

# COVID-19, MISINFORMATION, FAKE NEWS, CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND ISLAMOPHOBIA ON TWITTER AND YOUTUBE

## CASE STUDIES

100,545

TWEETS

100

TWITTER ACCOUNTS

112,850

YOUTUBE COMMENTS

46

YOUTUBE VIDEOS

## OVERVIEW

Covid-19 has shown how seemingly isolated events can trigger and drive misinformation and extremism, whereby far-right groups are leveraging the pandemic to promote their agenda (Ariza, 2020). It is important to address the link between the content that appears online and offline to demonstrate the severity and impact of misinformation, fake news, xenophobia, and extremism and how this content online may transgress offline. Providing a detailed depiction of how this can occur will hopefully encourage tech companies to do more to prevent such behaviour online now and, in the future, as well as providing guidance to security services who will face the offline ramifications (Ariza, 2020).

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### Muslim treatment in India during Covid-19

- An important theme that is intrinsic to this case study was that India are corona warriors against Islam. This theme embodies messages that Muslims are causing Covid-19 chaos in India, where they are deliberately transmitting the virus and India is facing a fight against Muslims and the virus that they are spreading.
- The pandemic has acted as a trigger which has unfortunately further instigated Islamophobia within India (Ahuja & Banerjee, 2020).

- Supporting this, the YouTube data also indicated an in-group/out-group commenter perspective, where Hindus were positioned as combatants against Muslims and the patriotic and protecting group, while Muslims were the alien and invading group
- Evidence of how this behaviour has transgressed offline is evident from Attacks on Muslims.
- Swaraj Abhiyan workers were reportedly attacked with cricket bats while distributing food to stranded migrant workers during the pandemic, attackers blamed them for the spread of the virus, accusing them of spitting in the food (Menon, 2020). Similar perspectives to those which fuelled the attack on Swaraj Abhiyan workers were also found in the YouTube data, with comments making references to instances where Muslims were spitting on food and attacking health workers, thereby undermining the efforts of the wider Indian community. Offline incidents such as these correlate with similar language and messages that this research has found online.
- It is suggested that Anti-Muslim hate has significantly increased under the Hindu national government, where Anti-Muslim hate grows in sync with the strategies of those in power (Pandey, 2021). This was evident during covid where Hindu leaders and ministers targeted Muslim men who attended a gathering branding them corona jihad and blaming them for the spread of the virus (Pandey, 2021).
- The mainstreaming of such a high level of Islamophobia in India, from areas of the government, media and social media, means that it is highly likely that we are still seeing the lasting effects of such a widespread consensus. In situations where extreme views, Islamophobia, misinformation is given a large enough platform it inevitably plays a role in legitimising the arguments which are able to gain traction and attract more supporters.

- This case study involves a key discussion around a prominent discourse that was found throughout the data both collected and analysed in the previous studies, regarding covid-19 and the involvement of the Quran and Mosques
- Messages that promote Anti-Muslim hate and the closure of mosques, stating they are a breeding ground for hate has previously been demonstrated to form a significant part of far-right ideology (Jackson & Feldman, 2011). Prior to Covid-19 the world has witnessed the role that the online space plays in contributing to behaviour offline. One significant case that demonstrates this is the Christchurch terrorist attack in 2019, where 50 people were killed whilst worshipping at their mosque (Lowe, 2019). An inquiry highlighted how the attacker visited far-right websites and posted right wing material on his Facebook page (BBC, 2020).
- This highlights how the internet can provide a platform for the incubation and promulgation of extremist ideologies (Crothers & O'Brien, 2020).
- There has been noteworthy evidence to demonstrate how this has been the case during covid, where offline behaviours resemble online misinformation and Islamophobia
- The number of attacks on mosques has increased considerably during the pandemic, Toronto recorded six incidents on mosques at the beginning of the pandemic (Al-Qazzaz, 2020)
- Far right activists shared a poster on social media to call on those infected with Covid-19 to visit local mosques to spread the virus, this highlights the sinister role social media has played in influencing behaviour offline during the pandemic (Allen, 2020).

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### Covid-19 and the involvement of the Quran and mosques

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### Muslims and Covid-19 treatment

- This case study refers to data collected showing numerous comments stating that Muslims are not worthy and deserving of covid treatment. Muslims were also accused of purposefully using racism as a scapegoat to flout lockdown restrictions, and that they deserve to get sick if they do not adhere to government policy.
- Many comments alluded to how Muslims have been favoured during the pandemic and that they have been above the law in terms of Covid-19 restrictions as well as seeing Muslims being labelled as Covid-19 super spreaders.
- As a result, many comments stated that Muslims should not be offered the vaccine, as they were not able to follow the rules and impeded the progress in the effort to fight covid. In addition to this, many comments also stated that the vaccines should not comply with Islam and Halal.

- Muslims have experienced hesitancy when accessing medical care for Covid-19 and vaccines due to feeling that the healthcare system does not strive to encourage their wellbeing (khan, 2021).
- Misinformation and disinformation regarding the Covid-19 vaccine has had an impact on vaccine uptake within Muslims communities (khan, 2021)
- Misinformation campaigns have targeted Muslims, suggesting that the vaccine contains components that are not Halal, which has left Muslims reluctant to come forward (Good, 2021)
- Previous epidemics have strengthened societal stigma and the marginalisation of minority populations, literature shows that misinformation on social media can intensify these reactions (Ahuja & Banerjee, 2020).
- Research found that in March 2020, as a result residential settlements and hospitals denied entry and service to some Muslims, resulting in further unnecessary deaths (Banaji & Bhat, 2020).