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**Shifting Narratives of Islamophobia: A Diachronic Analysis of UK
Social Media Responses to Key Events Involving Muslim Communities**

**Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
Master's Degree in Literature and Civilization**

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Dedication

To God, for His grace, wisdom, and strength that guided us through this journey, and to our beloved parents, for their endless love, sacrifices, and unwavering support, this achievement is yours as much as it is ours.

To our dearest brothers and sisters, you were our strength in weakness, light in darkness, and your love carried us through it all.

Lastly, to every soul who cheered us on, prayed for us, or lifted us when we stumbled, you are woven into these pages. Thank you.

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Abstract

This study examines the shifting narratives of Islamophobia through a diachronic analysis of social media responses to key socio-political events related to the representation of Muslim communities in the UK. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research investigates how public discourse on digital platforms Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube, evolved in reaction to significant socio-political events related to Muslims. A dataset of 257 posts, videos and comments was collected and analysed through quantitative content analysis, as well as qualitative thematic and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The quantitative analysis demonstrated a clear predominance of anti-Muslim narratives over counter-narratives in our sample. Anti-Muslim narratives portrayed Muslims as an existential threat to national identity and security, relying on exaggerated and widely propagated stereotypes. In contrast, counter-narratives emphasized multicultural coexistence and challenged these stereotypes. The findings showed that anti-Muslim social media narratives revolved around the themes of: rejection of multiculturalism, fear, chaos, and stereotyping. Additionally, the findings revealed an evolutionary pattern of anti-Muslim prejudice. This operated as an escalator mechanism, where negative sentiment escalated following events like the 2016 Brexit debates and the 2024 UK riots. Coded language and othering narratives persisted over time, particularly within far-right rhetoric. Platforms also reflected divergent moderation effectiveness with Twitter showing faster response to provocative content compared to Facebook and YouTube. These results highlight the urgent need for social media platforms to develop counter-strategies that prevent hate speech from spreading. Future research should explore cross-platform comparisons and longitudinal effects of counter-narratives.

Keywords: Islamophobia, UK social media platforms, diachronic analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

APPG	All-Party Parliamentary Group
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CNN	Cable News Network
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DA	Discourse Analysis
EU	European Union
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Cooperation
Tell-MAMA	Tell Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks
UK	United Kingdom
WHO	World Health Organization

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Satirical Depiction of a Future British Monarchy and Anti-Muslim Stereotypes	37
Figure 2.1 Tweet from @C4Ciaran discussing the motivations behind Brexit with hashtags #Brexit	56
Figure 2.2 Retweet from @RichardVaughn (originally by @Dwalingen) discussing the EU, the Middle East, and social issues with hashtags #StopIslam, #Brexit	57
Figure 2.3 A tweet by @cwillwc calling for the expulsion of a group from 'civilised lands,' using #BanIslam	59
Figure 2.4 A 2020 tweet from @harvingtonTR discussing supposed mosque gatherings during pandemic lockdowns	64
Figure 2.5 A @ranger_glen tweet framing Muslim communities as a perceived threat to family safety	65
Figure 2.6 A Tell Mama UK post highlighted a COVID-era case of reported Islamophobia and discrimination against disabled people	66
Figure 2.7 Tweet from @TRobinsonNewEra discussing violence against children and feelings of safety	71
Figure 2.8 Comment from @VictorVanYeen-pf4ii examining perceptions of Islam and violence.....	73
Figure 2.9 Tweet from @NeverShame identifying the reported perpetrators and nature of the #LondonRiots	74

List of Tables

Table 2.1 Frequency of Islamophobic Narratives and Counter-Narratives on Social Media During Brexit (2016)	53
Table 2.2 Islamophobic and Counter-Islamophobic Narratives on Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Platform Analysis	61
Table 2.3 Platform Variations in Islamophobic and Countering Content During UK Riots 2024.....	68

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
Abstract.....	4
List of Abbreviations and Acronyms.....	5
List of Figures	6
List of Tables	7
Table of Contents.....	8
General Introduction.....	11

Chapter One: Theoretical Foundation and Literature Review

Introduction	20
1.1 Theoretical Framework.....	20
1.1.1 Islamophobia Origin and Definitions.....	20
1.1.2 Key Events Behind the Rise of Islamophobia.....	23
1.1.3 Race, Religion, and Identity: Intersectional Dynamics in the British Context.....	27
1.1.4 The Influence of Mainstream Media in Shaping Public Perceptions of Muslim Communities	
1.1.5 The Digital Turn in Media: How Social Platforms Have Reshaped Narratives.....	29
1.1.6 The Concept of Othering.....	31

1.1.7 Theoretical Approaches to Social Media Discourse Analysis	35
1.2. Literature Review	38
1.2.1 Negative Portrayal of Muslims in Mainstream Media	38
1.2.2 Systematic Othering of Muslims in Media Discourses	40
1.2.3 Far-Right Exploitation of Crises	41
1.2.4 Media Amplification of Anti-Muslim Stereotypes	43
Conclusion.....	45

Chapter Two: Empirical Evidence and Findings

Introduction.....	49
2.1 Data Sources.....	50
2.2 Findings and Discussion	51
2.2.1 Brexit 2016	52
2.2.2 Covid-19	60
2.2.3 Riot 2024	67
2.3 Reinforcing Stereotypes: The Representation of Muslims in UK Social Media.....	75
Conclusion	77
General Conclusion.....	78
References	80

General Introduction

1. Background of Study

The phenomenon of Islamophobia is a term that has garnered considerable attention in contemporary academic and public discourse. It is deeply rooted in a historical tapestry of socio-political, cultural, and religious tensions that have evolved over centuries. This form of prejudice can be traced back to the medieval conflicts between Christendom and the Islamic world. These conflicts established enduring frameworks of hostility and "Othering" (Tolan, 2023). Historically, the development of Islamophobia can be divided into two distinct phases: the pre-digital era and the digital age (Allen, 2010; Butler, 2022; Khamis, 2023). The pre-digital era, spanning from the medieval period to the late 20th century, was characterised by direct and often violent confrontations. Moreover, the institutionalisation of anti-Muslim sentiment has been perpetuated through religious, colonial, and political narratives (Gada, 2021). According to Jaber (2022), a pivotal moment in this phase was the clash between the Christian West and the Islamic East during the Crusades (1096–1291). This clash laid the groundwork for enduring stereotypes of Muslims as "infidels" and existential threats to Christian Europe. During the 11th century, following the fall of Byzantine territories to Muslim forces, Pope Urban II initiated the First Crusade to reclaim Christian lands, particularly Jerusalem (Al-Quds). This event sparked centuries of conflict over religious and territorial dominance (Kumar, 2012). The rise of the Ottoman Empire between the 14th and 17th centuries further intensified these tensions, as it expanded its control over the Middle East, the Balkans, and Constantinople. These protracted struggles not only reshaped the geopolitical landscape but also entrenched ideological foundations for Islamophobia. These ideological divisions were conceptualised later as a "Clash of Civilisations" between Islam and the Christian West. This legacy of antagonism and othering continues to influence contemporary

perceptions of Muslims. Colonisation also significantly contributed to the rise of Islamophobia. During the 15th century, European colonial powers, notably Britain and France, waged wars across Islamic nations. This colonial enterprise was driven by a desire to maintain a clear distinction between "us" (the colonisers) and "them" (the colonised), thereby preventing the perceived influence of Islamic cultures on Western societies (Jaber, 2022).

The first wave of Islamophobia was formed largely in the 1980s, and its origins were the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran and its widespread consequences in the Islamic world. The revolution's success and its widespread impact heightened Western fears of Islam as a destabilising and extremist force. This period marked a significant shift, as Muslims were increasingly portrayed as a threat to Western security and values, laying the foundation for anti-Muslim (Raghipi et al., 2018). However, according to Allen (2010), the term gained broader recognition after the 1997 publication of the Runnymede Trust report, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, examined the historical presence of Muslims in the UK and formalised discussions on the phenomenon.

In the contemporary digital era, social media has played an increasingly significant role in shaping and perpetuating anti-Muslim narratives. A considerable portion of contemporary anti-Islam can be attributed to the role of Western media, frequently portraying Islam and Muslims through a distorted lens, emphasising irrationality, violence, and fear. Media narratives often homogenise Muslims, treating Islam as an existential threat (Zheng & de Almeida, 2021). This framing has been evident in coverage of key 21st-century events, including the post-9/11 attacks and the War on Terror (2001), the 7/7 London bombings (2005), the rise of far-right movements (2010s), the Brexit referendum and anti-immigrant sentiment (2016), the Christchurch Mosque shootings (2019), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), and the 2024 riots. Such portrayals have

perpetuated stereotypes and reinforced anti-Muslim discourses, contributing to the marginalisation of Muslim communities.

In an era where a single tweet can spark global outrage or solidarity, the digital landscape has become a pivotal area for shaping social attitudes, particularly regarding Islamophobia. Initially manifesting in street protests, Islamophobia has increasingly migrated to digital platforms. In Britain, this issue has grown into a significant concern, as social media has facilitated the widespread propagation of narratives that either perpetuate or challenge anti-Muslim narratives. The advent of digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), and YouTube revolutionized information dissemination, establishing it as a dominant force in influencing political, religious, economic, and cultural agendas. These platforms have also been utilised as the main tool of their propaganda. According to *Ofcom's 2022 Digital Media Habits Report*, 80% of UK adults use these platforms, underscoring their role in amplifying anti-Muslim content. These platforms then serve as spaces for growing online communities and hate groups that share violent, Islamophobic, and racist narratives, contributing to the creation of a hostile virtual environment (Awan, 2016; Selatnia & Toulgui, 2024).

2. Statement of the Problem

The prevalence of social media has heightened the importance of examining the patterns of hateful speech, particularly towards Muslims. However, few studies have explored how these narratives transform and persist over time. Hence, this study explores the evolution of anti-Muslim narratives in the UK, particularly within the context of social media. By analysing social media discourse across different historical periods, the study focuses on how anti-Islam discourse has been constructed, perpetuated, and transformed in response to key events related to the representation of Muslims. Furthermore, the analysis will explore how social media platforms

particularly, Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube, have shaped and reshaped public discourse, amplifying and challenging anti-Muslim narratives in the digital age.

3. Research Questions

The current study is guided by the following main question and its related sub-questions:

How have UK social media narratives of Islamophobia evolved in response to key events across distinct historical periods?

Sub-questions:

- What are the dominant trends in UK social media that reflect users' efforts to reinforce or challenge Islamophobic narratives?
- In what ways have these events Brexit (2016), COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), and the 2024 riots acted as amplifiers for the rise of Islamophobia over time?

4. Aims of the Study

This study seeks to construct an in-depth understanding of the development of anti-Muslim narratives within the context of UK social media. Specifically, it investigates how social media narratives have represented and portrayed Muslims in UK over time. The study employs a temporal lens to analyse these discourses. It focuses on the examination of the role played by key socio-political events in shaping and transforming the anti-Muslim narratives. The objectives of this study are to identify Islamophobic and counter-Islamophobic narratives over the selected events in UK social media platforms. Furthermore, it examines the linguistic patterns and meanings used to frame Islamophobic narratives during the aforementioned key events.

4. Significance of the Study

This research undertakes a diachronic analysis of the key events that have contributed to the spread of negative narratives surrounding Islam and Muslims. Academic researchers, educators, and students in disciplines such as sociology, media studies, and religious studies will find this study particularly valuable. Furthermore, researchers focused on social justice issues, including discrimination and hate crimes, will benefit from the study's insights.

6. Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research methods to achieve an in-depth understanding of the shifting narratives of anti-Islam in the context of UK social media. The rationale for adopting this approach lies in its ability to leverage the strengths of both methodologies. Data for this research were collected from prominent social media platforms, specifically Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube. These platforms were selected due to their global reach, widespread popularity, and significant influence in shaping public discourse. For the diachronic analysis, social media content was categorised into three timeframes: (1) 2016–2017, encompassing the Brexit era, where xenophobic rhetoric often intersected with Islamophobia; (2) 2019–2021 marked by the COVID-19 pandemic; and (3) 2024, characterised by the aftermath of widespread UK riots and the subsequent social and political discourse. This approach allowed for an examination of how narratives of Islamophobia evolved in response to socio-political events while accounting for platform-specific dynamics in public sentiment.

The dataset consists of 257 English-language social media tweets, posts, videos and comments, systematically collected over a period of 4 days from Twitter (X), Facebook, and YouTube, with geolocational filters applied to restrict sampling to UK-based users, ensuring thematic and demographic relevance. Data was gathered manually through Twitter's Advanced Search, Facebook Search, and YouTube's site-specific search. Only public user-generated content (UGC) was included to respect the ethical guidelines. Each platform was represented by nearly 50 posts and videos, collected using a combination of keywords such as "Islamophobia," "UK anti-Muslim," "Muslim immigration," "Brexit," "Covid-19," and "UK Riots 2024." The initial dataset of over 500 tweets, posts, videos, and comments was filtered based on relevance, engagement criteria (likes, shares, comments ≥ 10), and temporal proximity to key anti-Muslim incidents in the UK. The selection of data was based on the highest likes and comments to ensure that the most visible and widely circulated discourse was captured. The data was systematically coded for anti-Muslim narratives and counter-narratives, through quantitative content analysis. The qualitative analysis involved a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how language and ideology shape anti-Muslim narratives on UK social media. By applying CDA, the research uncovers the structural and discursive mechanisms that perpetuate and amplify anti-Muslim discourse across different platforms and temporal contexts.

7. Structure of the Study

This dissertation is organised into two substantive chapters. The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework and the literature review, adopting critical discourse analysis as primary lens for examining anti-Muslim narratives. This section particularly focuses on an integrated theoretical framework that bridges conceptual, representational, discursive, and temporal dimensions of analysis. These interconnected dimensions provide effective tools for analysing the

evolutionary patterns of anti-Muslim discourse. The second half of Chapter One conducts a systematic literature review, synthesizing existing studies on anti-Muslim narratives in digital spaces. It concluded by identifying the research gaps, particularly regarding longitudinal platform-specific dynamics in the UK context. Chapter Two presents the empirical findings from the mixed-methods analysis of UK social media data (2016-2024). The study concludes with implications for future research, framing Islamophobia as a progressive phenomenon rather than a series of temporary manifestations. It also provides practical recommendations for platform algorithms and counter-extremism strategies. Future research should emphasise cross-platform comparative studies and methods for evaluating these systems.

CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical Foundation and Literature Review: Anti-Muslim Narratives and Discourse Analysis

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Introduction	20
1.1 Theoretical Framework.....	20
1.1.1 Islamophobia Origin and Definitions.....	20
1.1.2 Key Events Behind the Rise of Islamophobia.....	23
1.1.3 Race, Religion, and Identity: Intersectional Dynamics in the British Context.....	27
1.1.4 The Influence of Mainstream Media in Shaping Public Perceptions of Muslim Communities	
1.1.5 The Digital Turn in Media: How Social Platforms Have Reshaped Narratives.....	29
1.1.6 The Concept of Othering.....	31
1.1.7 Theoretical Approaches to Social Media Discourse Analysis	35
1.2. Literature Review	38
1.2.1 Negative Portrayal of Muslims in Mainstream Media	38
1.2.2 Systematic Othering of Muslims in Media Discourses	40
1.2.3 Far-Right Exploitation of Crises	41
1.2.4 Media Amplification of Anti-Muslim Stereotypes	43
Conclusion.....	45

Introduction

To investigate the shifting contours of Islamophobia within UK social media landscapes, this study draws upon an integrated theoretical framework that bridges conceptual, representational, discursive, and temporal dimensions of analysis. At its core lies an examination of how anti-Muslim sentiment manifests, spreads, and transmutes in virtual publics. The chapter begins by engaging with critical scholarship on Islamophobia as a social phenomenon and lived experience within British contexts. Then, it explores empirical literature, examining and synthesising previous research on Islamophobia. This includes studies on media representations of Muslims and its role in reinforcing stereotypes. This review incorporates scholarship investigating the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media, the systematic othering of Muslims in media discourses, the far-right exploitation of crises, and the media amplification of anti-Muslim stereotypes. This chapter concludes with a synthesis of these studies, highlighting their limitations and identifying the gaps in literature.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The following section presents the theoretical assumptions that inform both the investigation and interpretation of the findings.

1.1.1 Islamophobia Origin and Definitions

According to Evolvi (2018), the word Islamophobia can be divided into two parts. The first one, "Islam," refers to one of the monotheistic religions in the world. The second part, "phobia," is a Greek affix used in English words to mean "fear." Historically, the word "Islamophobia" was first introduced in 1925 by French authors Etienne Dinet and Slima Ben Ibrahim in their work *Accès de Délire Islamophobe* (Allen, 2010). Edward Said argues in his book: *Covering Islam*

(1981/1997), that Islam is frequently depicted in the West as a backward and violent religion, while Muslims are stereotyped as irrational and threatening. His analysis provides a critical perspective on what would later be known as "Islamophobia." This term gained widespread usage following the publication of a report titled *Islamophobia: A challenge for us all* by the Runnymede Trust in the UK in 1997. The report defines Islamophobia as:

an unfounded hostility towards Islam. It refers also to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs. (p.4)

This definition highlights how Islamophobia involves baseless hostility toward Islam. It leads to discrimination and exclusion of Muslims from political and social spheres.

In 2004, the Council of Europe stated:

Islamophobia is the fear of or prejudiced viewpoint towards Islam, Muslims and matters pertaining to them [taking] the shape of daily forms of racism and discrimination or more violent forms, Islamophobia is a violation of human rights. (Tyler-Todd et al., 2023, p.6).

Bravo López (2010), defines Islamophobia as "hostility towards Islam and anything defined as Islamic or Islamophilic based on the belief that Islam is an enemy, a threat that must be countered." He emphasises that Islamophobia is not just a general dislike or prejudice against Islam but a structured hostility based on the idea that Islam itself represents a danger and threat that needs to be opposed. Allen (2017), suggests that -in his *A Briefing Paper* that was prepared in response to the Home Affairs Committee on December 13, 2016, the British Government should use the following as a working definition for this phenomenon:

Islamophobia is a certain perception of Muslims, which may be expressed as hatred toward Muslims. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of Islamophobia are directed toward Muslim or non-Muslim individuals and/or their property, toward Muslim community institutions and religious facilities. (p. 2)

This definition underscores that Islamophobia is rooted in negative perceptions of Muslims, which can be expressed as hatred and manifested through verbal and physical abuse.

In November 2017, to mark the 20th anniversary of their original report's publication, the Runnymede Trust published an updated report, *Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All*. The report provided both a short definition - "Islamophobia is anti-Muslim racism" (Runnymede Trust, 2017, p.7) - and a more comprehensive one:

Islamophobia is any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life (Runnymede Trust, 2017, p.7).

This definition elaborates that Islamophobia refers to the differential or unfair treatment toward Muslims (or those thought to be Muslims) by excluding or favoring others over them. It limits their basic rights and freedoms in various aspects of public life. On November 27, 2018, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims released a report titled *Islamophobia Defined: The Inquiry into a Working Definition of Islamophobia*. The report proposed the following definition: "rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness" (p.11).

Tell MAMA (Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks), is an independent and confidential support service in the UK that assists individuals facing anti-Muslim prejudice, racism, discrimination, and Islamophobia. It emphasises that any definition of Islamophobia should center on the experiences of Muslims to avoid confusion and ensure fundamental rights are respected. This organisation provides an overview of data on hate crimes targeting Muslims in the UK. According to Tell MAMA, there have been 1,201 verified attacks on Muslims in 2017, marking a 30% increase compared to the year of 2016 (Tell MAMA, 2018).

The term Islamophobia is widely used to describe discrimination, hatred, and hostility toward Islam and Muslims, yet its lack of a universally accepted definition has led scholars to challenge its conceptual clarity (Moten, 2012). Recent attempts have been made to for alternative terms such as anti-Muslim hatred or anti-Islam discrimination to more explicitly link prejudice and exclusion to the targeting of Muslims as a religious group. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on British Muslims, among others, has debated whether Islamophobia should remain in use or be replaced by a more precise term to better capture the systemic nature of anti-Muslim bigotry (APPG, 2018). This ongoing discourse reflects the evolving nature of the concept and the need for terminological precision in addressing anti-Muslim prejudice.

1.1.2 Key Events behind the Rise of Islamophobia

Islamophobia is not a recent phenomenon. For hundreds of years, there have been common Islamophobic stereotypes, such as the idea that Muslims pose a threat to Western society due to the terrible events that horrified the world (Universities UK, 2021). The terrorist attacks on New York's Twin Towers, known as 9/11, marked a turning point in global history. The subsequent "war on terror" launched by America as a reaction against the 9/11 bombing that resulted in the exclusion of the Muslim society (Khan, n.d.). Similarly, the 7/7 London bombings in 2005

involved four bombs detonated during the morning rush hour; three exploded in underground stations, and one on a bus. The attacks were perpetrated by four men of Pakistani heritage who were born in the UK. This incident claimed over 50 lives and injured more than 7 hundred people (European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2005). These early 21st-century attacks greatly changed things and had a long-term effect on people's lives.

Additionally, public opinion has shifted regarding immigration, with the general mood in the country that occupied people's minds associated with this issue (Whiteley et al., 2023). The prevailing sentiment in Britain is rooted in the fear that British culture is under threat, particularly as Muslims represent the second-largest religious group in the nation (Brookes & Curry, 2024).

A YouGov survey indicated that 63% of respondents identified immigration, including Muslims, as the most pressing issue facing Britain. These concerns, amplified by racist and xenophobic narratives, contributed to 52% of voters supporting the UK's decision to leave the European Union, commonly referred to as 'Brexit,' on June 23, 2016 (Clarke et al., 2017). A major consequence of this decision was the restriction of the free movement of goods and citizens across UK borders, marking a significant change in the country's immigration and border policies.

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has emerged as one of the most significant global public health threats in recent history. It has affected nearly 69 million individuals and claiming over 1.57 million lives worldwide as of December 10, 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). While the primary focus of global efforts has been on mitigating the biological and medical impacts of the virus, the socio-economic and psychological ramifications of the pandemic have been largely overlooked. Historically, infectious disease outbreaks such as the plague, influenza, cholera, and HIV have been accompanied by stigma, prejudice, xenophobia, and the "Othering" of specific communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has similarly exacerbated existing forms of

discrimination, particularly Islamophobia; defined as the fear, hatred, or discrimination against Muslims (Awan et al., 2024).

Green, McFalls, and Smith (2011, as cited in Balabantaray, 2022) argue that hate crimes and systemic biases often target specific groups based on predetermined characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided fertile ground for the resurgence of such biases, with Muslims being targeted as scapegoats for the spread of the virus. While the virus itself does not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, or religion, human responses to the pandemic have been deeply rooted in prejudice and bias.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by an infodemic; an overwhelming spread of misinformation and fake news. Social media platforms have played a significant role in disseminating anti-Muslim narratives, often portraying Muslims as "super-spreaders" of the virus or accusing them of receiving special treatment during the pandemic (Balabantaray, 2022). For instance, Twitter analyses during the pandemic revealed recurring themes such as the association of Muslims with COVID-19 transmission and the propagation of conspiracy theories that blamed Muslim communities for the crisis (Awan et al., 2024).

A prominent example of anti-Muslim rhetoric during the pandemic can be observed in the aftermath of the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi, India. An Islamic missionary group, Tablighi Jamaat, held a congregation in Delhi, which was later linked to a significant number of COVID-19 cases across the country. As a result, Muslims faced verbal abuse, physical attacks, boycotts, and systemic discrimination (Balabantaray, 2022). Thus, the pandemic has significantly amplified Islamophobia, exacerbating the existing discrimination faced by the Muslim community and adding voluminously to their struggles.

Throughout history, the world has witnessed numerous instances of large-scale rioting and civil unrest, with European nations, including Britain, experiencing several violent outbreaks often described as race riots (Willmott et al., 2024). Following the tragic murder of three children by a UK national on July 29, 2024, false claims propagated by far-right groups alleged that the assailant was a Muslim migrant. These unfounded allegations fueled widespread unrest, escalating Islamophobic, racist, and anti-immigrant sentiments. This culminated in the largest wave of racist violence, arson, and looting seen in England since the 2011 riots (Boukari & Devakumar, 2024; Ismail & Ardalan-Raikes, 2025). Horwood (2024) stated that between July 30 and August 7, 2024, an estimated 29 anti-immigration demonstrations and riots occurred across 27 towns and cities in the UK. These events led to both spontaneous and later organised attacks on mosques and hotels housing asylum seekers. By the end of August, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) confirmed that 1,280 people had been arrested for their involvement in the unrest. This highlights the severity of the crisis and the deep social divisions that fueled it.

The 9/11 attacks and the 7/7 London bombings directly linked Islam with terrorism in public discourse, fueling widespread Islamophobia. Brexit amplified anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments. In some regions, Muslims were blamed for the COVID-19 outbreak, seeing them as scapegoated for the pandemic. The 2024 riots reinforced stereotypes of Muslims as disruptive or violent. Collectively, these events have perpetuated negative stereotypes, exacerbated discrimination, and entrenched anti-Muslim narratives globally. This study interrogates how these key events (9/11, 7/7, Brexit, COVID-19, and 2024 riots) have institutionalised Islamophobia as a form of anti-Muslim racism, transforming public discourse in the UK.

1.1.3 Race, Religion, and Identity: Intersectional Dynamics in the British Context

In contemporary anti-Muslim rhetoric across Europe, the figure of "the Muslim" is often portrayed through three interrelated stereotypes: foreignness, backwardness and danger. Firstly, foreignness is identified in relation to Europe, with Muslims depicted as inherently different and separate. Thus, Islam is perceived as an alien religion or an incompatible culture with European values. This narrative is frequently intertwined with accusations of backwardness, portraying Muslims as intolerant, authoritarian, and sexist. Secondly, this negative representation of Muslims and Islam reinforces their perception as a threat. A prominent narrative further portrays Muslims as inherently violent and linked to terrorism. This anti-Muslim racism assumes all Muslims are suspect, requiring them to prove their "goodness." (Lauwers, 2019).

UK Muslims often struggle with a sense of belonging, stemming from the perception that their values are incompatible with dominant definitions of 'Britishness' due to their religious identity. This perception leads to stereotypes, misrecognition, and misrepresentation. It also results in systemic exclusion, such as employment discrimination and hate crimes. Muslims are frequently framed as the "Other" and "foreign," even for those who are UK-born. All of these factors challenge their perception of Britain as their home. Furthermore, the integration with British societies poses unique challenges for many Muslims, as their religious beliefs may conflict with their social norms. This increases the marginalisation of Muslims and reinforces barriers to full participation in British society (Phoenix, 2019; Lauwers, 2019; Anjum et al., 2019; Sufi & Yasmin, 2022; Sealy, 2022; Elsayed, 2023). For example, visible markers of Muslim identity, such as the niqab, often trigger both racial and religious prejudice. The wearing of the niqab is frequently taken as a sign of Islamist terrorism. Moreover, Muslim women are not exempt from the broader

stereotypes applied to Muslims in general, who are often portrayed as evil, barbaric, backwards, terrorists, and uncivilized (Zempi & Chakraborti, 2015).

1.1.4 The Influence of Mainstream Media in Shaping Public Perceptions of Muslim Communities

In today's world, mainstream media serves as a primary source of knowledge and information about people, cultures, and events globally. Also playing a crucial role in shaping and reinforcing stereotypes. This significantly influences public perceptions of various groups and minorities, particularly Islam and Muslim communities, who represent approximately one-quarter of the global population. One-fifth of the world's Muslim population inhabits in countries where Islam is not the majority religion. In Western societies, Islam is the principal minority faith and Muslims are the fastest-growing religious group. Despite the diversity of practices within Islamic traditions, Islam is often misunderstood and misrepresented in various contexts (Eid, 2014). For example, British media has frequently portrayed Muslims in highly derogatory ways, failing to distinguish between moderate Muslims and extremist groups (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Sian et al., 2012). This has contributed to rising anti-Islam and increase in hostile attacks on Muslims in the UK. Furthermore, Muslims are often associated with violence, terrorism, and aggression across media platforms, including cable news, newspapers, television, movies, web animations, flash-based games, and traditional video games (Saleem et al., 2015).

Numerous scholars have examined the representation of Muslims and Islam in various media and geopolitical contexts, with the majority finding predominantly negative portrayals and attitudes. These representations often revolve around securitisation, framing Islam as a violent religion linked to terrorism. Additionally, they contribute to processes of othering by depicting Muslims as a homogenous and undifferentiated Other in opposition to Western culture (Cervi et

al., 2021). For instance, in response to Anderson Cooper's question about why Westerners are afraid to criticise Islam, Bill Maher stated: 'Because they are violent, because they threaten us, and they are threatening, they bring up desert stuff to our world.' (Saleem et al., 2015). This statement reflects a stereotypical and prejudiced perception of certain groups, particularly Muslims and people from Middle Eastern or North African regions. It reinforces the idea of Othering by portraying them as violent and as a threat to Western societies. The phrase "desert stuff" further exemplifies an Orientalist perspective, reducing diverse cultures to simplistic and exoticised elements. Such rhetoric contributes to fear-based narratives and justifies exclusionary or securitised policies rather than fostering understanding and dialogue.

1.1.5 The Digital Turn in Media: How Social Platforms Have Reshaped Narratives

From the late 20th century to the early 21st century, prior to the widespread adoption of social media, anti-Islam was already a pervasive social issue. It manifested in various forms such as social isolation, discrimination, bullying, and other expressions of prejudice directed at Muslim communities (Chakraborty, 2017). However, the advent and global proliferation of the internet and social media platforms have significantly amplified the reach and intensity of anti-Muslim narratives. Social media, as a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, has become a vehicle for disseminating hate speech and perpetuating negative stereotypes about Muslims (Mohammed & Inusa, 2020).

Online platforms allow anonymity. This lets individuals spread anti-Muslim rhetoric, organise anti-Muslim protests, and target Muslims without consequences (Citron, 2015). Many uses anonymous accounts to hide their identities. This unrestricted use of social media has facilitated the widespread dissemination of the content that frames Muslims and Islam in a negative light. This fosters fear and intimidation among both individuals and communities (Farkas et al.,

2017).

Sandberg et al. (2023) argued that the portrayal of Muslims and Islam in Western media has long been characterised by a predominantly negative tone, contributing to entrenched stereotypes and prejudices. In the digital age, social media has emerged as a new tool for propagating propaganda. This content is often presented as factual information but is frequently distorted to portray Muslims and Islam negatively (Civila et al., 2020). This phenomenon has intensified significantly since the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, which marked a turning point in the global escalation of anti-Islam (Organization of Islamic Cooperation [OIC], 2018). The internet has also been identified as a platform for promoting radicalisation and terrorism, with its misuse described as "...one of the greatest threats that countries including the UK face" (Kenyon et al., 2021, p.3). In this context, Muslims have become targets of systemic negative stereotyping and prejudice, reflecting the enduring and evolving nature of Islamophobia as a global phenomenon.

In recent years, the escalation of far-right extremism has preoccupied the minds of the media, the public, and policymakers. The term "far-right" is often linked to racially motivated activities undertaken by organisations and groups that seek to undermine the rights of Muslim communities in the UK and across Europe (OIC, 2018). These groups frequently organise public marches, demonstrations, and campaigns aimed at opposing Islamic practices. They also challenge immigration policies, particularly in the wake of terrorist threats or attacks. The emergence and proliferation of social media platforms have further amplified the impact of far-right ideologies. While these ideological frameworks are not novel, they have gained a broader and more widespread influence. These platforms have facilitated the dissemination of both factual and

fabricated information. This has created an environment conducive to the spread of these ideologies and violent extremism within communities (Wade, 2019; Kenyon et al., 2021).

Far-right groups have exploited social media to propagate hate speech and misinformation targeting Muslims. Platforms such as Twitter have become instrumental in spreading anti-Muslim sentiments. They provide far-right groups with a means to politicise anti-Muslim rhetoric (Evolvi, 2019). This has introduced new challenges in addressing online harassment, hostility, and derogatory speech. Consequently, efforts to curb the spread of extremist ideologies and protect vulnerable communities from online and offline harm have become increasingly complex (Schoenebeck et al., n.d.).

1.1.6 The Concept of Othering

The concept of "Othering" refers to the process of viewing the Muslim community as fundamentally different or alien within society, particularly in Western countries. Historically, this concept was applied to Muslims in Spain centuries ago. Today, this troubling history is repeating itself, with Muslims often scapegoated in contemporary crises. "Othering" is a significant social issue of the 21st century, particularly in Western societies (Saeed, 2019). As Güven Kılıçarslan explains, in 2022, the "Other" is perceived as different, whether in terms of race, nationality, religion, or social class. This perception leads to a binary division between "us" and "them." The dichotomy often renders the "Other" as inferior, as they are seen as lacking the qualities or identity possessed by the dominant group. Foreignness, signifies "Otherness"; the perception of an alien culture, values, or way of life (Zebiri, 2008).

Theories of "Othering" trace back to thinkers such as Hegel, De Beauvoir, Lacan, Said, and Spivak. In contemporary usage, the term refers to processes through which dominant groups assign negative attributes to subordinate groups. These groups are often portrayed as morally

inferior, and threatening (Shaker Ardekani & Ahmadi, 2022). The dichotomy between the Western "Self" and the Eastern "Other" is deeply rooted in Occidental society, where identity is often constructed in opposition to the "Other." (Kılıçarslan, 2022). Paul Ricoeur (1992, as cited in Goitia Goitia, 2024) noted "one cannot be thought of without the Other, that instead one passes into the Other. "

Muslims today face violence, prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion, exacerbated by negative portrayals in media and social institutions. They are often depicted as "outsiders" who must be assimilated through various governmental strategies. The construction of the "Other" or the "us vs. them" binary is not based on facts or statistics but on imagined knowledge of who is us and who is them (Jaber, 2022). According to Frantz Fanon, the colonial era established the idea of the superior "White" who in turn created his own inferior "Other. " Islam is often seen as separate and "other, " lacking shared values with Western cultures (Gada, 2021).

In 2018, APPG stated a case example of two women from Guisborough who brutally tortured a Muslim convert. One shouted, "We don't like Muslims over here, you know. I hate them." The women were convicted of religiously aggravated assault, with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) concluding that the attack was driven by hostility toward the victim's faith. This incident highlights the harm caused by anti-Muslim violence and reflects the broader dimensions of anti-Islam. The women's vile comments reflect the "Othering" or "displacing" of Muslims, denying them a sense of belonging. Such rhetoric reinforces the narrative that they are unwelcome in the country.

Islamophobia overlaps with cultural racism and Arab-phobia, as the categorisation of someone as "Muslim" often relies on stereotyped physical or cultural traits (Cervi et al., 2021). Islam is frequently perceived as inferior, primitive, barbaric, and oppressive, leading to widespread

discrimination and hostility. The Runnymede Trust's report on Islamophobia highlights how Muslims are often viewed negatively as the "Other," frequently associated with terrorism and extremism. For example, Ann Coulter's statement, "not all Muslims are terrorists, but all terrorists are Muslims," perpetuates the stereotype of Islam as inherently barbaric. Such portrayals reinforce the perception of Muslims as a threat to civilised society (Jaber, 2022; Allen, n.d.).

Edward Said's work critically examines how the West constructs a distorted image of the Orient, framing it as the "Other" in opposition to the idealised West. Through his well-known texts -*Orientalism* (1978), *The Question of Palestine* (1979), and *Covering Islam* (1981)- Said deconstructs Western perceptions of the East. He offers a framework to analyse the concept of the "Other." (Mohrem, 2020). His theory of "Orientalism" reveals how Islamophobia is deeply rooted in the logic of Orientalist discourse. Historically, this discourse portrayed Islam and its adherents as inferior, barbaric, and unassimilable (Islamic Council of Victoria, 2020). As Said (1978/2003) argued, Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." (p. 3) It serves as a tool of cultural and political domination. Said further elaborates on the Western perception of the Orient, noting that its people are not viewed as citizens or individuals but as problems to be solved or confined. This dehumanising perspective justifies colonial and imperial ambitions, as the Orient is seen as a territory to be dominated rather than a society to be understood. Edward Said also argues that Western imperial powers construct knowledge about the East to position themselves as superior. This process of knowledge formation is rooted in colonial discourse. It frames "us" as superior and "them" as inferior. Said's work remains essential for understanding the historical and ideological foundations of anti-Islam, as well as its contemporary manifestations in political and cultural discourse.

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of Islam and Muslims, often portraying Islam as different from and a significant threat to the West. Within the British context, Muslims are frequently depicted as challenging "our" culture, values, institutions, and way of life, reinforcing a narrative of "us" versus "them." The world was conceptually divided into two unequal parts: the larger, "different," designated as the Orient, and the Other, referred to as "our" world, identified as the Occident or the West. In news media, Muslims are predominantly represented as violent terrorists, with little representation of them as ordinary, peaceful individuals (Said, 1981/1997). This skewed portrayal contributes to the marginalisation and exclusion of Muslims from the national narrative and the substantive rights of British citizenship.

Media actively constructs and reinforces the notion of Muslims as the "Other." By manipulating public opinion, the media perpetuates stereotypes that depict Muslims as uncivilised and incompatible with Western civilisation. These portrayals persist regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds (Said, 1981/1997; Sutkutè, 2023). Over the past fifty years, the media's role in shaping social attitudes have had both positive and negative effects; however, its contribution to the Othering of Muslims has been particularly detrimental (Saeed, 2019). As a result, Muslims often find themselves culturally excluded from Western civilisation. This systemic marginalisation denies them full societal participation, thereby perpetuating cycles of discrimination and alienation (Hussain & Bagguley, 2012).

The most significant intellectual foundation of anti-Islam can be traced back to Orientalism. This framework has expanded its influence with the development and diversification of communication technologies. The amplification of mass media, including television programs, advertisements, cinema, and digital games, has significantly spread the reach of Orientalist narratives. Mass media has become a vital tool for the West in constructing representations of the

East. As technological progress accelerated, Orientalist discourse adapted and continued through digital platforms. It gives rise to a new conceptualisation termed "Digital Orientalism." (Gezgin et al., 2021)

1.1.7 Theoretical Approaches to Social Media Discourse Analysis

Before exploring the emergence of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a distinct field of academic inquiry, it is essential to differentiate between Discourse Analysis (DA) and CDA. The fundamental distinction lies in the fact that DA involves the "analysis of discourse," while CDA adopts a critical stance (Le & Le, 2009).

Critical Discourse Analysis, established as a cross-discipline in the early 1990s by scholars such as Theo van Leeuwen, Gunther Kress, Teun van Dijk, and Norman Fairclough (Durmaz & Yoğun, 2022). It is defined by van Dijk (2015) as discourse analytical research that primarily examines how social power abuse and inequality are enacted through text and talk within social and political contexts. He characterises CDA as a scholarly movement focused on social issues like power abuse, dominance, and inequality. Rather than prioritising academic paradigms, it emphasises how dominant groups control text and context, and thereby influence the mind (Le & Le, 2009).

The primary mission of CDA is to scrutinise social injustices manifested in various social practices and to oppose social abuse, racism, prejudice, and discrimination against marginalised or dominated groups with less power. According to Fairclough (2010), CDA is fundamentally a form of critical social research aimed at better understanding how societies function, and how to mitigate or end harmful consequences. Central concepts to CDA are language and ideology.

Language is an integral part of human society, functioning not only as a medium of communication but also as a reflection of cultural and ideological constructs. Ideology, in this context, refers to the system of beliefs, values, and ideas that underpin social norms and behaviours. The relationship between language and ideology is complex, as language both shapes and is shaped by ideological frameworks. Language acts as a powerful mechanism for the dissemination of ideology, thereby influencing individuals' perceptions and interactions with the world ("Language as a Reflection of Ideological Constructs," 2022).

According to van Dijk (1998), Language plays a significant role in shaping how individuals and communities perceive reality, affecting their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Ideological language can perpetuate stereotypes, biases, and prejudices, which in turn impact interpersonal and intergroup dynamics. For instance, the representation of specific ethnic groups in media narratives can reinforce negative stereotypes, contributing to discrimination and social fragmentation. From a linguistic perspective, many words have been coined to perpetuate prejudices against Muslims and their religion, illustrating how the spread of anti-Muslim language functions as a "linguistic form of domination and manipulation" to borrow Fairclough's expression (Mohideen & Mohideen, 2008, p.76).

Cyberspace has emerged as a double-edged sword in the context of anti-Islam, offering both a platform for its propagation and a tool for its counteraction. The internet, with its instant, facilitates the spread of anti-Muslim narratives through applications like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube, while simultaneously providing opportunities to challenge such narratives (Khamis, 2023). On one hand, hashtags serve as powerful tools for mobilisation. They amplify anti-Muslim discourse by making it more visible and trend-driven, particularly in Western European media. Hashtags such as #StopIslam, #BanIslam, and #IslamIsTheProblem exemplify

how digital platforms shape narrative development and reinforce anti-Muslim sentiments. Similarly, memes, often perceived as humorous, have evolved into sophisticated vehicles for hate speech. They combine images and text to perpetuate harmful stereotypes (Evolvi, 2018; Civila et al., 2020; Poole et al., 2021; Khamis, 2023). For instance, memes that equate Islam with terrorism or portray Muslims as inherently violent (Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1

Satirical Depiction of a Future British Monarchy and Anti-Muslim Stereotypes



Figure 1.1 presents a satirical image depicting the future British monarchy engages with anti-Muslim themes and reinforces harmful stereotypes. By portraying the 2050 monarch in a manner that associates Muslims with terrorism and violence, the image perpetuates negative stereotypes prevalent in anti-Muslim rhetoric. Such representations risk exacerbating existing fears and prejudices towards Muslims (Chakraborty, 2017).

Conversely, social media also provides unprecedented opportunities for Muslims to counter digitally based Islamophobia-inspired campaigns. They achieve this by presenting alternative counter-narratives using various effective strategies and techniques. Hashtags like

#MuslimLivesMatter and #MuslimRage are employed to raise awareness about Islamophobia, foster solidarity with Muslim communities, and take action against prejudice. Memes, due to their simplicity and shareability, can also serve as effective tools for challenging anti-Muslim narratives, spreading rapidly across platforms to promote counter-discourses (Sills, 2017; Ta'amneh & Al-Ghazo, 2021; Riccioni, 2022; Khamis, 2023). **To analyse these discursive strategies, this study adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach, specifically drawing on van Dijk's (1993, 2001) framework. His concepts of discursive polarisation (e.g., "us vs. them" framing) and ideological structures are particularly relevant for examining how counter-narratives challenge dominant anti-Muslim discourse on social media.** By applying these constructs, the study analyses **linguistic features, rhetorical devices, and semiotic elements** in social media discourse to reveal their role in contesting anti-Muslim narratives.

1.2 Literature Review

This section reviews empirical evidence on media representations of Muslims communities. It focuses on evolving narratives of anti-Islam in the UK. The literature highlights four key themes. The themes covered in the previous empirical literature were: the negative portrayal of Muslims in the media, the systematic Othering of Muslims in media discourses, the far-right exploitation of crises, and the media amplification of anti-Muslim stereotypes.

1.2.1 Negative Portrayal of Muslims in Mainstream Media

A great deal of research in media studies has examined the portrayal of Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11, often highlighting a persistent trend of negative stereotyping. Many studies have focused on how media associates Islam and Muslims with negative portrayals reinforcing harmful generalisations. This framing has contributed to widespread anti-Islam, shaping public perceptions. A review of existing literature reveals that much of the research on this topic employs

qualitative methods, such as discourse analysis, documentary analysis, and content analysis, to examine media narratives and their social impacts. These studies demonstrate how media representations have marginalised Muslim communities, perpetuating them in hostile depictions.

For instance, Kurebwa and Muchakabarwa (2019) examined CNN's portrayal of anti-Islam. The research revealed a pattern of biased framing that aligns with broader post-9/11 media trends. Their study found that Western media, particularly CNN, frequently stereotypes Islam as violent, unjustly linking Muslims to terrorism. Incidents involving Muslim perpetrators were amplified and framed as representative of the whole religion. The study employed a qualitative methodology, made use of key informant interviews with experts in the field of Islam and media (e.g., with Imams, journalists, and academics). CNN outlets often stereotype Islam as a terrorist ideology, conflating Muslims with terrorism. These negative media portrayals contribute to widespread anti-Islam, leading to discrimination and hate crimes. While this study provides valuable insights, there are several limitations that must be considered, such as the exclusive focus on CNN, which may not fully represent all Western media. Despite this, the researchers argue that CNN's global influence amplifies these biased frames. Therefore, Future research needs to be expanded by comparing multiple networks to measure the spread of anti-Muslim narratives.

Allen (n.d.), through qualitative discourse and thematic analysis, found that British newspapers, particularly tabloids, portrayed Islam and Muslims negatively across four key periods (pre-9/11, post-9/11, post-7/7, and later developments). Stereotypes like "barbaric," "oppressive," and "a threat" dominated coverage, with Muslims framed as culturally incompatible, backward or dangerous. The study revealed significant real-world consequences demonstrated in rising anti-Muslim hate crimes. Surveys showed over 60% of public perceptions about Islam were media derived. Despite these valuable findings, several limitations emerge. For instance, the focus on

print media excludes digital platforms and broadcast media (e.g., social media). Allen's work underscores how British media perpetuates anti-Islam in which tabloids acting as key amplifiers.

1.2.2 Systematic Othering of Muslims in Media Discourses

The portrayal of Muslims in media discourses has long been shaped by a systematic "Othering". This process represents Muslim identity as different, threatening, or opposed with Western values. Scholars have examined how media discourses reinforce this Othering, often depicting Muslims as a monolithic group defined by extremism, backward, or violence. This systemic Othering not only perpetuates anti-Islam but also authorises structured discrimination, embedding anti-Muslim bias into legal, political, and cultural institutions. The literature review uncovers that most studies on this theme have employed mixed-methods approach to explore the phenomenon.

Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) employed a mixed-methods approach combining Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and computational Topic Modeling to examine representations of Muslims across 105 million words of Swedish forum data (2000-2013). Their analysis revealed systematic Othering patterns where Muslims are frequently depicted as violent extremists, fanatical or threats. These representations employed gendered stereotypes, framing Muslim men as aggressors while portraying women as the victims of oppression and sexual assault. While this study provides a crucial insight into digital anti-Islam's nature, several limitations constrain. The study focused exclusively on Flashback. This platform is known for its far-right tendencies that may not represent broader social media discourse. Nevertheless, the research significantly promotes understanding of how social media functions as an amplification mechanism for systematic "Othering."

Relying on critical analysis, Sultana's (2022) mixed-methods study examined how media discourses exploit freedom of speech to spread anti-Islam. She argued that it perpetuates violence against Muslim youth who experienced "Negative Attention" in public spheres. The research highlighted how this systemic Othering impact on Muslims' youth psychology (depression or anger) and their sociology (bullying, harassment, or discrimination). Sultana (2022) draws on Edward Said's Orientalism to critique Othering in media. Nevertheless, limitations are imposed on the study by the absence of a universally accepted definition of Islamophobia. The research highlights how media discourses reinforce harmful stereotypes, but further studies are needed to examine anti-Muslim narratives across different media platforms and over time.

Brookes and Curry (2024) identified shifting patterns in UK broadsheet press of anti-Islam across four time points: 2005; 2010; 2013; and 2021. Their Modern-Diachronic Corpus-Assisted Discourse Study (MD-CADS) revealed a nuanced evolution in the discursive representation of anti-Islam. While Muslims are negatively presented as being resistant to integrating into British society and associated them with violence and particularly, with terrorism. This mixed-methods study provides valuable insights; however, it has several limitations. Notably, its scope is restricted to UK broadsheet press, which may limit the representativeness of the findings. Additionally, the study examines a constrained time period. It may not fully capture longitudinal trends or broader contextual shifts. Future investigation should expand empirical studies to include both print and digital media across multiple countries. Moreover, employing longitudinal analysis would enable researchers to track the evolution of anti-Muslim narratives over extended timeframes.

1.2.3 Far-Right Exploitation of Crises

Extensive research on contemporary political discourse has examined how far-right movements exploit crises; whether public health emergencies, or terrorist attacks, to achieve

exclusionary agendas. Studies highlight that these groups frame crises as existential threats requiring solutions. Often, they scapegoat marginalised communities (particularly immigrants, Muslims, and minority groups), as the responsible of these crises. While qualitative case studies dominate this theme, analysing far-right rhetoric during events like COVID-19. Studies outline the mechanisms of these groups, arguing that crisis exploitation has become a feature of modern far-right mobilisation.

Mirrlees' (2021) qualitative analysis of 100 #RemoveKebab tweets reveals how far-right groups exploit social media to propagate genocidal anti-Islam. The hashtag, rooted in the Bosnian genocide, dehumanises Muslims and implicitly calls for their genocide and violence through memes and coded language, as well as, representing them as a threat to the West. This research provides critical perceptions into far-right digital radicalisation, their scope remains limited. The study examined a limited sample of 100 tweets, which may not comprehensively represent the full extent of #RemoveKebab's usage. Additionally, Data collection was restricted to a single day, potentially failing to capture variations in hate speech triggered by real-world events. Continued investigation should incorporate longitudinal tracking as well as analyse a larger dataset to better understand the full scope of #RemoveKebab's usage and its broader implications.

Hindu right-wing Instagram accounts such as @Hindu_secrets and @Hindu_he_hum propagated anti-Muslim narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic, framing Indian Muslims as "super-spreaders" of the virus (Chakraborty, 2023). While this study offers valuable insights into the encoding of anti-Muslim stereotypes during the pandemic, its narrow focus on only two accounts limits its broader applicability, suggesting the need for more comprehensive samples in future research.

1.2.4 Media Amplification of Anti-Muslim Stereotypes

The existing literature on media representations of Islam and Muslims has grown significantly. In particular, it focuses on how news and entertainment media perpetuate harmful stereotypes that shape public perceptions. Our review of the literature demonstrates that such negative representation has measurable consequences. It fosters anti-Muslim attitudes, justifies discriminatory policies, and even incites hate crimes. A significant section of prior research on media's role in shaping anti-Muslim prejudice has employed qualitative methods. These studies have produced evidence demonstrating how repeated exposure to stereotypical portrayals increases anti-Muslim bias among narratives. This section outlines how media systems operate as powerful amplifiers of anti-Muslim stereotypes.

Tama and Sulistyaningrum's (2023) literature review between 2013 and 2022, reveals how media representation amplifies anti-Muslim stereotypes. Factors connected with anti-Islam include negative portrayal, bias in news production, and a lack of understanding of Islam, contribute to anti-Muslim sentiment. Their analysis exposes that media portrayed Muslims as a threat to social security and stability. In addition, Muslim voices have been marginalised as a result of the media's concentration on fake news. These stereotypes reinforce fear and prejudice across both traditional and digital media platforms against the Muslim communities. The reader should bear in mind that the study is rely on Western and English-speaking contexts. This narrow focus may overlook distinct forms of anti-Islam perpetuated by non-Western media in regions like Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Through a qualitative analysis of UK media and social media discourse, Wade (2019), uncovered those anti-Muslim narratives became significantly amplified following terrorist attacks (such as 9/11 attack) through far-right propaganda. Both traditional and digital media platforms

reinforce anti-Muslim stereotypes and increase anti-Muslim hate crimes. The study demonstrated how media coverage linked Islam with barbarianism. While social media trends (such as hashtags like #KillAllMuslims) further amplified violent discourse against Muslim. The research highlighted that these media-propagated narratives had consequences, including a rise in hate crimes and marginalisation of Muslim voices in public discourse. However, the study's findings were constrained by its temporal scope in 2019. Despite this limitation, the findings emphasise how UK media landscapes function as amplifiers of anti-Muslim stereotypes. Later studies should integrate dichronic analysis to follow how these narratives change over time.

The extensive review of existing literature uncovered two significant limitations in studies of anti-Muslim narratives. First, while numerous analyses have examined how printed and press media construct narratives about Muslim communities, little attention has been paid to digital media. Second, the field has generally relied on synchronic analysis of events, rather than adopting diachronic analysis that traces evolving anti-Muslim discourses across different key events. The following chapter will address these gaps by conducting a critical discourse analysis of UK social media of key events involving Muslim communities and how narratives have shifted in response to these events.

Conclusion

Ultimately, by bridging conceptual, representational, discursive, and temporal perspectives, this study develops a multidimensional theoretical framework for analysis. In the literature review section, previous studies related to the research topic were critically analysed and discussed. Gaps within the existing body of literature were identified, and limitations in previous research were highlighted. By identifying these limitations, Chapter One has established a solid foundation that critically informs and supports the achievement of the objectives of the research study.

CHAPTER TWO

Evolving Anti-Muslim Narratives in UK Social Media: An Empirical Analysis

Chapter Two: Evolving Anti-Muslim Narratives in UK Social Media: An Empirical Analysis.

Introduction.....	49
2.1 Data Sources.....	50
2.2 Findings and Discussion	52
2.2.1 Brexit 2016	52
2.2.2 Covid-19	60
2.2.3 Riot 2024	67
2.3 Reinforcing Stereotypes: The Representation of Muslims in UK Social Media.....	75
Conclusion	77
General Conclusion.....	78
References	80
ملخص	89

Introduction

The first chapter established the theoretical framework and the literature review. This provided a foundation for the study's empirical investigation. Building on these theoretical insights, this chapter addresses the gaps in existing research and presents the empirical component of the study including data sources, and methodological approaches. The chapter begins introducing the three data sources; Twitter/X, Facebook, and YouTube due to their global dominance, their unique content spread policies, and their ideological influence as prominent forces in digital public discourse. The analytical methods are subsequently outlined. Finally, the findings are presented and discussed in relation to the study's primary research question. By integrating this systematic research approach with the earlier theoretical grounding. This chapter bridges the gap between the previous studies and the original empirical data (including collected tweets, posts, videos and comments) to provide practical findings.

2.1 Data Sources

This study examines three of the world's most influential social media platforms; Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter (X). They were selected for their combined global user base of 6.2 billion monthly active users in 2025. The platforms also demonstrate a significant impact on public discourse and have contrasting approaches to content moderation (Backlinko, 2025; The Social Shepherd, 2025; Cropink, 2025).

Twitter (now X): Twitter is a global and social networking platform that allows users to post short messages, or "tweets," and engage in real-time discussions. It is a widely used platform with over 368 million monthly active users as of 2023 (Statista, 2023). It serves as a major channel for news dissemination. Additionally, it plays a key role in political discourse and public debate. Twitter has faced criticism over its management of misinformation and hate speech. This criticism

grew particularly after its acquisition by Elon Musk in 2022. The Change in ownership led to significant policy changes regarding content moderation (Axios, 2022).

Facebook: Facebook is the largest social media platform in the world, with nearly 3 billion users as of March 2022 (Global Data, n.d.). Owned by Meta (formerly Facebook Inc.), it serves as a key space for news sharing, community engagement, and political advertising. Facebook has been criticised for its amplification of divisive content and its role in spreading misinformation (CBS News, 2021). Despite these challenges, it remains a dominant force in global digital communication.

YouTube: with over 2.5 billion logged-in monthly users, YouTube is the most widely used video-sharing platform, managed by Google (VPNRank, n.d.). It provides a vast range of content, including news, educational material, and entertainment. YouTube has faced criticism for its recommendation algorithm, accused of promoting extremist content (Mozilla Foundation, 2023). However, it remains a primary source of video-based news and information for users worldwide.

These platforms were selected for their different approaches to content spread, user demographics, and influence on public discourse. This makes them critical sources for analysing digital media trends.

2.2 Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion of mixed-methods study analysing the manifestation of Islamophobic narratives and counter-narratives within user-generated content (UGC) between 2016 and 2024. The dataset comprises tweets (from Twitter, now X), Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and comments, collected from UK-based users. The analysis examines how key 21st-century events have shaped these discourses: the Brexit referendum and its

associated anti-immigrant sentiment (2016), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), and the 2024 riots.

Islamophobic narratives, or anti-Muslim rhetoric, are characterised by dehumanising language and securitisation narratives, portraying Muslims as existential threats to national identity and security. In contrast, counter-narratives challenge these constructions by emphasising solidarity, human rights discourse, and critiques of xenophobia and Islamophobia. **The analysis reveals how these opposing narratives evolved in response to socio-political events, reflecting broader tensions in public discourse.**

2.2.1 Brexit 2016

Brexit was the UK's 2016 decision to leave the European Union (EU) after a close referendum (52% Leave vs. 48% Remain). Supporters saw it as independence from EU and its laws, while critics warned of economic harm and a rise in xenophobic attitude. After years of negotiations, the UK fully exited in 2020, leading to trade barriers, stricter immigration policies, and lasting political conflicts. While Brexit was not explicitly designed to target Muslims, however, its campaign was marked by anti-immigrant rhetoric in social media. This discourse reinforced far-right groups' hostility toward minorities, particularly Muslims.

This analysis was based on public and available tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and associated comments. The data were collected from X (Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube using the hashtags #Brexit, #BanIslam, #DeportMuslims, and #RefugeesWelcome within the UK context between June 1, 2016, and December 31, 2017. This dataset shows the anti-Muslim narratives and counter-narratives during a highly charged political period in the UK.

Table 2.1

*Frequency of Islamophobic Narratives and Counter-Narratives on Social Media
During Brexit (2016)*

	Twitter	Facebook	YouTube
Islamophobic narratives	41	16	15
Islamophobic counter-narratives	4	8	7

Table 2.1 provides quantitative data analysing the frequency of Islamophobic narratives and counter-narratives on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube during and following the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK. The data indicates the number of posts, comments, videos, or hashtags classified under each narrative category.

1. Twitter

The data reveals that Twitter served as a powerful amplifier of anti-Muslim narratives during the 2016 Brexit referendum. The data shows 41 tweets of anti-Muslim narratives, compared to only 4 counter-narratives. This reflects the platform's role in facilitating the rapid spread of polarising rhetoric. Far-right groups and populist politicians exploited Twitter's algorithm of engagement to amplify anti-immigration and anti-Muslim discourse. They often linked Muslim communities to threats against British identity and sovereignty through hashtags like #DeportMuslims and #BanIslam. These narratives scapegoated Muslims for socio-political tensions, economic anxieties, and pressures on public services, thereby reinforcing harmful stereotypes. While some users attempted to challenge these stereotypes through counter-narratives

(e.g., #RefugeesWelcome). Post-referendum, anti-Muslim hate crimes and online hostility increased in the UK, as documented by Tell MAMA. The organisation reported a 475% increase in incidents, jumping from 12 in the pre-referendum week to 69 between 24 June and 30 June (Atta, 2017). Meanwhile, the platform's failure to control such content exacerbated real-world violence and discrimination (Amnesty International, 2020).

2. Facebook

During the 2016 Brexit debates, Facebook served as a significant platform for discourse about Muslim communities, with the data revealing 16 posts of anti-Muslim narratives compared to 8 counter-narratives. The revealed data indicates Facebook's community-based structure (including posts and comments) may have facilitated in spreading aggressive content, framing Islam as a threatening religion and perpetuating stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists. However, it also allowed some space for counter-narratives. Anti-Muslim posts often exploited economic anxieties. They fueled Brexit-linked anti-Muslim by scapegoating Muslims for job competition and economic insecurity. Although counter-narratives were observed (e.g., intercommunity solidarity posts challenging stereotypes), they were limited. Meanwhile, the 16 anti-Muslim posts that were collected highlight the platform's struggle to fully counteract harmful narratives. Facebook's design enables extended discussions and community engagement. Such features may have reduced some of the economic fears against multiculturalism. However, they did not eliminate the tensions that fueled anti-Muslim sentiment during the Brexit.

3. YouTube

During the 2016 Brexit debates, the data reveals YouTube hosted 15 anti-Muslim narratives alongside 7 counter-narratives. These numbers reflect how the platform exacerbated socio-economic anxieties through controversial content. Brexit-supporting videos weaponised

anti-immigration discourse, employing the language of extremism, anti-Islam and immigration to frighten people in order to vote for leaving the EU. Videos like, "Immigration key in Brexit vote dividing nation" weaponised anti-immigration sentiment to fuel Brexit's success (AFP News Agency, 2016). These narratives frame Muslim communities as threats to British identity and economic stability causing social divisions. Although counter-narratives emerged (e.g., videos highlighting Muslim contributions to the UK economy), limited reach was reduced by YouTube's algorithmic prioritisation of sensationalist content. The platform amplified videos that scapegoated Muslims for economic decline, perpetuating hostile discourse and post-Brexit tensions (AJ+, 2016). This highlights how economic, and security anxieties were linked to anti-Muslim rhetoric, demonstrating YouTube's role in facilitating the spread of divisive narratives. It transformed economic anxieties into tools for political mobilisation.

2.2.2 Narratives of Brexit 2016

Rejecting Multiculturalism: A dominant theme identified in the narratives of Brexit is the rejection of multiculturalism across the three platforms. This section presents discourse analysis of posts that reflect this theme.

Figure 2.1

Tweet from @C4Ciaran discussing the motivations behind Brexit with hashtags #Brexit



Figure 2.1 captures the tweet "It's all about immigration. It's not about trade or Europe or anything like that, it's all about immigration" and "It's to stop the Muslims coming into this country. Simple as that" (Jenkins, 2016) employ similar discursive strategies. Both texts oversimplify Brexit into a singular issue (immigration). They systematically ignore other contributing factors, such as trade, sovereignty, internal social issues, and the complexity of the situation. These statements reinforce a binary opposition "us vs. them." The first statement reduces socioeconomic issues to immigration, constructing an in-group (those in the country) against an out-group (immigrants). The second statement explicitly targets Muslims as a distinct out-group. The language in phrases like "all about immigration" and "Simple as that" aims to present the argument as unquestionable and shuts down debate. This linguistic strategy aligns with far-right discourse, often promoting anti-democratic and racist ideologies. These ideologies contribute to the rise of violent extremism across Europe.

The tweet "It's to stop Muslims coming into this country. Simple as that" is a direct, declarative statement that frames the narrative around Brexit as an exclusionary policy targeting Muslims. The phrase "stop Muslims coming into this country" constructs Muslims as an external threat requiring exclusion. This discursive strategy perpetuates xenophobic and anti-Muslim narratives. These narratives position Muslim immigration as a problem. They reinforce racialised anxieties about cultural and national identity. The tweet reflects far-right discourse (exemplified by figures like Tommy Robinson). It positions Muslims as incompatible with "British values" and constructs them as a threatening "Other." This narrative ties Brexit to anti-Muslim fears of cultural and demographic invasion. In post-referendum discourse, these texts demonstrate how anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiment were weaponised to reject multiculturalism. They framed immigration as an existential threat and Muslims as its most dangerous form.

Figure 2.2

Retweet from @RichardVaughn (originally by @Dwalingen) discussing the EU, the Middle East, and social issues with hashtags #StopIslam, #Brexit



Figure 2.2 shows the tweet "#EU is turning our homes into that backward middle-east with riots, beheadings, rapes. #StopIslam #Brexit" (Vaughn, 2016, as cited in Standen, 2016) was posted on the Facebook platform. It exemplifies a reactionary discourse that emerged in response to Brexit 2016. The tweet employs highly provocative rhetoric, framing Islam and multiculturalism as existential threats to Europe. This statement illustrates a xenophobic narrative that gained prominence during the Brexit campaign. It reinforces exclusionary ideologies through discursive strategies. The phrase "backward Middle-East" invokes civilisational hierarchies. It perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes that depict Muslim-majority societies as primitive and violent. Such language reinforces a binary opposition between an "advanced" West and a "backward" Islamic world. Meanwhile, the phrase "riots, beheadings, rapes" unfairly associates Islam with violence, disregarding the fact that such acts are not representative of Muslim communities. This rhetorical move aligns with far-right propaganda that constructs immigration as an invasive force threatening European stability.

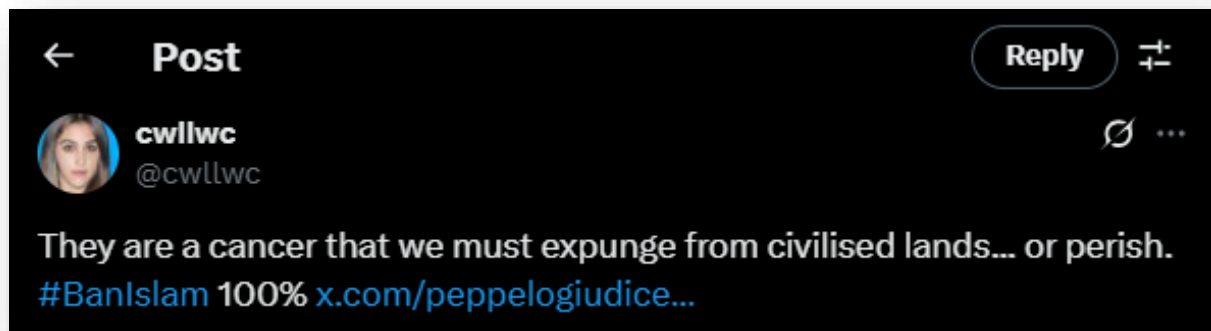
The phrase "Turning our homes into..." suggests a loss of control, thereby serving to alarm the public. The reference to "our homes" constructs an in-group (white, Christian Europe) portrayed as being under threat from an out-group, Muslims or Middle Easterners in particular. This framing reinforces an exclusionary "us vs. them" dichotomy. Furthermore, the post implies that multiculturalism leads to cultural erosion. This is a common theme in Brexit rhetoric, reflected by phrases such as "Take back control" and "We want our country back." The content writer, Richard Vaughn, used an exaggerated language "beheadings and rapes" strategically associates Muslims with terrorism, reinforcing the negative stereotypical narrative against Muslims. This post reflects reactionary responses against multiculturalism, portraying it as a failed policy that leads to social decline. The post also employs a generalisation strategy, framing both the EU and

the Middle East as monolithic entities. This oversimplification neglects the complexity and diversity of these regions and erases cultural distinctions within and between European and Middle Eastern nations. This narrative is extensively propagated by right-wing media such as The Daily Mail. The paper is widely regarded as Britain's most right-wing newspaper. In fact, 44% of Brits describe the country's most-read paper as "very right-wing," far ahead of any other outlet (YouGov, 2018).

Fear of an "Islamic Invasion": another dominant theme in Brexit-era discourse was the strategic use of fear to frame Muslims as an existential threat to Western civilisation. In this section, discourse analysis is applied to a post reflecting this theme.

Figure 2.3

A tweet by @cwllwc calling for the expulsion of a group from 'civilised lands,' using #BanIslam



The figure 2.3 presents the tweet "They are a cancer that we must expunge from civilised lands... or perish" (Cwllwc, 2016) was posted during the 2016 Brexit period. It exemplifies fear as a central theme in anti-Muslim discourse. It employs highly charged, dehumanising language by metaphorically likening Muslims to a "cancer," an invasive disease threatening the survival of a "civilised" society. This metaphor constructs Muslims as an existential threat that must be

eradicated. It invokes fear to justify exclusion or violence. In her tweet, @cwillwc calls for a direct action, like banning Islam and Muslims or eradicating/ killing them. Such rhetoric reflects far-right extremist ideology systematically constructing Muslims as a homogenised threat through negative stereotypes to amplify social fear and justify exclusionary policies. The phrase "civilised lands" frames the UK (white, Christian, and Western) as under threat from foreign cultures, particularly Muslims. The narrative that Europe is being deliberately Islamised through mass immigration, high Muslim birth rates, and "cultural collapse" aligns closely with Ye'or's "Eurabia" theory. This theory claims that Eurabia is hostile to Christianity and the West, threatening its culture and identity (Ye'or, 2005). It also reflects the "Clash of Civilisations" thesis, framing Islam and the West as opposed. The tweet constructs a misleading division between "civilised lands" and the "Other." It reinforces binary divisions and portrays Muslims as a barbaric threat to Western civilisation.

Brexit was significantly influenced by anti-immigration sentiment. Some in the British public linked economic struggles and social tensions to immigration, particularly Muslim communities. The tweet employs a scapegoating mechanism. It redirects anxieties about job losses and cultural change towards Muslims. It frames them as both an economic and cultural threat. The tweet reflects the emotional and hostile politics of anti-Muslim during Brexit. In this context, Muslims are demonised as a cancerous threat to a "civilised" society. This anti-Muslim discourse exploits economic fears and social insecurities. It adopts an Orientalist and dehumanising language to justify exclusionary policies and violent action.

2.2.3 Covid-19

COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It was first identified in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. It primarily spreads through

respiratory droplets and aerosols. The pandemic triggered global lockdowns, economic disruptions, and vaccine's development. However, it also led to misinformation, xenophobia, and anti-Muslim discourse, especially in regions where Muslim communities were falsely blamed for the virus's spread. The Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi was a particularly notable example. Covid-19 was not anti-Muslim, yet the online rhetoric reinforced hostility toward minorities, leading to real-world discrimination and violence.

The data were collected from X (Twitter) tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and comments. These were gathered using discriminatory hashtags #MuslimVirus and #TablighiJamatVirus within the UK context. The data covers key periods of the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated anti-Muslim rhetoric between 2019 and 2021. This dataset allows analysis of how pandemic-related discourse (2019–2021) intersected with anti-Muslim narratives and counter-narratives. It captures polarised debates around blame, religious-cultural practices (e.g., Eid gatherings, halal vaccine). It also highlights far-right and government responses during this crisis.

Table 2.2

Islamophobic and Counter-Islamophobic Narratives on Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Platform Analysis

	Twitter	Facebook	YouTube
Islamophobic narratives	12	6	0
Islamophobic counter-narratives	4	5	0

Table 2.2 presents a quantitative data comparing the spread of Islamophobic narratives and counter-narratives across three major social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube during covid-19 pandemic (2019-2021) in UK. The data consists of statistics on posts, comments, videos, and hashtags, classified according to narrative type across each platform.

1. Twitter

During the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–2021), Twitter became a significant platform for anti-Muslim narratives. Evidence for this can be seen in data showing 12 tweets and comments promoting such views, compared to only 4 counter-narratives. The platform facilitated the spread of anti-Muslim discourses through viral hashtags such as #MuslimVirus and #JIHADI_VIRUS_MUSALMAN. These hashtags falsely portrayed Muslim communities as deliberate spreaders of disease transmission. The anti-Muslim narratives employed exaggerated language and manipulated images to amplify fear and division around the country. For instance, they reinforced harmful stereotypes by accusing Muslims of violating public health measures (e.g., #muslims choose to still go to mosques in droves!!!). While counter-narratives attempted to challenge these lies, they were significantly outnumbered. As a result, the anti-Muslim rhetoric was able to dominate. This imbalance not only perpetuated the demonisation of Muslim communities but also amplified the prejudicial association between Islam and public health threats. This created a hostile digital space where Muslim communities were systematically scapegoated. It highlighted the platform's tendency to exacerbate polarisation during crises.

2. Facebook

Facebook also served as a platform where anti-Muslim discourse spread; 6 posts were collected compared to 5 counter-narratives. It exploited the heightened anxieties of the pandemic

to target Muslim communities for disregarding public health protocols, such as attending large gatherings. These narratives reinforced existing prejudices, framing Muslims as a collective threat to public safety. Although counter-narratives sought to expose these harmful stereotypes, they failed to counteract the dominant narrative of fear and misinformation. Like Twitter, Facebook's role in amplifying hostile narratives underscored this issue. It demonstrated how social media platforms exacerbate social divisions during difficulties.

3. YouTube

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the dataset did not identify any significant anti-Muslim narratives or counter-narratives on YouTube within the studied parameters (high engagement, relevance to UK context, and temporal proximity to key events), while anti-Muslim discourse surged on other platforms during this period, often linking Muslims to virus spread or lockdown violations. YouTube's content moderation policies or algorithmic filtering may have limited the visibility of such narratives in the collected data. However, further research is needed to assess whether anti-Muslim rhetoric persisted in more subtle or coded forms outside the study's scope.

2.2.4 Narratives of Covid-19

This section presents the analysis of the anti-Muslim narratives. The dominant themes that were identified in these narratives are Epidemic Fear and Muslim Stereotyping.

Epidemic Fear: refers to pandemic-driven anxiety exploited to falsely portray Muslims as disease spreaders, amplifying anti-Muslim narratives and justifying discrimination.

The figure 2.4 documents the tweet "Pubs, bars, restaurants, shops, churches all closing because of #COVID—19 #coronavirus #muslims choose to still go to mosques in droves!!! Close them @BorisJohnson they can pray at home like everyone else" (Harvington, 2020) exemplifies the ideology of disclaimers and how fear during the COVID-19 pandemic were weaponised against Muslim communities through discriminatory discourse. The tweet criticises Muslims for continuing to attend mosques while other public spaces (pubs, churches, and shops) were closing. It constructs a social sacrifice that promotes following with health measures.

Figure 2.4

A 2020 tweet from @harvingtonTR discussing supposed mosque gatherings during pandemic lockdowns.



The phrase "#muslims choose to still go to mosques in droves!!! frames Muslims' behaviour as deliberated resistance. While the negative connotation "in droves" exaggerates the scale of the issue, amplifying a sense of recklessness. The use of exclamation marks reinforces the anger tone. By addressing UK Prime Minister @BorisJohnson, the imperative demand "Close them" positions mosques as places of danger requiring state regulation.

The statement "They can pray at home like everyone else" reinforces an "us vs. them" binary. It suggests that Muslims are refusing to respect the universal norms of public health measures. This discourse fits into a long-standing anti-Muslim narrative that constructs Muslims as resistant to "Western" values. The Twitter user @harvingtonTR employs, in his tweet, linguistic

strategies that link public health fears with anti-Muslim sentiment, exploit the pandemic to justify discriminatory attitudes. Although some mosques had closed or implemented health protocols, the tweet generalises all Muslims as irresponsible, erasing these efforts. The pandemic exacerbated existing anti-Muslim discourses, scapegoating them as "disease spreaders." The pandemic exacerbated existing anti-Muslim discourses, with scapegoating Muslims as "disease spreaders." This reinforced anti-Muslim stereotypes that depict religious minorities as

Figure 2.5

A @ranger_glen tweet framing Muslim communities as a perceived threat to family safety.



"backward" or "dangerous. "

Figure 2.5 reveals a comment on Jolene Bunting's tweet during Covid-19 related to Muslims saying: "Why is our Army not dealing with these savages they're putting our families at risk ffs" (Ranger, 2020) exemplifies how health crises exacerbate existing prejudices. It shows how fear of disease becomes linked with anti-Muslim discourse. The term "savages" is deeply dehumanising. It evokes colonial and racist discourses that construct certain groups as uncivilised, violent, and inferior. Such discourse justifies extreme measures against them, removing them of moral consideration. Historically, the term "savages" has been employed to legitimise violence against marginalised communities particularly Muslims.

The demand for military involvement "our Army" reflects a securitisation discourse that frames public health as a security threat requiring aggressive force over medical or social solutions. The call to "deal with" the threat reflects a preference for oppressive measures over structural support. This rhetoric reinforces a binary opposition "us vs. them." It promotes in-group solidarity "our families" while positioning outsiders as existential dangers "they're putting us at risk." The interjection "ffs" (for fuck's sake) underscores the speaker's urgency and frustration, demonstrating that the threat requires immediate, violent response. Ultimately, the used language in the comment mirrors an Orientalist view. It constructs an irrational, dangerous "Other" (savages) that threatens the Western values. Additionally, it depicts a racialised, dehumanised enemy, advocating for violent domination rather than solidarity-based public health measures.

Muslim Stereotyping: refers to harmful and negative generalisations that portray Muslims as disease-spreaders or backward during Covid-19, fueling anti-Muslim bias and hate crimes.

Figure 2.6

A Tell Mama UK post highlighted a COVID-era case of reported Islamophobia and discrimination against disabled people.



Figure 2.6 illustrates a post by Tell Mama UK, an organisation that monitors anti-Muslim hate in the UK, reports an incident involving a disabled Muslim woman who was racially and religiously abused during the Covid-19 pandemic. She was told, "Go back to where you came from so the virus will leave with you" (Tell Mama UK, 2021). This statement reflects discourses of racialisation and anti-Islam during the pandemic. The language used reinforces long-standing racial and religious stereotypes. It frames Muslims as foreign threats and disease carriers, a narrative that was amplified during Covid-19. The phrase "Go back to where you came from" reinforces colonial notions of belonging, portraying minorities as perpetual outsiders. The suggestion that the virus would leave with her reflects racism. This is a common racist stereotype used to otherise minorities, suggesting they do not belong in the UK. It reinforces the colonial narrative that immigrants are perpetual foreigners and Muslims are "invaders." The addition of "so the virus will leave with you" links the Muslim woman to the spread of Covid-19, highlighting historical stereotypes of minorities as disease carriers. It suggests that the virus is tied to her identity, creating a dehumanising discourse.

The fact that the victim is a disabled Muslim woman further highlights how gender, religion, and disability amplify discrimination. Disabled people were already marginalised during Covid-19, with anti-Muslim narratives exacerbating this risk. The statement exposes how the abuser's language reflects hegemonic discourses that justify anti-Muslim hostility under the mask of "protecting public health." This aligns with early pandemic narratives where social media platforms falsely linked Covid-19 spread to Muslim communities, such as through unconfirmed claims about "secret Islamic burials." This incident is not an isolated event but reflects a wider trend of racialised blame during times of crisis. It demonstrates how the discourse around Covid-19 has been portrayed Muslims as disease spreaders rather than equal members of society.

2.2.5 Riot 2024

The 2024 United Kingdom riots were a series of violent clashes that took place from July 30 to August 5, 2024, across several towns and cities in the UK. The unrest was primarily fueled by far-right, anti-immigration groups and resulted in the deaths of three young girls. Misinformation spread online via social media, falsely claimed that the attacker was a Muslim asylum seeker, heightening anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments. This led to targeted attacks on Muslim communities, mosques, and immigrant neighborhoods, escalating tensions and violence.

The data were collected from X (Twitter) tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and comments, using hashtags like #RiotsNotProtests, #FarageRiots, and #riots2024 within the UK context. The dataset focuses on the period of civil unrest from July 30 to August 7, 2024, capturing the increase in anti-Muslim narrative. This data enables an analysis of how riot-related discourse intersected with anti-Muslim narratives and counter-narratives. It particularly sheds light on far-right narrative and the media framing of Muslim communities. The dataset provides insights into the role of digital platforms in amplifying extremist rhetoric and organising protests, as well as civil society efforts to resist hate speech and misinformation.

Table 2.3

Platform Variations in Islamophobic and Countering Content During UK Riots 2024

	Twitter	Facebook	YouTube
Islamophobic narratives	39	17	31

Islamophobic counter-narratives

11

22

19

The table 2.3 illustrates quantitative data comparing the frequency of Islamophobic narratives and counter-narratives across three major social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube in the context of the UK riots 2024. The data are represented as statistics of posts, comments, videos, or hashtags categorised under each narrative type per platform.

1. Twitter

Twitter’s discourse during the 2024 UK riots was demonstrated by a significant dissemination of anti-Muslim narratives, with 39 tweets of anti-Muslim narratives compared to just 11 counter-narratives. The spread of anti-Muslim narratives reflects how the platform amplified hostile rhetoric during the crisis. This was particularly through posts and trending hashtags that scapegoated Muslim communities. According to analysis of Twitter data, many tweets propagated misinformation by associating Muslim communities with riot violence. Such content not only exemplifies the spread of misinformation but also highlights how Twitter facilitated the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes. While limited counter-narrative efforts were identified (e.g., the hashtag #MuslimsAreNotTerrorists), their limited reach (11 tweets) compared to anti-Muslim narratives (39 tweets) points to visible systematic inequities. Despite these efforts, the considerable imbalance (39/11) underscores Twitter's failure to remove harmful content toward Muslim communities.

2. Facebook

On Facebook, anti-Muslim counter-narratives showed notable activity during the 2024 UK riots. The platform recorded 22 posts of counter- narratives compared to 17 anti-Muslim narratives.

The platform counter-narrative efforts reflect its capacity for organised resistance. According to the data, Facebook's community tools facilitate the spread of anti-racist messaging more than Twitter's hashtag system. Posts like, Muslim volunteers rebuild riots-damaged communities and how local mosques are countering extremist rhetoric, demonstrated how counter-narratives preserved religious dignity (Fraternité UK, 2024; Muslim Women's Network UK, 2024).

3. YouTube

YouTube's response of the UK riots in 2024 reveals a mix of anti-Muslim narratives and counter-narratives. However, the platform tends slightly more toward negative sentiments. With 31 narratives anti-Muslim alongside 19 counter-narratives, YouTube reflects a conflicted discourse. It presents a less extreme environment than Twitter, where hate speech dominates. This content often portrays Muslim communities as perpetrators of violence. It uses exaggerated images and dramatic headlines to amplify fear. For example, videos with captions like "UK Riots: Muslim Mob Takes Over Streets" reinforce stereotypes linking Islam to unrest (My Mum & I TV, 2024). On the other hand, YouTube's counter-narratives challenge these false claims as root causes of the riots. However, YouTube's algorithm tends to promote extremist videos because they often spread more widely than factual ones.

2.2.6 Narratives of the Riots 2024

Security Fear and Chaos emerge as primary themes in this section's analysis of anti-Muslim narratives.

Security Fear: harmful and exaggerated perceptions portraying marginalised groups (Muslims) as violent instigators or threats during crises like the UK riots 2024.

Figure 2.7

Tweet from @TRobinsonNewEra discussing violence against children and feelings of safety

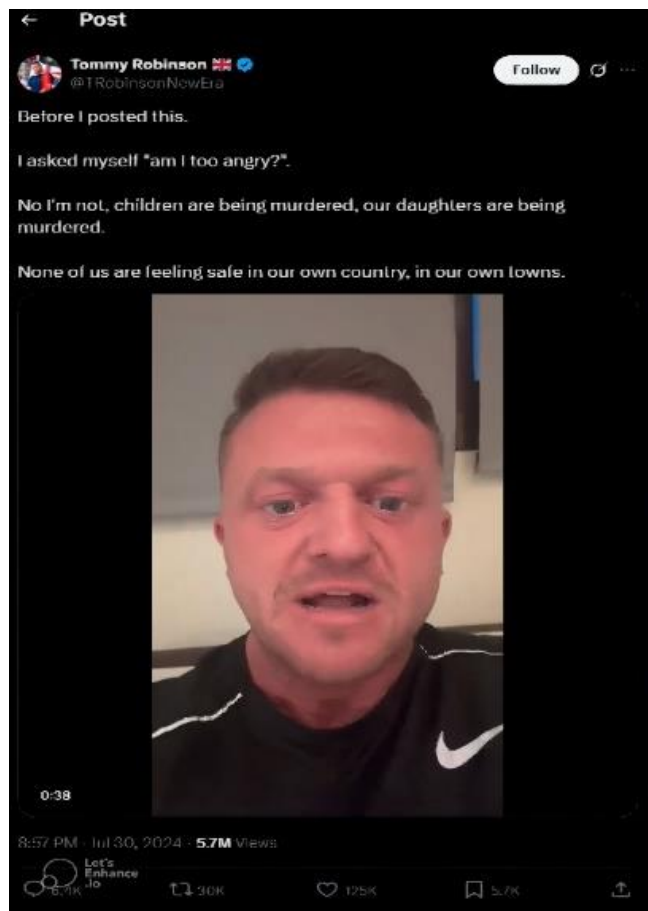


Figure 2.7 shows a representative sample of far-right discourse in a viral tweet posted by Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon), a British far-right activist, during the 2024 UK riots. The tweet states; "Before I posted this, I asked myself, "am I too angry?" No, I'm not. Children are being murdered, our daughters are being murdered. None of us are feeling safe in our own country, in our own towns" (Robinson, 2024).

Robinson's tweet employs emotionally manipulative, victimisation, and sensationalised language, exploiting generalised fear to construct a narrative of social collapse. Through his self-positioning

as a truth-teller, Robinson constructs a discursive strategy that not only justifies his rhetoric as morally necessary but also amplifies anti-Muslim narratives. The rhetorical question "am I too angry?" functions as a self-justification mechanism, framing his anger as a rational response rather than extremist provocation. The claim that "children are being murdered, our daughters are being

murdered" serves as an exaggeration strategy. It evokes emotional fear and implies an uncontrolled wave of violence. This reflects the classic far-right discourse. The assertion that "None of us are feeling safe in our own country, in our own towns" reinforces an invasion mentality, suggesting that Britain has been overtaken by external threats. The possessive language "our" country, "our" towns implicitly excludes minorities, particularly British Muslims, from national belonging. It negates the citizenship of those Muslims, constructing them as perpetual outsiders. This rhetoric establishes an exclusionary binary opposition; "Our" refers to White, non-Muslim Britons (implied as the "true" citizens), while "Their" frames Muslims and immigrants as invaders.

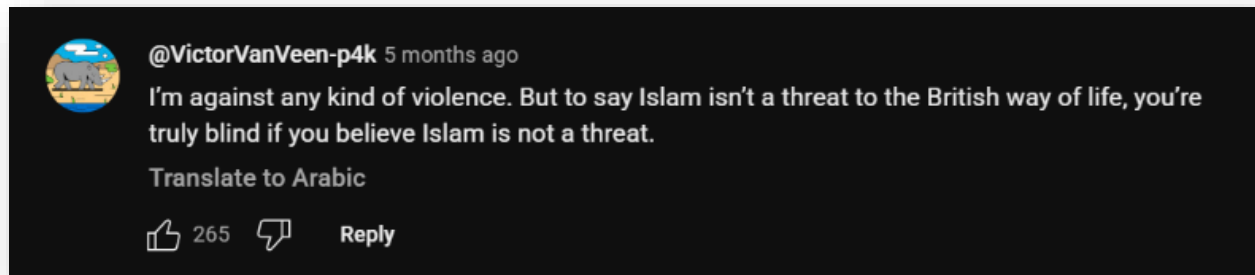
Such discourse aligns with the "Great Replacement Theory," a far-right conspiracy arguing that white populations are being deliberately displaced through immigration. In simple terms, this theory claims that immigration policies, especially those facilitating nonwhite migration, are intentionally designed to weaken the political influence and cultural dominance of white populations in Western countries. The theory frequently employs aggressive language, depicting migrants as an "invasion" that must be resisted (National Immigration Forum, 2022). Robinson's tweet capitalises on socio-political tensions, framing white Britons as victims under an existential threat. The tweet's widespread; garnering 5.7 million views, 125K likes, 6.4K comments, and 30K reposts, demonstrates how platforms algorithm amplifies anger content. This amplification functions as a spreader for extremism. In addition, the retweeting of this narrative by politicians and social media influencers also amplifies its reach, embedding it within mainstream discourse.

This type of discourse has social consequences, shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions such as the Prevent strategy and stricter immigration laws (Alvi & Zaidi, 2022). By distorting social realities into a narrative of ethnic and cultural replacement, Robinson's

discourse exemplifies how far-right actors exploit digital platforms to polarise societies. This narrative justifies exclusionary policies and reinforces hostility toward out-groups.

Figure 2.8

Comment from @VictorVanVeen-pf4ii examining perceptions of Islam and violence



The comment: "I'm against any kind of violence. But to say Islam isn't a threat to the British way of life, you're truly blind if you believe Islam is not a threat" (Van Veen, 2024) illustrates in Figure 2.8, posted after the 2024 UK riots. It exemplifies a securitisation discourse that weaponises linguistic strategies to frame Islam as an existential danger to British values. The opening disclaimer "I'm against any kind of violence" serves as a defensive justification, allowing the speaker to present their stance as reasonable rather than extremist. The capitalised "But" is a calculated discursive weapon and linguistic choice that carries significant ideological and rhetorical weight. It reveals that the speaker does not condemn violence but instead aggressively asserts that Islam itself is the real problem. This language structure is common in xenophobic and anti-Muslim rhetoric, where a soft opening is used to legitimise prejudiced conclusions. Crucially, the phrase "British way of life" implicitly excludes minorities, particularly Muslims, reinforcing the dominance of whiteness. This rhetorical construction creates a racialised "us vs. them" dichotomy, where the "British way of life" is coded as white and Christian, while Muslims are portrayed as a foreign "Other." Such framing perpetuates an anti-Muslim discourse by "Othering"

Muslims and orientalising them as opposed to British values. By declaring that those who disagree are "truly blind," the speaker dismisses counter-narratives, positioning their view as an unquestionable truth. The comment's 259 likes indicate that it resonates with an audience already receptive to anti-Muslim discourse, highlighting YouTube's role in amplifying such content.

Chaos: refers to the narratives that scapegoated Muslims for social unrest, fueling anti-Muslim bias by falsely associating them with protest-related violence, looting, vandalism, and arson.

Figure 2.9

Tweet from @NeverShame identifying the reported perpetrators and nature of the #LondonRiots

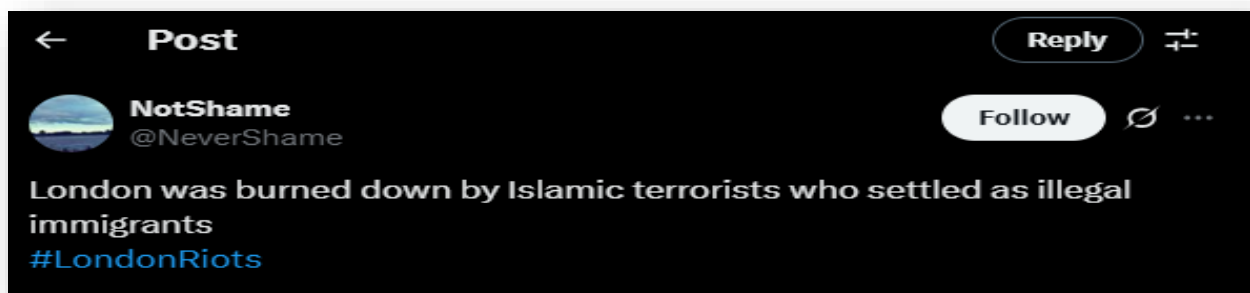


Figure 2.9 captures the tweet "London was burned down by Islamic terrorists who settled as illegal immigrants #LondonRiots" (NeverShame, 2024) circulated during the 2024 riots. It exemplifies how language constructs chaos by weaponising fear, xenophobia, violence, and misinformation. By framing civil unrest as an act of "foreign terrorism," the tweet employs several rhetorical strategies to manipulate perception and escalate tensions. The phrase "burned down" exaggerates the scale of destruction, evoking fear and a sense of permanent collapse to the British white. The phrase "Islamic terrorists" reinforces the anti-Muslim stereotype linking Islam with violence, perpetuating "Muslim threat" narrative. The followed phrase "illegal immigrants"

dehumanises a marginalised group (particularly Muslims) of legal and moral status. It excludes them from their rights and justifies hostility against them.

The tweet's narrative structure also performs selective blame attribution, removing socio-economic factors, such as far-right provocation. It scapegoats immigrants as the perpetrators of this riots. The statement constructs an "us vs. them" binary, opposing "native British" against "Muslim immigrants" and indicating that London is under foreign invasion. Such framing transforms riots from a socio-political protest into an existential war. Moreover, the hashtag #LondonRiots is weaponised to generalise all rioters as immigrants or terrorists, misrepresenting reality by omitting far-right participants. This aligns with the "Great Replacement Theory," a far-right conspiracy narrative promoting the deliberate displacement of "native" communities by non-white immigrants (National Immigration Forum, 2022).

Ultimately, the tweet's conflation of Islam with terrorism creates a narrative of existential threat. Through exaggerating, dehumanising, and demonising language, the tweet reinforces demands for oppressive measures revealing how discourse can be mobilised to produce chaos.

2.3 Reinforcing Stereotypes: The Representation of Muslims in UK Social Media

The findings of this study provide clear answers to the guiding research questions. First, concerning the evolution of UK social media narratives on anti-Muslim discourse in response to key events, the analysis indicates a gradual escalation of anti-Muslim discourse across historical periods, rather than distinct period-based shifts. Earlier empirical studies presented in the first chapter shows that early narratives (e.g., post-9/11 or 7/7 attacks) framed Muslims through a threat lens, portraying them as inherent terrorists. These discourses often linked Islam with extremism, exacerbating public fear and justifying discriminatory policies. Over time, however, counter-narratives emerged (particularly after events like Brexit 2016 or covid-19 pandemic) portraying

Muslims as victims of hate crimes or as allies in public health efforts. Despite their emergence, these counter-narratives had limited influence in challenging long-standing stereotypes, especially on polarised platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube.

The sub-question on event-driven amplification of anti-Muslim narratives underscores how crises act as triggers. For instance, geopolitical events (e.g., Brexit, the "migrant crisis") reinforced narratives of Muslims as outsiders, while protest-related violence (e.g., UK Riots in 2024) triggered waves of dehumanising rhetoric. Algorithmic prioritisation on Twitter (X), Facebook and YouTube exacerbated this issue, as sensationalist content garnered higher engagement. Conversely, events like covid-19 provoked solidarity discourses, though these were often overshadowed by doubt. Finally, the role of UK social media in representing Muslim communities reflects both marginalisation and resistance. However, dominant platforms frequently framed Muslims through negative stereotypes, and structural biases persisted with far-right influencers weaponising "free speech" to justify hate speech.

The present findings demonstrate consistency with previous empirical research documented in the literature review. They are grounded in the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), highlighting how power relations and ideological biases are reproduced through language. The dominant anti-Muslim narratives on UK social media (such as framing Muslims as violent or culturally incompatible) demonstrate that discourse is not neutral but systematically biased against Muslim communities. For instance, after events like the UK riot in 2024, platforms like Twitter and YouTube amplified distorted rhetoric. This rhetoric linked Islam with terrorism, reinforcing a discourse of threat. This aligns with CDA's focus on linguistic strategies (e.g., lexical choices like "Islamic extremism") that encode racialised stereotypes. Conversely, counter-narratives (like the #IslamIsPeace campaign) challenged negative stereotypes

by highlighting positive examples of Muslim peace efforts and their contributions to British history. This study supports studies on the racialisation of religion (Islam). It demonstrates how social media's linguistic patterns perpetuate violence against Muslim communities, even as resistance narratives emerge.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the empirical component of the study, detailing the analytical methods, key findings and the discussion. The study revealed that anti-Muslim narratives on UK social media evolve in response to key socio-political events, often amplifying negative stereotypes (e.g., "Muslims as existential threat") while marginalising counter-narratives that challenge such representations. The chapter concluded with a discussion summarising the findings in relation to the study's central research question. Applying CDA, the study uncovered how linguistic strategies, such as lexical choices, reinforce the racialisation and Othering of Muslim communities. These findings align with previous studies on anti-Muslim narratives while highlighting the role of social media platforms in shaping public discourse. Ultimately, this research underscores the dynamic interaction between event-driven narratives and structural biases in digital spaces. It offers critical insights into the perpetuation of anti-Muslim rhetoric in the UK.

General Conclusion

Over the past two decades, UK social media has reflected and often amplified the tensions surrounding anti-Islam. It has shifted between aggressive anti-Muslim narratives and counter-narratives. The current study examined this evolution through an in-depth analysis of anti-Muslim narratives and depicted counter-narratives in UK-based social media discourse in response to key socio-political events involving Muslim communities between 2016 and 2024. Guided by the central research question, how have anti-Muslim narratives and counter-narratives shifted on UK social media platforms in reaction to key socio-political events? This research employed a mixed-methods approach to analyse user-generated content (UGC) from X (Twitter), Facebook, and YouTube. Using a diachronic design to track longitudinal shifts, the study integrated quantitative (content analysis) and qualitative (critical discourse analysis) approaches. A dataset of 257 posts, comments, and videos was collected, focusing on events such as the Brexit referendum (2016), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021), and the 2024 UK riots. Employing thematic and critical discourse analysis (CDA), we explored the evolution of anti-Muslim discourse on social media to uncover shifting rhetorical patterns across time.

The findings revealed distinct patterns in narrative construction across events. Anti-Muslim discourse consistently employs dehumanisation and exaggeration rhetoric, portraying Muslims as existential threats during crises (e.g., post-Brexit terrorism framing, pandemic-related scapegoating). Far-right activists on social media exploited events like the 2024 riots to propagate anti-immigration and anti-Muslim ideologies, often through viral disinformation (e.g., false attributions of violence). Counter-narratives, though less prevalent, demonstrated increasing sophistication, invoking solidarity rhetoric, human rights discourse and intersectional critiques of structural racism. Twitter (X) hosted the highest volume of polarised debates, while Facebook also

saw significant engagement, and YouTube facilitated more enduring extremist content. Crisis events, such as terrorist attacks and riots, acted as triggers for anti-Muslim discourse. Social media further accelerated the spread of this narrative. However, counter-narratives faced imbalanced visibility due to platform algorithmic biases.

The study's limitations include excluding popular youth platforms like TikTok and Telegram, potentially reducing visibility of youth-led counter-narratives, as well as the dataset was affected by platform content removals, raising concerns about longitudinal analysis. Future research should expand to growing platforms like Telegram and TikTok, where extremist and counter-narratives are increasingly prevalent. Investigations into algorithmic bias in content moderation are also critical, as these systems often silence marginalised voices. By revealing how crises are weaponised against Muslim communities and how resistance adapts, this study underscores the need for policy interventions targeting the algorithms and moderation systems of social media platforms to disrupt the spread of hate. Finally, cross-country comparisons should be conducted to distinguish British-specific anti-Muslim narratives from global anti-Muslim systems.

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ملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة التحولات في سرديات الإسلاموفوبيا من خلال تحليل تزامني لتفاعلات وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في المملكة المتحدة تجاه أحداث رئيسية تتعلق بالمجتمعات المسلمة. وباستخدام منهجية متعددة الاساليب، تستقصي الدراسة تطور الخطاب العام على منصات مثل تويتر (X)، وفيسبوك، ويوتيوب، وذلك استجابةً لأحداث سوسيلوجية وسياسية بارزة بين عامي 2016 و2024. تم تحليل مجموعة بيانات تضم 257 منشورًا ومقطع فيديو وتعليقًا من خلال التحليل الكمي والتحليل النوعي للخطابات، مع التركيز على أطر خطابية مثل الخوف، والتعددية الثقافية، والفوضى، والتنميط. تكشف النتائج عن نمط تطوري في التحيز المعادي للمسلمين يعمل كـ "آلية تصعيد"، حيث تصاعدت المشاعر السلبية بعد أحداث محورية مثل مناقشات خروج بريطانيا من الاتحاد الأوروبي عام 2016 وأعمال الشغب في المملكة المتحدة عام 2024. كما استمر استخدام اللغة المشفرة وسرديات "الآخر" بمرور الوقت، لا سيما في الخطاب اليميني المتطرف. ولوحظت فروقات بين المنصات في فاعلية الإشراف على المحتوى، حيث أظهر تويتر استجابة أسرع للمحتوى التحريضي مقارنة بفيسبوك ويوتيوب. وتبرز الدراسة كيف تتكيف الإسلاموفوبيا مع الأحداث الاجتماعية والسياسية، مؤكدة دور وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في التهويل. وتؤكد النتائج على الحاجة الملحة لتطوير استراتيجيات مضادة خاصة بكل منصة للحد من انتشار خطاب الكراهية. وينبغي على البحوث المستقبلية أن تستكشف ديناميات المنصات المختلفة والتأثيرات الطويلة للسرديات المضادة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإسلاموفوبيا، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في المملكة المتحدة، تحليل تزامني