism in response to these portrayals.

It is important to mention that the act of wearing hijab could hold different interpretations and could be a means of identity consolidation in a different manner than the one discussed earlier in this section. For instance, Nura, a professional of a central Asian heritage, stated that she wears the headscarf occasionally as a cultural identity marker:

“I think I don’t wear it for religious reasons. Maybe more like an identity marker because I think when it comes to the religious debate, there are so many other things that need to be considered, it’s more of identity. I think it’s just an identity for me” (Nura, 20-29 years).

Salma and Nura are sisters who chose to have a group interview. What caught my attention was the conversation around the hijab, as they both held the belief that hijab is a religious practice and a display of their faith, and they both take pride in wearing it but for different reasons. Salma believes that hijab is part of her identity as a person both for religious reasons and for ethnic identity consolidation. She held a positive attitude around the hijab and feels empowered wearing it in public: “I will wear it for the rest of my life, I will never take it off. I feel naked [if I do], and I feel empowered wearing it; take away my scarf and I’ll feel very powerless”, and when I asked if she wears the hijab for religious reasons or because it is part of her identity she stressed:

“I wear it for both. Outside, I wear it mostly for religious reasons, otherwise, I wouldn’t you know, sometime if it’s hot I wouldn’t have to wear you know, or on Sunny days, you might want to have your hair down. So for me, it’s mainly religious reason when I wear it outside”(Salma, 30-39 years).

She stressed how committed she is to wearing the scarf despite the different challenges that can lead to taking it off like in hot weather for instance; however, she also mentioned that if she wears it indoors in events, it is to highlight her ethnic and cultural identity.

On the contrary, Nura stated the reason she wears the scarf is mostly cultural identity. Despite that, she acknowledges that it is an important Islamic practice, but she did not agree to how the majority of Muslims wear the hijab, covering the neck tightly as well as the hair.

“Nura: (Laughs) I’m not gonna lie to you, I do have issues with people that wear a scarf like this. (shows me with her hands how)

Salma: [interrupting her quickly in an explanatory tone as if she did not want me to get offended as that’s the way I wear my scarf] It’s a cultural thing we were not used to wearing like completely covered, like, you know, VERY covered. (And then she carried on explaining how she wears it for both cultural and religious identity)

Radja: How about you Nura?

Nura: I think when it comes to the religious reason, there are so many other things that need to be considered because...

Salma: Let’s not go into debate (both laughing showing that they already know that they hold opposing opinions about this topic)

Nura: I wear it more of identity. I think it’s just a cultural identity for me. I would substitute it with a hat or hoody when I go out in an area where I don’t feel safe, and I don’t want to be targeted by some young people who look at me and think of me as a weak person” (Nura, 20-29; Salma, 30-39 years).

Nura and Salma’s approach to wearing the hijab, as discussed in the passage, highlights the cultural and personal dimensions of their hijab practices. Nura views her loosely worn hijab, which reveals some hair, as an expression of cultural identity rather than strictly religious adherence. She even considers substituting it with a hat or hoodie in situations where she feels unsafe, suggesting that the visibility of hair and the style of her hijab are flexible tools for managing her identity and safety in public spaces. Salma, on the other hand, wears her hijab in a similar loose style, which she connects to both cultural and religious reasons. This

style, common among Muslim Asians, can be seen as a marker of their cultural background, reflecting how their hijab practices are shaped by a blend of cultural and religious influences, as well as practical considerations. As Emma Tarlo notes, “they [Muslim women] have learned to use their dress and knowledge of fashion as a visual and material means by which they can up-play or down-play their religious and ethnic attachments in different contexts” (Tarlo 2010, p 93). This insight reinforces how Muslim women like Nura and Salma use the visibility of hair and the style of their hijab to navigate complex social environments, balancing cultural identity, religious faith, and personal safety.

This could be interpreted as different facet of social identity consolidation, one linked to cultural dimension rather than the religious one. In the next section, I will explore the aspects of religious identity reinforced as a coping mechanism and in which way it helps the participants to cope with the negative impacts of media portrayals.

Another notable coping mechanism observed for identity consolidation in this research was the active involvement of some participants in activism and charity work. Leila and Elham, for instance, devoted time to such endeavours not for financial gain, but out of genuine interest and a desire to make a positive impact. Leila emphasised the inclusive nature of her efforts within a charity, stating,

“we’re doing stuff where we’re reaching out, we’re not just doing things for our own women. Helping others isn’t just about fulfilling a duty, it’s about living out what we believe, as Muslims, we’re encouraged to be charitable, to give from our hearts.

That’s why I work with women from all backgrounds. It’s not just about helping my Muslim sisters, but we include the [broader]community as well. The issues that affect

the community affect us too, so we end up partnering with women who aren't Muslim and working alongside them" (Leila, 40-49 years).

Similarly, Elham expressed satisfaction in her role, citing her joy in contributing to areas like disability support and homelessness.

"I trained as a secondary school teacher. And I've been doing supply most of my life. And then along with that, I've been involved in the charity sector, doing social care as well; working with disability, and homelessness... it brings me joy to be able to help and give back to the community, after all that's what our religion is all about" (Elham, 50-59 years).

This engagement not only fosters a sense of belonging and purpose but also reaffirms their agency and efficacy as active agents of societal change. Importantly, this proactive involvement can serve as a means for participants to combat devaluing stereotypes often perpetuated in media, empowering them and providing them with a sense of fulfilment in making tangible contributions to their communities.

In summary, the data discussed in this section emphasises the multifaceted nature of identity consolidation among Muslim women, particularly through group identification, activism, and charity work. From a social identity perspective, participants demonstrated a strong affiliation with their religious identity as a strategic coping mechanism to counteract perceived prejudice and negative portrayals. This was evident in their active engagement in activism, their visible expressions of Muslim identity, and their pronounced pride in belonging to the Muslim community in Britain.

Despite challenges such as familial resistance to wearing the hijab, participants like Rewan exhibited remarkable resilience in asserting their religious identity publicly. The diverse perspectives on hijab-wearing; ranging from religious obligation to cultural identity markers, highlight the complexity of identity consolidation among participants and the nuanced ways they navigate their identities as Muslim women in Britain. For some, the hijab was an empowered expression of faith and community belonging; for others, it rather symbolised cultural heritage or a personal journey of self-discovery.

Active involvement in activism and charity work also emerged as a significant coping strategy. Participants such as Leila and Elham reaffirmed their agency and sense of purpose by effecting positive societal change while simultaneously challenging devaluing stereotypes. These acts of service not only fostered a sense of belonging and solidarity but also allowed participants to visibly and meaningfully contribute to their communities, thereby reinforcing their identities as empowered and proactive agents of change.

Overall, these findings highlight the dynamic and evolving process of identity consolidation among Muslim women, shaped by a combination of internal beliefs, cultural practices, and external societal pressures. The act of wearing the hijab, in particular, emerged as a powerful tool for consolidating Muslim identity, enabling participants to assert pride, agency, and resilience in the face of prejudice and societal expectations. While participants held diverse perspectives on the hijab, these perspectives collectively reflect the multifaceted ways Muslim women navigate and reinforce their identities in response to external challenges.

The next section builds on this discussion by examining another facet of social identity reinforcement, focusing specifically on the role of religious identity in shaping the experiences of Muslim women in Britain.

7.3.2 Reinforcing Religious Identity as a Coping Strategy

In this research, where the threatened social identity is of a religious nature, the participants used two techniques to consolidate their Muslim identity and to cope with the related threat from negative portrayals. Firstly, individuals turned to spiritual support and practices, such as prayer and meditation, as coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges posed by the threat to their religious identity. Secondly, they benefited from access to supportive ‘communities of faith’ where both individual and collective wellbeing can be fostered through shared beliefs, values, and support networks. These techniques will be discussed with illustrative examples from the participants.

7.3.2.1 *Spiritual Support*

Threats targeting individuals’ religious identity can be responded to through religious coping mechanisms such as prayers, meditation and engaging in religious rituals and practices, which can be considered as a form of social (religious) identity consolidation in the face of stigma and negative portrayals. For example, Khadija described “Salah” which is the Arabic word for prayer as tool to cope with stress similar to practicing mindfulness and going for walks. For Khadija, this is her chosen technique to cope with the stress that comes with being exposed to negative stereotypes.

“we pray five times a day. We push mindfulness and all these things, and we tell people go on walks, and make sure you do yoga and take a break regularly whilst you're working. And that's exactly what your Salah is, you're literally told to take a break from everything that goes on in this world for 10 minutes, pray your prayers, and then come back to it. Practice gratitude regularly, five times a day.” (Khadija, 20-29 years).

Khadija also spoke about her choice of attire, which was a long dress covering all her body and a head cover that is consistent in colour without covering the face; this could be referred to as 'Jilbab'. Khadija mentioned that her outfit brings comfort and reassurance to her:

“it’s just a long prayer dress really in’it. So, it feels like wherever I am, I’m always ready to pray, and I think that reassurance made me love my clothing...” (Khadija, 20-29 years).

Despite the fact that this type of clothes could make the person wearing it hypervisible and, therefore, more exposed to stigma and discrimination, Khadija had a positive, confident demeanour and she embraced her choice of attire with happiness and pride viewing it as a true reflection of her religious beliefs and identity as well as a source of reassurance as it enables her to do prayers whenever needed. This shows Khadija’s process of reinforcing her religious identity while utilising on some of the religious practices (prayer and clothing) to feel empowered and cope with stereotypes and stigma.

Likewise, Dhikra faced significant instances of racism and religious discrimination in her previous workplace, ultimately prompting her departure, as detailed in section 6.4.4. For Dhikra, leaving was imperative due to the toxic environment she encountered. However, the repercussions of these negative experiences persisted, prompting her to turn to religious practices like prayers and getting actively involved in community activities such as leading religious study groups for children as coping mechanisms: “I have this anxiety, I just dealt with it by praying and trying my best to connect with my interests. And I had my community, I was doing voluntary things on the side”. (Dhikra, 30- 39 years).

Additionally, Dhikra highlighted the importance of a supportive spiritual community and environment in such challenging situations.

“And I was flourishing in that environment. I was always celebrated every time I did a Halaqa⁵² or I used to lead a youth group. And we used to do retreats once a month. And the parents of children were like, celebrating. And I only say that, because I want to highlight the role of environment and what it does to your own ability to cope” (Dhikra, 30- 39 years).

In her interview, Dhikra highlighted the crucial role of both spiritual supports derived from religious practices and the encouragement she received from her supportive faith community. This concept is often referred to as “communities of faith” in scholarly research (Lim and Putnam 2009). These communities provide a unique form of support that is distinct from the broader community, as it is rooted in shared faith and beliefs. This support network not only offers emotional and spiritual solace but also reinforces a sense of belonging and identity, enabling individuals like Dhikra to cope more effectively with the challenges of discrimination and adversity. Moreover, Dhikra’s statement highlights the important role of Mosques for Muslim communities in Britain, serving as hubs where both types of support are consolidated, which shows in the community’s dedication to constructing and enhancing mosques (Gilliat-Ray 2010), and emphasising the centrality of mosques in performing communal religious responsibilities, such as religious education (halaqa), Friday prayer and rites of passage, all of which require collective participation (Ahmed 2024). This illustrates how mosques not only serve as spiritual centres but also reinforce the communal bonds of Muslims in Britain, which aligns with Dhikra’s observation about their importance.

⁵² Halaqa: Arabic word that means circle. Halaqa in Islamic terminology refers to a religious gathering or meeting for the study of Islam and the Quran.

This emphasis on the supportive role of spiritual communities will be further explored in the subsequent section.

7.3.2.2 Community Support

In addition to religious coping mechanisms such as prayer; leaning on religious identity as a social identity provides a supportive community that shares values and beliefs. Receiving social support from both religious and non-religious social circle emerged as a crucial coping resource and could impact the individual's wellbeing positively, supporting the argument that communities of faith foster the greatest wellbeing (Lim and Putnam 2009). As discussed in the previous chapter, the participants who experienced reduced anxiety and fear of judgment in public often had a bigger supportive circle. This could be having supportive family and friends, despite of their religious belonging, or having an environment that is more aware of the impact of negative portrayals, and they are more exposed to Muslims in real life.

“Radja: How did you cope with those feelings and anxiety?

Karima: Well, it helps that obviously, I have a lot of Muslim friends and you know, we would always talk to each other, we would, you know, seek out support from each other. So I think, you know, having Muslim friends definitely helped because, you know, you need the support from friends and family so I think that definitely helped having friends who were going through the same thing. So we were just there for each other, giving each other the emotional support.” (Karima, 30-39 years).

Karima considered herself lucky for not experiencing this fear of judgment as she has always been surrounded by “politically clued up and politically conscious people, who would never question her” at her workplace. Other participants who did not experience this fear of

judgment had common circumstances such as having external support from family and friends. Being surrounded by more similar people to them gave them confidence and empowered them to cope with this anxiety.

“I have a lot of Muslim friends, and you know, we would always talk to each other, we would seek out support from each other. I think, you know, having Muslim friends definitely helped because you need the support from friends and family, so I think that definitely helped having friends who were going through the same thing, we were just there for each other, giving each other the emotional support” (Karima, 30-39 years).

Similarly, Basma recognised the importance of having a supportive community for Muslim women and suggested redirecting resources towards education initiatives locally and fostering collaboration among women as a first step to organising a supportive community for Muslim women:

“I think from the Muslims perspective, we need to kind move on from sending on our money back home and building mosques, etc, but also to invest money into education here, into getting women and together, and to also be more organised a community to help each other into their professional fields to have more professional bodies” (Basma, 30-39 years).

Basma and Halima explained that living in diverse areas like London makes them feel less fearful of discrimination or hate crimes. In these environments, the presence of Muslims, including women who wear the hijab, is more familiar and accepted, creating a sense of safety and belonging. This sense of security stems from being part of a local community that is not only diverse but also includes many people who share their faith, offering an implicit form of support. This highlights how localised, diverse communities can foster a more

inclusive and supportive atmosphere for Muslim women. While some participants found reassurance in community diversity, others took a more direct approach in addressing societal stereotypes, actively engaging in ways to challenge and reshape the narratives around them.

7.4 Self-representation as Coping

In this section, I discuss the participants who adopted a confrontational approach to address the stigma of existing representations. These participants chose careers and academic paths that directly or indirectly influence representation politics; many (n=23) pursued fields such as journalism, politics, psychology and social sciences, as noted in section 5.2. Although this sample may not fully represent the socioeconomic status and academic level for Muslim women in Britain, it reveals an important pattern that merits attention in my analysis.

Notably, participants were not selected randomly, with most approaching me rather than the other way around, additionally, this pattern emerged during the coding and data generation process, which is why I did not ask direct questions about it during interviews. Nevertheless, several participants highlighted how their career choices were a response to the representation politics they encountered and a way to take control of their portrayal instead of waiting for the media to change.

For instance, Amina, who at the time of our interview was a doctoral student stated that her identity “definitely informs the path I’ve chosen”. Amina was focusing on policy making in her studies and reflected a commitment to policy change through activism and writing.

Amina explained that she sees “a lot of injustice in the world, I see a lot of stereotypes and, and things that lead to harmful politics and harmful policy decisions that affect people’s lived experience.” Which motivated her to:

“try and fight against [injustice] by changing policy, by writing research that challenges and gives more presentation to the people whose voices are so often denied. My goal is focusing on policy focusing on community organising, focusing on ensuring people who are so often voiceless afforded space and are able to build power in their communities.” (Amina, 20-29 years).

Amina’s perspective was echoed by two other participants, Amel and Ferial (20-29 years), both students in higher, as discussed in section 5.3. Both Amel and Ferial chose their fields of study in response to the stigmatising and stereotypical portrayals of Muslims in the media, aiming to create their own narratives and proactively counter these portrayals.

Additionally, Halimah reflected a similarly proactive and determined mindset, emphasising the importance of self-representation and agency, stating

“if you are not happy with the way you’re being represented, then create content to change that narrative, which is what I’m trying to do with my career. I’ve got like a novel book, hopefully, inshallah coming out next month. It’s about Muslim women, but again, portraying them in a way that I think Muslim women should be portrayed. I’m just like, this is what I want to do. If you like it. You don’t like it. Go find somebody else.” (Halimah, 20-29 years).

In a similar context, Aseel highlights the significance of platforms run by British Muslim women, such as Amaliah⁵³, which offer authentic and diverse narratives seldom found in mainstream media.

“I love going on that because you never hear those stories and they’re so authentic and not just about being Muslim, they’re about people doing things that they love doing whether it’s knitting or whatever, you just never ever hear that narrative”
(Aseel, 20-29 years).

Furthermore, for Basma, it is crucial for Muslims to invest in research and education within the Muslim community, beyond traditional investments in mosques and charitable activities to counter the negative stereotypical narrative. Basma a professional and a graduate student in higher education advocates through her career and field of expertise for channelling resources into supporting scholars, organising women professionally, and fostering professional bodies:

“it’s really important for us, to invest in research. I’m passionate about decolonisation. And a lot of universities are having decolonisation programmes now, and I think we [Muslim women] need to start having those discussions about assumptions and imagery, and to push for those stories. we need to invest more into the arts, into media courses, into writing courses, to get more Muslims into literature and broadcast media and films, etc. People like Razia Hamidi⁵⁴ who has a coaching website, that’s quite

⁵³ Amaliah is a media company that aims to amplify the voices of Muslim women and create inclusive moments that centre Muslims

⁵⁴ Muslim female life coach and marriage counsellor

good as well. These are the things we need to do and to kind of hold media bodies accountable” (Basma, 30-39 years).

In summary, this section explored how participants utilised self-representation as a coping strategy to challenge external stigmatisation and reclaim their narratives within the broader societal context. Moving forward, the next section delves into the internal dynamics within the Muslim community, examining how intra-group discrimination and pressures to conform affect Muslim women in Britain. The next section addresses the complexities of navigating both external and internal expectations, highlighting how intra-group discrimination shapes identity and belonging.

7.5 Intra-group Discrimination and Conformity

In this section, I explore intra-group discrimination against Muslim women in Britain within their social group, the Muslim community. Rather than centring this discussion exclusively through Social Identity Theory (SIT), I draw on it selectively to help illuminate some of the intra-group dynamics observed in participants’ accounts.

Not all participants received community support, and discrimination from the Muslim community towards Muslim women who do not wear hijab or adhere to cultural norms was evident in the accounts of Serena, Souheila, Karima and Basma. These four participants stated that they faced a certain level of discrimination from within their own Muslim community.

According to SIT, social groups often form around shared norms and expectations for behaviour, and individuals who diverge from these expectations may be perceived as deviating from the group. Consequently, Muslim women who do not appear typically

Muslim, such as those not wearing hijab, may face judgment from both non-Muslims and fellow Muslims.

For instance, Serena shared that her decision on whether to wear the hijab was influenced more by personal experiences rather than media representations. She recounted negative encounters with hijabi women in both Britain and Luxembourg, describing them as “hypocrites who preach one lifestyle while living another”. Serena mentioned that some were extreme in their views, assuming an entitlement to preach to everyone despite lacking substantial knowledge about Islam. She briefly wore the hijab while at university but realised she was doing so for the wrong reasons and felt she was “being brainwashed”. Serena respects the hijab if worn for modesty and dignity, but she criticised those who wear it to appear pious while behaving differently behind closed doors or acting as what she calls “religious police” who lack formal authority.

“Radja: How does media representation contribute to your decision of wearing it or not wearing it?

Serena: ... The media would not impact my views on whether to wear a hijab or not... I did wear it briefly when I went to university (UCL) and had become a member of the Islamic society. Thankfully I realised soon I was being brainwashed and was wearing the hijab for the wrong reasons. Unfortunately, some Muslim women who wear the hijab have not helped. They wear it to show society that they are pious. And they do everything behind closed doors. Or there are those who start playing the role of religious police just because they are wearing a cloth on their head. Preaching when they have not right to” (Serena, 40-49 years).

When Serena contacted me to express her interest in participating in the interviews, she was highly motivated to contribute to this project and share her experiences. However, due to her demanding work schedule, we were unable to conduct an online meeting as initially planned. Determined to be part of the project, she insisted on participating through written correspondence via email. Over a period of time, we exchanged emails where I sent her my questions, often providing additional explanations when needed, and she responded with detailed answers, sometimes offering further information upon my request. This method enabled me to access Serena's valuable insights, but because our interaction was limited to email exchanges, this made the experience of data generation feel somewhat incomplete. Not being able to see Serena's face or hear her tone of voice meant that I could not fully understand the emotional depth of Serena's experiences and perspectives. However, I could discern that Serena developed a sense of resentment toward certain hijabi women she had encountered, which had influenced her decision not to wear the hijab. I followed up with probing questions about her views on the hijab, and she responded that, while she respects those who wear it for genuine reasons, she has developed an aversion to it due to the discrimination she experienced from some Muslim hijabi women who she described as "so extreme with their views and preach to everyone around them thinking they have a god given right to do so" (Serena, 40-49).

Similarly, Suheila, a schoolteacher from North-African heritage, reflected on how internal community pressures and cultural conflicts can lead to a sense of exclusion. She pointed out that, despite not facing discrimination from non-Muslims, she often felt marginalised by other Muslims who questioned her authenticity due to her appearance and cultural practices. My interview with Suheila lasted over an hour, as she was extremely lively and cheerful and I found it easy to talk to her about different topics, she was smiling and laughing while telling

me how she has been often confused for a revert (convert Muslim) in the mosque due to her non-Arab, non-North African look; in contrast she would be often mistaken for a Latin American or Spanish person which, in her opinion, was a privilege and the main reason she has never been discriminated against based on her ethnicity or faith:

“Radja: Did you experience discrimination or stigma because of your religion?

Suheila: No, not from non-Muslims. And I know that that’s a privilege because I don't wear a scarf, I also don't look Arab. And I don't look very North African but can be mistaken for a Latin American Spanish [...]” (Suheila, 30-39 years).

Suheila explained that she felt scrutinised by other Muslim women from other ethnic backgrounds, often questioning her belonging to the Islamic faith due to her looks:

“I feel like the only time I've had it fall against me is from other Asians. Because their assumption is, oh , are you a convert? And I'm like, No, I was born into the religion, I speak the language. And then that's when it becomes like a kind of - we butt heads” (Suheila, 30-39 years).

This questioning stemmed from the assumption that her cultural expressions did not align with their interpretations of religious practices, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts. Suheila elaborates that for her, different Muslim communities have misinterpreted culture for Islamic practices, causing them to misjudge other Muslims who did not share the same cultural practices:

“Because not to say that I know the religion better, but I do feel a bit like, hang on, a lot of your practices are very cultural and what I see you do, I don't see myself in it at all [...] In school, I have South Asian friends (and) when they're talking about

(religious) things, I'm like, I don't know what you're talking about because that's not my culture. If you were to talk to me about praying five times a day, and... yeah. But when you start adding the sort of accessories, then our accessories are different.

(laughs) Very different language, the way we dress, food wise, all of that, but it seems to be that they've religion-ised even the culture. Actually, most of the time I feel like it can go either way. You're ostracised because you don't look Muslim, whatever that means. Or it's the opposite way – you're kind of put on a pedestal because you speak Arabic, so you must be like a proper Muslim. But there is Jews who speak Arabic (laughs)” (Suheila, 30-39 years).

In the first section of this statement, Suheila emphasises the fact that she speaks Arabic. According to ethnolinguistic identity theory (ELIT) (Giles and Johnson 1987), language is a core identity marker, and Suheila's use of Arabic, the language of the Quran, signifies her strong belonging to the Muslim community. However, at the end of the statement Suheila acknowledges that some Jews can speak Arabic, highlighting that linguistic ability alone does not fully define one's religious or cultural identity. My interpretation while Arabic is a respected and significant language among Muslims, speaking it does not automatically confer a 'perfect' Muslim identity; yet some non-Arab Muslims might hold the belief that whoever speaks Arabic is a good Muslim and should behave in a certain manner, which did not align with how Suheila is viewed. Suheila's statement can be seen as an attempt to counteract within the Muslim community, asserting that despite not fitting the stereotypical image of a Muslim, her ability to speak Arabic does not make her any more or less a Muslim.

Notably, Suheila's concept of 'religionising culture' reminded me of a previous example discussed by Elham Section 7.2.1. Elham argued that the hijab, as it is known today, is a form

of Arabic dress that has been linked to Islam. Similarly, Suheila believes that some Muslim Asian communities merge their cultural practices with religious beliefs in the same way.

Suheila continued to talk about the cultural disparity between Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds and how this could result in internal discrimination among Muslims:

“I remember this incident; it happened when I've been at a mosque actually praying. And here, the mosques are predominantly Asian. I was wearing leggings with a long top, and I hadn't ever had a scarf before. An elderly woman came up while I was praying and started pulling my leggings down. And I was like, what are you doing? First of all, you've just cut into my Salah (prayer) I had to stop, and she was like, I can see too much of your ankle. And I promise you, you couldn't, my legging went all the way down to my ankle and then there was my sock” (Suheila, 30-39 years).

Suheila explained how angry she felt by this behaviour, but her mom was with her and asked her to “not start a fight”, eventually after reflecting on the incident, Suheila concluded that “the woman was old and probably had good intentions” showing a level of understanding and empathy despite the anger she felt at the time of the incident.

Suheila's reflection during our interview provides a nuanced perspective on the complexities of identity and discrimination within the Muslim community. Her experience highlights the intersectionality of appearance, culture, and religion, and how these factors can shape the Muslim women's social interactions and acceptance both in the Muslim community in Britain and the wider community.

Basma echoed similar sentiments, highlighting the constant judgment faced by women who wear the hijab. She described the persistent scrutiny and unsolicited advice on how to behave,

noting that hijabi women are often held to different standards “than anybody else”. Basma also pointed out that women who do not wear the hijab are sometimes excluded from Muslim forums and not seen as good Muslims, which adds another layer of pressure.

“when you’re with women who wear hijab, it’s always a constant judgement, that ‘Oh, sister your hair is showing sister maybe you shouldn’t talk about this’, or ‘Sister you shouldn’t have done that, just because you wear a hijab’, you’re seen as having to behave in a different way than anybody else has to, so you’re constantly being given messages about how you should behave, how you should be... then, if you don’t wear a hijab you don’t want to get as invited to Muslim forums, because you aren’t seen as a good Muslim without hijab, it’s like a whole other set of pressures.” (Basma, 30-39 years).

Although many of the problematic stereotypes leading to discrimination against Muslim women who do not wear the hijab (non-hijabi) are perpetuated by media outlets, there is also a pre-existing set of stereotypes and prejudices within the British Muslim community itself. These internal biases exacerbate disparities among Muslims of different ethnic backgrounds, leading to a sense of estrangement and, in some cases, acts of discrimination. Some of these dynamics may be helpfully understood through concepts from SIT, particularly the tendency to construct in-groups and out-groups based on normative expectations. In this context, MWB may be perceived as an ‘out-group’ by those who adhere to more traditional or conservative norms within the Muslim community. This can evoke intense emotional responses from MWB, including feelings of alienation, isolation, and frustration as explored in the previous chapter (see section 6.3). They may experience a profound sense of being marginalised not just by broader society but also within their own community. These emotions are

compounded by the external pressures of media portrayals, which often reinforce negative

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stereotypes, and the internal pressures of community expectations, which can feel like an emotional battleground. Such divisions not only deepen the social rift but also highlight the complex interplay of cultural and religious identities among British Muslims. The dual pressures create a multifaceted landscape of challenges for MWB, emphasising the need for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Muslim women's identities in Britain, recognising their emotional experiences and the diverse ways individuals navigate their cultural and religious affiliations.

The prejudices within the Muslim community extend beyond cultural and religious expectations, influencing the experiences of Muslim women in profound ways. As highlighted by Serena, Suheila and Basma, these internal biases often lead to feelings of exclusion and discrimination among Muslim women who do not conform to specific cultural or religious norms. However, another dimension of discrimination that Muslim women face, particularly those who wear the hijab, involves societal beauty standards and the pervasive scrutiny of their appearance. Karima's perspective provides a poignant example of how Muslim women are subjected to multiple layers of judgment.

“If you're in public, you're going to be consumed. We're gonna look at your hair, we're gonna look at your eyes. Are you beautiful? How are you wearing your makeup? What are you wearing? So, all that, and then imagine you're a Muslim woman who's put into that mix? And if you're in a hijab, then obviously your Muslimness is judged by non-Muslims and Muslims, you are scrutinised: why is your neck not covered? If your neck is covered, then why are your ears not covered? So there are always going to be different measurements for judging women. You just basically, you're being consumed, and first thing that people are judging you by is

how beautiful you are. And if you're not classified as beautiful, then people aren't going to take you seriously.” (Karima, 30-39 years).

Similar to Suheila and Serena, Karima has frequently faced misjudgement from fellow Muslims for not wearing the hijab and has received critical comments on her dress code when she does choose to wear it. In her Asian cultural heritage, a scarf is often worn as an accessory, regardless of whether she considers it a hijab or not. This statement highlights how the intersection of cultural and societal expectations places Muslim women, especially those who wear the hijab, under relentless scrutiny. They are judged not only on their piety and conformity to religious norms but also on their physical appearance and perceived attractiveness, which can ironically undermine the purpose of wearing the hijab. Hijab is meant to divert attention away from a woman's appearance, focusing instead on her character and modesty (Franks 2000), however; these criticisms can turn the hijab into yet another aspect of appearance to be evaluated, defeating its intended goal. Tarlo notes that for many women, “the hijab is lived as a form of resistance to these pressures [Western unrealistic body image], even if, in the process, they reassert the identification of women with sex and submit to another set of discourses and disciplinary regimes concerning the female body” (Tarlo 2010, p. 67).

Basma highlighted the continuous battle hijabi women face in deciding if they are wearing the right clothes and the constant need to prove themselves against negative media representations that portray them as untrustworthy. This dual pressure from both the community and the media creates a complex and challenging environment for Muslim women regarding their choices about wearing the hijab.

“I think personally, also from the social media perspective, when you see all these images of women dressed to the teeth⁵⁵, etc, it can be quite difficult to for you, as a woman to have to constantly wear hijab, and to not look as good as you want to be, because I think innately as women, you want to look good, and you want to kind of be beautiful, and you want to kind of let your hair down and wear nice clothes and take Instagram pictures, because then you’re obviously constantly battling that are wearing a hijab. am I wearing the right clothes? Am I not wearing the right clothes... there's a whole host of issues when you wear it, and also when you don't wear it. So, and I think that the media again, because the representation of a woman is so quite negative, and somebody who cannot be trusted under any circumstances. You're constantly having to prove yourself” (Basma, 30-39 years).

These reflections from Karima and Basma highlight the pervasive nature of objectification and beauty standards that women face universally, with additional layers of complexity for Muslim women who wear the hijab. Their statements emphasise how women, particularly in public spaces, are subject to intense scrutiny based on their physical appearance and adherence to societal beauty norms. This scrutiny is even more pronounced for Muslim women, who face judgments from both non-Muslims and Muslims regarding their appearance and level of religiosity.

As introduced at the beginning of this section (6.5), Serena’s statement revealed that not only did she lack support from the Muslim community, but it was this very community that fostered her aversion to the hijab. Her strong opinions against the hijab stemmed directly

⁵⁵ Completely, fully

from the discrimination she faced from other Muslim women who wore it. The participants in this project, including Serena, came from diverse backgrounds and expressed a wide range of opinions, highlighting the complexity and variety within the Muslim female community. Serena's experience highlights the challenges in achieving a singular representation of Muslim women, emphasising the nuanced and individual nature of their experiences and perspectives.

These insights align with a substantial body of literature on the objectification of women and beauty standards (Wolf 1991; Harper and Tiggemann 2008; Rollero 2013; Rollero and Tartaglia 2016; Santoniccolo et al. 2023). Although this phenomenon is not limited to one culture or community but is a widespread issue exacerbated by media portrayals that perpetuate unrealistic beauty ideals (Grabe et al. 2008); for Muslim women, these pressures are compounded by cultural and religious expectations. Studies like those by Siraj (2011) and Moors (2009) discuss how Muslim women navigate their identities amidst these dual pressures. Siraj's research on British Muslim women illustrates how hijab-wearing women often face contradictory expectations from their communities and the wider society, leading to a complex negotiation of their identity and appearance, whilst Moors explores how Muslim women's dress practices are influenced by both religious convictions and the desire to comply with or resist societal beauty norms. Furthermore, Peterson's article (2016) highlights that social media culture imposes additional pressure on Muslim women to not only face and counter Islamophobic stereotypes but also conform to certain beauty standards.

The dual judgment experienced by Suheila, Karima, Serena and Basma reflects what has been termed 'intersectional discrimination' (Crenshaw 1989), where multiple aspects of a person's identity, such as gender, religion, and ethnicity, intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination and marginalisation; which in turn calls for an intersectional

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approach in addressing these issues, recognising the unique challenges that arise from the interplay of cultural, religious, and societal expectations.

Additionally, while SIT suggests that social groups set out norms to which members are expected to conform, the findings I discussed in this section reveal the difficulty in applying such a uniform model to a highly diverse group like Muslim women in Britain. This diversity was a focal point in the discussion around media representation of Muslims and Muslim women in Britain for the women participating in this research.

7.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the coping strategies of Muslim women in Britain facing negative stereotypes and discrimination. Several key themes emerged, categorising MWB responses into individual and collective strategies.

Individual strategies included distancing from aspect of their group identity and concealing identity markers like the hijab to align with higher-status groups, primarily enhancing personal wellbeing. While these choices can reflect broader patterns identified in social psychology literature, such as those discussed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), this chapter has focused more on the lived motivations and contextual meanings behind such actions. This strategy was made manifest in some participants' choice to avoid choosing Islamic names for their children and wearing hijab; however, not all participants who did not wear hijab did so to distance themselves from their religious social group.

Additionally, social creativity is another individual strategy which involves redefining intergroup relations to maintain a positive identity and self-esteem. This manifests as acceptance, seen in Karima's detachment from media representations, and avoidance, as

observed in Halimah and Dhikra's distancing from negative portrayals and toxic environments. It is also important to note that there is not always a clear distinction between these strategies: some participants who utilised individual mobility at one point may have employed other strategies, such as social creativity, in different instances.

Collective strategies, or social competition, were also prevalent among participants, particularly those rooted in shared identity and group solidarity. Consolidating the Muslim identity emerged as a significant mechanism, with participants exhibiting strong group membership and religious identity, using these affiliations to cope with stress from negative portrayals (Ysseldyk et al., 2010). Engagement in activism, charity work, and visible expressions of Muslim identity were not only expressions of identity consolidation but also assertions of agency, resilience, and belonging. Despite familial resistance, participants like Rewan showed resilience in publicly asserting their religious identity. The varied perspectives on hijab-wearing marked the complexity of identity consolidation among participants, revealing the nuances of identifying as a Muslim woman in Britain.

Additionally, participants used spiritual support and practices such as prayer and meditation to cope with challenges posed by threats to their religious identity. They also benefited from access to supportive 'communities of faith' which fostered individual and collective wellbeing through shared beliefs, values, and support networks. However, not all participants had community support, and discrimination from within the Muslim community toward women who do not wear the hijab or adhere to cultural norms was evident, as seen with Serena, Souheila, Karima, and Basma.

Reflections from Karima and Basma highlighted the pervasive nature of objectification and beauty standards that women face universally, with additional layers of complexity for

Muslim women who wear the hijab. Their statements emphasised how women, particularly in public spaces, are subject to intense scrutiny based on their physical appearance and adherence to societal beauty norms. This scrutiny is even more pronounced for Muslim women, who face judgments from both non-Muslims and Muslims regarding their appearance and level of religiosity.

While this chapter acknowledges the significant role of media portrayals in shaping stereotypes and identity threats, it adopts a broader perspective, examining how Muslim women in Britain cope with identity threats in general. By exploring their strategies in a wider societal context, this chapter considers how stereotypes generated by the media often extend into other social domains, affecting social interactions, workplace dynamics, and perceptions within the wider community. This approach allows for a more holistic understanding of how these women navigate their identities in response to multifaceted societal pressures.

Overall, in this chapter I have highlighted the complex and varied coping strategies adopted by MWB who participated in this study, in response to negative media portrayals and identity threats in a wider social context. Rather than relying solely on the SIA, this analysis foregrounds the participants' lived experiences, emotional responses, and adaptive strategies. This allowed for deeper understanding of how these women navigate and resist stereotypes, discrimination, and social pressure.

By examining how these women navigate and resist stereotypes, discrimination, and social pressures, this chapter addresses RQ4: What strategies do Muslim women use to cope with the negative representations?

This exploration aligns with the chapter's aim to uncover the resilience and agency of Muslim women, emphasising the importance of collective identity and social support in combating the invasive impact of negative media representation.

8 Discussion and Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together the key findings of this research, reflecting on its broader significance in understanding the emotional impact of media representations on Muslim women in Britain. It begins by summarising the study's central arguments and the major themes that emerged from participant narratives, emphasising how media portrayals shape emotional wellbeing, identity negotiation, and trust in mainstream discourse. The chapter then discusses the study's contributions to existing scholarship, particularly in relation to the intersection of media, identity, and emotions. Additionally, it addresses the study's limitations and highlights areas for future research, including the need for more diverse and intersectional approaches to media representation. Finally, the chapter concludes with reflections on the potential for change, considering how more inclusive portrayals and community-driven narratives can reshape dominant media discourses surrounding Muslim women.

8.2 Contributions of the Study

This thesis set out to explore the emotional impacts of media representations on Muslim women in Britain, focusing on their lived experiences, emotional wellbeing, and coping strategies. Muslim women in Britain are frequently misrepresented in western media, either erased from public narratives or confined to stereotypes portraying them as oppressed, radical, or incompatible with Western norms. Common depictions include the oppressed and voiceless victim needing rescue (Al-Saji 2010; Abu-Lughod 2013), the dangerous extremist threatening societal stability (Kundnani 2014), a combination of the two (Jackson 2021) and

the culturally backward figure resisting modern values (Eijberts and Roggeband 2016). These reductive portrayals reinforce exclusionary narratives that dehumanise and marginalise Muslim women in the public sphere, perpetuating systemic marginalisation and stigmatisation while exerting a profound and invasive impact on their emotions and lived experiences, an aspect often overlooked in existing research.

Through a review of the literature, combined with my personal experiences within the Muslim community, I recognised the urgent need to prioritise the emotional dimension of the media's (mis)representation of Muslim women. Emotions play a crucial role in shaping various aspects of Muslim women's daily lives, lived experiences, and overall wellbeing. Recognising this gap, I designed and conducted a study with Muslim women in Britain (MWB) to explore how they perceive, engage with, and respond to these media portrayals, focusing on the emotional consequences of misrepresentation. As Ahmed (2004, p. 10) asserts, "Emotions are not simply private or psychological, but socially constructed and politically significant," a perspective that resonated throughout the narratives shared by the participants. Their stories illustrated how emotional responses to media portrayals influence processes of identity negotiation, social interactions, and individual and collective resilience, highlighting the significance of examining these dimensions within this context.

Thus, this research examined how MWB perceive, engage with, and navigate media portrayals, how they believe they should be represented, and how they cope with and resist the emotional impacts of these misrepresentations in their daily lives and in relation to their identities. Grounded in the Social Identity Approach and further refined through the integration of Intergroup Emotions Theory (IET), this study offered a nuanced exploration of the emotional dimensions of media misrepresentation.

By centring the emotional narratives shared during the interviews, I highlighted the agency of Muslim women as they navigate, resist, and redefine their identities in response to media portrayals. Participants demonstrated this agency through various actions, such as engaging in community activism, challenging stereotypes on social media platforms, participating in advocacy campaigns, and embracing public-facing roles that contest negative representations. These efforts marked their capacity to reshape societal narratives while asserting their multifaceted identities. This approach taken in this study provides nuanced insights into how media misrepresentation shaped participants' lived experiences, placing emphasis on the emotional impact of these portrayals and the strategies that these Muslim women adopted to reclaim their narratives and assert their complex identities.

While the Social Identity Approach is a well-established theoretical perspective, its relevance to this study lies in its ability to explain how individuals' sense of self is shaped by their membership in social groups and the dynamics of intergroup relations. In the context of this research, it provided a robust framework for understanding how media narratives construct and reinforce group-based identities, leading to a collective sense of emotional impacts on Muslim women. By focusing on social categorisation and group identification, the Social Identity Approach helps to illuminate how participants' collective identity as Muslim women amplifies their emotional responses to stigmatisation, such as anger, frustration, and fear, while also fostering resilience and solidarity.

Additionally, the Social Identity Approach's focus on the interplay between individual and group-level experiences made it particularly well-suited for exploring the dual pressures faced by Muslim women: navigating both personal and collective identities amidst systemic discrimination. Participants frequently described these dual pressures manifesting in their daily lives through constant identity negotiation, balancing cultural expectations within their

communities while confronting external societal prejudices. Several participants recounted modifying their public behaviours to counter stereotypes while striving to maintain cultural authenticity in private, highlighting the emotional labour involved in this dual navigation. This perspective enabled a detailed analysis of how gender, religion, and ethnicity intersect to shape these women's experiences of misrepresentation and their strategies for coping with this misrepresentation. By situating participants' narratives within this theoretical framework, this study demonstrates the enduring utility of the Social Identity Approach for analysing contemporary issues of identity, representation, and emotion.

While negative portrayals in media often provoke feelings of anger, frustration, and isolation, this research highlights the importance of taking Muslim women's lived experiences seriously. Participants' narratives revealed the complex and deeply personal ways in which media representations affected their emotional wellbeing and self-perception. By critically engaging with stereotypes and reductive narratives, participants expressed their desire for more nuanced and authentic portrayals that reflect the diversity and complexity of their identities. Furthermore, they employed a range of coping strategies, including individual redefinition of identity, community solidarity, and activism, to counter the negative effects of media stigma. These findings align with and contribute to existing literature on Islamophobia, gendered media representation, and identity politics, offering a comprehensive understanding of how Muslim women navigate the intersecting pressures of visibility, cultural expectations, and systemic discrimination.

This thesis advances knowledge by positioning the emotional experiences of Muslim women as central to understanding the broader impacts of Islamophobic media discourses. While prior studies, such as Al-Saji (2010), Eijberts and Roggeband (2016), and Ahmad (2006), have examined media representation and its social and political consequences, few have

centred emotions as the primary lens of analysis (Zempi 2020, Zempi and Chakraborti 2015). By foregrounding emotions, this research highlights the personal and collective emotional toll of media misrepresentation, offering a deeper understanding of how media narratives shape not only public perceptions but also the inner emotional landscapes of those being portrayed. This distinctive focus bridges the gap between structural critiques of media representation and the lived emotional realities of Muslim women in Britain, adding a critical emotional dimension often overlooked in media and identity studies. By doing so, this research fills a critical gap by explicitly exploring how emotions mediate the relationship between media representation, identity, and lived experience. Through a qualitative methodological framework, I analysed the emotional dimension of misrepresentation, contributing to academic debates on identity, emotions, and media studies.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, I integrated theoretical perspectives on social identity, emotions, and coping mechanisms to examine how Muslim women resist and redefine narratives that seek to marginalise them. This approach highlights both the resilience and agency of Muslim women while critically examining the structural and emotional barriers they encounter.

This research is one of the first studies to explicitly centre the emotional impacts of media representations on Muslim women in Britain, bridging gaps in existing scholarship on Islamophobia, gender, and media. By exploring the interplay between identity, emotions, and representation, this thesis contributes to broader discussions on the need for inclusive and authentic portrayals in media. It emphasises the importance of amplifying Muslim women's voices, not only as subjects of representation but as active agents of change who challenge and transform the narratives that seek to define them.

This research highlights the rich diversity within Muslim communities in Britain, particularly among Muslim women. The participants expressed a wide range of perspectives on what constitutes positive representation, reflecting the profound heterogeneity within these communities. This variation emphasises the critical need to move beyond monolithic portrayals and acknowledge the multifaceted identities, experiences, and narratives that exist within Muslim communities.

8.3 Revisiting Research Questions (RQ)

RQ1: How do Muslim women perceive, engage with, and navigate different media portrayals of their identity?

RQ2: How do Muslim women think they should be represented?

A significant finding of this study was the participants' acute awareness of the media's role in perpetuating these stereotypes, leading to pervasive distrust that the participants expressed toward mainstream media. While previous studies have well-documented the Islamophobic framing of Muslim women (Poole 2002; Saeed 2007; Alsultany 2012), far less research has examined how Muslim women themselves critically engage with, interpret, and respond to these portrayals. This study contributes to the field by offering empirical evidence of Muslim women's perceptions of media misrepresentation and their active strategies for navigating these portrayals, expanding on Al-Saji's (2010) critique of media's instrumentalisation of Muslim women to uphold reductive binaries of "acceptable" versus "unacceptable" Muslim identities.

Participants consistently critiqued the lack of nuance in media portrayals, particularly the “good Muslim” archetype, which imposes narrow ideals of conformity to Western values and erases the diversity and complexity of Muslim identities (see Section 5.3.1).

Participants with academic or professional expertise in sociology, media studies, or psychology often extended their critiques to structural analyses, recognising how these portrayals are underpinned by systemic power dynamics. Their perspectives align with Kundnani’s (2014) exploration of how Islamophobic tropes in Western media reinforce broader social and political structures of exclusion.

Engagement with media was characterised by a critical and selective approach. Participants described varying strategies, including active disengagement from harmful narratives and seeking alternative, community-driven forms of representation. This pattern resonates with Beshara (2019) argument that community-driven media initiatives can serve as transformative tools in challenging dominant media narratives. For some participants, particularly those in professional or academic fields, their critique extended to advocacy for systemic change in media production. A striking reflection of media’s pervasive influence on participants’ daily lives was their choice of field of study or career, often driven by a desire to challenge the status quo and foster more accurate and inclusive representations of Muslims in the media. These women actively sought to address not only the immediate emotional toll of misrepresentation but also the broader structural issues that perpetuate exclusionary portrayals.

The emotional impact of these portrayals was a recurrent theme. Participants frequently described feelings of frustration and exhaustion in navigating media representations that erase their individuality. For example, the imposed “good Muslim” archetype was particularly

troubling for women who felt that their complex identities were reduced to conformist models designed to appeal to Western sensibilities.

The participants emphasised the need for authentic, diverse, and non-politicised representations of Muslim women. Unlike previous studies that have analysed how Muslims are framed in Western media (Morey and Yaqin 2011), this study directly incorporates Muslim women's perspectives on self-representation, revealing their desire for media narratives that reflect their lived realities rather than reductive tropes (see Section 7.5 on counter-narratives).

A key contribution of this research is the identification of the tension between visibility and agency. While participants valued representation, they were wary of tokenism and co-optation; where Muslim women are included in media narratives in ways that reinforce existing power structures rather than challenge them. This mirrors Mora's (2019) critique of how hijab fashion influencers simultaneously challenge and reproduce postfeminist beauty norms, raising questions about the commercialisation of Muslim identity. Similarly, participants in the present study advocated for portrayals that highlight the complexity and multiplicity of Muslim women's experiences, beyond Western assimilationist models or stereotypical victim narratives.

Ultimately, I argued that MWB's engagement with media is not passive but deeply critical and reflective. They navigate a complex media landscape by balancing disengagement from harmful narratives with active efforts to seek and support authentic representations. This finding has not been explicitly reported in the existing literature reviewed, although recent studies have explored how Muslim women resist and reclaim their identities both in online spaces (Hirji 2021) and in public (Khokhar 2022).

RQ3: How does media stigmatising visible Muslim women affect their emotional wellbeing?

Negative media portrayals significantly impact the emotional wellbeing of Muslim women, eliciting a range of complex and interconnected emotional responses such as anger, frustration, fear, and self-censorship. While previous research has explored media-driven Islamophobia's effect on public attitudes (Saleem and Ramasubramanian 2019), this study extends the discussion by examining the direct emotional consequences for Muslim women in Britain (see Section 6.3).

These responses are deeply tied to participants' collective identification as members of the Muslim community, amplifying their reactions to the persistent stigmatisation in media narratives. The anger and frustration experienced by participants stemmed from the dehumanising nature of stereotypes, which not only reduce their identities to simplistic archetypes like the "oppressed victim" or the "cultural threat" but also perpetuate societal biases that they must navigate daily. This frustration often led to feelings of disempowerment, as participants were confronted with a media landscape that repeatedly misrepresents their individuality and community, reflecting Ahmed's (2014) analysis of anger as a response to systemic marginalisation.

Fear was another recurring emotional response, arising from concerns over discrimination, hate crimes, and societal exclusion. This fear fostered a cycle of apprehension and withdrawal, where participants often chose to avoid public discourse or modify their behaviours to minimise exposure to bias. Such self-censorship, which emerged as a coping strategy, highlights the pervasive influence of media stigmatisation, as participants adjust

their actions to counteract societal prejudice while grappling with the psychological toll of being visibly Muslim in a hostile media environment (see section 7.2).

These emotional responses were not isolated but deeply collective, as participants described a shared burden of representation. The collective nature of their identity intensified their emotional reactions to negative portrayals, reinforcing group solidarity but also exacerbating feelings of isolation and anxiety. This aligns with Kunst et al.'s (2012) findings on the heightened emotional responses evoked by collective identity threats. Furthermore, the media's reinforcement of narrow and reductive stereotypes imposed a dual burden: resisting these stereotypes while navigating systemic discrimination.

This research contributes to the literature by demonstrating that emotional responses to media representation are not just personal reactions but deeply collective experiences that reinforce group solidarity while also exacerbating feelings of isolation and anxiety. This study also introduces new empirical evidence showing that media stigma extends beyond discourse to shape Muslim women's emotional wellbeing, decision-making, and social interactions.

RQ4: What strategies do Muslim women use to cope with negative representations?

Muslim women adopt multifaceted coping strategies, both individual and collective, to navigate and resist the negative impacts of stereotypical media portrayals. While previous studies have examined the effects of Islamophobia on Muslim communities (Zempi and Chakraborti 2015), this study contributes new insights into the specific strategies used by Muslim women to resist, reinterpret, and adapt to media bias (see Section 7.1 for an overview of coping strategies).

Individual strategies include social mobility and social creativity (individual). Social mobility involves strategies such as distancing from religious markers like the hijab or Islamic names to reduce stigmatisation and enhance social acceptance. For example, participants made decisions about their attire or their children's names to mitigate bias, but these choices did not necessarily equate to complete disidentification from their Muslim identity. Although this finding aligns with identity management literature (Hopkins 2011) this study highlights the unique challenges of hyper-visibility that complicate complete disengagement with social group.

Social creativity emerged through techniques like acceptance and avoidance. Acceptance was observed in participants who chose not to engage with media representations, strategically reframing their focus to minimise emotional distress and preserve their psychological wellbeing. Previous research has identified that news avoidance is often driven by emotional motives, with individuals disengaging from media content as a means to reduce stress, anxiety, and frustration associated with negative or biased portrayals (Gorski 2023). This aligns with findings that selective disengagement serves as a coping mechanism, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of control over their media exposure and avoid the cumulative emotional burden of consuming distressing content. Additionally, avoidance was expressed through both physical and emotional withdrawal from hostile environments, with participants choosing to leave stigmatising workplaces or, in some cases, relocate to different countries to escape discrimination. This aligns with Zempi and Chakraborti's (2015) findings, which demonstrate that visibly Muslim women, particularly those wearing the niqab, frequently withdrew from public spaces or modified their behaviour to reduce their exposure to Islamophobic abuse.

Collectively, strategies grounded in social competition emphasised strengthening group identity and advocating for representation. Participants consolidated their religious identity through activism, charity work, and visible expressions of their Muslim identity, such as wearing the hijab. Despite facing familial resistance, participants like Rewan demonstrated resilience in affirming their faith publicly. Others leveraged their professional roles to influence representation politics, challenging stereotypes and advocating for policy changes. Social competition strategies, such as activism, advocacy, and faith-based resilience, align with prior research on countering Islamophobia (Khokhar 2022), but this study adds depth by illustrating how Muslim women use their careers, digital platforms, and community networks as tools for resistance (see Section 7.4).

Community and spiritual support were also critical. Participants found solace in prayer and meditation, using these practices to foster resilience and emotional balance. Faith-based communities provided a network of solidarity, enabling participants to navigate discrimination and reinforce their sense of belonging. However, internal biases within the Muslim community, such as judgments based on appearance or adherence to cultural norms, added an additional layer of complexity. This intra-group discrimination highlighted tensions between cultural and religious identities.

Ultimately, these coping strategies highlight the resilience and agency of Muslim women in Britain. While negative portrayals provoke significant emotional distress, the participants in this study navigated these challenges through adaptive responses that emphasise individual self-esteem, collective solidarity, and proactive advocacy for representation and change. These findings not only reflect the dynamic interplay of identity, faith, and community but also stress the urgent need for more nuanced and inclusive media portrayals of Muslim women.

Overall, this study makes a significant contribution by shifting the focus from how Muslim women are represented to how they actively respond to, critique, and reshape media narratives. Unlike previous studies that have primarily quantified negative portrayals, this research highlights the agency, resilience, and strategic engagement of Muslim women in navigating media landscapes.

By focusing on the lived experience of Muslim women in Britain, this study also provides a nuanced understanding of how Muslim women's emotional and social responses to media representation function at individual, community, and institutional levels. These findings emphasise the need for future studies to move beyond structural critiques and focus on exploring the lived experiences and resistance strategies of Muslim women.

8.4 *Limitations*

This research was conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown, which profoundly influenced the study's methodology and participant recruitment process. The pandemic necessitated online interviews instead of face-to-face interactions, creating both opportunities and challenges.

8.4.1 Methodological Constraints

One significant advantage of conducting online interviews was the ability to engage with participants from geographically diverse locations, including Wales, Scotland and England. This broadened the study's geographic reach, enabling the inclusion of a wider range of narratives that would have been difficult to access through in-person interviews. However, online interaction also presented notable challenges. Given that the research centred on participants' emotional experiences, the inability to capture non-verbal cues such as facial

expressions, body language, and tone variations limited the depth of emotional interpretation. This constraint became particularly apparent when one participant opted for an email interview, and another chose to keep her camera off despite reassurances that only audio would be recorded. As a result, some interactions were less immersive than anticipated, though the adaptability required to navigate these challenges highlighted the study's resilience in unprecedented circumstances.

8.4.2 Recruitment Limitations

The pandemic also necessitated an entirely online recruitment process, restricting the reach of the participant call to individuals with access to social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (now X). This reliance on social media inherently narrowed the recruitment pool to individuals already engaged with digital platforms, potentially excluding Muslim women from communities with limited internet access or those less active on social media. Additionally, the recruitment process was largely limited to my immediate social circle and their extended networks, which further constrained the sample's diversity.

My original recruitment strategy included visiting mosques, community centres, and Muslim organisations, aiming to engage with a broader, more representative participant pool.

However, pandemic-related restrictions rendered this plan infeasible. Consequently, the final participant sample featured a notable proportion of academically advantaged individuals, many of whom had professional or educational backgrounds in fields such as media, sociology, and policy studies. While this enriched the data with analytically insightful and critically aware perspectives, it also narrowed the range of lived experiences captured in the study. The sample underrepresented voices from less academically privileged backgrounds,

which could have offered different perspectives on media engagement, emotional responses, and coping mechanisms.

8.5 Future Methodological Considerations

To address these limitations, I suggest that future research should adopt a multi-method recruitment strategy, combining online and in-person engagement through community centres, mosques, and local events. Expanding beyond social media recruitment would ensure a more socioeconomically and educationally diverse participant pool, thereby strengthening the representational breadth and depth of the findings. Additionally, obtaining consent to record interviews using both audio and visual means; whether conducted online or in person, could provide valuable opportunities to analyse non-verbal emotional cues, such as facial expressions and gestures. This approach would enhance the depth of emotional and experiential analysis in participants' narratives.

8.6 Future Recommendations

The emotional toll of media misrepresentation calls for an ambitious, transformative, and multi-faceted approach to addressing Islamophobic portrayals of Muslim women in the UK. Without significant reform, these narratives will continue to perpetuate cycles of exclusion and marginalisation, damaging the psychological and social wellbeing of Muslim women. The following recommendations outline areas for future research, policy innovation, and practical interventions to create a more equitable and inclusive media landscape.

The findings of this study highlight the urgent need to foster nuanced and authentic portrayals of Muslim women that reflect their diverse identities and lived experiences. Future research could explore how media representations evolve over time, particularly in response to

societal shifts, technological advancements, and political changes. These studies should go beyond measuring surface-level improvements to assess whether efforts to promote positive portrayals lead to substantive change or merely reframe stereotypes in ways that remain reductive and harmful. For instance, examining portrayals in emerging platforms like TikTok could reveal how new media trends influence representation.

A key area for further investigation is the role of organisations like the Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM) in challenging Islamophobic narratives and promoting accountability in media reporting. Established by the Muslim Council of Britain, CfMM systematically monitors and analyses media content to identify biased, inaccurate, or stereotypical portrayals of Islam and Muslims across print, broadcast, and online platforms. The organisation not only publishes evidence-based reports but also engages in constructive dialogue with media professionals and offers training to promote fair and responsible journalism. Future research might evaluate the impact of CfMM's interventions on journalistic practices, public opinion, and newsroom culture. This includes examining how CfMM's findings are integrated into editorial decision-making and whether their initiatives inspire a long-term commitment to diversity and inclusion in reporting. Collaborative projects between CfMM and major UK news outlets could serve as case studies, showcasing how accountability mechanisms influence the media landscape.

Community-led media ventures have immense potential to counter stereotypes and redefine representation. Initiatives led by Muslim women could challenge dominant narratives while fostering empowerment and self-representation. Research could investigate how such projects resonate with wider audiences and whether they inspire shifts in mainstream media practices. Funding and policy support for these initiatives, through public grants or partnerships with media organisations, are vital to ensure their sustainability and reach.

The increasing diversity within Muslim communities in the UK demands greater scholarly and public attention. Future research should investigate how different subgroups, such as Black Muslim women and Muslim women with disabilities, experience and respond to media misrepresentation. These voices, often underrepresented in academic research and public discourse, are essential to understanding the full spectrum of challenges faced by Muslim women. Intersectional studies could illuminate how overlapping identities shape unique experiences of exclusion and discrimination, offering insights for more inclusive representation.

Policy-oriented research is crucial for addressing the structural dimensions of Islamophobia in media. Studies could evaluate the effectiveness of existing regulatory frameworks, such as those enforced by Ofcom, in mitigating discriminatory content. Additionally, research might assess the impact of anti-discrimination policies on increasing the representation of Muslim women in media production and leadership roles. Future policy recommendations could include mandatory diversity audits for media organisations and incentives for hiring and promoting Muslim women in decision-making positions.

Understanding how Muslim women consume, interpret, and respond to media narratives is essential for driving meaningful and transformative change. Employing methods such as digital ethnography or content analysis to examine online interactions and reviews of existing portrayals of Muslim women could yield invaluable insights into how they engage with media content, whether as active consumers, critical observers, or creators of alternative narratives. Audience-focused research could further illuminate the coping strategies that are most effective in mitigating the emotional and psychological toll of Islamophobic portrayals, shedding light on mechanisms of resilience and resistance within the community. Such

findings could also serve as a foundation for designing targeted media literacy programmes

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tailored specifically for Muslim women. These programmes would not only provide tools to critically navigate and deconstruct harmful narratives but also empower participants to contribute to more authentic and inclusive representations, thereby fostering both individual and collective agency in reshaping media discourses.

Envisioning a future where Muslim women are not merely represented but celebrated as architects of their own narratives requires bold collective action across research, policy, and practice. Scholars must expand the scope of inquiry to address the systemic roots of Islamophobia in media, while policymakers and organisations like CfMM must work collaboratively to hold media accountable. Media creators, empowered by community-driven initiatives, have the opportunity to redefine storytelling and centre Muslim women's voices as agents of change.

These recommendations challenge the status quo and inspire transformative progress. They call for a media landscape that genuinely reflects the complexity, diversity, and richness of Muslim women's identities. By fostering equitable and authentic representation, we can disrupt the cycles of exclusion and create a society where all voices are valued, heard, and celebrated.

8.7 Conclusion

Overall, my thesis has demonstrated the profound emotional impact of media misrepresentation on Muslim women in Britain, while also showcasing their resilience and agency in navigating and resisting these harmful portrayals. The findings not only highlight the emotional toll, including anger, frustration, fear, and self-censorship provoked by dehumanising stereotypes, but also underline the broader implications for media reform and

academic inquiry. They emphasise the strength of collective identity and the protective role of community solidarity as vital mechanisms for coping and resistance.

Moreover, the coping strategies employed by participants, ranging from individual acts of resistance to collective activism, reveal a nuanced and multidimensional response to systemic discrimination. These efforts show the limitations of existing media narratives and the urgent need for reform to challenge Islamophobic stereotypes, amplify authentic representations, and provide spaces where Muslim women can shape their own narratives. By connecting these findings to the broader context, this research advocates for the role of academic and practical interventions in fostering inclusive media reform.

I believe that change, while gradual, is inevitable. The Muslim community in Britain is growing rapidly, comprising a young, dynamic, and ambitious population. Its inherent diversity is not just a challenge to stereotypes but also a powerful asset that can be leveraged to empower Muslim women. This diversity fosters a wealth of perspectives and experiences that are increasingly reflected in bold, multifaceted self-representations on social media platforms. According to the 2021 Census, for the first time, more than half of the Muslim population in Britain was born in the UK rather than migrating from elsewhere. This demographic shift will further shape Muslim communities, as the British context increasingly becomes the only one many individuals have ever known. These emerging narratives, often diverse and unapologetically authentic, demonstrate the capacity of MWB to redefine their identities on their own terms.

It is my conviction that this change will soon extend beyond digital spaces and influence traditional media platforms, reshaping mainstream narratives to include more inclusive and nuanced portrayals. By recognising the agency of Muslim women and building on their

resilience, we can envision a media environment that not only reflects the richness and diversity of their identities but also challenges the systemic inequalities that perpetuate their marginalisation. Through continued research, advocacy, and dialogue, these transformative efforts can lead to a future where Muslim women are celebrated as active agents of change rather than constrained by the limitations of reductive media narratives.

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Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Main themes for discussion:

1. Nature of relationship between Muslim women in Britain and Media
2. Stigma and emotional health
3. Generational differences

QUESTIONS

- 1) Nature of relationship between Muslim women in Britain and Media
 - a) How do you choose your most preferable form of media? Do you use different forms for entertainment/information?
 - b) How would you describe your relationship with media in general?
 - c) Do you usually trust media? What forms of media do you think are the most reliable sources of information?
 - d) When I say Muslim women and media what or who comes to your mind first?
 - e) Who is your favourite Muslim woman on international Media?
 - f) What do you think of this woman's image on media?
 - g) Can you think of a Muslim woman character or representation on any type of media that you did not like?
 - h) Why you did not like it?
 - i) in what way you generally see Muslim women represented? what do you think is the most common representation of a Muslim woman on western media?
 - j) What do you think it takes from a Muslim woman to be on British media?
 - k) How would you describe the relationship of British media with Muslims?
 - l) What do you think of the way Muslim women are portrayed generally?
 - m) Is there any difference between those who wear hijab and those who don't in terms of representation?

n) What is the ideal image of a Muslim woman that you would like to see on media?

2) Stigma and emotional health

- a) Do images that circulate in the media impact on your everyday life as a Muslim woman in the UK? In which ways? How does this make you feel?
- b) Have you ever experienced stigma because of your faith or stereotypes about Muslim women? How do you cope with/responds to this?
- c) Is there any impacts on your wellbeing?
- d) Who do you think media focuses on the most Muslim women wearing hijab or the ones who don't?
- e) How can you explain that?
- f) Who, in your opinion, is more representative of Islam in western media?
- g) Do you think that hijab makes you more visible? How?
- h) How does media representation contribute to your decision of wearing it or not wearing it?
- i) Can you tell me how do you feel when you wear hijab in a public space?
- j) How does wearing hijab affect your daily life at work/study...etc?
- k) Does wearing hijab make your life harder?
- l) Did you consider taking off hijab?
- m) For non hijabies: did you consider wearing it? what prevented you from doing it?

3) Generational differences

follow up on earlier questions with additional points to pick up on generations:

- a) Are your views on wearing the hijab the same as those of your mother/daughter/younger-older relatives?

- b) Do you engage with the same or different forms of media than your mother/daughter/younger-older relatives?

- c) What do you think of the way Muslim women are portrayed generally? Do you think this has changed over time? Has it got worse or better? How is it different?

Appendix 2: Call for Participants

Muslim Women in Britain needed for a PhD project at Cardiff university studying:

The Effects of Media Representations on Muslim Women's Emotional Health in Britain

For this project, I will be interviewing Muslim women from all ethnic backgrounds, aged above 18 years old and living in Britain.

The Participants will be asked to select three images representing Muslim women on any (social) media platform to discuss during the interviews.

The interviews will be conducted online via Zoom (or skype if preferred).

This Project has received Ethical Approval from the Ethical Committee at Cardiff University.

For further information or to take part please contact:
**Radja Bouchama, PhD researcher at Cardiff University,
School of Social Sciences**

Email: Bouchamar@cardiff.ac.uk



Appendix 3: Ethical Approval Letter



School of Social Sciences
Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol
Head of School, Pennaeth yr Ysgol
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28 January 2021

Our ref: SREC/4065

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Dear Radja,

Your project entitled '*The Effects of Media Representations on Visible Muslim women's Emotional Health in Britain*' has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project should all necessary forms of approval been received.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

All ongoing projects will be monitored and you will be obliged periodically to complete and return a SREC monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Professor Emma Renold
Chair of School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee



Appendix 4: Participants Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Media Representation of Muslim Women in Britain

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being undertaken and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others, if you wish.

Thank you for reading this.

1. What is the purpose of this research project?

This student led research project aims to examine the experiences of Muslim women in Britain in relation to media portrayals and to give an insight on how these portrayals may impact women's emotional health and wellbeing.

2. Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part in this research because you are a Muslim woman who lives in Britain, and you are over the age of 18.

3. Do I have to take part?

No, your participation in this research project is entirely voluntary and it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part, I will discuss the research project with you and ask you to sign a consent form. If you decide not to take part, you do not have to explain your reasons and it will not affect your legal rights. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate in the research project at any time, without giving a reason, even after signing the consent form.

4. What will taking part involve?

If you decide to take part in this research project, you will receive an e-mail from the researcher with a link to join an online meeting via Zoom at a pre-arranged date and time. You will be required to download the Zoom app, if you do not already have this on your device. When you click on the link to join the meeting, you will be able to see the researcher and the interview will be conducted in real time and include visual contact (you will be able to see and hear the researcher, and the researcher will be able to see and hear you). Before the interview, the researcher will ask you to select three images of Muslim women in Media and to bring them with you to the interview in order to discuss them with the researcher. The interviews may take from 60 to 90 minutes and will be audio-recorded. Both the audio-recordings and the images will be stored securely on Cardiff University servers following the university rules and regulations of research confidentiality.

5. Will I be paid for taking part?

No. You should understand that your participation is optional and any data you give will be offered voluntarily and you will not benefit financially.

6. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Although there will be no direct advantages or benefits to you from taking part in this research, your contribution will help to understand Muslim women's experiences in relation to media and how their emotional wellbeing is implicated.

7. What are the possible risks of taking part?

Due to the nature of this research, you are involved in, it is possible that the interviews may evoke upsetting experiences or events. Should this situation arise, the interview will be stopped.

All participants' names will be anonymised, and any person, place, or organisation mentioned in the interviews will also be anonymised. Any queries about the study are welcome at any stage.

8. Will my taking part in this research project be kept confidential?

All information produced with you during the research project will be kept confidential and any personal information you provide will be managed in accordance with data protection legislation. Please see 'What will happen to my Personal Data?' (below) for further information. Throughout the research, participants will be assured anonymity and confidentiality; unless in the circumstances of intention of serious crime or potential harm to the participants and/or others is uncovered, the researcher will be legally and professionally obliged to override confidentiality and make a disclosure to the relevant agencies. Where appropriate, the research team will aim to notify you of the need to break confidentiality (but this may not be appropriate in all cases).

9. What will happen to my Personal Data?

All personal and non-anonymised information you provide such as name, address, email address, date of birth, interview recordings, photographs or attributable quotes will be kept strictly confidential in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Cardiff University is the Data Controller and is committed to respecting and protecting your personal data in accordance with your expectations and Data Protection legislation. Further information about Data Protection, including:

- your rights
- the legal basis under which Cardiff University processes your personal data for research
- Cardiff University's Data Protection Policy
- how to contact the Cardiff University Data Protection Officer
- how to contact the Information Commissioner's Office

may be found at <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/public-information/policies-and-procedures/data-protection> Research data will be anonymised as quickly as possible after data collection so that individuals cannot be identified and your privacy is protected; with the exception of your consent form and interview recordings.

Your consent form, actual interview recordings and any identifying photographs will be retained **for no less than 5 years or at least 2 years post-publication and then destroyed in accordance with GDPR**. Anonymised information will be kept for a minimum of 5 years but may be published in support of the research project and/or retained indefinitely, where it is likely to have continuing value for research purposes. In addition to this, data that generated through interactions with you as part of the research activity, also your personal data within project governance documentation and records of any communications with you through email or letter will be retained for audit purposes even if you decide not to take part or withdraw from participation at a later date.

10. What will happen to the results of the research project?

The findings from this study will contribute towards a PhD thesis in Social Sciences. Elements of this may be published in academic journals and presented at conferences. Participants will not be identified in any report, publication or presentation and any quotes used in this research will be completely anonymised.

11. What if there is a problem?

If you wish to raise a query, concern or complaint, you can contact the researcher: Radja Bouchama (Email: Bouchamar@cardiff.ac.uk). In case you feel that your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you may contact the research supervisors (contact details are provided below).

If you have any queries or concerns about how your personal data will be used during the research project you can contact the University Data Protection Officer and the Information Commissioner's Office at: nforequest@cardiff.ac.uk

12. Who is organising and funding this research project?

The research is organised by the PhD student Radja Bouchama, under the supervision of Dr. Dawn Mannay from the School of Social Sciences, and Dr. Michael Munnik from the School of History, Archaeology and Religion in Cardiff University. The research is fully funded by the Algerian government as part of a scholarship programme organised and funded by the Ministry of Higher Education in Algeria.

13. Who has reviewed this research project?

This research project has been reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Cardiff University.

14. Further information and contact details

Should you have any questions relating to this research project, you may contact the researcher during normal working hours:

Radja Bouchama

Email: Bouchamar@cardiff.ac.uk

For more information about this study, you can also contact the supervisors:

1. Dr. Dawn Mannay **Email:** Mannaydi@cardiff.ac.uk
2. Dr. Michael Munnik **Email:** Munnikm@cardiff.ac.uk

Thank you for considering to take part in this research project. If you decide to participate, you will be given a copy of the Participant Information Sheet and a signed consent form to keep for your records.

Appendix 5: Consent Form

Cardiff School of Social Sciences

Cardiff University

1-3 Museum Place

CF10 3BD

Radja Bouchama

PhD Candidate

Email: Bouchamar@cardiff.ac.uk



Obtaining informed consent from research participants via email

Please read the statements below. If you are happy with all of the statements, please copy and paste them into an email and send it to me at Bouchamar@cardiff.ac.uk. This will be considered to constitute giving your consent to participate in the study.

If you have any questions about the research or the statements below, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the study entitled: **The effects of Media Representation on Muslim Women's Emotional Health in Britain**. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at **any time**, ☐

without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty. ☐

- 2. I understand what will happen to my data.
- 3. I give the researcher(s) permission to **interview and audio record me**.
- 4. I give permission for the researcher(s) to quote me directly **anonymously**.
- 5. I give permission for the researcher(s) to re-contact me to clarify information.
- 6. I am happy to take part in the research.

☐☐☐☐

Signature of Participant (write your name):

Date: