**Title: The blame game: A thematic analysis of Islamophobic tweets during the COVID-19 pandemic.**


## Abstract

There is a sincere concern regarding the spread of Islamophobia, both online and offline. Events like COVID-19 fuelled more Islamophobic fake news and conspiracy theories online. The current research used data from 1,000 Twitter comments. It examined Islamophobia on Twitter during COVID-19. A thematic analysis was utilised to find key themes in the shared content. Four main themes emerged: (1) Muslims are COVID-19 super spreaders; (2) Muslims are getting special treatment during COVID-19; (3) Hindus are corona warriors against Islam; (4) COVID-19 originated from the Quran. This research provides theoretical explanations for the pandemic-related content on Twitter. It also comments on the differing impacts of anonymity on the emergence of potentially harmful content. We recommend several strategies to reduce Islamophobia and potentially harmful content online. This includes adding a button to report misinformation, adopting soft verification, and installing a tiered warning system.



**Keywords:** Islamophobia, COVID-19, fake news, misinformation, Muslims, Islam


## Introduction

The internet allows individuals to interact with others of similar mindsets (Bliuc et al., 2018). Research outlines that extreme far-right groups provide a means for individuals to satisfy their need for belonging (Borum, 2014) by providing a transnational community online (Bliuc et al., 2018; De Koster and Houtman, 2008). Forums provide a space for in-groups to validate extremist ideologies by facilitating interactions between individuals holding similar ideologies (Bliuc et al., 2021). Individuals are influenced by confirmation bias (Hogg et al., 2013) and gravitate towards online echo chambers (Bessi, 2016). These online, polarised communities provide content that corroborates the individual's attitudes and beliefs. Incorrect information that supports a group's beliefs is likely to be accepted, whereas correct information that runs contrary to the group's beliefs is likely to be dismissed (Bessi, 2016; Borum, 2014). The echo chamber effect can be exacerbated by characteristics of right-wing ideologies, specifically concerning the distrust of government (Costello et al., 2016). Right-wing individuals tend to hold anti-government attitudes, which can lead to the increased likelihood of exposure to extremist material online as they seek out supportive attitudes, of which there is an abundance online (Costello et al., 2016). Grounded in social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), it is likely that individuals who hold anti-government sentiments inevitably gravitate towards each other, adopting and amplifying their ideologies and increasing the likelihood of further exposure to extremist material (Costello et al., 2016).

The psychological vulnerabilities associated with extremism include the need for meaning, the need for belonging, and a sense of perceived injustice (Borum, 2014). Fulfilling these needs allows individuals to stabilise their sense of personal identity (Borum, 2014) and reduce feelings of uncertainty associated with the sense of self (Hogg and Adelman, 2013). The strong ideologies articulated by extremist groups can mitigate this type of uncertainty (Hogg et al., 2013). The need for belonging reflects the social nature of humans and the motivation to form and maintain social relationships (Baumeister et al., 2007). The fear of

exclusion may motivate individuals to join extremist groups, not because of any affinity with the ideology but to gain a sense of community (Borum, 2014; De Koster and Houtman, 2008). Therefore, the process of radicalisation may have its roots in social rather than ideological groundings (Borum, 2014).

In an online context, the attacking of a particular group online may increase the sense of belonging to their in-group. Indeed, Awan et al. (2019) found evidence to suggest feelings of pride are often evoked in online messages towards the individual's group identity, but anger and disgust towards out-groups. Relating to this, Stankov (2018) outlined characteristics of an extremist mindset that included social attitudes such as religiosity. Religiosity reflects beliefs in the existence of divine entities and the importance of religion in society (Stankov and Lee, 2016). Given that some users online might consider belief in certain systems as mutually exclusive to belief in others, this could lead to the creation of definitions that distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, with Islam being classified as the out-group.

According to Bastick (2021), the spread of misinformation on social media can impact the unconscious attitudes of individuals whose responses can be affected by manipulation and the causality of truth. Even minimal exposure to fake news can modify the unconscious behaviour of individuals (Bastick, 2021). Anderau (2021) argues that fake news is not new but has become more dangerous due to its widespread nature online.

In 1997, the publication of the Runnymede Trust report entitled Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All was the first report to raise awareness about the problem of Islamophobia in the UK. It defined Islamophobia as "the shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims" (Runnymede Trust, 1997: 1). According to Awan and Zempi (2020), Islamophobia is: "A fear, prejudice and hatred of Muslims or non-Muslim individuals that leads to provocation, hostility and intolerance by means of threatening, harassment, abuse, incitement and intimidation of Muslims and non-Muslims, both in the online and offline world. 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". The significance of this definition is twofold: firstly, it emphasises the link between institutional levels of Islamophobia and the manifestations of such attitudes triggered by the visibility of the victim's (perceived) Muslim identity. Secondly, this approach also interprets Islamophobia as being an online phenomenon and thus encapsulates and reaffirms our findings concerning the exponential growth and trigger for Islamophobia on social media during the COVID-19 crisis.

Racism is dynamic and organised; it can be embedded online and offline and be a structured form of social control (Feagin, 2006). According to Feagin (2006), racism has five key attributes: racial hierarchy, racial framing, collective and individual discrimination, racial inequalities, and, finally, racist institutions. Systemic racism "is not a matter of a few rotten apples"; it is a form of historical abuse and oppression that has become pervasive in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2021: 521).

Racism captures structural inequalities that persist. During the pandemic, Muslims faced socio-economic and political disadvantages and were subject to Islamophobia and racial stereotypes from institutions like the health service. Alexander (2017) argues such anti-Muslim discourses are built upon racist Orientalist ideas that hinge upon post-war mass migration where Muslims suffered from racist stereotypes that branded them as 'coloured' migrants. The failure of legislation to define Islamophobia as a form of racism has rendered Muslim citizens essentially invisible within the criminal justice system (Tyrer, 2008). The ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 5 (revised) on preventing and combating anti-

Muslim racism (2021) specifically calls the discrimination and exclusion of Muslims a new form of racism. Carr and Haynes (2015) argue that the state needs to address the issues of 'whiteness' and anti-Muslim racism to prevent Muslims from being excluded and racialised.

Muslims have been labelled as lacking 'purity of blood' because they did not possess 'pure Christian blood'. This ideology can be traced back to notions of Muslims being seen as biologically inferior to white Europeans (Mielants and Grosfoguel, 2006). Ideas around race and whiteness are linked back to the imperialist European process whereby racial categories were assigned to individuals, a process inherently based on race-making classifications of humans based on biological characteristics (Selod and Embrick, 2013). Omi and Winant (1986) believe the definition of race is, therefore, tied to racial classifications as a process of racial formation whereby racial categories are formed and transformed. Muslims are assigned this hierarchical system whereby white Europeans are at the top, and other groups, such as Muslims, are at the bottom. The process of whiteness helps to ascribe a set characteristic based on physical and cultural attributes. As Garner and Selod (2015) note, this is not limited to skin pigmentation but includes cultural traits such as clothing and language. This means that the process of whiteness can be based not just on physical appearances but also on older forms of biological racism. Islamophobia, therefore, becomes a specific form of racism because Muslims are targeted in a way that has racialised them.

In the post-9/11 climate, Muslims are seen as dangerous and a threat to Western values and norms. Muslims are characterised as being violent and are inherently linked to terrorism, misogyny, and fundamentalism (Garner and Selod, 2015). The physical markers linked to Islam mean that Muslims, who are seen as visibly identifiable because of their clothing or appearance, are more susceptible to hate crimes both online and offline.

The insights presented here outline the range of impacts that Muslims have experienced and how the pandemic has perpetuated racial stereotypes and Islamophobia both online and offline. The mismanagement of COVID-19 impacted Muslim groups during the national lockdown, meaning many were unable to attend religious services until restrictions were lifted. This impacted social aspects of religious observance; this went beyond praying individually but also affected the social function normally experienced as part of collective worship during religious festivals. The mishandling of COVID-19 also impacted mosques, which had to respond to changes in restrictions, which posed challenges for the community and was met with concern regarding how far individuals feel able to observe their faith within a safe space. These experiences appear to have invariably emerged as part of the wider challenge of navigating faith and worship, which has been distinctive for Muslims in the context of the pandemic.

**Group Polarization**

Group polarisation is the process through which the views of a group over time become more extreme or polarised (Isenberg, 1986). This process can be attributed to members of a group attempting to conform to the ideal or stereotypical member identity or behaviour, which in turn results in more polarised or exaggerated behaviours. This involves an element of social comparison. A group member might compare their attitude or position to the group's average and then adjust to be closer to the group position. If enough people do this, the group average will also shift, becoming gradually more extreme and, in turn, pull along the positions of individual members (Mackie and Cooper, 1984).

With group polarisation, there are other factors to consider, such as confirmation bias (only sharing or seeking information that confirms the attitudes held) - as well as the use of increasingly extreme persuasive arguments to protect or defend the currently held attitudes

(Van Swol, 2009). This can act like the formation of an echo chamber where only attitudes or position-confirming information and arguments are shared, and individuals attempt to move their position closer to that of the group (Sieber and Ziegler, 2019). When the scale and cohesiveness of the group become greater, individual responsibility becomes diffused, which leads to riskier and more extreme decisions and behaviours (Bramson et al., 2016). In the case of extremist or Islamophobic groups, this polarisation is certainly possible and would explain the hardening or adoption of more extreme attitudes and behaviours over time.

**Social Comparison Theory**

Relevant to the discussion regarding the presence of Islamophobia online is the social comparison theory. This theory underpins the idea that individuals actively engage in making subjective comparisons with other people around them and that this is done in the absence of objective information about norms and standards (Festinger, 1954). It has since been argued that these subjective social comparisons can occur when objective information is available (Cash, 2012). It is also suggested that individuals are motivated to engage in social comparison for self-improvement and self-enhancement, not just for self-evaluations (Wood, 1989). When discussing the presence of Islamophobia, the process of downward evaluations is particularly relevant. In traditional discussions, it is assumed that downward comparisons lead to a positive self-evaluation, where an individual's selection of a comparison target is linked to specific motivations for the comparison (Alicke, 2007; Cash, 2012; Festinger, 1954). In theory, downward comparisons are typically used when an individual wishes to boost their positive self-regard, this may occur when an individual is under threat and is used as a defence tendency. By making lateral comparisons against less fortunate and upward contacts, the process of downward evaluating can boost one's self-esteem (Taylor and Lobel, 1989).

Whilst the discussions surrounding the mechanisms of social comparison focus greatly on an individual's process to enhance self-confidence and self-esteem, this theory can be further applied to group behaviour. Groups may attempt to present and compare other 'out-groups' as being of lower value and associate them with negative qualities to portray themselves as having higher value or being more worthy. Research highlights how social media users have demonstrated this type of behaviour; far-right users have been found to depict Muslims as a dangerous, untruthful out-group and refer to them as dirt and filth (Copsey et al., 2013). This content online is closely aligned with messages that also suggest that Muslims are a threat to our way of life and that they are manipulative and dishonest (Oboler, 2013). Elements of downward evaluation are evident in these messages, presenting Muslims as dishonest and manipulative ensures that those spreading such content are, in contrast, presented as being trustworthy, honest, and credible. Such behaviour online allows the reinforcement of prejudices and marginalisation towards Muslims.

**Social Identity Deindividuation Effects and Anonymity**

The role of relative anonymity and the Social Identity Deindividuation Effect (SIDE) explains a contributing factor to more disinhibited or extreme behaviour in online settings. Social Identity Theory states that we may adopt different identities for different groups and situations (Abrams and Hogg, 1988). SIDE is when this group identity becomes so strong as to replace individual identity as a priority. Individuals become less identifiable; they feel less responsible as individuals, and the importance of their attitudes and judgements becomes secondary to that of the attitudes and position of the group (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). When this occurs, individual behaviour becomes less inhibited and more extreme and can include behaviour that might be harmful, illegal or against social norms (outside that of the group).

An individual within an extremist group may engage in more extreme behaviour due to this diffusion of responsibility and deindividuation (Reicher et al., 1995).

This can be further heightened by the role of anonymity, with online spaces having greater allowances and affordances for relative anonymity (Lea et al., 2001). When an individual's identity becomes less prominent, the group identity becomes more prominent, leading to disinhibition and the adoption of potentially more extreme group attitudes, norms and behaviours (Marx, 1999). A member of an extremist group may view the group's identity and needs as more important than their norms and standards. They may feel less identifiable and, thus, safer from reprisals. As they strive in comparison (see discussion about polarisation) to become a more typical member of the group, this could lead to increasingly risky and extreme behaviour.

## Rationale

The current research aimed to provide a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the Islamophobic-related tweets disseminated on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a trigger event, which led to widespread COVID-19-related fake news, misinformation, and Islamophobia on social media. Research is required to address the factors behind Islamophobia (Sufi and Yasmin, 2022). To address this, the current research explored the Islamophobic narratives on Twitter during the pandemic and provides potential theoretical explanations for the different types of narratives. This research provides crucial recommendations for strategies that could help to reduce the type of hate and misinformation about Muslims on social media. It also addresses areas for future research.

## Method

### Design

This was a qualitative exploration of 1,000 Islamophobic and COVID-19-related tweets taken from a pool of 100 users who disseminated COVID-19 misinformation, fake news narratives, and Islamophobia. This was a sub-set of data from a larger previously collected sample (Awan et al., 2023). A thematic analysis was conducted to reveal the anti-Muslim rhetoric during the pandemic.

### Participants

The data set utilised for this study was generated using the previously manually collected tweets (Awan et al., 2023) to create a rich and detailed subset of 1,000 tweets for more in-depth qualitative analysis. For qualitative research designs such as this, the number of participants is based on the level of data saturation. Data saturation commonly indicates that based on data that has already been collected, any further data collection would be unnecessary (Saunders et al., 2018) and would fail to produce any distinguishable new data (Sargeant, 2012). For this study, a target and a total of 1,000 tweets were selected from the original data set, as this was a volume of tweets that should ensure saturation without the need to selectively revisit the larger dataset.

### Procedure

This research sifted through over 100k previously collected tweets (Awan et al., 2023) to develop a data sample of 1,000 tweets. This sample was systematically generated by adopting a previous operationalisation method involving the use of a pre-defined word list (Awan et

al., 2019) containing 19 extreme words such as banislam and islamistheproblem. This word list was produced based on previous research that explored the impact of trigger events and their effect on online extremism (Awan et al., 2019). This aided in the identification of relevant tweets to ensure that the data was successfully saturated per the current research topic. The final 1,000 selected tweets were the most representative in terms of the volume of Islamophobic keywords from the previously cited lists. This data set of 1,000 tweets was then utilised to perform a content analysis.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen to elucidate major themes that were evident in the data. This was conducted using the Braun and Clarke (2006; 2014) guidelines and stages. A thematic analysis was appropriate for this study as it provides a highly flexible approach that could be altered to suit the needs of the research whilst providing rich and detailed as well as trustworthy and insightful findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

## Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitive nature of collecting online data, all data was collected in accordance with the British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidance for internet-mediated research (BPS, 2021). The data collected and utilised for this research was within the public domain, from public Twitter accounts. As a result, informed consent was not collected – by posting online, Twitter users have consented to their data being accessible to the public. Details of the Twitter users were protected, they were stored confidentially and have not been disclosed as part of any findings.

## Findings

### Muslims are COVID-19 Super Spreaders

Evident in the comments were strong messages explicating that Muslims were COVID-19 super spreaders. Comments suggested that the origin and subsequent spread of COVID-19 could be traced back to Muslims. One of the key targets of blame amongst Muslims was the Tablighi Jamaat.

*"…Bro, to see him you need to open your eyes first and instead of wasting time here why can't you ask question to the maulana of #NizamuddinMarkaz Just because of #TabhleegiJamaat 189 people came covid-19 positive and few reports r yet to come. #TablighJamaat #TablighSuperSpreader."*

Related to this dominant theme is the discussion around the tactics that Muslims used to spread COVID-19. Users employed terminology to describe these tactics; these included terms such as 'coronajihad', highlighting the attempt to associate COVID-19 with the term 'jihad'. These comments referred to Muslims who were spitting on food and elucidated how Muslims were celebrating the spread of COVID-19.

*"…Can't you see the PEOPLE CELEBRATING? This event celebrated the success of #CoronaJehad .And yes, they really deserve it. Afterall, much effort was put behind the same like Tablighi congregation, tablighi's spitting and urinating, stone pelting, Killing Corona warriors etc."*

*"…It's not "Ramadan", this time it's "CORONADAN", by the way these people are distributing the corona virus across social groups by spitting, defecating and urinating on edibles."*

*"The persons involved in different work have been swab tested specifically for this purpose. NO public participation was there. They are not like those Muslims who knowingly defied government order to spread Corona virus to people. Spitting on food to spread virus."*

In addition to this, narratives online depicted Muslims as poisonous. This depiction forms the basis of general blame in stating that Muslims were poisoning society through the spread of Islam. However, during the pandemic, it is clear how this portrayal was developed to describe Muslims as poisonous by spreading the virus. This is evident within messages that made references to Muslims as *poisonous creatures*. Within this, statements were also provided suggesting that Islam is a virus and is worse than COVID-19.

*"I'm not an animal protection nut but I am appalled the UK Government has knowingly allowed Halal slaughter to become commonplace in the UK. It is patently cruel and only panders to the medieval religious Muslims who are poisoning our society. IT MUST BE BANNED."*

*"#IslamicVirus is worst than #coronavirus Decent Scandinavians did not realize what they are bringing to their homes & their country. You don't keep "Cobra as pet" #swedenriots #Norwayriots two example from #Sweden & #Norway https://t.co/4cw0iTcmxe."*

There were also attempts to dehumanise Muslims. An important element was the effort to strip Muslims of their human identity and dignity, to cast them out as 'others' and to present them as animals and vermin. This behaviour online was used to demonstrate the living standards of Muslims, describing them as unhygienic and how their ways of living inhibit social distancing. This content was an effort to further promote how Muslims were spreading coronavirus.

*"Omg!! These filthy people live like rats! And what social distancing are they doing? They have no loyalty towards India! Islam means #terrorism #muslimvirus #muslimliars #muslims_are_terrorist #antiindia #muslimsspreadingcorona #Terrorist #lockdownindia #coronavirus #hindustan."*

The content found online demonstrated a similarity among users about how to deal with Muslims who were described as super spreaders. A significant rhetoric here was that Muslims needed to be punished for the behaviour that they demonstrated during the pandemic; many accounts encouraged the use of deadly force against the so-called super spreaders.

*"Why govt doesn't declare that all Jamaatis who are still hiding are potential corona bombs and they will be shot at if they don't come out in next 2 days?I am sure, all Jamaatis will be standing in a line before end of day."*

*"Shoot these bastard who are attacking on medical staff...#CrushTablighiSpitters."*

**Muslims are receiving Special Treatment during COVID-19**

This theme embodies the rhetoric that during the pandemic, Muslims received special treatment, whereby they were able to ignore COVID-19 rules and continue normal life without any of the restrictions that were in place for others.

*"Muslim COVID spreaders get off while other Aussies are fined. Muslims seem to be a protected species in … #BanIslam #BanDan - Q Society should be running #Victoria ! https://t.co/MMJyHngJbY."*

Key Behaviours that signify this rhetoric include the lack of social distancing amongst Muslims, large gatherings, and being able to still attend mosques. Messages online suggest that there were special rules and relaxations for Muslims, this is specifically relevant during the Holy month of Ramadan when Muslims were able to ignore COVID-19 restrictions. It was also suggested that Muslims were immune to punishment from the police.

*"Hundreds of Muslims seen leaving a mosque in Dublin today, Ireland remains in level 5 lockdown. It certainly seems that different rules apply to different people as when people gathered at the grave of Michael Collins to say the rosary they were dispersed."*

*"But Muslims still go 300 to a mosque and taxi drivers are supper spreaders along with police.. ever muslim area has been hit the worse. So don't you think you should stop them.. no because its do as I say not as I do..!!!!."*

*"It's not "Ramadan", this time it's "CORONADAN", by the way these people are distributing the corona virus across social groups by spitting, defecating and urinating on edibles."*

Attempts to portray the disparity of treatment during COVID-19 are reflected in comments that state that it was one rule for Muslims and another for everyone else. In addition, efforts were made to highlight evident discrimination towards Christian communities during COVID-19, where they were bearing the brunt of COVID-19 restrictions and punishments. Calls were made for the government to do more and act against Muslims disobeying lockdown rules.

*"No Beatings For BLM OR Full mosques with 100s in attendance while Christian churches remain closed. Racısım is being perpetrated against Irish people their own country. LEO you have opened the floodgates yesterday promising houses for all asylum seekers. its the last Straw."*

*"People have had enough anti-Irish racism and double standards done on them. Churches are closed and mosques are opened with full attendence. No Garda beatings for those Covid rule breakers."*

**Sub-Theme - Muslims are not Worthy of COVID-19 Treatment**

This theme demonstrates the frustration regarding the double standard between Muslims and everyone else during the pandemic. Comments represent an uprise to resist the inequality that they faced by attempts to suppress Muslims and demand the end to Muslims being put first during COVID-19. This theme underpins ideas that Muslims did not deserve COVID-19 treatment.

*"Why are these people being given any medical care? If they wanna hide in mosques then let them be there in 1 mosque and seal it and they can continue praying, spitting, urinating and starving till they die there."*

"*Thanks god he is not PM in covid times..else vaccine only for Muslim."*

Relevant messages that were shared relating to this theme include ideas that suggest that Muslims should not have been given priority and offered NHS care and vaccines, as well as

stating that vaccines should not have had to comply with Halal. More sinister messages are evident in the suggestions that Muslims should have been used to trial the vaccines.

*"So if the link is as we all think - high levels of those that follow Islam - and they think that rules dont apply to them and/or Allah will take care of their needs then the answer is simple.... Let them take care of themselves and be barred from using the NHS services."*

*"Give the vaccine to all the minority's they can test for side effects."*

*"Halal Vaccine demand is simply not acceptable. Very narrow mindset in the time of pandemic.#halalvaccine #hypocrisy #radicalism."*

*"If you are black and don't want the #vaccine , so be it. When and if you get ill then you'll probably die."*

**Hindus are Corona Warriors against Islam**

This theme refers to messages that represent a collective force in India attempting to expose how Muslims were causing COVID-19 chaos in India. This theme symbolises Hindus as corona warriors who were trying to control the virus and produce vaccines whilst also fighting against Muslims who were spreading the virus.

*"Nobody hates Muslims in india, Muslims are playing the minority card because they know that they have broken rules in Delhi and caused so much chaos woth corona in india and nothing els."*

*"I request jahils not to spit. Please, keep your venom away from our corona warriors."*

Hashtags such as covid786 were used to signify a gathering of the Tablighi Jamaat, an event which was blamed for the spread of COVID-19 in India. References to this include messages that state that the behaviour of the Tablighi Jamaat was equivalent to terrorist behaviour. There were attempts to demonstrate how India endured more suffering during the pandemic. This relates to comments that state that the rest of the world only suffered from COVID-19 whereas India also dealt with an internal attack from corona jihad, who were spreading the virus.

*"Can't you see the PEOPLE CELEBRATING? This event celebrated the success of #CoronaJehad . And yes, they really deserve it. Afterall, much effort was put behind the same like Tablighi congregation, tablighi's spitting and urinating, stone pelting, Killing Corona warriors etc."*

*"Rest of the world: COVID19India:Covid786 #Covid786AttackInIndia #Covid786 #BanJahilJamat."*

Messages suggest that there was a vendetta against Hindus in India during the pandemic. This is evident in comments that depict Muslims as purposely infecting Hindus. References were made to suggest that they were experiencing a Hindu lockdown, whereby only their livelihood was threatened by the pandemic, as compared to Muslims who were above the law and were able to ignore COVID-19 guidelines.

*"First they do #biojihad then 50 Peacefulls attacked law abiding hindu family who expressed their concerns about safety of society.This is pure terrorism. #CoronaJihaad#IslamicCoronaJehad."*

*“Nothing new it's the hate which most of muslims living in india have against hindus,he was praying for 50 crore hindus to get killed by corona virus & they will made this country an islamic country.”*

*“Absolutely true, However, the problem is that our govt has also inclined towards appeasement. That is why, PIECEFULS are wreaking havoc on this country. #CoronaJehad #LockdownForHindusOnly #islamicvirus”*

*“#Islamophobia #victimCard #jihadagainsthindus #Hinduphobic #IslamicVirus #IslamicState #IslamicVictimCard  Peaceful religion peaceful talks.”*

**COVID-19 Originated from the Quran**

Throughout many of the comments, there were efforts to demonstrate a link between the involvement of Islam and COVID-19. This theme underpinned ideas that suggested that COVID-19 originated from the Quran.

*“The origin of #Covid_19 is from Quran :- #ShaheenaBagh #protestor #CoronavirusOutbreakindia #JantaCurfewVsShaheenBagh#CoronaStopKaroNa.”*

This perspective explores the characteristics of Islam, addressing the fundamental links it has to terrorism. This view was developed during the pandemic to promote ideas that suggest that COVID-19 was part of Islam’s agenda to spread hate and terror.

*“Asshole get out of India with your entire filthy community! Infesting every country and spreading hate and terror! You are intolerant of every other religion and are murderers #muslims_are_terrorist #muslims_are_hinduphobic #muslimsspreadingcorona #muslimvirus #muslimliars.”*

Keywords such as Quran corona demonstrate the attempts to link the two. Commentators stated that Allah had guided Muslims in the spread of the virus. Metaphors were used to establish the link between Islam and COVID-19 further, suggesting that COVID-19 grew a beard.

*“Muslim man wipes his nose and mucous on currency notes to spread #coronavirus pandemic. He claims there is no cure for #COVID19 because it is disease sent by Allah to destroy infidels.”*

*“Why are the muslims here in India acting so rudely*
*Pelting stones on Doctors and abusing them and being distributor of Corona and stating Corona as Allah's blessing. #IslamicCoronaJehad.”*

*“Corona didn’t become a communist bcz it originated in China. Destruction was inflicted on Italy,Spain,Rome , U S &Vatican. Yet, Corona didn’t become Christian. Visiting Israel but not a Jewish. But when TabLeague Marcus came through, Corona put on the beard #JihadiVirus #Corona.”*

Commentators attempted to signify the integral role mosques played in helping the spread of the virus. Mosques were described as a breeding ground to spread hate and terror and now COVID-19, through teaching radicals how to spread the virus. References have suggested how mosques were being used to hide the disease bombs. Terms such as corona bomb were used to symbolise a link between COVID-19 and terrorism further.

*"Patna, Meerut, Nizamuddin Mosque, Sudan, Kenya, China, Indonesia, Malaysia? Clerics of Kyrgyzstan are hiding? First hide foreign disease-bombs in mosques, then spread the disease, drop dead bodies and then send the government to full vigor. #CoronaJihad."*

*"Why govt doesn't declare that all Jamaatis who are still hiding are potential corona bombs and they will be shot at if they don't come out in next 2 days?*
*I am sure, all Jamaatis will be standing in a line before end of day."*

*"#CrushTablighiSpitters They act like using biological weapons like corona This Is The Serious Act of Terrorism. They Are Acting Like Suicide Attackers."*

**Sub-Theme - The Vaccine is Part of the Islamic Agenda**

This theme furthers the perspective that suggests a link between COVID-19 and Islam. This refers to concerns that the vaccine was part of the Islamic agenda. Commentators state how the vaccine was aiding Muslims with the Islamic takeover of the world.

*"Muslim world take over looking good after giving the correct vaccine to your people so the men are not sterile."*

Comments specifically suggest that the vaccine was part of a sterilisation programme governed to increase the level of Muslim dominance around the world. Messages state that vaccines were causing the sterilisation of those who were not Muslim to reduce the non-Muslim population.

*"I heard men are sterile afterwards except for the Muslim men."*

*"Vaccines make men sterile except for Muslim men. Sheeeee."*

**Discussion**

The current findings that relate to the rhetoric of the dehumanisation of Muslims concur with research that has previously found similar behaviour online, whereby a key characteristic of hate speech online, targeted towards Muslims, is a tactic of dehumanisation (Awan, 2016). Analysis of tweets and YouTube data associated with the Christchurch Mosque attack and Shamima Begum outlined consistent rhetoric which similarly attempted to reframe Islam as an illness, a cult and outlined that Muslims are animals (Awan et al., 2019). It was outlined by Awan et al. (2019) that a key theme amongst online content is the attempt to strip Muslims of their identity whilst subsequently portraying Muslims as being a drain on the system and causing endless problems for society. It has been outlined that during the process of dehumanisation, the persecutor experiences a reduced capacity for empathy, which can result in the denial of human rights and encouragement of violence towards the dehumanised individual or group (Murrow and Murrow, 2015). This process is evident in the tweets provided under theme one; Twitter users outlined the need to punish Muslims for their behaviour during the pandemic, and users made references to doing so by using deadly force. This phenomenon has been elucidated by research that outlined how online-driven language and COVID-19 misinformation potentially impacted real-world events (Awan et al., 2021). COVID-19 displayed how seemingly isolated events have the potential to trigger and drive misinformation and extremism – whereby far-right groups leveraged the pandemic to promote their agenda (Ariza, 2020).

Theme one centres around the rhetoric that Muslims were super-spreaders of COVID-19, ironically, previous research demonstrated how Islam itself is viewed as a virus (Awan et al.,

2019). Research outlines how Islam has a purpose to cause "harm" and is regarded as an "illness, like a plague, that is spreading uncontrollably" (Awan et al., 2019). This is significant as it demonstrates the existence of an anti-muslim rhetoric of associating Islam or Muslims with the words virus and illness. This rhetoric outlines that users have attempted to not only metaphorically brand Islam as a virus but also demonstrate that Islam is associated with spreading real viruses, such as COVID-19. As outlined by Ajun Appadurai, attempts to associate the virus with Muslims reflect some of the key features of anti-muslim sentiment within India, specifically how there is the rhetoric that Muslims themselves are a kind of infection in the body (Perrigo, 2020).

A significant theme demonstrated how Muslims were perceived as receiving special treatment during the pandemic. This finding supports previous research, which outlined how Islam has been described as a backward religion that is given preferential treatment (Cheng, 2015). Research has also shown how this 'preferential treatment' has been observed in other situations (Awan et al., 2019). In response to the Christchurch attack, rather than Twitter users showing sympathy, many messages focused on reminding others of what has happened to their religion and the attacks that have affected them – as if their religions were being excluded and were not receiving similar recognition (Awan et al., 2019). The current research underpins themes associated with anti-immigrant views, whereby immigrants are blamed for stealing jobs and taking advantage of welfare and social housing (Daftary, 2018). Theoretical research has illustrated a potential explanation for the behaviour outlined within this theme. Findings suggest that as a minority group increases, so does the threat level that they pose to the majority group and in response, the majority group mobilises to protect their privileges (McCann and Boateng, 2022). This research is relevant to this theme as it is evident that majority groups are attempting to protect their privileges by marginalising and downward evaluating Muslims to prevent their access to equal privileges. Research confirms these ideas; an exploration of the presentations of Muslims suggested that Muslims are routinely perceived as a homogenous 'other' that bestows a significant, ongoing and potential apocalyptic threat to 'our' way of life (Morey and Yaqin, 2011).

A sub-theme explored within this research outlined how Muslims were perceived as not being worthy of COVID-19 treatment. Previous epidemics have strengthened societal stigma and the marginalisation of minority populations; literature shows that misinformation on social media can intensify these reactions (Ahuja and Banerjee, 2021). There are several impacts of such behaviour online; first is the competition for access to health care, where minorities can face medical discrimination based on class, religion or ethnicity (Ahuja and Banerjee, 2021). The effects of disinformation, which suggested that Muslims were intentionally spreading the virus in India, became evident very quickly. In March 2020, residential settlements and hospitals were denied entry and service to some Muslims, resulting in further unnecessary deaths (Banaji and Bhat, 2020). The pandemic saw the separation of patients based on their religion and the random quarantining of Muslims, as well as the subjection of violence and harassment towards Muslim healthcare workers (Tazamal, 2020).

The third theme concurs with research that also explored the emergence of Islamophobia during the pandemic. Previous pandemics have been politicised, and this was also the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby legislation and public reaction provided fertile ground for the growth of xenophobic behaviour, with COVID-19 acting as the catalyst (Aaltola, 2012; Ahuja and Banerjee, 2021). The current research is consistent with findings that used topic modelling to investigate hateful topics surrounding COVID-19, there was a significant association with aspects of the Tablighi Jamaat event and its members - with

content specifically blaming the event for the rise in COVID-19 (Chandra et al., 2021). This research also refers to tweets which outline how the Muslim community caused a setback to India's efforts in attempting to curb the virus (Chandra et al., 2021). The juxtaposition of the Tablighi Jamaat with the virus resulted in the virus going from being something of the unknown to having an origin and a host (Ahmed, 2021).

Key elements of the fourth theme are the suggestion that COVID-19 originated from the Quran and that Muslims were being taught to spread the virus - with mosques being an integral facilitator. The current research demonstrates a development in the manifestations of blame associated with Islamophobia, with there being previous attempts to accuse Muslims of sinister behaviour, including rape, paedophilia, incest and terrorism (Copsey et al., 2013). Like the current findings, research has outlined that a hateful topic prevalent during the pandemic was the assigning of blame to Muslims and Allah for the spread of COVID-19 (Chandra et al., 2021). Offline behaviour has further established evidence of this rhetoric. Far-right groups have increased their opposition to mosques during the pandemic, this was particularly the case regarding the new mosque development in central London, claiming it to be a biological threat posed by worshippers (Allen, 2020). Far-right activists shared a poster on social media to call on those infected with COVID-19 to visit local mosques to spread the virus (Allen, 2020). This highlights the sinister role social media has played in influencing behaviour offline during the pandemic. During lockdown, a man shared on social media how he sat in his vehicle outside a mosque in America to conduct a 'Ramadan bombathon' to monitor the mosque for COVID-19 compliance and attempt to intimidate the community (Al-Qazzaz, 2020).

The second sub-theme, which again brings reference to the agenda of Islam, suggests that the vaccine was used to aid Muslims in taking over the world, particularly through the sterilisation of non-Muslims. These findings establish an alternative perception to research, which, on the contrary, outlined how there were concerns that vaccines had been developed to make Muslims impotent (Abbas et al., 2021). Additionally, whilst not specifically linking blame to Muslims, further research has found that Twitter users displayed paranoia in response to the vaccine as there were concerns around sterilisation (Awan et al., 2021).

## Conclusion

The behaviour online during the pandemic became significantly entangled with misinformation, conspiracy theories and hate aimed towards minority groups. This research illustrated the epidemic of Islamophobia during the pandemic. The degree of individual agency in the dissemination of conspiracy theories on social media has meant that during a time of decline in political trust, participation is easier to access and provides a more engaging alternative to mainstream forms of participation in political discussion (Dacombe, 2021). This resulted in more diverse and 'seemingly' plausible political ideas and theories, which ultimately formed conspiracy theories. Far-right content that emboldened anti-muslim rhetoric was able to gain significant traction and following – leading to the popularisation of content like what has been outlined within this research.

This research recommends several strategies to be employed to reduce misinformation and Islamophobia on social media. The implementation of a button to help users report misinformation would assist in detecting false or misleading information and prevent the spread of conspiracy theories. Whilst some social media companies, such as X (formerly Twitter), allow users to label misleading tweets, a report button would act as a powerful tool to report misinformation.

Due to the differential role that anonymity plays in the levels of Islamophobia online, our research recommends the use of soft verification to mitigate the effects of online anonymity and potentially harmful content. Anonymity has been previously shown to act as a facilitator in levels of conspiracy theories, hate speech, misinformation and anti-Muslim hatred online. It is recommended that online platforms encourage users when registering, to display a minimum amount of identifiable information. This could minimise how anonymity acts as a facilitator for potentially harmful content.

A tier system to warm and remove users could be another strategy to mitigate potentially harmful content. Corpus linguistics and sentiment analysis could be used to create a crude tier system or an early warning system for both platforms and users. This would identify potentially harmful content, such as conspiracy theories, misinformation and disinformation. Essentially, if comments/content pass a specific threshold, users could be warned about the content they are viewing and be reminded to fact-check and refer to other sources. This type of tier system could help remove racializing conspiracy theories from social media, and the wider consequences should include the ability to de-platform offline and online stigmatising communications. Furthermore, the development of a tool to detect and filter potentially harmful content and sites is needed. This could detect and fact-check information content as well as categorise accounts that potentially are, or are not, credible and trustworthy. This empowers users to make an informed decision on the content they are viewing.

This research also recommends the development of an international digital training programme around social media literacy for users to be upskilled and be better informed on the trigger events and drivers of potentially harmful content. This program should cover education about misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech to help users distinguish between fact and fiction. This would provide individuals with the knowledge of how to safely navigate social media and assess and evaluate the content they are exposed to.

The adoption of a new digital charter that has clear aims to prohibit dehumanising language is imperative. This could outline rhetoric and language that is used to dehumanise a group of people because of their faith, religious identity, and visibility. This online charter should be underpinned by the welfare of its consumers. A social media fund could be created from sanctions applied against social media companies over failures in the duty of care of consumers. This fund could be used to produce future research to tackle potentially harmful content that incites and inflames racial tension.

It is pertinent to encourage future research areas to aid the understanding of the potential harms evident on social media. As outlined, the role of a user's anonymity on social media is an area that requires continued attention to track its differential effect. It is also important to assess the role that gender and masculinity play in the manifestation of potentially harmful content on social media. Efforts should be taken to illustrate the gender differences in the lived experiences of potentially harmful online content. Finally, research that produces an audit trail that can evidence false and misleading information, such as images, videos, captions and posts in a large database, could help to identify fake news stories and compare them with factual news stories. This research approach should be evidenced-led and would apply algorithms to enable social media companies to quickly identify and detect conspiracy theories before they gain traction.

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