



BIRMINGHAM CITY
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Covid-19: What are the Drivers of the Islamophobic Infodemic Communications on Social Media?

Study 4 Key Findings



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Study 4: Key findings

Sub-Theme: Islam's place in the world

As was the case for the previous theme on Attitudes towards Muslims, there was also discussion on the place of Islam in the world. Consistent also with the previous theme, was a majority version or rejection of Islam as having a place in the world. For example, Islam being incompatible with western values:

"...Is it no coincidence that British society has no history of direct islamic influence due to Islams clear incompatibility with British values. And is the multicultural quest destined to create a two tier society?The white middle class british led islam (as in the norwich example) being the exception to the rule rather than a viable norm."

The way in which those who follow Islam interact with their country was also commented on. For instance, closely related to the perspective that Islam is not compatible with western culture, some users commented that those who follow Islam are not open to embracing the culture of the country in which they live.

As much as I agree with the premise of that video, I'm still waiting to hear one single Muslim recognise that it is not easy to see your country changing before your eyes and not be angered. It is not easy to feel that people are coming and they want you to respect their culture and not the other way around. The cultural clash is just too much sometimes.

The perceived status of Islam in non-islamic countries was also discussed, with commenters often implying that non-Islamic countries protect Islam more than they protect the native religion of those countries:

"Seems like Muslims have invaded Great Britain and subjugated Your people. With this proposal in power, You will literally be a second class citizen if You are not a Muslim. Also the symbol of Crescent Moon stands higher than The Cross in your country as you cannot criticize the



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This study involves a case study driven approach, using previously collected data and analysis from Twitter and YouTube, in attempts to elucidate the link between online misinformation and offline actions and consequences. This element of the research will provide important evidence of how online driven language and Covid-19 misinformation has potentially impacted real world events. Although it is difficult to provide a direct cause and effect for these scenarios, these case studies will be presenting evidence to suggest how there is a plausible link between online and offline behaviour. Previous research has successfully demonstrated links between online and offline extremist behaviour (Awan, Sutch & Carter, 2019).

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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Case studies from Twitter and YouTube

Case Study 1 - Muslim treatment in India during Covid-19

This case study involves a key discussion around a prominent discourse that was found throughout the Twitter and YouTube data collected and analysed in the previous studies. Both the language and key behaviours and themes found have documented the landscape of Covid-19 in India and how this has been reflected online.

In terms of the language used online during the pandemic, there were specific terms/hashtags used on Twitter to disseminate content around Covid-19 and India. This included phrases such as delhiahainstjehadvioence, bantablighijamal, crushtablighispitters, nizamuiddidiots and banjahlhamat. These phrases are important when recognising how the online space such as Twitter was utilised during the pandemic to promote misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories. This is evident as these phrases correlate with many of the news stories circulated during the early stages of pandemic.

What was described as a 22-day fake news frenzy in India, included claims that Muslims spread Covid-19 by spitting on fruit, food and utensils as well as profiling the Tablighi Jamaat as super spreaders of the virus (Bakry, Syatar, Haq, Mundzir, Arif & Amiruddin, 2020; Nagar & Gill, 2020; Udupa, 2020). Many of these news stories have now been proven too have embedded fake news and embroiled a network of fear, miscommunication and Islamophobia (Ahuja & Banerjee, 2020; Banaji & Bhat, 2020; Jadhav, 2020). Nevertheless, Covid-19 has facilitated the creation of a new dimension of hate speech and disinformation which has been targeted towards Muslim communities within India (Banaji & Bhat, 2020).

In the context of YouTube comments made in response to news videos that covered the treatment of Muslims during the pandemic in India, similar perceptions of Muslims not supporting the health strategy of the government had emerged.

A substantial focus for commenters was to express that Muslims were purposefully spreading the virus and not adhering to lockdown rules, were not welcome in India, with their presence having inflicted substantial burden on the country, and that they have further impeded on the governments health strategy by committing crimes and attacks on health workers.

In addition to key linguistic features found on Twitter there were important messages and themes that were evident throughout the data. These were explored in depth during the thematic analysis. An important and relevant 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.

Prior to Covid-19, throughout history, India has endured a complex relationship between Hindus and Muslims. The pandemic has acted as a trigger which has unfortunately further instigated Islamophobia within India (Ahuja & Banerjee, 2020), this has been evident both online and offline. 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.

As this research has demonstrated, other researchers have also revealed the power of social media and how it has been used to fuel the fire of Islamophobia within India, through the sharing of hashtags such as #coronajihad - which has provoked further political tensions and criminality aimed at Muslims (Ahuja & Banerjee, 2020). Numerous cases of Islamophobia have been reported in India during the pandemic.

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Evidence of how this behaviour has transgressed offline is evident from Attacks on Muslims and calls to boycott Muslim run businesses, seeing Muslims being prevented from entering residential areas to conduct usual business (Menon, 2020). Muslim fruit vendors were threatened and told to shut their shops as they were blamed for the spread of the virus (Menon, 2020). Assessments have shown that misinformation on social media regarding meat eating within has contributed to losses of 130 billion rupees in the poultry industry (the equivalent of 1.3 billion pounds) (Menon, 2020). 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.

There has also been a continued influx of general hate towards Muslims even 18 months after the start of the pandemic. It is suggested that Anti-Muslim hate have 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 and 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.

These messages, along with specific language used on Twitter and YouTube further perpetuates the levels of miscommunication, fake news and Islamophobia that has been present across media platforms both social media and broadsheets. This raises plausible questions on how such content effects the offline world. Although it is difficult to provide a direct cause and effect for such behaviour, it is possible to outline the coincidental link that such language and behaviour that is being seen online could instigate and encourage similar offline behavioural trends.



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Case studies from Twitter and YouTube

Case study 2 - Covid-19 and the involvement of the Quran and mosques

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. Both the language and key behaviours and themes found have documented the conspiracies theories and disinformation surrounding Islam and Covid-19, in particular the involvement of mosques and the Quran.

The linguistic analysis highlighted important language that is relevant to this case study, including *islamspreadcovid*, *islamiccoronajehad*, *jihadagent*, *islamistheproblem*, *islamicvirus*, *coronajehad*, *coronajihad*, *islamexposed*. This illustrates a clear attempt of how Twitter users have attempted to associate the origin and transmission of the virus with Islam. Elements from the thematic analysis also demonstrate this, themes such as Covid-19 originated from the Quran, highlights content stating that Allah is telling Muslims to spread the virus, how mosques are a breeding ground for the disease, and how mosques are instructing Muslims to not adhere to social distancing. 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).

In addition to this, the trial for the Finsbury Park Mosque attack, where in 2017 Darren Osbourne drove his van into worshippers as they left a mosque, highlighted how the extreme far-right content posted online had influenced him to carry out the attack (Lowe, 2019). Attacks such as these highlights how the internet can provide a platform for the incubation and promulgation of extremist ideologies (Crothers & O'Brien, 2020). With this in mind it is important to recognise how extremist content, misinformation, xenophobia, fake news and conspiracies theories online can influence behaviours which can transgress offline.

There has been noteworthy evidence to demonstrate how this has been the case during Covid, where offline behaviours resemble online misinformation and Islamophobia. During lockdown, a man shared on social media how he sat in his vehicle outside a mosque in America to conduct a Ramadan bombathon, in order to monitor the mosque for Covid-19 compliance and attempt to intimidate the community (Al-Qazzaz, 2020). 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 groups have increased their opposition to mosques during the pandemic, this was particularly the case regarding the new mosque development in central London, claiming it to be a biological threat posed by worshippers (Allen, 2020). Far-right activists shared a poster on social media to call on those infected with Covid-19 to visit local mosques to spread the virus, this highlights the sinister role social media has played in influencing behaviour offline during the pandemic (Allen, 2020).

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Case studies from Twitter and YouTube

Case study 2 - Covid-19 and the involvement of the Quran and mosques

This case study is particularly important as it provides a more distinct correlation for the appearance of online misinformation, fake news and Islamophobia found on social media and within news articles and how this can transgress offline. There are three key elements to this case study, Muslims not being worthy of Covid treatment, Muslims hesitant to receive Covid treatment and Muslims lack of access to covid treatment. This section of the case studies 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 seeing Muslims being labelled as Covid-19 super spreaders. Muslims were also perceived as being prioritised over other ethnic communities, such that Muslims deaths received more publicity than non-Muslim deaths. 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. This was represented in not only the themes but also evident in the corpus linguistics when seeing the prevalence of hashtags such as #saynotohalal. There is a clear defiance online to resist Islam and restrict Halal (Hussein, 2015). Further calls for Muslims to be denied the vaccine emerged when commenters would point towards potential conflicts in the ingredients of the vaccine, and the principles followed by Muslims. For example, Muslims should not take the vaccine as it will contain pork.

The type of content found in the current research can be linked to offline behaviour. Misinformation and fake news that has circulated online has seen fear within the Muslim community when getting tested for coronavirus

(abplive.com, 2020). This may be linked to fears that they will be ridiculed and blamed for spreading the virus if they test positive.

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 also 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). There are several impacts of such behaviour, one important to mention, that is relevant to this case study, is the competition for access to health care; where minorities can face medical discrimination based on class, religion or ethnicities (Ahuja & Banerjee, 2020). The effects of disinformation stating that Muslims were intentionally spreading the virus in India became evident very quickly. Research found that in March 2020, residential settlements and hospitals denied entry and service to some Muslims, resulting in further unnecessary deaths (Banaji & Bhat, 2020).

This is a significant case study that needs attention when thinking of the offline impact, messages such as these online will further the marginalisation of Muslims in society. With numerous cases being reported of attacks on Muslims on a daily basis. The emergence of Covid-19 and how it has been utilised to promote misinformation and Islamophobia, clearly presents a new dimension of Islamophobia that can occur both online and offline. More efforts are needed to combat Islamophobia in society as it is apparent that the way in which Islamophobia can take hold is mutating to include more sinister actions including the denial of healthcare and fearmongering of those trying to access healthcare.

Recommendations

1. A button that helps users report misinformation on social media

We propose that social media companies such as Twitter and YouTube have a button that can help users report misinformation in order to detect online harms and potential impacts offline. We argue that this could help prevent the spread of conspiracy theories and assist in detecting false or misleading information. Some social media companies such as Twitter already allow users to label tweets as misleading but the report button could act as a powerful tool for users to report misinformation.

2. Soft verification of identity to tackle online anonymity

Although our findings suggest that an increase in Islamophobic conspiracy theories and misinformation was associated with Twitter users who were characterised by a higher number of identifiable items in their user name/profile, research has shown how it is paramount to explore how anonymity plays a role in levels of hate speech, conspiracy theories and extremism online. The findings of the present research demonstrates how anonymity can play a differential role in the levels of extremism and Islamophobia online. This research suggests that the role which anonymity plays in the occurrence of these types of behaviour online can depend on the trigger event and what drivers are involved. For instance, with Covid-19 much of the misinformation and subsequent hate speech and extremism which followed was widespread, with much of the content being presented by mainstream sources. In instances such as these, anonymity plays a lesser effect. Never the less, anonymity has been shown to act as a facilitator in levels of conspiracy theories, hate speech, misinformation and extremism online. One suggestion for social media and online platforms is to encourage or insist in some on a minimum amount of identifiable information to reduce conspiracy theories and hateful rhetoric.

3. Using a tier system to warn and remove users

Whilst there are some issues in relation to hateful speech that need to be addressed corpus linguistics and sentiment analysis could be used to create a crude tier system or early warning system for platforms or users, identifying videos with more toxic or conspiracy theories. If the comments for a video or platform pass a certain threshold users could be warned about the potential content, or reminders to fact check could be presented by the platform. This type of tier system could help remove racialising conspiracy theories from social media and the wider consequences should include the ability to de-platform offline and online stigmatising communications.

4. Educational digital training programme

As Covid-19 has increased the spikes in misinformation there is a need to incorporate an international digital training programme around social media literacy for users to be upskilled and help build resilience so that users are better informed on the actual drivers of misinformation. This digital training package would cover key stories around misinformation and act as a tool that helps users distinguish between fact and fiction. As this would be an international training programme it could also help raise awareness about international trigger events that lead to conspiracy theories and provide users with the knowledge to critically assess, analyse and evaluate what and how social media posts are used to create misinformation.

Recommendations

5. Tracking conspiracy theories through evidenced-based research

The ability to be able to track false news stories and misleading information can help reduce the likelihood of misinformation. By adopting a research approach through an audit trail that can evidence false and misleading information such as images, videos, captions and posts in a large database it could help to identify fake news stories and compare them with factual news stories. This research approach should be evidenced-led and would apply some form of algorithms that would enable social media companies to quickly identify and detect conspiracy theories before they gain traction.

6. To prohibit the use of dehumanising language through clear repercussions

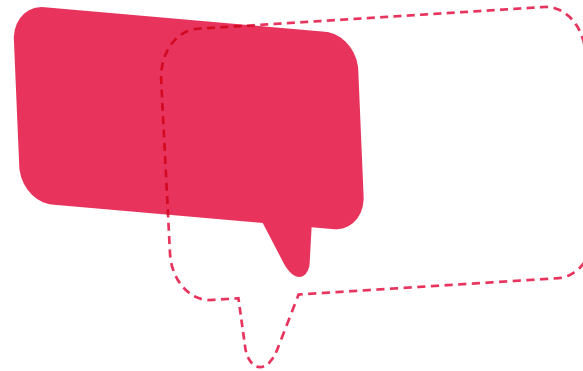
A new online digital charter should be adopted with clear aims that can start with the prohibition of dehumanising language. This could include rhetoric and language that is used to dehumanise a group of people because of their faith, religious identity, and visibility. This online charter should be underpinned by the welfare of its consumers. We believe that if some form of sanctions are applied against social media companies because they failed in their duty of care to consumers that this could create a social media fund that can be put back into the online community and be used to tackle language that incites and inflames racial tension.

7. Detection and Filtering misinformation content

Having a tool to detect and filter harmful sites and webpages that promote conspiracy theories is much needed. This could be used to detect and fact check how misinformation is spread online. This platform could be used to list trustworthy and credible accounts against those deemed untrustworthy. This could help to classify where misinformation comes from and also track people's digital footprint.

8. Bulk reporting of inappropriate content or misinformation

Whilst the options to report content currently exist within Twitter there is a cap on how many tweets can be reported at a time. At the time of writing approximately 5 tweets from an account can be reported in one go. Any further reporting of content from that same user must be done separately in another report, and usually after the first report has been addressed. This process can take a few days. Often though the account reported has many more tweets that could be reported, indicating an entrenched pattern of behaviour and communication that is at odds with Twitter's policy and respectful discourse. We would recommend that a bulk uploading of tweets (more than five), or of a time period (covering the offending tweets) would be more comprehensive.



Conclusion

The preceding discussion has examined the online and offline impacts of Islamophobia on two main social media platforms; namely Twitter and YouTube. Specifically, the aim of this report was to examine: (a) To discover the impact of misinformation and the 'infodemic' pandemic on social media sites (for this project the social media sites included the platforms of Twitter and YouTube); (b) To understand the drivers of conspiracy theories and the relationship between online and offline extremism in relation to Islamophobia; and (c) To provide recommendations to ways to reduce Islamophobic hate speech on social media.

The project entailed four studies in relation to data collection. The four stages of this project considered the role of language, expression of emotion and sentiment, performed actions (pro-social and anti-social actions), Covid-19 miscommunication and misinformation related narratives, and potential links not only between these online elements of miscommunication but also potential offline impacts. These approaches highlighted the frequency of miscommunication that is spread throughout social media sites (Twitter, and YouTube) and how this can instigate miscommunication online. Importantly, it also considered the role of key factors like anonymity, membership and peer groups might have on social media content. Our findings suggest much more work needs to be done when considering the role and impact of conspiracy theories in relation to Islamophobia.



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Appendix A

Sample Word List for Corpus Linguistics Data collection

1. Againstislam
2. Antiislam
3. Banislam
4. Banmosques
5. Banmuslims
6. Bansharia
7. Deportthemall
8. Islamiscancer
9. Islamisevil
10. Virusjihad
11. Coronajihad
12. Covid 19
13. Islam
14. Muslim
15. Muslimcovid
16. Mosques/eid
17. Virusspreaders
18. Stopislam
19. Islamistheproblem

