

# **‘I will Blow your face off’ – Virtual and Physical World Anti-Muslim Hate Crime**

## **Abstract**

Anti-Muslim hate crime is usually viewed in the prism of physical attacks; however, it also occurs in a cyber context, and this reality has considerable consequences for victims. In seeking to help improve our understanding of anti-Muslim hate crime, this article draws on the findings from a project that involved qualitative interviews with Muslim men and women who experienced both virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate, and reported their experiences to the British government-funded service Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks). In doing so, this article sets out the first ever study to examine the nature, determinants and impacts of both virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime upon Muslim men and Muslim women in the United Kingdom (UK). Correspondingly, we found that victims of both virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime are likely to suffer from emotional stress, anxiety and fear of cyber threats materialising in the ‘real world’.

## **Key Words:**

Anti-Muslim Hate crime; Victims; Virtual; Physical Attacks; Qualitative Interviews

## **Introduction**

Following the terrorist attacks in Paris and Tunisia in 2015, and in Woolwich, south east London where British Army soldier Drummer Lee Rigby was murdered in 2013, we have seen a sharp rise in anti-Muslim attacks (Littler and Feldman 2015). These incidents have occurred in the physical world where mosques have been targeted, Muslim women have had their hijab (headscarf) or niqab (face veil) pulled off, Muslim men have been attacked, and racist graffiti has been scrawled against Muslim graves and properties. In addition, there has been a spike in anti-Muslim attacks occurring in a cyber context, including Muslims being targeted by campaigns of cyber bullying, cyber harassment, cyber incitement and threats of physical violence. According to Tell MAMA, 548 verified incidents (of 729) were reported to them concerning anti-Muslim hate crime. The majority of incidents took place in a cyber context (402 out of 548) (Littler and Feldman 2015). Almost a fifth of service users reported repeat incidents of anti-Muslim hate, with Muslim women suffering more incidents in the physical world than Muslim men. Typically, the victim was wearing traditional Islamic clothing at the

time of the incident and the perpetrators were overwhelmingly white male (Littler and Feldman 2015). Indeed, evidence shows that individuals with a 'visible' Muslim identity are more vulnerable to anti-Muslim hostility, intimidation, abuse and threats of violence (see, for example, Allen *et al.* 2013; Zempi and Chakraborti 2014).

Against this background, the aim of our article is twofold. Firstly, to examine the nature and extent of virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime directed towards Muslims in the UK. Secondly, to consider the impact of this hostility upon victims, their families and wider Muslim communities. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Muslim men and women who have been victims of both virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime in the UK, this is the first ever study to shed light on the anti-Muslim hate crime experiences of Muslims both in the virtual and physical world, rather than examining these experiences in isolation. It will be concluded that especially for repeat victims, it is difficult to isolate the virtual threats from the intimidation, violence and abuse that they suffer in the physical world. Rather, there is a continuity of anti-Muslim hostility in both the virtual and the physical world, especially in the globalised world.

## **Understanding anti-Muslim hate crime**

Anti-Muslim hate crime falls under the category of religious hate crime. It is not limited to physical attacks but includes a wide range of potential criminal behaviour from offensive graffiti, damage to property, abusive and threatening messages, harassment, intimidation and verbal abuse. Perry (2001: 10) argues that hate crime is about offenders pursuing a level of control and power, and states that a hate crime must involve "...acts of violence and intimidation, usually directed towards already stigmatized and marginalized groups..." According to the Association of Chief Police Officers (2014), hate crime in a cyber context includes illegal hate content that aims to incite hatred based on the grounds of race, religion and sexual orientation. This could include; words; posts; forums; videos; chatrooms; pictures and websites. One of the problems with understanding hate speech and virtual hate crime is the relationship between virtual hate speech and actual acts of violence. For example, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers (1997) argue that hate speech involves all forms of hateful material and content including inciting, promoting and justifying racial hatred. They argue that such intolerance is based upon notions of nationalism, ethnocentrism,

discrimination and stereotyping minority communities. Moreover, the Council of Europe's Additional Protocol to the Convention on Cybercrime (2003) defines virtual hate speech as including written material or images which promote and incite hatred and discrimination based on a person or groups of person's race, ethnicity, descent and national origin.

The role therefore of actual 'threats', 'action' and 'speech' problematise the notion of what constitutes virtual hate speech and actual hate crime. We argue that virtual hate speech includes material of a malicious nature that are posted with the intent to promote, or justify intolerance, hostility and prejudice towards an individual or group of people. However, the problematic associations with hate speech and hate crime on the Internet are exacerbated by the notions of freedom of speech and expression within the current climate. Indeed, the European Court of Human Rights (1976) has found that people have a right to cause 'offence' to others, without clarifying what could constitute offence. We believe that this could cause problems where people express ideas or dissent, and instead should include material that causes fear alongside harassment and intimidation.

Interestingly, those at the sharp end of tackling much of the virtual hate speech and hate crime are social media network sites. For example, Facebook uses its community standards to define what it considers to be hate speech, which it defines as content that 'attacks people based on their actual or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sex, gender, sexual orientation, disability or disease is not allowed. We do, however, allow clear attempts at humour or satire that might otherwise be considered a possible threat or attack. This includes content that many people may find to be in bad taste (ex: jokes, stand-up comedy, popular song lyrics, etc)' (Facebook Community Standards 2015).

Other sites such as Twitter (2015) whilst not providing a definition of hate speech, do make the case that all 'hateful content, sensitive topics, and violence globally' are prohibited. Another popular, social media site known as Reddit uses its virtual community to monitor and report incidents of hate speech. Through the use of subreddits (a discussion forum) it allows it's over 136,000 users to pose questions to other users and challenge any hateful content. Reddit also provides a list of what it views as hate speech which include bigotry; overtly sexual comments about

appearance; body shaming; lewd comments and name calling as hate speech. Similarly, YouTube (2015) define hate speech as 'content that promotes violence or hatred against individuals or groups based on certain attributes, such as: race or ethnic origin; religion; disability; gender; age; veteran status and sexual orientation/gender identity'.

As noted above, the difficulty therefore in distinguishing virtual hate speech and hate crime is further reinforced by the Crown Prosecution guidelines (2013) which state that there must be either a credible threat of violence or communications which specifically target an individual or group of people. Such communications must be a breach of a court order or is considered grossly offensive, indecent, obscene or false. In practice, the element of posing a threat remains the most important reason to pursue a prosecution. As a result, we argue that virtual hate speech must be viewed in a broader context and we make the case that virtual hate speech intends to dehumanise and demonise individuals and does not necessarily need to include inciting threats of violence but relies on creating tensions. For example, in our study this is personified through the 'them versus us' culture (Cole and Cole 2009).

Furthermore, a key finding that emerges from our project is the fact that anti-Muslim hate incidents and crimes increased both in the virtual and physical world following 'trigger' attacks including terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who choose to identify themselves as being Muslim or acting in the name of Islam. Such 'trigger' attacks include the terror attack that hit London in July 2005 and the terror attack that hit the United States in September 2001 (Hanes and Machin, 2014; Poynting and Mason, 2006). According to Byers and Jones (2007), terrorist attacks have a significant impact on the rise of anti-Muslim hate crime. We therefore argue that 'trigger' events such as the terrorist attacks in Paris and Tunisia can also lead to anti-Muslim hostility and indeed wider impacts on Muslim communities. For example, the organisation Tell MAMA, has found that there had been a significant rise in anti-Muslim attacks, ranging from incitement, harassment, cyber threats to actual physical violence, following the Tunisia, Paris and Woolwich events (Littler and Feldman 2015). Moreover, local and regional events such as the Rotherham child sexual exploitation scandal in the UK have perpetuated anti-Muslim sentiments and 'legitimised' anti-Muslim attacks both in the virtual and physical world (Feldman *et al.* 2013). Previous

studies have found that anti-Muslim hate crime has also increased in a cyber context, in particular against Muslim women, for example, via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (Awan 2014). Within this context, Muslims are deemed to be part of the 'problem' and a 'risk' to society (Walklate and Mythen 2014). This is reinforced when discussing issues pertaining to the hijab and niqab and the comments used to describe Muslim women as a 'national security threat' (Mythen *et al.* 2009). This spike in anti-Muslim prejudice has led to further strengthening the narrative of official suspicion and has led to the current debate that Muslims are the 'new suspect community' (Pantazis and Pemberton 2009; Awan and Blakemore 2012; Perry and Alvi 2012; Perry and Olsson 2009; Keats 2014).

Threatening and abusive comments, whether it be by visual images, fake virtual profiles, Facebook messages, YouTube videos and tweets, can have a detrimental effect on the victims who are targeted, their families and wider communities (Poynting and Noble 2004). What our study demonstrates is that anti-Muslim hate crime in a cyber context can be 'normalised' by offenders on the basis that they consistently use anonymity, manipulation and social control to target their victims (Douglas *et al.* 2005). Virtual perpetrators can often hide their identity and conceal personal information in order to escape detection. This level of anonymity means that many perpetrators of virtual anti-Muslim hostility tend to use the cyber space to disguise who they really are, knowing that they are highly likely to evade the authorities and thus feeling safe to express hate messages in the cyber world.

However, whilst this form of cyber hate often remains "invisible", sometimes due to offenders deleting tweets, comments or posts and also because the perpetrator can hide their identity, the threat remains very real for the victims it targets (Hall 2013). As we shall discuss later, the hate images and posts in particular contain a number of loaded generalisations with respect to Islam and Muslims. As a result, Muslims are considered a "threat", and the perpetrators of cyber hate stereotype and demonise all Muslims in the same manner, and therefore consider them as a group that should be ostracised, deported or killed by using hostile imagery and depicting them in an innately negative fashion (Allport 1979; McKenna and Bargh 1998).

The social cognitive theory, as purported by Bandura (2001), provides us with some important points to consider with regards to how cyber hate communication can be influenced by the social environment. According to Bandura (2001), this approach helps to inform groups and creates 'motivating' factors. Bandura (2001: 265) states that: "social cognitive theory provides an agentic conceptual framework within which to examine the determinants and mechanisms of such effects..." Within the construct of cyber hate, motivation and behaviour, groups such as the English Defence League (EDL) have been proactive in exploiting the virtual environment and are using worldwide events to incite hatred towards Islam and Muslims. Within the framework of social cognitive theory, we see how members of groups can act as producers within a virtual social environment.

The use of emotional factors are symbols of how hate groups in a cyber context can also transform and galvanise groups, and transfer power of the environment to create cognitive models of judgement. Meyrowitz (1985) observes that electronic media has changed the way in which we interact with each other over time; therefore, the Internet has had significant impacts on social behaviour. Moreover, Meyrowitz (1985) argues that these virtual behaviours are determined by different stages of socialisation in a cyber context. Furthermore, Goodboy and Martin (2015) observe that hate groups in a cyber context can build profiles upon certain traits. Their study examined the relationships between the Dark Triad personality traits and self-reported cyberbullying behaviours. They found three trait behaviours as being prominent in such cases, namely; Machiavellianism, Psychopathy and Narcissism (Goodboy and Martin 2015: 1). Goodboy and Martin (2015: 1) also point out that cyberbullies attempt to "harass, denigrate, impersonate, or ostracize others" and "spend a considerable amount of time online and engage in risky online behaviours". As our study has found, there are overlaps between those aggressive behaviours and how anti-Muslim hostility was used through videos and posts in a cyber context in order to coordinate aggressive responses and enter into hate-filled dialogue.

Similarly, Christopherson (2007) argues that anonymity affords protection for individuals and groups in the virtual world. This level of anonymity can influence the way individuals behave within cyber groups. This forms part of social psychological concepts within cyber groups and includes the notions of 'bystander apathy' and

'social loafing.' This level of anonymity in the virtual world was also described by Zimbardo (1969) as the 'deindividuation theory'. This means that anonymity and personal social environmental factors can influence cyber behaviour. Dubrovsky *et al.* (1991) argue that face-to-face communication and electronic communication can vary in different groups depending on the social structure. Taking a similar view, Hayne *et al.* (1997) suggest that anonymity in group support systems is used by groups to create a cyber presence. McKenna and Bargh (1998) emphasise that these identities are built upon a sense of self-esteem and self-belonging.

Social cognitive theory also demonstrates how 'visible' Muslims are targeted in the cyber world in the wake of national and international 'trigger' events. As discussed in more detail below, our research questions were semi-structured and explorative in nature as we aimed to examine anti-Muslim hostility in both the physical and virtual world. Using the basis of emotional impacts within social constructs we hoped to see whether people online had been impacted by social behaviour and/or trigger events. We also hoped to see how the environment can lead to behaviour patterns and trends when reporting anti-Muslim hostility and as a result our research questions were based upon notions of the environment, social behaviour and how these directly impact upon victims perceptions of the criminal justice system. Furthermore, the Social Learning Theory specifically, examines how people are viewed in a mediatised world. According to Bandura, this type of behaviour can be influenced by the environment, behaviour and experiences of cognitive behaviour. This is particularly important in our study since we argue that victims' personal experiences in the virtual world determine their expectations of the criminal justice system as a whole.

## **The Research Project**

The methodology of the study was comprised of 20 individual interviews with Muslim men and women who have been victims of both virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime in the UK. Participants had reported their experiences to Tell MAMA, which is a public service that supports victims of anti-Muslim hate and also measures and monitors anti-Muslim incidents. Victims of anti-Muslim abuse can use a freephone number to speak to staff or report cyber incidents via social media networks such as Twitter, Facebook and via email. In addition, Tell MAMA has a website which provides

a range of sources and information for victims of anti-Muslim hostility and uses the information it receives to pass onto the police service. Within this space Tell MAMA staff work closely with victims to help provide them with support mechanisms and raise awareness of the experiences of victims of anti-Muslim abuse.

Tell MAMA contacted Muslims who had reported both virtual and physical world incidents of anti-Muslim hate crime to them within 2015. Once prospective participants confirmed their interest in taking part in this study, their details were passed on to the researchers of this study, who engaged directly with participants for conducting the interviews. Certainly, our sample does not cover the full spectrum of views and experiences that might be held by Muslims who have experienced cyber and/or physical world anti-Muslim hate crime, and it is not representative of the hundreds of victims who have used MAMA's services. However, we are confident that they provide a starting point for academics, researchers and policy makers who are working within this area.

The interviews were conducted between May and August 2015. Participation to this study was voluntary. Also, participants' names have been changed in order to ensure their anonymity. Out of the twenty participants, we interviewed eleven female and nine male individuals. A common characteristic amongst all participants was that they were 'visibly identifiable' as Muslim. For example, some of the female participants wore the jilbab, hijab and/or niqab whilst the male participants had a beard and often wore the traditional Islamic clothing and a cap that identified them as being Muslim. In terms of age, the majority of participants were aged between 20 - 30 years (seven participants aged 20 and over and eight participants aged 30 and over) with four participants aged 40 and over and one participant aged 50. The youngest participant we interviewed was aged 20 and the oldest was 50. In terms of ethnicity, we had a broad and diverse group, which was made up of different backgrounds and ethnicity. The interviewees included those from Asian heritage (eleven) participants, White British convert (five), Somalian (three) and Libyan (one). The locations where victims were targeted in the physical world varied and included public transport, schools and near their homes, business or mosques. Ethical considerations involved all participants being able to withdraw their consent at any time and all participants were ensured confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research study. All data collection instruments used



(such as interview questions and topic guides for participants) were framed and worded selectively.

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed. Participants of the interviews consented to being involved in a participant process that involved reading and clarifying a summary of the role of the interview before the process. Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim and each participant name has been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Transcripts were read and annotated to develop themes, which are defined below. Although it is not possible to generalise the current findings due to the qualitative nature of the study, we hope that by sharing participants' stories we shed light on the links between virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime, and the multiple impacts it can have upon victims, their families and wider Muslim communities.

It is important to acknowledge that this was a qualitative study based on a very small sample; therefore participants' accounts cannot be generalised to a wider population. However, using grounded theory the study provided a detailed exploration of participants experiences of both cyber and 'real' world anti-Muslim hate crime. Also, the research did not speak to perpetrators. Although this aspect was deliberately excluded from the parameters of this study, it is evident that we do not actually know the motivations that drove the perpetrators to commit the acts that they did. Rather, we have to rely on victims' testimony in order to draw conclusions about offenders' motivations. These limitations do not undermine the significance of the study but it is clear that future research should explore them in more depth.

## **Determinants of anti-Muslim hate crime incidence**

The prevalence and severity of anti-Muslim hate crimes are influenced by 'trigger' events of local, national and international significance. As Williams and Burnap (2015) point out, hate crimes are communicative acts, which are often provoked by antecedent events that incite a desire for retribution in the targeted group, towards the group that share similar characteristics to the perpetrators. From this perspective, hate crimes increase following 'trigger' events as they operate to galvanise tensions and sentiments against the suspected perpetrators and groups associated with them. Indeed, evidence shows that anti-Muslim hate crimes have increased significantly following 'trigger' attacks including terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who

choose to identify themselves as being Muslim or acting in the name of Islam (Hanes and Machin 2014). Spikes in anti-Muslim hate crimes and incidents following ‘trigger’ events are not confined to the physical world; rather, the physical world pattern is replicated in the virtual world (Awan 2014).

Indeed, the Woolwich attack<sup>1</sup> was cited by our participants as a terrorist antecedent ‘trigger’ event, which induced a significant increase in their virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime experiences, as the following extracts illustrate:

I know sisters who have been punched, being shouted at on the street, being pulled and pushed around by people, had their houses being burned down. These are the results of trigger events like when Lee Rigby was murdered. (Sarah)

I have figured out over the years that this happens when there is a terrorist attack in the news committed by Muslims so Islamophobia happens even more. A clear example is the Lee Rigby murder. (Ahmed)

Littler and Feldman (2015) found that there was a substantial spike in reports of anti-Muslim hate crime following the Woolwich attack, which ranged from general abuse towards ‘visible’ Muslims on the street, to graffiti at mosques, through to firebombs at mosques and threats in a cyber context. Britain’s biggest force, the Metropolitan police, recorded 500 anti-Muslim hate crimes following the Woolwich attack (The Guardian 2013). Furthermore, participants reported that the prevalence of both virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crimes increased following high-profile terrorist attacks around the world such as Sydney<sup>2</sup>, the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris<sup>3</sup>, and attacks in Copenhagen<sup>4</sup> and Tunisia<sup>5</sup>. Reflecting a spike in both virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime, participants stated that:

I have received Islamophobic abuse in social media and on the street on various occasions. After the Sydney incident, I received Islamophobic remarks on four separate occasions in the space of two weeks. (Hamza)

After the Paris attacks, I got a lot of nasty comments especially on social media. (Asma)

In addition, it is important to recognise that in a globally connected world, the actions by one terrorist group such as ISIS can lead to counter-reactions and impacts on Muslims in the UK. Participants pointed out that they were “bombarded with virtual and physical world threats” with the prominence of ISIS, especially following the release of

videos showing beheadings carried out by ISIS or when there was a terror threat made against the UK from ISIS members, as the following extracts indicate:

I keep my Facebook account private but I get a lot of abuse on twitter especially if something has happened like when ISIS killed Alan Henning ... I recently posted a comment on Channel 4 News webpage saying that the ISIS actions are bad and then I got loads and loads of abusive comments like "you are part of a terrorist religion". (Sophie)

I was on my way to the shops and people shouted at me "why don't we chop your head off?" In another case, people on the street shouted 'your head will be much better on the floor'. (Sarah)

Furthermore, national scandals such as the grooming of young girls in Rotherham by groups of Pakistani men, twisted by the far-right into a 'Muslim' issue or the alleged 'Trojan Horse' scandal in Birmingham framed as a 'jihadist plot' to take over schools, were also highlighted by our participants as 'trigger' events. In the context of the Rotherham scandal, 'Muslim' was deployed in order to cast all Muslims as synonymous with child abusers and indeed participants reported incidents where they were called 'rapists' and 'paedos' – (paedophiles).

The child sexual abuse scandal in Rotherham and the Trojan Horse investigation at Birmingham schools saw an increase in anti-Muslim attacks at record levels. (Hamza)

I live in Rotherham and the grooming case has portrayed all Pakistani men in Rotherham as paedophiles but what about the Jimmy Saville case? Why did they not mention his colour and religion? This really frustrates me and makes me angry. (Ibrahim)

As the following extract demonstrates, a couple of participants pointed out that certain Muslim individuals have failed to condemn these 'trigger' attacks and therefore they were to some extent 'responsible' for the rise in anti-Muslim hostility.

There are Muslims like Anjem Choudary who are proverbial thorns in the side of Islam who refuse to condemn the Woolwich attack and the killings committed by ISIS...I am comfortable to speak out against the abhorrent actions of ISIS. These people are doing so much damage to the image of Islam that not to speak out is a bad thing. (Adam)

At the same time, some participants highlighted the role of media in reporting of these 'trigger' events as 'adding fuel to the fire'. Williams and Burnap (2015) argue that the traditional media play a role in 'setting the agenda', 'transmitting the images' and 'claims making' following deviant events of national or international interest. According to Hanes and Machin (2014), if attitudes towards Muslims are influenced by 'trigger' attacks and by media coverage of these attacks, then this finding fits with the

proposition of 'attitudinal shocks,' where a driver of hate crimes is the level of hatred or bigotry for a particular group in society, which may be influenced by media framing and coverage of attacks. The perceived role of both traditional and social media in promoting anti-Muslim sentiments is evident in the following quotes:

I experience anti-Muslim hostility from people based on what they read on the Daily Mail or what they read on Facebook pages by Britain First. (Nabeela)

My mother is hostile to my hijab. She watches the news and because of the disproportionate coverage of Islam and terrorism she thinks that this is what Islam is. (Kelly)

Relatedly, participants highlighted that people are largely ignorant about the teachings of Islam and that the media do not take sufficient action to educate the public about what 'true' Islam means, as the following extracts illustrate:

Anti-Muslim hate exists because of ignorance about Muslims that is fuelled by the media. People don't understand Muslims because they are not exposed to them. If the only information they get is from the media, then they are naturally going to assume that all Muslims are as bad as ISIS. But if you live next to Mr and Mrs Khan [common Muslim family name] you will realise that Muslims are just normal people. (Sophie)

In addition to 'trigger' events, the visibility of Islam is key to revealing the individual's Muslim identity and thus triggering virtual and physical world anti-Muslim attacks. Indeed, it is well established in the literature that there is a significant relationship between being visible as a Muslim and experiencing anti-Muslim hate crime (see, for example, Allen *et al.* 2013; Zempi and Chakraborti 2014). In this context, if the markers of Islam (for example, a Muslim dress or a Muslim name) are absent, 'passing' as a non-Muslim is possible for those without conspicuous Muslim names or dress, and those who do not 'look like' a Muslim. Correspondingly, participants were convinced that it was their distinctive Muslim appearance that made them a target of anti-Muslim hate, as the following extracts illustrate:

I have a public twitter account to promote my work and I get regular abuse on that. I have my picture on my twitter account so they know I am Muslim ... I started wearing the hijab two years ago. I was not a Muslim before. I did not get any online or offline abuse at all before wearing the hijab. (Sophie)

I am identifiable as a Muslim because I have the full beard, I wear a turban and I also wear the Islamic clothes. I am a very practising Muslim and I feel that is why I am targeted. (Ibrahim)

Our study highlights the significance of 'visible' Muslim identities in both the virtual and physical world. Specifically, young Muslims are particularly vulnerable to abuse on social media. According to the Global Digital Data statistics on Internet users, the number of people actively using social media networks is 2.078 billion (Kemp 2015). In the case of young Muslims we also see a growing population increase and one that inevitably have been using social media and the Internet. In the case of the virtual world where Muslims have a visible identity they have been targeted because they have been identified by their name, their faith, age, dress, appearance and also the views they have expressed online.

At the same time, Muslim women highlighted feeling vulnerable in a cyber context and also in the 'real' world because they were visibly identifiable as Muslims. Specifically, we found that Muslim women were seen as the personification of the 'Islamic problem' in a cyber context. This was true, when discussing the hijab and niqab and the comments used to describe Muslim women on social media sites, such as a 'national security threat' and comments suggesting that they were forced to wear the veil. The hate images and posts in some cases contained a number of loaded generalisations with respect to Muslim women as a 'threat' because of the visible identity. As a result, Muslim women were more likely to receive cyber hate messages that stereotyped and demonised them through hostile imagery and depicting them in an innately negative manner. For example, Hira who mainly uses Facebook, had to make her Facebook profile private because of the consistent online anti-Muslim abuse she has suffered. She noted that:

I have had to re-adjust all my security settings, so that only friends can contact me or see my profile because of the abuse I have suffered. (Hira)

This sense of fear and pervading insecurity in a cyber context is also personified by Kelly, who stated that:

These trolls are not the stereotyped EDL, they come from all walks of life and all backgrounds which is alarming. They will set up a hoax ID and from there they can abuse anyone with complete anonymity and hiding behind a false ID. (Kelly)

The relentless abuse Sophie suffered was because of her 'visible' presence in the virtual world as a White Muslim convert. Halima has also been the victim of the EDL cyber mob and had to report the abuse that she had suffered because of the direct threats that were made to her life. In Halima's case, an EDL sympathiser had threatened her with physical violence. Below is the conversation that took place in the virtual world:

Hahahhahaa I told you my agenda hunny. Don't worry I will knock you out.' 'Babe let's do a meet and greet. We're not far from each other.' 'Save your smart mouth for Saturday. I can't wait. (Sophie)

The virtual world prejudice and discrimination paradigm is used by perpetrators who will involve swearing coupled with anti-Muslim, racist language as a means to target Muslims. This cyber element is also used by perpetrators where prejudicial statements and messages are used to target a particular group or person. Indeed, this type of negativity can also lead to an escalation of cyber abuse and the normalisation of such behaviour through likes and retweets via social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. However, as we shall see below, both cyber and physical world incidents can have a similar pattern and a trend, which is based primarily on the perpetrator using abusive and provocative language to pose real offline threats against victims, their families and wider Muslim communities.

Similarly to the virtual world, where actual and potential victims are identified through the visibility of their Muslim identity, Muslims are equally vulnerable to intimidation, violence and abuse on the street, particularly when their Muslim identity is visible offline. Evidence suggests that 'visible' Muslims – such as Muslim men with a beard and Muslim women who wear hijab or niqab – are at heightened risk of anti-Muslim hostility in public by virtue of their visible 'Muslimness'. Specifically, popular perceptions that veiled Muslim women are passive, oppressed and powerless increase their chance of assault, thereby marking them as an 'easy' target to attack. We also found that whilst stereotypes were used to depict Muslims in a negative manner in the virtual world, such effects were used in the physical world to characterise Muslims with strong verbal abuse. For example, Sarah noted that:

When I became identifiably Muslim I got nasty looks, threats and abuse, and that's an everyday experience, especially because I am a white British Muslim. (Sarah)

These views were reinforced by comments that were made against Sarah who on a daily basis had to hear the following comments 'Oh you are a Paki lover.' These comments were not isolated to Sarah, but a number of other participants had also experienced racist abuse, which they suffered because of their visible identification as Muslim. Ahmed stated that:

They call me 'terrorist', they call me 'paki', I've been told 'fuck off go away', I get sworn at, and that's mainly because I'm Muslim. The thing is, I am born in this country. I want to live here. (Ahmed)

Mohammad talked about how his children have also been targeted by anti-Muslim abuse in schools. He noted that 'Other pupils call them names like 'Paki get lost', swearing, 'go back home', 'you don't belong here', 'Muslim monkeys', other pupils have pulled their headscarves.' Sophie stated that:

On my previous school placement, my hijab was sharply pulled by a child, this was witnessed by a teacher but was not challenged by them. (Sophie)

Along similar lines, Hamza stated that 'I was called a 'Muslim groomer' while Mohammad also argued that 'I have been called 'Muslim terrorist' and 'Here come's Osama Bin Laden'. Ultimately, it is important to recognise that the visibility of Islam is key to revealing the individual's Muslim identity and thus triggering cyber attacks towards Muslims. For example, in social networking sites individuals might be perceived as 'Muslim' because of their name, appearance in their profile picture (dress for women and beard for men) and comments indicating their affiliation with Islam. Visibility is a critical element to prejudice given that "perceptible differences are of basic importance in distinguishing between out-group and in-group members" (Allport 1979: 132). The power of social perception along with negative attributions ascribed to those viewed as visibly different is a key element to understanding hate crime in general and anti-Muslim hate crime committed against individuals more specifically (Byers and Jones 2008). Without what Allport (1979) refers to as "visible differences" in the form of social dress, perceived in-group and out-group membership would not be ascribed. He refers to the merging of the "symbol" (e.g., physical and cultural

attributes) and what the symbol is perceived to stand for (e.g., terrorism, enemy) as “condensation” whereby the visible difference and the ascribed meaning given to the symbol come together, thus, creating a key element of the necessary perceptual formula for prejudice (Jacobs and Potter 1998: 13).

In light of the fact that the visibility of their Muslim identity was key to triggering attacks, participants took steps to become less ‘visible’ through downplaying or concealing their ‘Muslimness’ in order to protect themselves from abuse both in the virtual and physical world, as discussed below.

### **Impacts of virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime**

Crime can incur a number of different ‘costs’ following a victimisation experience that involve emotional, psychological, physical and financial liabilities. However, evidence shows that ‘hate crimes hurt more’. Indeed, empirical studies of targeted victimisation emphasise the more severe impact for victims of hate crime when compared to non-hate victims (see, for example, Chakraborti *et al.* 2014; Smith *et al.* 2012; Williams and Tregidga 2014). In the context of anti-Muslim hate crime, both virtual and physical world attacks upon Muslims ‘hurt’ more than ‘normal’ crimes as they are seen as an attack upon the victims’ Muslim identity. From this perspective, the impact of anti-Muslim hate crime may exceed that of ‘normal’ crime because of victims’ perceived and actual vulnerability due to their affiliation to Islam.

Our participants reported suffering a range of psychological and emotional responses to anti-Muslim hate, from lowered self-confidence and insecurity to depression, isolation and anxiety. Given that they were targeted because of the ‘visibility’ of their Muslim identity – which is easily identifiable because of their Muslim name and/or Muslim appearance either in the virtual world or in the physical sphere – participants were unable to take comfort in the belief that what happened to them was simply random and ‘could have happened to anyone’. Rather, they were forced to view this abuse as an attack on their Muslim identity and this had severe implications for their levels of confidence and self-esteem as well as for their feelings of belonging and safety in the UK.



As might be expected, experiences of virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime increased feelings of vulnerability, fear and insecurity amongst participants. Ahmed stated 'It is scary because we are constantly under attack.' As mentioned previously, the Internet allows people to take on a new and anonymous identity, and to bypass traditional editorial controls, to share their views with millions. Cyber anti-Muslim hate messages can be sent anonymously or by using a false identity, making it difficult to identify the offender. As the following quote shows, the anonymity aspect in cases of anti-Muslim hate messages in a cyber context is extremely frightening as the perpetrator could be anyone and the virtual threats can escalate into the physical space.

I am scared because in face-to-face situations I can see who the perpetrator is but when someone does it online I always think who is it? Who is hiding behind the keyboard sending me messages of hate?  
(Aisha)

Repeat incidents of virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate increased feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and anxiety amongst our participants. Bowling (2009) states that repeated or persistent victimisation can undermine the security of actual and potential victims, and induce fear and anxiety. The distressing nature of anti-Muslim hate crime coupled with the frequency with which these acts were committed, had created high levels of fear amongst participants. As a result, they felt extremely vulnerable for themselves and they were also concerned about the safety of their family. One of our participants, Ibrahim, expressed his fear for the safety of his wife who wears the niqab: 'My wife is very vulnerable when she is on her own. I fear for her safety'. A couple of participants warned about the risks of radicalisation, especially for young people as a result of suffering virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime, as the following quote illustrates:

Anti-Muslim hate crime has affected Muslims. This is why Muslims are going to Syria. This is why they support ISIS. When people experience Islamophobic abuse, they will be easily radicalised. They feel weak, lonely, isolated, and rejected from British society. (Hamza)

Affective responses that were common amongst our participants were isolation, depression, loneliness, and a sense of rejection from wider society. In this regard, experiences of anti-Muslim hate crime have long-lasting effects for victims including making them afraid to engage with other communities and feeling like social outcasts.

For example, Hafsa, Bilal and Asma reported feelings of social isolation in the following quotes:

I feel very isolated and I have become quite cynical about non-Muslims. (Hafsa)

Suffering Islamophobia has made me become insular, lack confidence, I feel I am not accepted. (Bilal)

As a result of their recurring experiences of virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate, participants emphasised that they always had to keep their guard up and be vigilant. In this regard, they felt anxious and were constantly on the alert. Anxiety was usually expressed as excessive fear and worry, which was often coupled with feelings of tension, restlessness and vigilance.

You might find it bizarre but when I walk on the street I am always watching out in case anything happens. I am a big guy, six-feet tall, I stand out as a sore thumb. Sometimes people look at me with disgust. (Ibrahim)

It is important to recognise that the continual threat of virtual and physical world abuse can be emotionally draining for victims who feel the need to be constantly on the alert, even to the extent that they might become paranoid, as the following extracts illustrate:

To be honest, I have slowed down with my openness on twitter because I feel very unsafe, I feel very vulnerable. There was a time I felt so vulnerable just being in the UK because of my twitter account. I became paranoid, that everybody might be watching me, the government, people, everyone really. (Bilal)

As already indicated, a key finding throughout interviews was that participants were multiple and repeat victims of both virtual and physical forms of anti-Muslim hate crime. Rarely did participants describe anti-Muslim hate crime as 'one-off'; rather there was always the sense, the fear, the expectation for another attack. From this perspective, anti-Muslim hate crime and its attendant forms of virtual and physical abuse, intimidation, violence and harassment were seen by the majority of participants as 'normal' (Awan 2014, Zempi and Chakraborti 2014). The fact that anti-Muslim hostility was understood as a normative part of their lived experiences also meant that some participants had become 'used to it' and therefore 'immune' to this victimisation, as the following quotes indicate:

When I suffer abuse in public, people walk off or stare. Anti-Muslim hate is normal. (Sarah)

I have been called a "Muslim terrorist" so many times but I have grown a thicker skin as a result. (Bilal)

I am not afraid anymore because I am so used to it. I have to live here so I need to adjust myself to the abuse. If I beat the crap out of them I will be in trouble. I take the abuse and keep my head down. I just want to carry on with my life. (Muhammad)

We argue that the victims and perpetrators of anti-Muslim abuse are both located and targeted in the cyber and real-world with reference to threats and specific acts of violence. We found that for victims and their families, it is often difficult to isolate cyber threats from the intimidation, violence and abuse that they suffer in the 'real' world. Rather, there is a continuity of anti-Muslim hostility in both the virtual and the physical world, especially in the globalised world. Specifically, participants highlighted the relationship between cyber and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime, and described living in fear because of the possibility of threats in a cyber context materialising in the physical world, as the following quotes demonstrate:

I am scared, I fear for my life because at the end of the day they [cyber perpetrators] might come and find me because my twitter profile is public. (Aisha)

I know many Muslims who have been physically attacked and verbally attacked. Personally, I have been called "Muslim scum", "jihadist" and "paedophile". (Adam)

In some cases, cyber attacks had effects in the 'real' world. For example, in the case of Amin, an image was used of him on Twitter with the caption "suspended child grooming taxi drivers" despite the post being false and malicious. Amin stated that:

They used a picture of me and said 'Taxi driver groomer suspended'. The impact has been immense because Rotherham is a small town and people get to know things quickly ... I can't even get a job in Rotherham now because of this picture. (Amin)

The case of Amin directly shows the link between the virtual and physical world as Amin noted how he could not find a job because of the manner in which his picture had been used in a cyber context to damage his reputation. He reported feeling uncomfortable walking down the streets in Rotherham because people might recognise his picture from Twitter, and think that he was one of the perpetrators of the grooming scandal. Clearly, cyber hate messages and comments contribute towards the stigmatisation and the 'othering' of Muslim communities in the 'real' world. This shows that in reality, virtual and physical world boundaries may be more blurred than the terms imply.

Furthermore, another cost that victims of anti-Muslim hate crime often experience is a change in their routines and lifestyles. In this case, the threat of both virtual and physical anti-Muslim hate crime is so 'real' that it can cause individuals to change the way that they live their lives and even take steps to become less 'visibly' Muslim. For example, some participants who had converted to Islam (such as Sarah, Kelly, Sophie and Adam) explained that they kept their English name to avoid suffering anti-Muslim hostility whilst other participants who were born into Islam had adopted western names in order to hide their Muslim identity, especially in a cyber context. Moreover, some participants were reluctant to leave the house, especially on their own because of fear of being attacked, as the following quotes indicate:

We stay in, we don't go out because we are scared of what will happen. If I leave the house I am usually accompanied by my husband or my son. (Nabeela)

My wife wears the niqab and she had many incidents where people have made nasty remarks, so just to avoid conflict we don't go out. (Ibrahim)

The constant threat of anti-Muslim hate crime had forced participants to adopt a siege mentality and keep a low profile in order to reduce the potential for future attacks. Zempi and Chakraborti (2014) found that veiled Muslim women often try to become less 'visible' and as such less vulnerable by taking the veil off. Similarly, our participants revealed downplaying their 'Muslimness' by taking the Muslim dress off, or by dressing in western clothes, as the following extracts illustrate:

I do not feel safe to wear the hijab up in my hometown because of the dangers there. I take my hijab and abaya off when I go to my hometown because of the abuse I will get as a result. (Sarah)

In this context, participants appear to manage impressions of their Muslim identity in the virtual and physical world mainly through concealment with the aim to reduce the risk of future abuse. Perry and Alvi (2012) point out that this is not a voluntary choice, but the 'safe' choice. Whether in cyber or 'real' world, anti-Muslim hate crime creates 'invisible' boundaries, across which members of the Muslim community are not 'welcome' to step. The enactment of both virtual and physical boundaries impacts upon 'emotional geographies' in relation to the way in which Muslims perceive the spaces and places around and outside their communities of abode. Rather than risk

the threat of being attacked, either in a cyber or physical context, many actual and potential victims opt to change their lifestyles and retreat to 'their own' communities.

Furthermore, several participants felt angry, upset and frustrated because they were targeted for being Muslim. Indeed, hate crime studies have established both specific and generalised frustration and anger on the part of victims – towards the perpetrator and towards a culture of bias and exclusion (Williams and Tregidga 2014).

I suffer Islamophobia all the time. People have labelled me as a “paki bomber” just by looking at me, which makes me very angry. I feel I have to pay for something that it is not even my fault. (Bilal)

Clearly some participants felt frustrated; however, others felt weak, powerless and defenceless on the basis that they were not 'allowed' to challenge anti-Muslim hate crime, as the following extract indicates:

When incidents like the Charlie Hebdo happen, I am asked to condemn it and I do condemn it, not only as a Muslim but also as a human being, but when attacks against Muslims happen, no one asks me to condemn it. That is Islamophobia for me and it is very upsetting...We feel helpless. (Hamza)

Finally, a couple of participants pointed out that anti-Muslim hate experiences made their faith in Islam stronger. In this regard, Islam became a more salient and important marker of identity in response to experiences of virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime. Such experiences increased in-group solidarity and identification with their religious identity. Brown (2001) observes that as Muslim identities have been constructed as 'other' to western identities, an attempt to distort Muslim identities, or to suppress the symbols of these identities, often has the opposite effect; it strengthens these identities. As the following quotes show, suffering anti-Muslim hate crime made some participants more determined to continue to practise Islam.

Islamophobia has pushed me closer to practising Islam. I am more passionate now about my Muslim identity. I feel I don't belong anywhere else. (Bilal)

I love my hijab more when they attack me for it' (Asma)

## **Conclusion**

The preceding discussion has examined the virtual and physical world, anti-Muslim hate crime experiences of Muslim men and women in the UK. Specifically, the aim of this article was to examine: (a) the nature and extent of cyber and 'real' world anti-

Muslim attacks directed towards Muslims in the UK and (b) the impact of this hostility upon victims, their families and wider Muslim communities. The study included 20 in-depth interviews with Muslims who have been victims of virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime, and had reported these experiences to Tell MAMA. Key themes that emerged from the research findings included the nature and determinants of anti-Muslim hate crime incidence, and the consequences for victims.

Correspondingly, we found that the prevalence and severity of virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crimes are influenced by 'trigger' events of local, national and international significance. Terrorist attacks carried out by individuals who identify themselves as being Muslim or acting in the name of Islam – such as the Woolwich attack, the atrocities committed by ISIS and attacks around the world such as Sydney, the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, and attacks in Copenhagen and Tunisia – induced a significant increase in participants' virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime experiences. Additionally, national scandals such as the grooming of young girls in Rotherham by groups of Pakistani men, and the alleged 'Trojan Horse' scandal in Birmingham framed as a 'jihadist plot' to take over schools, were also highlighted by participants as 'trigger' events, which increased their vulnerability to anti-Muslim hostility.

Participants highlighted that the visibility of their Muslim identity was key to being identified as Muslims, and thus triggering virtual and/or physical world anti-Muslim attacks. Unarguably, this victimisation increased feelings of vulnerability, fear and insecurity amongst participants. They also suffered a range of psychological and emotional responses such as low confidence, depression and anxiety. Throughout interviews, participants highlighted the relationship between virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime, and described living in fear because of the possibility of cyber threats materialising in the physical world. The constant threat of anti-Muslim hate crime had forced participants to adopt a siege mentality and keep a low profile in order to reduce the potential for future attacks. Many participants reported taking steps to become less 'visible' for example by taking the headscarf off for women and shaving their beards for men.

Our research study has found that when it comes to behaviour in the virtual world, individuals learn to adapt and behave in certain ways by viewing what other people have done. These socially constructed behaviours as purported by Bandura (2004), demonstrate how witnessing behaviour in the virtual world can influence perpetrators and their decision to target someone. For example, in our study many participants spoke about how they have been targeted by a string of cyber comments where perpetrators personified similar behaviours and tactics. This means that in many cases victims of cyber anti-Muslim hate speech would witness a cyber mob who would replicate the same observed behaviours from those who began the thread of conversations. The cyber mobs in this instance are likely to mimic those instructions (Bandura 2002). This shows how cyber hate speech becomes a normality and adopted by the perpetrators.

Furthermore, these processes have had a huge impact when it comes to how victims view the world, their self and others because of the manner in which they perceive social identities. In our study, this is relevant to the type of prejudice and discrimination they have to encounter, and the social reality that attitudes are shaped by the way in which people categorise them as a 'threat'. The reality is that victims' social reality is placed within a narrative that they are different and therefore they have rationalised this fact that they are helpless. Moreover, for victims the motivations of being deemed as victims of hate crime becomes normalised to the extent that this is their social and human reality. Indeed, Bandura's model of moral disengagement explores how offending behaviour can be justified both in the virtual and physical world (Bandura 1990; Bandura *et al.*, 1996).

Ultimately, increased awareness of the nature and impacts of both virtual and physical world anti-Muslim hate crime is crucial. Only by raising awareness about this problem, and learning about Muslims' experiences of anti-Muslim hate crime, can we begin to address the harmful consequences of this form of hate crime.

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<sup>1</sup> Muslim converts Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale murdered Fusilier Lee Rigby at the Royal Artillery Barracks in Woolwich, south-east London on 22 May 2013.

<sup>2</sup> On 15-16 December 2014, Man Haron Monis, an Iranian-born Australian citizen, took hostages in a siege at the Lindt Chocolate Café at Martin Place, Sydney. The siege resulted in the death of Monis and two hostages.

<sup>3</sup> For three days (from 7 to 9 January 2015), a series of terrorist attacks occurred in Paris. On 7 January 2015, brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi forced their way into the offices of the French satirical weekly newspaper Charlie Hebdo in Paris and killed 11 people and injured 11 others in the building. After leaving, they killed a French National Police officer outside the building.

<sup>4</sup> On 15 February 2015, a gunman opened fire on a synagogue, hours after one man was killed and three police officers wounded during an attack on free speech event in city.

<sup>5</sup> On 26 June 2015, a gunman attacked the beach resort of Sousse in Tunisia. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack in which 38 people - plus the gunman - were killed. At least 15 of the victims were British.

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